



The Impact of the American–Israeli–Iranian War on Gulf Digital Discourse about the United States

**An Analytical Study using Digital Listening for the Period of February 27 – April
30, 2026**

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Executive Summary

This study examines public digital discourse across the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states—Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman—regarding their relationship with the United States during the period from February 27 to April 30, 2026. The study covers the period from the day before the outbreak of the American–Israeli–Iranian War on February 28 through several weeks after the announcement of the American–Iranian ceasefire on April 8, 2026. This timeframe allows the study to trace shifts in Gulf digital discourse across three distinct phases: the initial shock following the outbreak of the war and the first direct Iranian strikes on Gulf territory; a period of escalating military developments; and the post-ceasefire phase, marked by new strategic uncertainties.

The study employed a digital listening platform to analyse 55,600 original online discussions generated by 29,800 unique users across the GCC states. These discussions generated 531,600 interactions and reached a potential audience of approximately 4.5 billion users. To ensure data quality, bot activity and AI-generated content were excluded. The analysis was limited to Gulf-generated content that addressed American security protection-or proposed alternatives to it-rather than the war more broadly, in both Arabic and English.

The findings show that 76.6% of Gulf digital discourse concerning the United States and its security role during the war expressed a negative sentiment. Neutral news content accounted for 22.5% of the dataset, while explicit support for the American security umbrella represented less than 1% of the overall discussion. What adds analytical depth to these figures is the manner in which they formed: the discourse



evolved across four temporal peaks correlated with successive pivotal events spanning from the early days of the war through the ceasefire announcement. This reveals that the Gulf digital space responds to significant symbolic events rather than to the gradual progression of the crisis.

The findings show that this discourse often extended beyond the Gulf–United States relationship to encompass broader strategic considerations. Israel was mentioned in more than 23,800 posts as the factor that transformed American military bases in the Gulf into perceived Iranian targets within the Gulf's collective digital consciousness. Russia emerged as a political factor prompting discussion about possible diplomatic settlements and their implications for Gulf interests. China appeared primarily as a challenge to the information infrastructure supporting the American military presence in the region. Neither Russia nor China featured prominently as a credible alternative to the American security umbrella in the Gulf, this shifted the discussion beyond assessments.

This study contributes to two closely connected fields of research: The first examines the nature of Gulf digital discourse during major security crises and the shifts it reveals in collective perceptions; The second addresses the broader strategic question raised-but not resolved-by the findings: Do these findings reflect a temporary digital response to an exceptional crisis, or do they point to a deeper transformation in Gulf perceptions of the regional security architecture that has underpinned regional politics for decades?



Part One: Introduction and Background

1.1 The American Relationship in the Gulf: Origins and Transformation

Since the establishment of the Quincy Agreement in 1945 between U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt and King Abdulaziz Al Saud, the relationship between the United States and the Gulf states has been founded on an implicit strategic bargain: energy security in exchange for American security guarantees. Over time, this arrangement evolved into an extensive American military presence across the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. Today, between 40,000 and 50,000 U.S. military personnel are stationed across nineteen facilities, including eight permanent bases. These include Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar—the largest U.S. air base in the region—the U.S. Fifth Fleet headquarters in Bahrain, and a wide network of military installations in the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia¹.

The American security commitment to the Gulf deepened following the Iranian Revolution of 1979, when U.S. President Jimmy Carter declared in his "State of the Union Address" on January 23, 1980, what became known as the "Carter Doctrine"², stating explicitly: "Any attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force." This commitment was further reinforced by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait

¹ "U.S. Forces in the Middle East: Mapping the Military Presence," Council on Foreign Relations, June 23, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/articles/us-forces-middle-east-mapping-military-presence>; see also "Mapping US Troops and Military Bases in the Middle East," Al Jazeera, June 12, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/6/12/mapping-us-troops-and-military-bases-in-the-middle-east>.

² The Carter Doctrine was the first formal U.S. policy declaration to designate the Gulf as a region of vital American interests warranting direct military defence. It fundamentally reoriented U.S. strategy from offshore containment to a permanent forward military presence in the region. This transformation was institutionalized with the creation of the Rapid Deployment Force in 1980, which was subsequently reorganized as the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) in 1983, the military command that continues to direct and coordinate the U.S. military presence across the Gulf.

المزيد: Jimmy Carter, "State of the Union Address," January 23, 1980, U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977–1980, vol. XIX, doc. 16, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v19/d16>; see also Cole Bunzel, "Whither the Carter Doctrine? The Biden Administration and the Gulf," Hoover Institution, September 12, 2023, <https://www.hoover.org/research/whither-carter-doctrine-biden-administration-and-gulf>.



in 1990 and the unprecedented American military deployment it generated in the region, before reaching its zenith in the post-September 11 era³.

However, the second decade of the third millennium witnessed the beginnings of fractures in this equation on two levels. At the level of official policy, the American withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 triggered a wave of doubts about the credibility of the American commitment, prompting Gulf states, albeit in a preliminary manner, to consider diversifying their security partnerships without fundamentally abandoning the American umbrella. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Pakistani Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif signed the Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement in Riyadh on September 17, 2025, one of the first collective defense agreements between a Gulf state and a non-American nuclear power. The UAE President Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan deepened his country's defense partnership with India in January 2026, a development that may appear to be a diversification of Gulf security guarantees rather than a rupture with Washington⁴.

The twelve-day war between Israel and Iran in June 2025 also placed Gulf states before a different kind of security landscape. That confrontation erupted on June 13 with a surprise Israeli attack targeting Iranian nuclear facilities⁵, to which the United States joined in its final phase with direct strikes⁶. Iran responded on June 23 by firing missiles at Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, targeting the American military presence on Qatari territory rather than the Gulf as a party to the conflict⁷. The United States brokered

³ F. Gregory Gause III, *The Gulf States in International Political Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 45–78.

