

Takeaways from the 2026 United Nations General Assembly

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World leaders convened in New York over the past two weeks, as they do every September, for the annual United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). Convened under the theme of "Restoring Trust, Managing Transformation: a United Nations that Delivers for All," this year's gathering reflected a world that has become more fragmented, more disrupted, and more transactional over the past year – and sought to examine whether the existing international system, which President Trump has openly attacked and Prime Minister Netanyahu has repeatedly thumbed his nose at, is still fit for purpose.

The implications for a Middle East transformed over the last year by war, economic disruption, and shifting alliances were front and center throughout the two weeks. Two key themes emerged: the consolidation of a new regional security agenda and the increasingly prominent roles of Iran and Israel as drivers of regional instability. In both cases, U.S. actions and policies helped to accelerate these trends. The challenge now for Washington is figuring out how to reconcile competing priorities – support for Israel, containment of Iran, protection of Gulf security and our role as its guarantor, and preservation of freedom of navigation and trade routes. Failure to balance those priorities risks further regional integration taking shape without the United States or Israeli participation.

UNGA 2026: A Recap

The most important outcome of UNGA this year was not any individual speech, but the extent to which Arab, Gulf, and European members coalesced around a common perspective: the existing regional security order is no longer sufficient to meet the challenges of this moment. The Gulf states have moved beyond vague expressions of concern in recent years (for example, as relates to Gaza) to a sharper focus on the need for mechanisms to prevent conflict from engulfing the region, with a specific focus on violations of sovereignty and freedom of navigation.

In his UNGA address, Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad al Thani called for a regional system of collective security that includes Iran and begins by utilizing diplomacy to re-open the Strait of Hormuz. Other Gulf states reinforced parts of this agenda, with Kuwait calling out Iranian attacks on Gulf states as violations of sovereignty and international law, and Oman emphasizing the need for dialogue and peaceful dispute resolution to address what Qatar described as years of kicking proverbial cans down the road.

Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister condemned both Iran and the Houthis for attacks on its territory, demanded stronger international protection of the Gulf and its maritime routes, and then called for diplomacy to contain the conflict. The UAE, in contrast, led with calls for diplomacy and de-escalation, including through continued engagement with both Israel and Iran. Taken together, the Gulf painted a picture of a growing preference for security diversification –

maintaining the American security umbrella while also expanding diplomatic, economic, and security mechanisms that reduce over-dependence on any single partner, supply route, or de-escalation mechanism.

European leaders came to New York against a backdrop of intensifying war in Ukraine. They prepared to position themselves as the new guarantors of international law, regional partnerships, and strategic autonomy. The European Union (EU) highlighted growing cooperation with the Gulf while the United Kingdom pointed to a reset of its policy towards Israel and the Palestinians. Stepping out from behind historical U.S. leadership on that issue, Saudi Arabia and the EU even co-hosted the ministerial meeting of the Global Alliance for the Implementation of the Two-State Solution, alongside Norway, with broad global participation from almost 100 states and non-governmental organizations.

Iran: A Problem and Part of the Solution Too

Iran emerged from UNGA as both the most immediate security challenge for the Middle East and an unavoidable participant in any international effort to build a more durable regional order. The Gulf states were unequivocal in condemning Iranian attacks on their territories. At the same time, however, those countries implicitly acknowledged that continued, episodic confrontation with Iran is not a sustainable strategy for the region. UAE diplomatic advisor Anwar Gargash noted that, amidst reports that a number of Gulf States are exploring non-aggression side deals with Iran, geography leaves no alternative to engagement.

The emerging paradox is that, while the Gulf states are becoming more, not less, concerned about Iranian belligerence, they are also becoming more determined to develop new frameworks to manage that threat and avoid being repeatedly drawn into cycles of conflict between the U.S. (or Israel) and Iran. If anything, the war has simultaneously shown Iran's ability to disrupt the region's security and economic stability while also revealing the limitations of a security architecture dependent almost entirely on the U.S.

For Washington, this offers both opportunity and challenge. U.S. military capabilities and economic coercion tools are indispensable to our allies (both in the Gulf and beyond). Alone, though, it is clear they are not enough to permanently contain Iran or stave off the effects of its destabilizing activities. The question for Washington is whether it has the focus and resources to be a partner in constructing a new order that addresses this reality – or whether it is content to continue with alternating cycles of economic pressure and military escalation, while the alternative order is developed by others working around us.

Israel: From Regional Integration Anchor to Isolated Actor?

Discussion of Israel at UNGA was, if possible, even more nuanced than that of Iran. Arab and European leaders alike conveyed deep unhappiness with the Israeli government and its treatment of the Palestinians. The Gulf countries, however, took wildly different approaches to addressing that frustration. The UAE, most notably, balanced calls for implementation of the international peace plan for Gaza and halts to Israeli escalation in the West Bank and East

Jerusalem with continued commitment to expanded engagement with Israel. The Emirati delegation remained seated in the General Assembly Hall during Netanyahu's speech and then welcomed him to Abu Dhabi later in the week to discuss bilateral relations and regional challenges. In doing so, the UAE demonstrated it is possible to maintain a strategic (and mutually beneficial economic) relationship with Israel while not shying away from criticism of its policies.

This approach differed markedly from that of other Arab States. Saudi Arabia continues to condition normalization with Israel on a credible path to Palestinian statehood, while Qatar has been among Israel's most vocal critics even as it remains deeply engaged in regional mediation efforts. Other Arab states have sought to compartmentalize their relations with Israel, which in some cases continue to expand on a practical level.

The picture emerging from UNGA is thus complicated: normalization has proven resilient where it supports concrete national interests, but it is no longer driving the broader regional integration envisioned by the Biden administration. This leaves Israel with a strategic choice between continuing to rely on the U.S. to shield it from growing global diplomatic pressure or recognizing that the terms and requirements of regional integration are changing and threaten to leave it behind absent a new approach to the Palestinians.

Conclusion

The Trump Administration has helped to accelerate two divergent trends that it now has to manage: Gulf allies seeking greater regional integration and collective security and European states aligning more closely with Arab positions on Israel. Both trends could serve core U.S. national security interests. Burden sharing has, after all, been a key tenet of President Trump's foreign policy, and better outcomes in Gaza, Syria, and Lebanon require sustained international diplomatic and financial support. A failure to deftly manage this, however, brings considerable risk, including greater international isolation of Israel and a regional integration construct that is less dependent on Israel and more willing to accommodate Iran. Sustained diplomacy – and a reversal of the ongoing sidelining of the State Department and career diplomats who understand these nuances – would be good places to start.