



Get your priorities right, Malaysia

3 MONTHS AGO
Phar Kim Beng



The current situation in the Gulf is extremely fluid, and rather than declare support for one side or the other, Putrajaya must prepare to evacuate Malaysians working there.

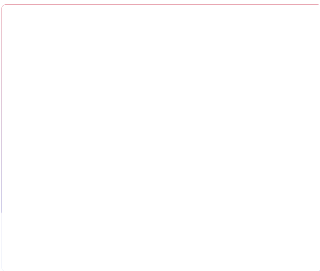


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The unfolding confrontation between Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has entered what can best be described as a hyper-liquid strategic situation.

Alliances are shifting rapidly, retaliatory strikes are multiplying, and assumptions that once underpinned regional stability are collapsing.



For Malaysia, the most responsible response is neither rhetorical support for Iran nor enthusiastic endorsement of the United States and Israel.

The priority must instead be far more practical: preparing to protect and potentially evacuate more than 20,000 Malaysians living and working across the Gulf.

The crisis escalated dramatically following large-scale military strikes on Iran by the US and Israel under Operation Epic Fury.

Iran responded with missile and drone attacks across the Gulf, striking military installations and energy infrastructure in several states.

In doing so, Tehran has placed the entire GCC security architecture under severe strain.

Countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait and Oman now face the prospect of their territories becoming potential theatres of retaliation or military escalation.

The conflict has therefore moved beyond the familiar Iran-Israel rivalry. It is rapidly becoming a broader geopolitical confrontation capable of engulfing the Gulf itself.

This is precisely why the situation must be understood as hyper-liquid.

A hyper-liquid strategic environment is one where alliances, hostilities and calculations change almost by the hour.

Under such circumstances, governments cannot afford to anchor their policy positions to rigid ideological sympathies.

Instead, they must focus on safeguarding their citizens and protecting national interests.

Malaysia has a large diaspora across the Gulf region. Malaysians work in sectors ranging from engineering and finance to aviation, hospitality and education.

Many are professionals in energy-related industries that form the backbone of Gulf economies.

If the war spreads across the GCC, thousands of Malaysians could find themselves trapped in a rapidly deteriorating security environment.

Recent estimates suggest that more than 20,000 Malaysians reside across the GCC countries alone.

The broader Middle East region hosts an even larger number.

This means Putrajaya cannot afford to indulge in grandstanding foreign policy positions.

Its immediate task must be to prepare evacuation mechanisms, strengthen embassy coordination, and identify safe transit routes should the security situation deteriorate further.

Evacuations in conflict zones are never easy. Airspace restrictions, missile threats and congested civilian airports can quickly complicate any evacuation plan.

The experience of earlier crises – from the Gulf War to conflicts in Lebanon and Yemen – demonstrates how quickly evacuation operations can become chaotic if not prepared in advance.

Malaysia must therefore work closely with regional partners, airlines and international organisations to establish contingency plans.

Embassies across Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, Doha, Manama, Kuwait City and Muscat must maintain real-time communication with Malaysian citizens.

Hotlines, emergency registries and safe assembly points must be prepared.

This is not alarmism. It is responsible governance.

At the same time, Malaysia must preserve its longstanding diplomatic balance in the Middle East.

Kuala Lumpur enjoys cordial relations with Iran, the GCC states, Turkey and many other countries across the region.

Malaysia also maintains important economic and security ties with the US and China.

Taking sides in a war that is still unfolding would only erode Malaysia's diplomatic credibility.

The Gulf countries in particular are vital economic partners.

Malaysia's trade, investment and labour links with Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar have expanded steadily over the years. Malaysian companies are involved in construction, services and financial sectors across the Gulf.

Millions of Southeast Asian workers also rely on the stability of Gulf economies.

If the conflict escalates further and disrupts GCC economies, the consequences will ripple across Asean.

Energy markets represent another major concern.

The Strait of Hormuz, through which a significant portion of global oil shipments passes, sits at the centre of the current crisis.

Any prolonged disruption to shipping in this narrow corridor could send oil prices soaring.

Higher energy prices would quickly translate into inflation across Asia, weakening growth prospects and straining national budgets.

Malaysia, despite being an energy producer through Petronas, would not be immune.

Domestic fuel subsidies, transportation costs and the manufacturing sector would all be affected by sustained volatility in oil markets.

This is why Malaysia must approach the crisis with strategic sobriety.

Foreign policy conducted through emotional solidarity or ideological fervour rarely produces sound outcomes.

Malaysia's diplomatic tradition has long emphasised moderation, dialogue and non-alignment.

These principles were carefully cultivated during the Cold War to prevent Southeast Asian states from becoming entangled in conflicts among larger powers. The same logic applies today.

The Iran-GCC confrontation is deeply complex, involving historical rivalries, sectarian tensions, energy politics and great power competition.

It is not a conflict that Malaysia can influence through declarations of support for one side or another.

What Malaysia can do, however, is demonstrate responsible statecraft.

This means prioritising the safety of its citizens abroad, maintaining diplomatic neutrality and advocating peaceful resolution of the conflict.

Kuala Lumpur can continue calling for restraint, dialogue and de-escalation through international forums.

But it must avoid being drawn into the polarising narratives that often accompany wars in the Middle East.

The current crisis may continue for weeks or even months. All of which at the whims of President Donald Trump who demands an unconditional surrender. And also, an Iranian leader who can be acceptable to him. Iranians will revolt against such imposition.

Yet, truth be told its trajectory remains uncertain; since just as Iranian drones and missiles can hit various air bases in GCC, ostensibly backed by Russian intelligence, the US is not going to roll over and pretend nothing is happening.

Thus Malaysia cannot root for Iran, nor can it root for any other party in this confrontation.

With more than 20,000 Malaysians trapped in the Gulf, they may require protection or evacuation at short notice. Malaysia's top government responsibility is to ensure all Malaysians can be safely repatriated from the GCC.

This is a hyper-liquid geopolitical moment such as the current one in West Asia where prudence, neutrality and preparedness are not signs of weakness. Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim cannot do more beyond what he already has. Otherwise, Malaysian nationals will be trapped in an active war zone.

PMX's diplomatic efforts to criticise the US-Israeli operation in Iran are fine examples how to navigate the choppy waters of political and maritime affairs of Malaysia.

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