⁴ "Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement," Wikipedia, accessed June 1, 2026, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strategic_Mutual_Defence_Agreement; "The Saudi-Pakistan Defense Pact Highlights the Gulf's Evolving Strategic Calculus," Atlantic Council, September 26, 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-saudi-pakistan-defense-pact-highlights-the-gulfs-evolving-strategic-calculus>; "India-UAE Embark on a Strategic Defense Partnership," *The Diplomat*, January 22, 2026, <https://thediplomat.com/2026/01/india-uae-embark-on-a-strategic-defense-partnership>.

⁵ "Twelve Days of Inferno: The Cost of Opening Pandora's Box," Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, 2025, <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/analyses/twelve-days-inferno-cost-opening-pandora-s-box>; "The Dawn of Operation Rising Lion: Unity and Fragility in Iran," Stimson Center, June 23, 2025, <https://www.stimson.org/2025/the-dawn-of-operation-rising-lion-unity-and-fragility-in-iran>.

⁶ "U.S., Israel Attack Iranian Nuclear Targets - Assessing the Damage," Council on Foreign Relations, June 25, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/articles/us-israel-attack-iranian-nuclear-targets-assessing-damage>; "What Operation Midnight Hammer Means for the Future of Iran's Nuclear Ambitions," CSIS, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/what-operation-midnight-hammer-means-future-irans-nuclear-ambitions>.

⁷ "Iran Launches Missile Attack on Al Udeid," Air and Space Forces Magazine, June 24, 2025, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/iran-missile-attack-al-udeid>; "How Iran's Strike on Qatar's Al-Udeid



a ceasefire within hours of that strike through American-Qatari mediation⁸, making America appear effective rather than impotent in that war. There was, in that context of the 2025 war, nothing that compelled the question of the utility of American protection of the Gulf to be raised with any urgency warranting a reconsideration of the regional Gulf security architecture. This contrasts sharply with what the current war produced; the 2026 war came with an entirely different logic, as intensive Iranian attacks targeted Gulf infrastructure itself, prompting the security question to be raised in an unprecedented manner, transforming accumulated skepticism into widespread public digital discourse (the subject of this study).

At the level of digital public opinion, prior studies revealed growing Gulf criticism in the virtual space regarding the performance of American protection, which remained until 2025 scattered and irregular. The 2026 war transforms this accumulated skepticism into a wave of public digital discourse (the subject of this study)⁹.

1.2 The American-Israeli-Iranian War: An Event That Shatters Security Assumptions

On February 28, 2026, the United States and Israel launched joint strikes against Iranian military and nuclear facilities in an operation Israel called "Lion's Roar" and Washington designated "Epic Fury," resulting in the killing of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and a number of senior commanders¹⁰. Iran responded by launching missiles and drones at targets in Israel, American bases and Gulf cities, as well as targets in Jordan, Iraq, and Syria, in what it termed "Operation True Promise IV"¹¹. Bahrain,

Base Is Changing Regional Dynamics," Amwaj Media, July 28, 2025, <https://amwaj.media/en/article/how-iran-s-strike-on-qatar-s-al-udeid-base-is-changing-regional-dynamics>.

⁸ "U.S. and Qatari Forces Successfully Defend Against Iranian Ballistic Missile Attack," U.S. Central Command Press Release, June 24, 2025, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/news/2025/06/mil-250624-centcom01.htm>.

⁹ F. Gregory Gause III, *The Gulf States in International Political Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

¹⁰ "Operation Lion's Roar: How the IDF Planned the Strike on Iran," *Israel Hayom*, February 28, 2026, <https://www.israelhayom.com/2026/02/28/operation-lions-roar-how-the-idf-planned-the-strike-on-iran>; "The Iran Strikes, Explained: How We Got Here and What It Means," American Jewish Committee, 2026, <https://www.ajc.org/news/the-iran-strikes-explained-how-we-got-here-and-what-it-means>.

¹¹ Iran: Unlawful Strikes Across Gulf Endanger Civilians," Human Rights Watch, March 17, 2026, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/03/17/iran-unlawful-strikes-across-gulf-endanger-civilians>; "'Nightmare Scenario' for GCC Countries as Iran Unloads Drones and Missiles," *Breaking Defense*, March 3, 2026, <https://breakingdefense.com/2026/03/iran-attacks-uae-saudi-missiles-drones-gcc-air-defense>.



the UAE, Kuwait, and Qatar all came under direct attack¹², and all were compelled to close their airspace¹³. The GCC states collectively intercepted more than 954 missiles and 2,500 drones in the first weeks of the war¹⁴, with these attacks continuing at a reduced pace even during the ceasefire.

These attacks revealed an unforeseen security fragility: the American missile shield failed to fully repel the Iranian strikes, and the American bases, previously described as the guarantors of Gulf security, became magnets for direct Iranian targeting¹⁵. This is observable across multiple dimensions. At the level of military coordination, the incident of three American fighter jets shot down by Kuwaiti friendly fire on March 2, 2026, revealed fundamental flaws in the joint field coordination system between American and Gulf forces in the midst of battle¹⁶. At the level of civilian life, Qatar resorted to transitioning government employees to remote work starting March 1, extending it on the following day¹⁷. At the political leadership level, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed appeared publicly on March 7, 2026, to declare that his country was "in a state of war", an exceptional characterization in the history of Gulf political discourse, which has long favored restraint in such situations¹⁸. Perhaps the deepest significance in this scene was that Oman, which had long provided a diplomatic channel between Tehran and Washington and had kept its distance from regional alignments, was itself not spared from Iranian targeting. Strikes reached the ports of Duqm, Salalah, and Sohar

¹² "The GCC States and the War on Iran: Rethinking Responses to Unwanted Consequences," Arab Center Washington DC, March 23, 2026, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-gcc-states-and-the-war-on-iran-rethinking-responses-to-unwanted-consequences>; "Iranian Missile, Drone Strikes Target Gulf Countries," *Defense Security Monitor*, March 4, 2026, <https://dsm.forecastinternational.com/2026/03/02/iranian-missile-drone-strikes-target-gulf-countries>.

