



## Escalating conflict in Middle East threatens Gulf shipping

Recent attacks between Israel-US and Iran have significantly heightened tensions, raising concerns about the safety of merchant vessels in and around the Arabian/Persian Gulf and Israeli waters. The situation is evolving rapidly, and there is a growing risk of spillover effects impacting shipping.

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## **Operation Roaring Lion / Operation Epic Fury**

On 28 February 2026, the US and Israel launched coordinated strikes against Iran under Operation Epic Fury (US) and Operation Roaring Lion (Israel), targeting IRGC command infrastructure, air-defence systems, missile sites and strategic military facilities. PM Benjamin Netanyahu stated the operation was aimed at removing an “existential threat”. Tehran vowed “crushing retaliation,” and within hours, Iran initiated Operation True Promise 4, launching ballistic missiles and one-way attack UAVs against Israel and striking US forces and facilities in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE, Kuwait, Oman, and Iraq. On the same day, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was killed in the opening strikes, prompting the Iraqi-based militia Kataib Hezbollah (28 Feb) and Lebanon-based Hezbollah (1 Mar) to join hostilities in support of Tehran. As of 12 March, the war remains ongoing, with immediate spillover risk to Gulf airspace, regional energy infrastructure and maritime traffic.

## **US, Israel and Iran**

- Over the past 24 hours, US and Israeli strikes have continued to be reported across Tehran, with new strikes reported targeting Basij and internal security infrastructure across the capital, including Basij and internal security checkpoints in District 1 in northern Tehran and Districts 14, 15, and 16 in southwestern parts of the city, police stations and other internal security facilities, Basij centres and regime-affiliated infrastructure across Tehran Province, and a Bank Sepah building in the capital, reportedly destroying the facility and disrupting in-person and online services.
- On 11 March, a state-affiliated Iranian news agency reported that IRGC will begin targeting US and Israeli technological infrastructure across the region. The outlet identified potential targets including technology company offices and data centres linked to Amazon, Microsoft, IBM, Google, Palantir, Nvidia, and Oracle in locations including Tel Aviv, Herzliya, Haifa and Beersheva in Israel, as well as Dubai and Abu Dhabi in the

## **Bahrain**

- On 12 March, Bahraini authorities reported that fuel storage tanks at a facility in Muharraq Governorate were targeted, resulting in a major fire.
- On 11 March, the Bahrain Defence Force (BDF) stated that air defence systems had intercepted and destroyed over 100 missiles and more than 170 UAVs targeting Bahrain since the onset of the attacks.
- Bahrain's Ministry of Interior said it has arrested four Bahrainis for "espionage activities with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps", including photographing locations in the country.

## **Saudi Arabia**

- On 12 March, the Saudi Ministry of Defence stated that air defence systems intercepted and destroyed three ballistic missiles launched toward Prince Sultan Air Base (PSAB). Authorities also reported intercepting several UAVs across the country, including drones in the eastern parts of Saudi Arabia and in the Empty Quarter, with one drone reportedly heading toward the Shaybah oil field. No damage or casualties were reported.
- On 11 March, the Saudi MoD stated that air defence systems intercepted and destroyed seven ballistic missiles and 21 UAVs targeting locations across the country. Of the missiles, six were launched toward Prince Sultan Air Base and one toward the Eastern Province. UAV interceptions were reported in the Empty Quarter while heading toward the Shaybah oil field, as well as in the Eastern Province, east of Al-Kharj, and in Hafar Al-Batin, with no damage or casualties reported.

## **Oman**

- On 11 March, Omani authorities reported drone-related incidents in Dhofar and along the central coast. Several drones were intercepted near Salalah, while others struck fuel storage tanks at the Port of Salalah, causing a major fire, with no casualties reported. Separately, north of Duqm, one drone was shot down while another fell into the sea, with no damage or injuries reported

## **Kuwait**

- On 12 March, a drone struck a residential building in the Mangaf area in southern Kuwait, causing a limited fire and injuring two people, while fire services evacuated residents and contained the fire. Separately, Kuwaiti authorities stated that air defence systems intercepted a number of hostile drones that penetrated northern Kuwaiti airspace, while additional ballistic missiles heading toward the southern region were also intercepted, with no damage reported.

