

## The Reuters Leaks: How Is Saudi Arabia Managing Its Battle with Iran?



According to a Reuters report, which revealed that Saudi Arabia carried out direct military strikes against targets inside Iran in late March in response to Iranian attacks targeting Saudi territory since the outbreak of the current war, the issue of Gulf involvement in this confrontation has once again returned to the forefront, along with the gradual shift from the position of a cautious observer to that of a direct actor in the course of the regional conflict.

The importance of this report lies in the fact that it is the first time information has emerged this clearly about the Kingdom carrying out direct military operations deep inside Iran, reflecting a notable shift in the Saudi approach toward its foremost regional rival, even as Riyadh has officially maintained a policy of silence and has not publicly claimed those operations.

These strikes do not merely reflect—both in timing and significance—the widening scope of the war and its expansion beyond the traditional confrontation

between the United States and Israel on one side and Iran on the other; they also reveal that the region has entered a more complex phase, in which Gulf security and strategic calculations are intertwined in unprecedented ways.

Such strikes once again open the door to reconsidering the Saudi approach to the current war, the limits of the Kingdom's involvement in it, and the nature of the messages Riyadh seeks to send through them. This raises several questions about how these leaks should be read, whether first in their internal Saudi context or, second, within the broader Gulf and regional framework.

Exclusive: Saudi Arabia launched numerous, unpublicized strikes on Iran in retaliation for attacks carried out in the kingdom during the Middle East war, two Western officials briefed on the matter and two Iranian officials said

<https://t.co/roQOErwt5k>

– Reuters (@Reuters) May 12, 2026

What Do These Strikes Mean?

Theoretically, this development carries a number of indicators reflecting a clear shift in the Gulf approach to the ongoing war, foremost among them Saudi Arabia's move from a position of defense and threat containment to adopting the option of direct retaliation. For many years, Riyadh was careful to avoid direct military confrontation with Tehran, even after the 2019 attacks on Aramco facilities, which at the time constituted one of the most dangerous blows the Kingdom had suffered. Yet current indicators suggest that Iranian targets are no longer a "red line" for Saudi decision-makers as they once were.

This development also reveals a clear fracture in the de-escalation agreement brokered by China between Riyadh and Tehran in 2023, which was primarily aimed at reducing tensions and opening new avenues of understanding between the two sides. However, the recent Iranian attacks, followed by a direct Saudi response, have in practice exposed the fragility of that agreement and its limited ability to withstand tests of field escalation, even if diplomatic channels have remained in place and have not been completely shut down.

Among the most prominent implications of this escalation as well is the Saudi shift from a policy of "passive absorption" of Iranian attacks to an attempt to establish a clearer deterrence equation. In the past, Riyadh often limited itself to political condemnation and diplomatic moves, driven by economic and security considerations tied to avoiding a slide into a broad regional confrontation and the repercussions that could have for energy markets and domestic stability.

Today, however, the Kingdom appears to be trying to send a direct message that any targeting of its security or interests will be met with a similar response inside

Iranian territory, in an effort to redefine the rules of engagement between the two sides.

At the same time, however, Riyadh's refusal to officially announce those operations and its silence about them at the time also carry a number of messages and implications related to the nature of the Saudi approach to this escalation and the limits of what the Kingdom seeks to achieve in terms of political and security objectives. This opens the door to many questions about the nature of this strategy, its limits, and its future prospects amid an extremely complex regional landscape.

### Between Escalation and Diplomacy

An initial reading of these leaks suggests that Saudi Arabia chose to pursue a path of direct escalation in response to the Iranian attacks. However, the details contained in the leaks themselves point to a different approach, closer to the concept of "calibrated deterrence," which combines sending military messages while keeping channels of communication and diplomacy open at the same time.

According to the sources that spoke to Reuters, Saudi Arabia did not carry out its military operations suddenly or outside the context of indirect understandings. Rather, they were preceded by messages and signals to the Iranian side, followed by intensive diplomatic activity aimed at containing the repercussions and preventing matters from sliding into open confrontation.

Thus, this escalation did not—as might have been expected—lead to a complete rupture or a comprehensive breakdown in relations between the two sides, but instead resulted in a form of implicit understanding regarding the limits of engagement and the ceilings of escalation.

This understanding was reflected in a number of field indicators, most notably the marked decline in the pace of Iranian attacks on Saudi Arabia, which fell—according to Saudi Ministry of Defense data—from 105 missile and drone attacks during the period between March 25 and 31 to only about 25 attacks during the period from April 1 to 6.

There was also a notable shift in the nature of the launch platforms associated with attacks on the Kingdom, moving from Iranian territory to the Iraqi arena, suggesting an Iranian attempt to move the direct confrontation away from its own territory and display a degree of "goodwill" toward Riyadh.