¹³ "Mapping the Damage: Iranian Strikes on the GCC," IISS, March 27, 2026, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2026/03/mapping-the-damage-iranian-strikes-on-the-gcc>.

¹⁴ "GCC Countries Intercept Over 900 Iranian Missiles, 2,500 Drones, and 17 Aircraft, Says Bahrain," *News on Air*, March 12, 2026, <https://www.newsonair.gov.in/gcc-countries-intercept-over-900-iranian-missiles-2500-drones-and-17-aircraft-says-bahrain>.

¹⁵ "Kuwait Shoots Down US Jets in Friendly-Fire Incident, US CENTCOM Says," *Reuters*, March 2, 2026, <https://www.aol.com/articles/kuwait-intercepts-hostile-drones-third-043826445.html>; "Three US F-15 Warplanes Mistakenly Shot Down by Kuwait Defence Forces as Iran War Escalates," *The National*, March 2, 2026; "US F-15 Friendly Fire Incident in Kuwait, All Pilots Safe," *Military.com*, March 2, 2026, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2026/03/02/us-f-15-friendly-fire-incident-kuwait-all-pilots-safe.html>.

¹⁶ "3 F-15s Shot Down Over Kuwait in Friendly Fire Incident, CENTCOM Says," *Stars and Stripes*, March 2, 2026, https://www.stripes.com/branches/air_force/2026-03-02/kuwait-pilots-crash-20926094.html.

¹⁷ "Remote Work Extended Until Today," *Qatar Tribune*, March 2, 2026, <https://www.qatar-tribune.com/article/222079/front/remote-work-extended-until-today/amp>.

¹⁸ "UAE President Says Prepared to Confront Threats as Iran Attacks Continue," *Al Jazeera*, March 7, 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/3/7/uae-president-says-prepared-to-confront-threats-as-iran-attacks-continue>.



from early March 2026, meaning that neutrality was no longer a sufficient guarantee¹⁹. International analysts collectively described this scene as “the toughest test of the American security umbrella in the region in half a century”²⁰. On March 21, U.S. President Donald Trump threatened to destroy Iranian power plants within 48 hours if the Strait of Hormuz was not opened, before announcing on the 26th a ten-day delay to the strikes in exchange for allowing oil tankers to pass. On April 8, Washington and Tehran reached a preliminary ceasefire through Pakistani mediation²¹.

1.3 The Gulf Digital Space

The digital space in Gulf states is characterized by a system of legal and regulatory constraints that render politically dissenting public opinion socially and legally costly. Nevertheless, like other digital spaces, it expands during major crises within a measured and cautious logic. Digital data has confirmed that the X platform (formerly Twitter) occupies a pivotal position in the Gulf digital space; Saudi Arabia and the UAE are ranked among the world’s highest in social media usage rates, with the Kingdom alone hosting approximately 15.7 million users on the platform, making it among the world’s highest in X usage relative to population²². This has cemented the platform’s presence as the primary Gulf digital space for sensitive political and strategic discourse.

This is where the research importance of this study derives; Gulf digital discourse on strategic security issues may be among the phenomena that academic studies have rarely addressed with appropriate methodological tools. Traditional monitoring instruments were generally not designed to capture this kind of spontaneous, immediate expression that the digital space produces during crises. Digital listening tools may offer a methodological approach to this space, opening the possibility of analyzing what is said in the Gulf public digital sphere outside official and institutional

¹⁹ Oman and the Iran War: Neutrality Under Strain," Arab Center Washington DC, 2026, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/oman-and-the-iran-war-neutrality-under-strain>.

²⁰ "Nightmare Scenario' for GCC Countries as Iran Unloads Drones and Missiles," *Breaking Defense*, March 3, 2026, <https://breakingdefense.com/2026/03/iran-attacks-uae-saudi-missiles-drones-gcc-air-defense>.

²¹ "US-Iran Ceasefire: What It Means for Trump, Tehran, Israel and US Allies," Chatham House, April 8, 2026, <https://www.chathamhouse.org>.

²² Statista, "Social Media Penetration Rate Worldwide by Country," 2025, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/282846/regular-social-networking-usage-penetration-worldwide-by-country>; "X Users by Country (2025)," DataReportal, January 2025, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-global-overview-report>.



channels. The question this study seeks to explore: What did this public digital space produce when the Gulf faced what could be described as the first genuine test of the American umbrella in its modern history?

Part Two: Methodology

2.1 General Methodological Framework

This research relies in its analysis on a methodology combining quantitative and qualitative levels for monitoring public digital discourse, emanating from any of the six Gulf states, on the subject of the relationship with the United States and American protection in the context of the American-Israeli-Iranian War. The query tool and search equation were constructed with precision to target digital interaction emanating from users residing specifically in the six GCC states, while excluding any electronic noise, bots, or AI-generated content without genuine human intervention, and restricting results to Gulf-sourced content directly addressing the topic of American protection.

In this context, Framing Theory constitutes the primary theoretical pillar of the analysis. **Robert Entman** formulated its most cited definition, holding that framing means selecting certain aspects of perceived reality and making them salient in a text in a way that promotes a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral judgment, or treatment recommendation²³. In the context of this study, the theory is partially employed to understand the frames through which digitally interactive users in Gulf-sourced digital spaces chose to address the topic of American protection — particularly the negatively interactive proportion. It thus raises questions: Is it a sovereignty frame touching on national dignity? A security frame? Or an identity and civilizational frame?

2.2 Definition of Operational Terms

Independent Digital Discussion: Any original public post published by any digital user in Gulf states on an open digital source directly addressing the topic of American

²³ Robert M. Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm," *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4 (1993): 51–58.



protection, excluding comments or likes which are counted among interactions rather than independent discussions.

Unique User: Every electronic account in the six Gulf states that published at least one independent discussion on the topic during the monitored period; each account is counted only once regardless of the number of posts.