## **Qatar**

- On 11 March, the Qatari MoD stated that the country was targeted by nine ballistic missiles and a number of UAVs launched from Iran. Air defence systems intercepted all UAVs and eight ballistic missiles, while one ballistic missile fell in an uninhabited area, with no casualties or damage reported.

## **UAE**

- On 12 March, authorities in Dubai reported multiple drone-related incidents across the city, including a drone falling in the Al Bada'a area with no injuries reported, another incident along Sheikh Zayed Road, and a drone striking a building near Dubai Creek Harbour.
- On 11 March, the UAE MoD stated that air defence systems intercepted six ballistic missiles, seven cruise missiles, and 39 UAVs launched from Iran, while two drones fell near Dubai International Airport (DXB), resulting in four injuries

## **Iraq**

- On 11 March, multiple drone-related incidents were reported across Iraq, including four drones shot down near Baghdad International Airport, a drone striking a US diplomatic facility in Baghdad after several drones were launched toward the compound, a drone crashing near a residential home in the Al-Jihad neighborhood in west Baghdad, and a drone intercepted over Erbil near the US Consulate

## **Global**

- The British Royal Navy announced that the naval destroyer HMS DRAGON has departed the UK to head to the eastern Mediterranean to bolster British defences in the region.
- The International Energy Agency (IEA) convened an extraordinary session to discuss decreased oil production and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz. The IEA agreed to release the largest volume of emergency oil reserves in its history, saying it will make 400 million barrels of oil available.
- Leaders of the G7 nations agreed to examine the option of providing escorts for commercial vessels to ensure freedom of navigation in the Gulf. The statement was issued following a call convened by French President Emmanuel Macron to discuss the US-Israeli war with Iran and its impact on rising global energy prices.

# Maritime

- The Director General of the General Company for Ports of Iraq (GCPI), Farhan Al-Fartousi, announced the total suspension of operations at oil terminals except the commercial ports, which remain functional as of 12 March.
- On 11 March, several drones were shot down near the Port of Salalah, Oman, while others struck fuel storage tanks within the port area. The strikes caused a fire at the fuel storage facilities. No casualties were reported and no merchant vessels were damaged.
- The following attacks/claims have been reported in the Gulf and Strait of Hormuz over the past 24 hours.
- On 12 March, Liberia-flagged container ship SOURCE BLESSING was hit by an unknown projectile approximately 35nm north of Jebel Ali, UAE, at 02:19 UTC. The Master reported that the impact caused a small fire onboard. A full damage assessment is currently impaired by darkness. All crew are safe and no environmental impact has been reported.
- On 11 March, Marshall Islands-flagged tanker SAFESEA VISHNU and Malta-flagged tanker ZEFYROS were hit by unknown projectiles approximately 5nm south of Al Basrah, Iraq, in Iraqi territorial waters. The CSO reported that the impact caused fires onboard both vessels and that all crew members were evacuated safely. According to Iraq's state oil marketer SOMO, the vessels were operating in the bypass loading area within Iraqi waters at the time of the incident, with tanker ZEFYROS preparing to enter the Port of Khor Al-Zubair to load an additional 30,000 tonnes of oil product after completing a previous discharge operation.
- On 11 March, the IRGC claimed it attacked Thailand-flagged cargo vessel MAYUREE NAREE and Liberia-flagged containership EXPRESS ROME in the Strait of Hormuz. The IRGC stated that the vessels were targeted by fire after ignoring warnings from the IRGC Navy and attempting to transit the Strait. IRGC Navy Commander Adm. Alireza Tangsiri stated that vessels intending to pass through the Strait must obtain permission from Iran and referenced the two vessels as having ignored such warnings. The reported involvement of MAYUREE NAREE has been confirmed, while there has been no confirmation of an attack on EXPRESS ROME and it may have been limited to a splash in the vicinity.