In return, Saudi Arabia adopted a diplomatic discourse that appeared cautious and somewhat different from some other Gulf rhetoric. Riyadh stressed on more than one occasion the need to stop the war and prevent its expansion into a comprehensive regional confrontation, based on its awareness of the scale of the

repercussions such a war could impose on regional security, the stability of the global economy, and energy markets. At its core, this reflects a Saudi attempt to balance between consolidating a new deterrence equation on the one hand and preserving a minimum level of regional stability on the other.

### The Gulf Is Not a Single Bloc

The data cited in the Reuters report, along with the indicators that followed it, reveal a reality that has become clearer in the context of the current war: the Gulf states are not acting as a unified political or security bloc in dealing with the confrontation against Iran. Rather, they are operating according to differing approaches governed by each state's national security considerations and strategic interests. Accordingly, talk of a unified Gulf position on this war appears closer to political simplification than to an accurate description of the existing reality.

Saudi Arabia, for example, despite being directly targeted by Iranian attacks and then resorting to military retaliation, appears keen to employ that response within a framework of "calibrated deterrence," not within a strategy of open escalation. As reflected in recent political and military moves, the approach here is based on establishing an equation of mutual deterrence that prevents a repeat of Iranian targeting, while at the same time keeping diplomatic channels open and working in parallel to push toward a political settlement of the war rather than engaging in an all-out military path.

Riyadh appears to proceed from the conviction that the collapse of the Iranian regime or the region's descent into a state of comprehensive chaos would not be in the Gulf's interest, but could instead open the door to costly security and economic repercussions for everyone.

By contrast, the Emirati approach appears relatively more hardline, as Abu Dhabi tends toward a tougher view of Tehran that goes beyond the idea of weakening Iranian capabilities to supporting a path aimed at undermining the Iranian regime itself, in clear alignment with the American and Israeli agendas in managing this confrontation.

The UAE also appears less enthusiastic about de-escalation and diplomatic opening than the Saudi position, which has recently contributed to widening the political gap between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi over the management of the war and its regional repercussions.

As for the rest of the Gulf states, Qatar and Oman are broadly closer to the Saudi vision, particularly regarding the priority of political containment and preventing the war from expanding, while maintaining channels of communication with Tehran and avoiding involvement in sharp escalation policies.

Bahrain and Kuwait, meanwhile, despite their relatively hardline positions toward Iran, tend to support the option of weakening Iranian capabilities and curbing its regional influence, but without moving toward an open confrontation that could push the entire region into more dangerous and complex scenarios.

### Shifting, Relatively, Outside the American Umbrella

Riyadh is well aware that any slide into an open and direct confrontation with Iran would carry highly complex economic and strategic costs, especially in light of the direct threat this could pose to navigation through the Strait of Hormuz, or even the possibility of its closure, with all the catastrophic repercussions such a scenario would have for global oil markets, supply chains, and international energy security. Hence, Saudi calculations on this issue appear to be based primarily on avoiding the point of all-out war and trying to keep escalation within limits that can be politically and security-wise controlled.

This orientation, however, does not mean settling for diplomatic neutrality or returning to a policy of complete reliance on the American security umbrella, especially after recent years—most notably the Aramco attacks—revealed the limits of that umbrella’s effectiveness and its ability to provide full protection to Gulf allies.

For this reason, the Kingdom has sought a gradual repositioning in its security approach by adopting a policy that is relatively bolder than it was before the outbreak of the war, based on calculated response and symbolic deterrence, in parallel with maintaining channels of understanding and political communication with Tehran.

In light of these shifts, it can be said that the Gulf states have become, in one way or another, direct parties to the ongoing war, even if the levels of involvement and limits of escalation vary from one capital to another. Although Iran has shown relative understanding of the nature and limits of the Saudi response, the more hardline Emirati positions, along with the escalatory political rhetoric adopted by some Gulf capitals, could push this path toward sharper levels, despite ongoing Saudi attempts to manage Gulf anxiety and frame it within specific ceilings that prevent being dragged into a broad war that would primarily serve external agendas and could harm Gulf interests in both the short and long term.

Perhaps most notably in this context, the rhetoric coming from Saudi Arabia, as well as statements from Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain regarding the “right to respond” and the protection of national security, is singing somewhat outside the American tune, even if it has not yet moved beyond its prescribed course. It reflects—albeit gradually and slowly—a growing Gulf tendency to redefine the

---

security relationship with the United States and reduce complete dependence on it as the sole guarantor of Gulf security.

This is a shift whose contours may become clearer in the coming years, especially with the possibility of new international powers entering the line of security, economic, and political arrangements in the region, such as China, Russia, and India, in ways that could reshape the balance of power and alter the features of traditional alliances in the Gulf and the Middle East more broadly.

---

[رابط المقال](https://www.noonpost.com/en/373981/): <https://www.noonpost.com/en/373981/>