Interactions: The sum of responses users express toward monitored discussions, including likes, reactions, comments, and shares.

Potential Reach: The maximum estimated number of unique users who could be reached by the discussions based on the follower counts of their authors; represents a theoretical ceiling for dissemination, not an actual number of consumers.

2.3 Monitoring Tool and Sample Construction

The digital listening and analysis tool monitored, during the period between February 27 and April 30, 2026, a period spanning from the day before the outbreak of the war on February 28, 2026, through several weeks after the announcement of the American-Iranian ceasefire on April 8, 2026, a total of 55,600 original discussions on Gulf-sourced open digital spaces directly addressing the topic of American protection of the Gulf or proposed alternatives. These discussions do not include comments or likes, which are counted among interactions rather than independent discussions.

These discussions were produced by 29,800 unique users from the six Gulf states: Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and the Sultanate of Oman. They collectively garnered 531,600 interactions including likes, reactions, comments, and shares, with a potential reach of 4.5 billion users.

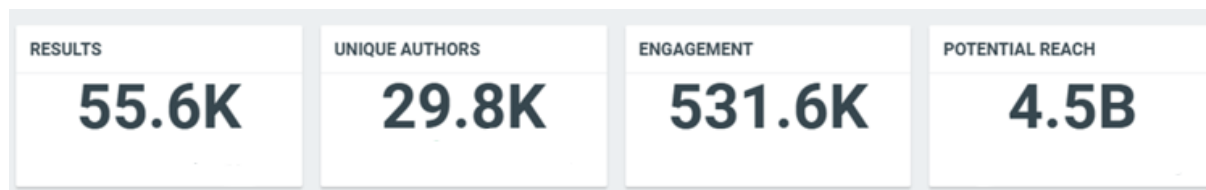
The monitoring tool analyzed a mix of diverse public digital platforms: social media platforms (X, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube), news blogs, and public websites, in both Arabic and English. The sample was not limited to news agencies or official media, but also targeted public digital discourse in its broadest sense.



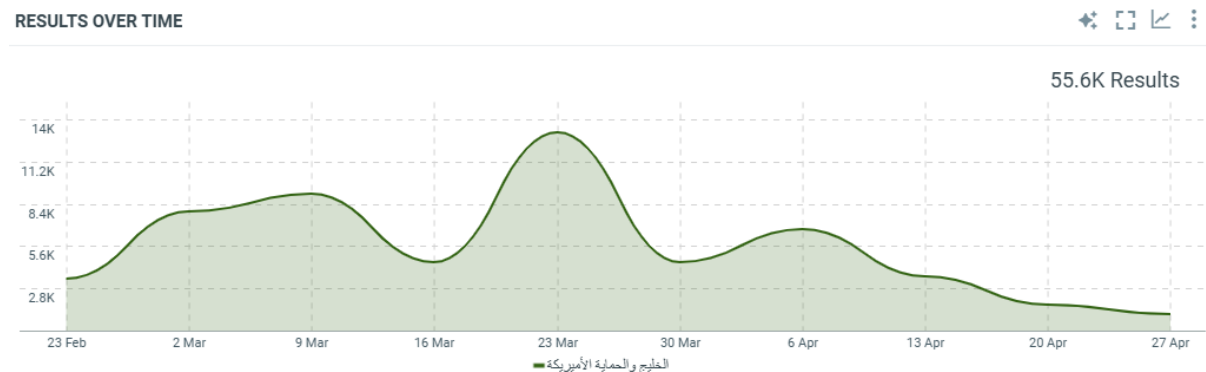
Part Three: Findings and Analysis

3.1 Sample Size of Digital Discourse

The study monitored 55,600 original digital discussions produced by 29,800 unique users, garnering 531,600 interactions. This volume of findings reflects the following implications: First, that the angle of approach in Gulf public digital discourse toward the relationship with the United States centered around the role or concept of protection, with the matter of American protection occupying the center, not the periphery, of Gulf digital interest. Second, that the massive volume of interactions relative to the number of discussions indicates that the content struck a sensitive popular chord.



3.2 Peaks in Gulf Digital Discourse on American Protection



The trajectory of Gulf digital discourse on American protection witnessed four distinct peaks during the period from the day before the war's outbreak through April 30, 2026, each directly correlated with the course of events. This reveals that the Gulf digital space operates on an event-response logic.

The discourse trajectory rose sharply to reach its first peak on March 2–3, driven by the early days of direct Iranian attacks on American bases and Gulf cities in Bahrain, the UAE, Kuwait, and Qatar. The dominant question in the Gulf-sourced public digital discourse regarding American protection at this peak was: Why did the American bases fail to prevent the Iranian strikes on the Gulf?



The trajectory then rose again on March 9, surpassing the first peak, when Speaker of the Iranian Islamic Consultative Assembly Mohammad Qalibaf explicitly declared that Gulf states would remain targets as long as they hosted American bases, a statement that transformed Iranian targeting from a military reaction to a political position placing Gulf states before a new and different equation: the American presence is the cause of the targeting. This coincided with Ukraine's announcement of sending military experts to the region, adding a new dimension about the entanglement of international files on Gulf soil. The trajectory subsequently declined again between March 12 and 20.