## Risk analysis

As of 12 March 2026, large-scale hostilities are ongoing across the Persian Gulf, Gulf of Oman and Strait of Hormuz. Confirmed missile and drone attacks have impacted commercial vessels and port infrastructure across multiple Gulf states, while sustained air defense activity and GNSS/GPS interference are ongoing. Amid the escalation between the US, Iran, Israel, and Iran's regional proxies, as well as all the other Gulf states, the maritime environment remains in active kinetic exposure.

Therefore, as of 12 March, Vanguard assesses:

- There is a HIGH risk of deliberate Iranian targeting against all types of vessels transiting the Strait of Hormuz and adjacent Gulf approaches, not just US and Israeli-flagged/affiliated. However, this is particularly the case for US and Israeli-flagged/affiliated vessels stationary, at berth, or at anchor in Gulf ports.
- There is a HIGH risk of Iranian naval approaches, harassment, or tactical intimidation against all commercial vessels in the Strait of Hormuz and adjacent approaches. This could include IRGC naval manoeuvring, aggressive shadowing, coercive signalling, and VHF hailing.
- There is a LOW risk of a full closure of the Strait of Hormuz. While Iran may seek to exert pressure through threats, signalling or limited interference, the presence of US and allied naval forces and ongoing military operations in the region make a sustained official closure unlikely. However, continued attacks on merchant vessels have de facto had the same effect at current.
- There is a MODERATE risk of mine deployment in the Strait of Hormuz or adjacent Gulf approaches. No confirmed mining activity has been observed so far. However, an Iranian attempt cannot be ruled out given the current escalation.
- There is an EXTREME risk of sustained GNSS/GPS/GLONASS interference across the Strait of Hormuz, Gulf of Oman and southern Arabian Gulf, significantly elevating navigational risk amid concurrent naval deployments and missile activity. Interference is particularly pronounced in the approaches to Iranian ports, including Bandar Abbas, Qeshm, Chabahar and surrounding coastal corridors.

## **Strait of Hormuz**

As per [JMIC Update 011](#) , “The maritime security environment in the Strait of Hormuz and the Arabian Gulf remains at a critical level of kinetic risk. Three commercial vessels were struck within the Strait of Hormuz transit corridor between 10–11 March, and there are no confirmed indicators of de-escalation. Recent reporting continues to suggest that vessels which are anchored, drifting, or operating in predictable patterns may face elevated exposure. Support or assistance vessels operating near an affected ship may also be at increased risk.

Mariners continue to report severe GNSS/GPS spoofing, AIS anomalies, and electronic interference affecting navigation and communications reliability across the region. AIS-derived monitoring indicates that commercial traffic through the Strait of Hormuz remains heavily suppressed, reflecting continued operator caution and elevated war-risk conditions.

Beyond direct vessel targeting, the reported strike against the BAPCO facility in Bahrain highlights the continued exposure of regional energy infrastructure, although no sustained port-targeting campaign has yet been confirmed. Several major carriers continue to suspend or defer transits, and vessels remaining in the area are strongly encouraged to maximize distance from military assets and minimize time spent stationary at anchor or alongside in high-risk zones.

Over the next 24–48 hours, JMIC assesses the most credible risks to include:

- Continued UAV and missile activity across the wider Gulf region
- Follow-on incidents near recent maritime event locations
- Stand-off or sabotage-style attacks against stationary vessels, offshore infrastructure, and port areas
- Persistent GNSS interference, AIS anomalies, and communications disruption degrading navigational reliability and increasing congestion-related hazard

The Strait of Hormuz traffic is expected to remain heavily suppressed in the near term. Any vessel transiting the Strait of Hormuz does so at their own risk”.

