



A person stands next to a motorcycle as smoke rises in the Fujairah oil industry zone, the UAE, on March 3, 2026, amid the US-Israel conflict with Iran.
● AMR ALFIKY/REUTERS



Hundreds of mourners gather at the funeral of Mohamed al-Mosawi in Muharraq, Bahrain, on March 27, 2026. Mosawi's corpse had bruises and marks all across the face and body, inciting the allegations of torture in the hands of Bahraini authorities.
● MIDDLE EAST EYE

among their own citizens. The United Arab Emirates has launched one of the more aggressive Persian Gulf state crackdowns. As of early April, security services in Abu Dhabi alone had reportedly made 375 arrests for filming damage from strikes or “publishing misleading information.” According to the attorney general, the arrests — which swept up people of various nationalities — fell into three expansive categories: publishing authentic but sensitive video clips, fabricating visual content, and “glorifying a hostile state and its political and military leadership”. The deeper subtext concerns Abu Dhabi’s acute sensitivity to any damage to the country’s carefully curated image as an enclave of stability and prosperity and to the nationalism it has worked hard to cultivate among citizens. Protecting both, in the regime’s calculus, requires a firm grip over the informational space, making the “media battle,” as one Emirati official put it at a recent GCC meeting, “no less important than the battle of arms”.

Equally aggressive, if not more so, is Qatar, which attempted to steer a neutral course in the early stages of the war but has hardened its posture as the conflict has dragged on, particularly as Iranian retaliation has inflicted mounting damage on its natural gas infrastructure. As of early March, 313 people had been arrested “for filming and circulating unauthorized video clips, spreading misleading information and rumours, and disseminating content intended to incite public concern,” according to the Qatar News Agency.

Sectarianism

Nowhere is the risk of sectarianism more apparent than in Bahrain, where Shia citizens constitute an estimated majority of the population and have long been marginalized from political and economic power under the ruling Sunni monarchy. The longstanding divide shaped the 2011 uprising and crackdown as well as the marches and protests that erupted at the beginning of the war.

Most were peaceful, but scattered reports of violence have emerged, and arrests following the outbreak of war have since taken on a sectarian hue. This crackdown has moved on two fronts: Security forces reportedly detained 60 to 65 protesters, the majority from Shia neighborhoods, while authorities separately arrested more than 50 individuals for sharing videos and social media posts,

charging them in exceptionally harsh terms with “betrayal of the nation” and, in a few instances, requesting the death penalty. According to a separate nongovernmental source, more than 160 people — including two prominent artists — have been arrested as of mid-March for alleged sympathy for Iran or similar charges. And at least one person detained in connection with the war has died in police custody: a 32-year-old Shia man who had been previously imprisoned and whose body bore signs of torture and blunt force trauma.

In tandem with this crackdown, the Bahraini regime and its supporters have mounted a robust informational campaign with a heavy-handed insistence on national unity. The government-controlled Bahrain News Agency, for example, has published stories with headlines such as “Bahraini families, institutions express solidarity amid Iranian attacks” and “National Guard Commander highlights Bahrain’s security, national unity”.

Hints of sectarianism have also surfaced in Kuwait, which has a sizable Shia minority and has historically faced periods of political strife along Sunni-Shia lines, though not typically to the same degree or as consistently as in Bahrain. Most notably, Kuwait announced in mid-March the arrest of 14 Kuwaiti citizens and two Lebanese nationals in two separate raids, both allegedly linked to the Iran-backed Shia group Hezbollah. While Hezbollah has denied the claim and no attacks resulted from supposed plots, the arrests raise concerning parallels

to the country’s most recent spate of violent sectarianism: in 2015, Kuwait was rocked by a Daesh (Islamic State) attack on a Shia mosque in Kuwait City that killed 27 worshippers, followed by the arrest of 26 Shia suspects with alleged links to Hezbollah. Regardless of a genuine connection between the most recent arrests and Hezbollah, even the appearance of Shia disloyalty at a time of heightened security concerns could threaten the delicate relationship the monarchy has developed with Kuwait’s Shia minority community.

At the same time, Saudi Arabia has portrayed itself as largely immune from sectarian tensions, despite the government’s historically tenuous relationship with the kingdom’s Shia minority community — a focal point of the country’s Arab Spring demonstrations. Staunch regime supporters have pointed to Saudi national unity as the reason behind this relative tranquility, while others indicate a general fatigue with the tired narratives of sectarian divide. The monarchy’s attempt to foster a relatively moderate variant of Salafism while also promoting a Saudi nationalism that is more inclusive of religious — and other — minorities may offer a partial explanation for the absence of sect-based polarization. But without real transparency and independence in the Saudi media landscape, measuring the extent and impact of the reforms is difficult.