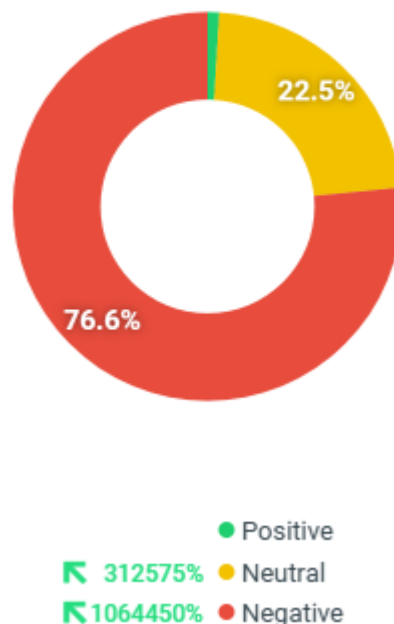
During the period between March 16 and 27, the trajectory reached its absolute peak. Yet what the shape of the trajectory reveals is no less important than what the numbers reveal; the peak was not a sudden digital explosion, but a gradual ascent that began on March 16 and continued rising until reaching its summit on the 23rd. This gradual rise means that there were drivers that preceded President Trump's threat on March 21 to destroy Iranian power plants within 48 hours if the Strait of Hormuz was not opened. The preceding days had witnessed an escalation in Iranian attacks on Gulf infrastructure and escalating Iranian statements about the continuation of targeting, producing in the Gulf digital space a state of accumulated anxiety before Trump's threat added additional fuel to a discourse that was already escalating. Perhaps the deepest significance in this particular threat was its connection to energy and the sustainability of electricity; "electricity" was the dominant word in posts during that period, because the threat to strike Iranian power plants means in the collective Gulf consciousness a possible retaliatory Iranian escalation against Gulf infrastructure in kind, something that directly affects daily life. Then came Trump's retreat on March 26, announcing a ten-day delay to the strikes in exchange for allowing oil tankers to pass, which appeared to Gulf audiences as indicating an inconsistency between Trump's statements and military performance on the ground. What this gradual rise means analytically in its entirety is that Gulf audiences were responding to an accumulated sense that fateful decisions affecting them were being made without their having a voice in them, and that the digital question gradually shifted from "What is happening to us?" to "Who is deciding for us?", which explains why this was the highest peak across the entire period.



The trajectory then witnessed a second gradual rise between March 30 and April 8, a rise that differs in nature from the preceding peaks; it was an expression of a phase of Gulf repositioning. As the ceasefire approached, Gulf digital questions began shifting from "What is happening?" toward "What comes next?" From April 8 onward, the trajectory declined continuously through the end of April. The decline in digital discourse likely reflects the transition of the crisis from a phase of participation in discourse around rapidly unfolding events, which produces digital peaks, to a phase of silent anticipation in which digital production diminishes.

3.3 Sentiment Analysis of Gulf Digital Discourse on American Protection

SHARE OF SENTIMENT



Sentiment analysis reveals the following:

76.5% of the public digital discourse emanating from Gulf states on American protection represents a negative stance toward American protection. Negative expressions constituted the dominant pole of the discourse, ranging across: questioning the effectiveness of American protection in the field; criticizing security dependency as



an invitation to danger rather than a repellent of it; and questioning the utility of hosting American bases, the cost of which was borne by Gulf infrastructure. In this constrained context for Gulf political expression, this proportion represents a qualitative shift in the level of Gulf digital boldness in critically engaging with the major security partnership.

The wave of rejection (76.6%) can be categorized into four distinct discursive frames that escalate in depth. The first is the sovereignty frame, which goes beyond criticizing the performance of American protection in the Gulf to reframing the entire American military presence as the source of danger; the American base on Gulf soil is now considered by Iranian forces in this frame to be a target drawn on Gulf land, which the Iranian strikes, the first and most severe of their kind, proved correct.

The second frame can be described as the pragmatic, which presents an accountability regarding field performance by objective standards: Did America intercept the Iranian missiles directed at the Gulf? Did America protect Gulf infrastructure? This war provided an unprecedented genuine test that revealed a gap between the implicit promise of protection and actual performance on the ground.

The third frame is the alternatives frame, which represents the most advanced maturity in the discourse; this frame of rejecting discourse adopts a forward-looking perspective, searching for and raising scenarios rather than merely criticizing American protection. It raises the question "What comes next?" invoking in general terms partnership with China, Turkey, and India, or building an independent Gulf defense system, or the Omani model of strategic neutrality.

The fourth frame is the Gulf civilizational-identity frame, the most difficult to quantify, which transcends security calculations to raise a deeper question about the Gulf's historical relationship with the West, finding its fuel in a particular scene: states paying a heavy price for decisions they did not participate in making.

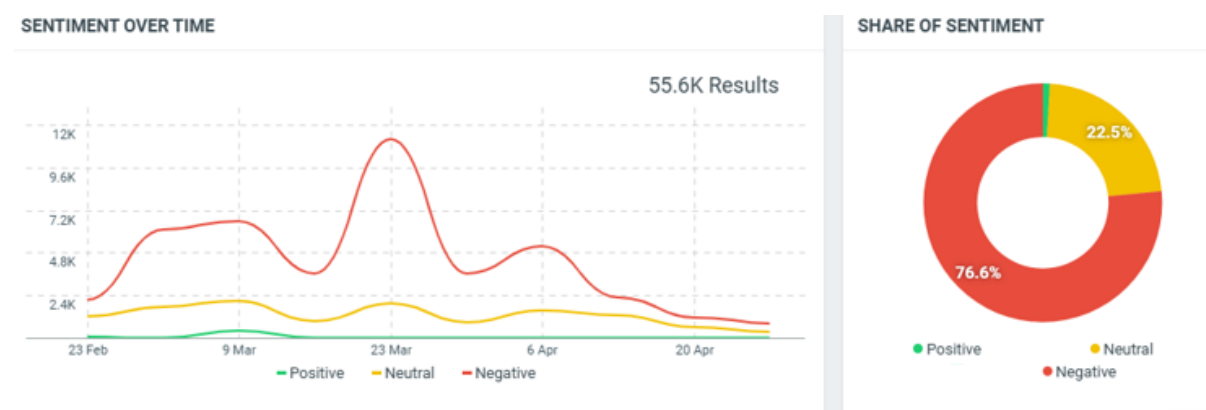
Moving to other sentiment patterns, the findings reveal that 22.5% of Gulf-sourced digital content on American protection had a news character, with users circulating news and information about the war and attacks without expressing a clear position, partly reflecting a culture of caution in the Gulf digital space. However, this neutrality carries an implicit significance; the mere choice to circulate and disseminate



news of American security failure is itself an implicit position with negative analytical significance.