## **Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb**

As per [JMIC Update 011](#) “ *The situation across the Red Sea, Bab el-Mandeb Strait, and Gulf of Aden remains at a substantial threat level due to the ongoing regional conflict and the continued hostile posture of Houthi forces toward commercial shipping. No verified Houthi attacks against commercial vessels have been confirmed since the escalation of hostilities on 28 February, though the group retains both the capability and demonstrated intent to conduct maritime attacks in the region. Known threat vectors include anti-ship missiles, one-way attack UAVs, and uncrewed surface vessels (USVs). Commercial traffic through the Red Sea and Bab el-Mandeb Strait remains significantly reduced, with approximately 23 vessel transits recorded during the past 24 hours, indicating that many operators continue to avoid the route despite the absence of recent attacks*”.

## **JWC Listed areas**

The Joint War Committee (JWC), have added new regions and extended existing ones. They have added five new regions to the listed areas: Bahrain, Djibouti, Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar. Existing coverage areas have been extended for Gulf of Oman, stretches of the Pakistan coast, and eastern maritime zones with extensions reaching down to the Somali border. These updates have been formalized in Circular JWLA-033 (dated 3 March). Gard clients are advised to reach out to their respective underwriters for more information on this.

# IBF/ITF list of designated risk areas

The International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) and the Joint Negotiating Group (JNG), as social partners of the International Bargaining Forum (IBF), designated the Strait of Hormuz, Persian Gulf and surrounding waters as a High Risk Area on 2 March 2026. Southern stretches of the Gulf of Oman have been designated as extended risk zone. The High Risk Area designation activates enhanced protection measures for seafarers operating in or near the affected waters. The enhanced protection measures include right to refuse sailing, with repatriation at company's cost, additional wages and compensation.

[JOINT ITF-JNG STATEMENT: DESIGNATION OF HIGH RISK AREA IN THE STRAIT OF HORMUZ](#)

## Guidance by Flag States and Port States

We are aware that several Flag States have issued urgent circulars for their fleets, such as India's DGS Circulars [08/2026](#) and [09/2026](#) , and [Marine Advisory 03/2025/Rev.4](#) by Liberia. We strongly advise owners and managers to consult their respective Flag States for the latest requirements and safety protocols. Furthermore, some port states have temporarily suspended navigation within their waters; for instance, please refer to the recent [official announcement by Qatar](#) .

## Electronic interference

Mariners can encounter electronic interference in areas of geopolitical tension. These can be in the form of fake Automatic Identification System (AIS) echoes or interference to GPS and LRIT systems.

For detailed guidance on detecting and mitigating GPS disruption, reference can be made to Intertanko's [Jamming and Spoofing of GNSS](#) publication. Additionally, Gard has published an article [GPS interference in geopolitical conflict zones](#) and a [case study on a grounding incident caused by GPS disruption](#) .

## Contractual implications

The ongoing conflict can lead to charterparty issues, such as if the Master decides to deviate for the safety of the vessel and crew. Who bears the costs depends heavily on the terms of the specific charterparty, particularly the routing and war risk clauses (for example BIMCO's CONWARTIME 2013/2025 and VOYWAR 2013/2025).

These clauses generally protect shipowners if the vessel "may be exposed" to war risks, potentially allowing deviation from the agreed or customary route, for the safety of the vessel, her crew and her cargo in the Master's reasonable assessment. However, the application of these clauses and the financial responsibility for deviation costs hinge on factors such as whether the risks have materially changed since the charterparty's inception, whether a specific route was contractually agreed and the specific wording of any war risk clauses. Whether these clauses could be said to be triggered would have to be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

For a more detailed discussion on contractual and insurance implications, please refer to Gard's article [The Middle East conflict: Contractual and insurance implications](#) .

We are closely monitoring these developments and will issue further updates as new information becomes available

## References

- [MSCIO Advisories](#)
- [JMIC Advisories](#)
- [UKMTO incidents updates](#)

*We would like to thank [Vanguard-Tech](#) for helping us with this alert.*