Migrant vulnerability

A quieter but no less important aftershock of the war concerns

the disparity between the Persian Gulf’s wealthy citizens and residents and its low-income migrant workers. Migrants account for just over half of the GCC countries’ overall population, according to 2024 World Bank estimates. After three weeks of strikes from Iran, at least 23 civilians have died in Persian Gulf countries, 21 of whom were noncitizens. Further reporting also indicates that the migrant populations may be disproportionately suffering injuries as well, though GCC states have not been releasing comprehensive data on injured persons’ nationalities.

South Asian migrants constitute well over half of the Persian Gulf’s migrant workforce. These workers move from India, Pakistan, Nepal, and Bangladesh for the Persian Gulf’s coveted jobs and the opportunity to send money back to family in their home countries. (India alone receives \$125 billion annually from these remittances.) Still, these numbers do not fully account for the distribution of civilian deaths.

The discrepancy is better explained through the vulnerabilities born of the kafala system, a catchall for practices pertaining to sponsored migrant labor, from foreign consultants to construction workers. Experiences under these systems vary dramatically by sector and country, but systemic abuses generally derive from employers’ extensive control over migrant mobility, often leading to unfair pay, unacceptable housing, unsafe working conditions, and unaccountable subcontracting. Moreover, many of these jobs, such as sanitation, construction, and de-

livery services, are impossible to do remotely. As a result, Iranian attacks pose a disproportionate threat to much of the Persian Gulf’s migrant population, with strikes killing workers at residential sites and in delivery vehicles.

Despite the glaring shortcomings of the kafala system and the war’s uneven impact on these communities, the region threatens to only further exacerbate this existing divide. Even prior to the war, Kuwait recently instated a new law requiring private-sector workers to obtain exit permits from employers. Qatar’s Shura Council had considered doing the same, which would undo reforms responding to international criticism over migrant labor practices preceding the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar. Continuing with these rollbacks may pose too great a reputational risk at a time of increased scrutiny over the region’s stability from the Persian Gulf’s economic partners. Still, as GCC governments crack down in the name of national security — with migrants occasionally caught in the crosshairs — while the war’s economic ramifications apply pressure to regional regimes, the pretext and incentive to revisit recent reforms to this lucrative system may prove too tempting to resist.

Postwar risks

These three governance challenges and social fissures are not new in the Persian Gulf but have been thrown into sharper relief by the Iran war. Of them, securitization and the crackdown on freedom of expression are the most worrisome for the region’s long-term prospects. To be sure, authoritarian retrenchment and consolidation have been features of the post-Arab Spring period, but the new wave of arrests connected to the war threatens to entirely eliminate recent modest gains. Alarmingly, the arrests are targeting not just ordinary citizens and expatriates sharing images or videos but accredited journalists reporting on the war: Both Qatar and Kuwait, among the more tolerant of the Persian Gulf monarchies, have detained journalists amid a broader environment of arbitrary reprisal for coverage of Persian Gulf security.

The resulting lack of transparency could create a vicious cycle in which the war’s full effects, especially on vulnerable

communities, are cloaked from scrutiny by the region’s own citizens and the outside world alike. In Bahrain — the Persian Gulf’s most at-risk state in terms of social cleavages — the absence of news coverage in the war’s early days spawned unverified rumors of violent protests and regional intervention. The opacity continued weeks later in the apparent cover-up of the Shia detainee’s death in custody. Yet, in an encouraging development, the Bahraini entity charged with investigating police abuses arrested and charged the intelligence officer involved, apparently in response to online outrage and pushback. Undercutting the development, however, the monarchy announced on April 19 that it would be reviewing citizenship entitlements for “those who have betrayed the nation”. Beyond sectarianism, wealth disparities and economic marginalization are other fissures the Iran war has sharpened. The prewar kafala reforms, undertaken largely to blunt international criticism, never delivered the security and prosperity that drew migrants to the region, and the war has only widened the gap. While some commentators from the region have celebrated the retention of foreign workers while reporting a lack of tension between citizens and migrants, systemic barriers remain for migrants seeking to relocate, and any rollbacks on migrant protections could further jeopardize regional labor while deterring future expatriates at every economic level.

Even as this war has exposed flaws in governance and economic organization across the Persian Gulf, these trends do not pose a serious risk to national viability — even in states like Bahrain facing inordinate social strife. If anything, the stress tests reveal an opportunity. As regime impulses lurch toward tighter control — whether over perceived security threats or economic downturns — zealotry may prove self-defeating. Draconian measures to monitor and silence disaffected publics risk backlash down the line, and continued failures to protect migrant workers could undermine a vital engine of the region’s economies. Persian Gulf monarchies would do well, then, to accelerate rather than pause their ongoing reforms, fostering greater resilience, inclusivity, and unity.



Migrant workers in their sleeping quarters in the United Arab Emirates
● GHAITH ABDUL AHAD/GETTY IMAGES

The article was first published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.