Regarding positive findings, the results indicate that support for American protection did not exceed 1% of Gulf-sourced digital discourse, barely making an impact in the discourse landscape. Its small volume indicates that supporting voices, which scarcely exist, are largely confined to the resharing of official positions, particularly those using the English language that complimented the American presence in the Gulf.

3.4 Temporal Evolution of Sentiments



A comparison of phases of Gulf digital discourse across the period from February 27 through April 30, 2026, reveals a temporally differentiated structure that makes the Gulf digital space an echo of the event rather than an expression of a settled position.

Perhaps the first methodological observation revealed by the temporal trajectory is that the red line (negative digital discourse) and the yellow line (news digital discourse) run nearly in parallel without crossing or exchanging positions. This means that the true driver of the peaks was not a shift in the nature of sentiments from neutrality to rejection, but an escalation in the overall volume of discourse in response to pivotal events while maintaining a constant ratio between sentiments.

In the first phase between February 27 and March 8, the neutral nearly approximated the negative in volume relatively more than in any subsequent phase. This relative approximation is explained by the fact that moments of initial shock push

With the intensification of events in March, the gap between the two lines began widening in favor of the negative, reaching its maximum at the major peak of March 23, which constituted the highest concentration of negative sentiments across the entire period. What distinguishes this phase is not only the rise of negativity but the diversity of its content; negative discourse was no longer confined to criticizing the field failure of the American shield but extended to questioning the logic of the entire alliance and raising explicit strategic alternatives.

In the aftermath of the ceasefire after April 8, the intensity of negativity declined in parallel with the decline in overall discourse volume, but its proportion remained constant at 76.6% without change. This is the most significant datum in the entire sentiment analysis: when the acute crisis ended, those who rejected did not turn to support, but many stopped speaking. The silence here may not be acceptance, but withdrawal from a space that no longer produced events warranting commentary, while the position retained its weight in depth.

يهدد الخليج قدرات عسكرية أنابيب الغاز
ثلاث موارد المنطقة لاختيارات
دفع المنطقة الأمريكيون والإسرائيليون
يكررون الحديث
القواعد
النظام الإيراني
برميل نفط
ولست القواعد
عصفورين بحجر
إسقاط إيران
أكبر كارثة
يغير شيئاً
شرق أوسط
الصواريخ الإيرانية
ليندسي غراهام
بحة الدفاع بداية المشروع
يهتموا بذلك
الغاز الأذربيجانية
النموذج الخليجي

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discursive frames did they think? Compound expressions appear in this cloud reveal the structure of thinking, not merely its subjects.

The answer the cloud reveals is explicit: American protection is discussed as a security guarantee and a problem requiring accountability.

"American bases" then dominates the cloud by an exceptional volume, and this dominance is itself significant; when the Gulf user thinks of American protection, they do not invoke the concept of "guarantee" or "alliance" but rather "the base" as a tangible physical structure on their land. This framing makes the question of protection a question about the direct military presence rather than about the abstract political commitment, which Gulf digital discourse has evidently excluded.

In this context, compound expressions reveal three distinct discursive frames in addressing this protection. The first is the frame of accusation of dual purposes and American goals, embodied in the expression "two birds with one stone" which states explicitly that American protection of the Gulf is not an end in itself but a tool for achieving a broader American-Israeli agenda, the price of which will be paid by the Gulf in security and infrastructure, as clearly appeared during this war. This frame is reinforced by the expression "under the pretext of defense," which articulates an explicit doubt among digital interactors in the Gulf about the declared justification for the American military presence on Gulf soil: the claimed protection is not protection, but a pretext; America achieves its goals in the region and serves Israeli interests under the cover and pretext of defending the Gulf and providing protection.

The second frame can be described as questioning the function of the American military presence, carried by the expression "the bases and not the bases", meaning the American bases designated to ensure protection are not effective bases and did not perform their role at the required level. This embodies the summary of the great paradox in Gulf discourse: the base exists on Gulf soil, and protection is absent from it. When the digital user in the Gulf uses this expression, they are not disputing the existence of American installations but disputing what these installations provide; in their view, these are not protection bases for the Gulf but operations bases serving a broader American agenda, located on Gulf soil not because the Gulf benefits, but because the



geographic location serves Washington. Consequently, in the view of Gulf public digital discourse, the current war has revealed the true nature of these bases from the outset.

The third frame is the economic cost of protection, embodied in the expression "a third of the region's resources for choices" alongside the presence of "gas pipelines" and "oil barrel"; a segment of Gulf discourse links the failure of American protection to the magnitude of the economic price Gulf states have paid for this protection over decades, where the protection did not succeed, and the bill was heavy.

As for the appearance of "Lindsey Graham's" name, it reveals that a segment of digital users in the Gulf was following American internal statements and invoking them in their discourse about protection. This means they do not deal with America as a unified system but distinguish between its conflicting internal orientations, an advanced Gulf political awareness that reframes the question of protection from "Does America protect us?" to "Which America is it that protects us?", meaning that Gulf political awareness has shifted from a genuine and legitimate question about the utility of American protection to an indignant question derived from practical experience clarified by this war, proving the weakness of American protection of the Gulf.

The most significant absence is any word belonging to the vocabulary of positive protection: no "guarantee," no "ally," no "shield," no "security partnership." The Gulf digital lexicon when speaking of American protection is exclusively a lexicon of accountability and recalculation, and this lexical transformation is the deepest thing this cloud says.

3.6 Israel in Gulf Digital Discourse

The data captured a clear presence of Israel in Gulf digital discourse related to the war's impact on Gulf-American security relations. The word Israel appeared in more than 23,800 posts from the total sample, reflecting its weight in Gulf collective consciousness as a complicating variable in the current war's equation. This discourse was dominated by a central framing axis: that the American tie to Israel is what transformed American bases in the Gulf into legitimate Iranian targets, and that Gulf states are paying the price of a war they were not party to. This frame transcended popular posts to occupy space in analyst discourse, with analysts considering that



Netanyahu drew Trump into this ill-calculated war, and that the Israeli influence factor is what will end this war from which they suffered harm, an indirect indication of Gulf digital public opinion's dissatisfaction with what the American-Gulf relations have yielded in the form of harm to the Gulf. This pattern reveals an important semantic transformation: Israel has come to be framed in Gulf digital discourse as a factor that weakens the effectiveness of the American umbrella in the Gulf and widens the circle of Iranian targeting of the Gulf.

3.7 Russia and China in Gulf-Sourced Digital Discourse on American Protection

The extracted data monitored 3,600 posts that mentioned Russia in the context of the war and its relationship to American security protection, distributed across 2,700 unique authors with a total of 28,600 interactions. The discourse centered on questions related to Russia's indirect role in the conflict, particularly whether Moscow was supplying Iran with intelligence information helping it target American bases in the Gulf, in addition to questions about the implications of the relationship between the American and Russian leaderships on the course of the crisis and Gulf states' interests.

This pattern of discourse indicates that Russia was raised in Gulf digital consciousness as an international power capable of influencing its political and strategic balances. Russia's presence in the discourse was not linked to fear of its ability to directly threaten Gulf security, but rather to its potential capacity to influence the behavior of parties engaged in the war or to reshape its political arrangements. This reflects a growing awareness among Gulf users of the nature of contemporary conflicts, which are not limited to direct military confrontation but also encompass intelligence, diplomatic, and cross-border influence network dimensions.

By contrast, the data monitored 5,800 posts mentioning China, distributed across 5,000 unique authors, with a potential reach of 333.9 million users and 18,200 interactions. Notably, the major wave of China-mentioning discourse came late, between April 6 and 13, in a phase when digital discourse had begun moving beyond following direct field developments to attempting to interpret their causes and strategic consequences. These posts centered on allegations that Beijing had also leaked intelligence about American and Gulf bases to Iran, a development that shifted discourse from evaluating the effectiveness of the American military response to



questioning the solidity of the security and intelligence architecture underpinning the American security umbrella.

This finding carries important significance: China was not invoked in the discourse as a ready-made security alternative to the United States, but as an indicator of the transformations the international system is witnessing and the growing capacity of rival major powers to influence the Gulf security environment. From this perspective, speaking of China became an indirect means of reassessing the effectiveness of American security guarantees in a world characterized by multiple centers of power and growing geopolitical competition.

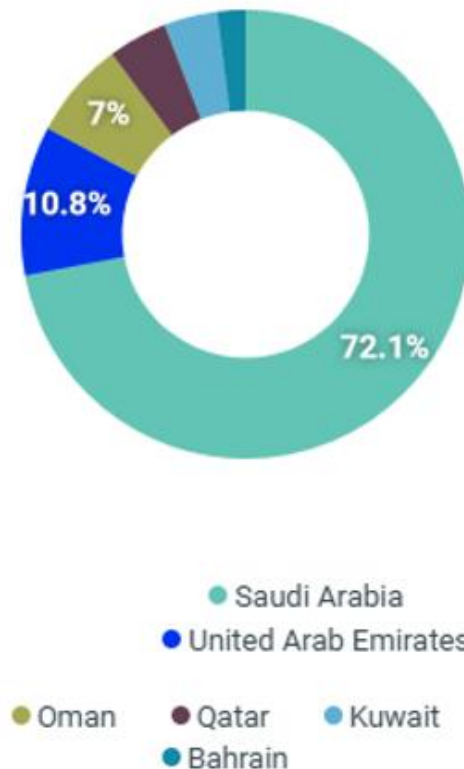
Many posts also pair Russia and China within the same context, indicating that Gulf users did not deal with them as separate actors, but as part of an international bloc competing with American influence. This pairing reveals a qualitative shift in digital discourse; it moved from focusing on the direct parties to the war to thinking about the broader international architecture that produces conflict and influences its outcomes. In this context, Russia and China came to represent in the Gulf digital imagination indicators of the decline of U.S. monopoly on influence over regional security, more than being clear alternatives to existing security arrangements.

Accordingly, the presence of Russia and China in the discourse was not merely a reflection of interest in war developments, but represented an attempt to understand the Gulf's position within the network of great power competition. This indicates that part of the Gulf digital discourse during the crisis transcended evaluation of immediate American performance to raising deeper questions about the future of the regional security architecture amid ongoing transformations in the global balance of power.



3.8 Geographical and Demographic Analysis

SHARE OF COUNTRIES/REGIO...



Saudi Arabia leads Gulf digital discourse on American protection by a vast margin, accounting for 72.1% of the total discourse, followed by the UAE at 10.8%, then Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, and Bahrain at much lower proportions.

The explanation for Saudi dominance at 72.1% intersects two main factors: the demographic weight, as the Kingdom contains approximately two-thirds of GCC population, and the Saudi digital space that is relatively broader in addressing security files compared to other Gulf states. Added to this is the fact that the question of American protection in the Saudi context carried an additional dimension related to the negotiations over the Saudi-American security agreement that was under negotiation before the war, making Saudi discourse on protection more urgent and tied to a specific future.



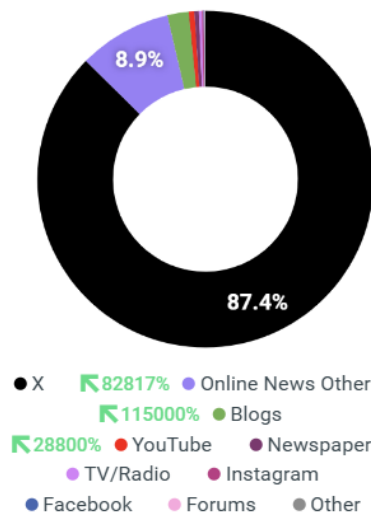
The UAE's second place at 10.8% comes in light of the high rate of Emirati internet usage, although the proportion of its digital discourse on American protection remains far below the Saudi proportion.

Qatar and the UAE record relatively low proportions in this particular discourse; both countries imposed announced restrictions on digital publishing related to security files during the war period, a direct methodological factor that explains the decline in their share of the monitored sample and requires explicit mention when reading this distribution. This can also be explained by the high proportion of foreigners relative to citizens, who perhaps did not participate in the discourse with the same intensity as Gulf citizens due to fear of legal accountability.

Oman's very low proportion remains understandable in light of its security model based on strategic neutrality and mediation, a model that makes the question of American protection less urgent in its digital space compared to its neighbors.

3.9 Analysis of Digital Discourse Distribution Across Platforms

SHARE OF MEDIA TYPES



The X platform (formerly Twitter) dominates Gulf digital discourse on American protection with 87.4% of total monitored discussions, a proportion that makes X virtually the only platform with a measurable analytical effect on this subject specifically. The remaining 12.6% is distributed across multiple sources including other news websites at 8.9%, and blogs, forums, YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram at marginal proportions.

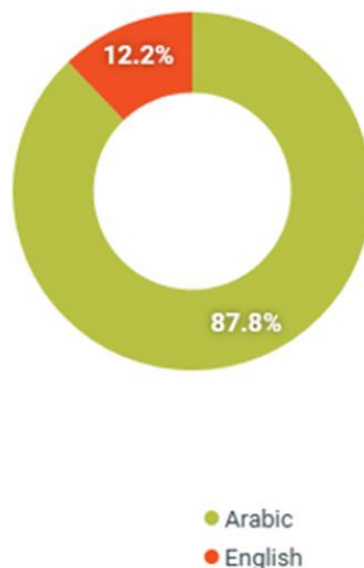


X's dominance at this scale is unsurprising in the Gulf context; the region is historically ranked among the world's highest in platform usage rates relative to population, and X has cemented its presence as the primary Gulf digital space for political and security discourse. What merits reflection, however, is that this dominance in the context of the topic of American protection specifically means that the discourse was mostly spontaneous and individual; X is a platform for personal opinion and immediate commentary rather than produced, edited content. This makes the monitored data closer to the genuine popular mood than to directed institutional discourse.

The minimal proportion of Facebook and Instagram carries dual significance; these two platforms dominate everyday social discourse in the Gulf but withdraw from sharp political discourse. This indicates that the topic of American protection is not a topic of "entertainment or social content" but of intensive analytical discourse that finds its natural environment on X.

3.10 Distribution by Language in the Discourse

SHARE OF LANGUAGES





Gulf digital discourse on American protection is recorded at 87.8% in Arabic and 12.2% in English. While this English proportion may seem modest, it merits analytical reflection, as it reflects two different segments of producers: foreign residents in Gulf states who expressed their direct concerns in their first language in the context of a crisis they were living on Gulf soil, and some Gulf citizens themselves who chose to express themselves in English, whether because it is the second language in Gulf states or because they were targeting a broader audience outside the region.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study presents empirical evidence that the American-Israeli-Iranian War produced an exceptional moment in the trajectory of Gulf public digital discourse on American protection in wartime. The findings showed that approximately three-quarters of Gulf digital discourse carried a negative stance toward this protection, in a digital space historically associated with higher degrees of political caution when addressing security and strategic issues.

These findings contribute to understanding the nature of Gulf digital discourse during major security crises and what it reveals about potential shifts in collective perceptions. The study revealed the existence of a clear gap between official discourse bound by alliance considerations and defense agreements, and the digital popular mood that expressed broad rejection of American protection at a rate reaching 76.6%, albeit in a cautious manner that respects the imposed constraints.

The findings also revealed that rejection trends formed gradually with the accumulation of field indicators related to security performance, indicating that public discourse is influenced more by the cumulative course of events than by a single event. The four peaks monitored during the study period show that Gulf digital discourse interacts at a high degree with pivotal symbolic moments that redefine the understanding and meanings of the crisis for the public.

The notable presence of English also reflects a growing awareness among a segment of users of the importance of the international digital space as a channel for influencing foreign public opinion and decision-makers, and reflects the contribution of foreign residents on Gulf soil to the discourse.



The findings related to Israel, Russia, and China add a broader strategic dimension that transcends the bilateral Gulf-United States relationship. Israel appeared in more than 23,800 posts, with discourse centering on considering the American tie to Israel as one of the factors that contributed to exposing American bases in the Gulf to Iranian targeting, reinforcing perceptions linking Gulf security to the fallout of the broader regional conflict.

Russia, which appeared in approximately 3,600 posts, was mostly associated with political and strategic questions related to mediation roles, potential international understandings, and their implications for Gulf interests. By contrast, China emerged in approximately 5,800 posts within contexts focused on issues of informational and intelligence penetration, reinforcing questions linked to the effectiveness of the American security umbrella in a security environment characterized by increasing complexity and the intertwining of traditional and non-traditional power tools. The escalation of China-related discourse during the post-crisis phase suggests the transition of part of the discourse from direct reactions to a deeper level of strategic thinking about the future of security balances.

In light of this, this study seeks to contribute to the academic debate related to the nature of the transformations that Gulf collective perceptions toward the regional security architecture may witness. While the findings document an exceptional digital moment linked to the circumstances of an unusual crisis, they do not permit a definitive conclusion as to whether these trends are a circumstantial expression tied to the exceptional nature of the event or an indicator of a deeper and more enduring shift in the Gulf view of the security architecture that has formed one of the pillars of regional policy for long decades.

The study concludes by affirming that 55,600 Gulf digital discussions represent an important collective record for monitoring how digital public opinion can be said to interact with a major security crisis, and open the field for subsequent studies tracking the trajectory of these perceptions in the post-crisis phase.



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