

## Middle East war accelerates regional cross-border cooperation



*The UN-mandated TIR process allows sealed containers to transit GCC borders with minimal inspection. Photo credit: IRU.*

[Greg Knowler, Senior Editor Europe](#) | Apr 15, 2026, 10:40 AM EDT

The huge volume of diverted Middle East-bound ocean cargo that overwhelmed land transport systems in the region has accelerated collaboration between countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) that will outlast the war, regional industry leaders say.

Decisions involving cross-border trade that before the conflict would have taken months are now being decided in days, speeding up road transits, freeing urgently needed capacity and easing customs procedures, a webinar organized by global road transport association IRU heard Wednesday.

“What we have witnessed so far is that it’s not six countries in the region responding independently to a crisis,” said Achraf Ellili, CEO of Flow Progressive Logistics in Saudi Arabia. “It’s a coordinated effort and the entire logistics ecosystem is working together.”

Ellili noted that cooperation between regional port authorities and customs regimes was happening “in real time across borders.”

“That level of GCC coordination is something that I’ve never seen before in nearly three decades in this industry, and it signals a maturity in the regional logistics ecosystem,” he said. “The corridors we have created are not going to go back into the box. This is a new normal for the Middle East.”

About 95% of all goods in the Persian Gulf countries are imported, mostly by ocean, and routed through the Middle East’s largest port — Jebel Ali in the UAE. When the war started on Feb. 28, the Strait of Hormuz was effectively closed to commercial traffic and ocean carriers offloaded containers at ports en route, such as Singapore or Colombo, or at the ports of Fujairah and Sohar on the Gulf of Oman just outside Hormuz, or Salalah on the Arabian Sea.

Forwarders scrambled to find road transport solutions to get the stranded boxes to destinations in the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain and Iraq, and the land logistics were quickly overwhelmed by the wave of inbound volume.

## **Proactive decisions ease bottlenecks**

But seven weeks on and with improving coordination between regional governments, the land transport bottlenecks, while still a challenge on some routes, have eased.

“It was remarkable how proactive governments were with decisions taken in one or two days that normally would take months to happen,” Rami Karout, senior manager of Transports Internationaux Routiers (TIR) and transit development at the IRU, told the webcast.

Karout attributed much of the smoother cross-border flows to the conflict-accelerated use of TIR, which was rolled out in the GCC in 2017. It is a UN-mandated, IRU-managed global customs transit system that simplifies cross-border trade. TIR allows sealed containers to transit GCC borders with minimal inspection using a single guarantee, cutting transit times by up to 92% and lowering costs.

“The use of TIR in submitting advanced cargo information has been optimized during this crisis to facilitate the movement of goods and it has been severely tested,” Karout said.

“Time is critical when it comes to cargo movements at the borders, especially now with costs skyrocketing, and if you have an element where operators can save time at borders, that is precious,” he added.

While road transport will never be able to handle the millions of containers imported into the Persian Gulf every year, its role in the regional logistics chain has been strengthened by the war, according to Hasan Boz, deputy director general at the Turkish Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure.

“After the crisis, the corridor connecting Turkey with Middle Eastern countries should not be considered only as an alternative or transit road,” Boz told the IRU webcast. “The corridor will help increase trade between Turkey and Saudi Arabia, between Turkey and Europe, Jordan and Romania or Bulgaria and Syria.

“This corridor may be a transit route, but it will also increase bilateral trade in the region,” he added.

Ellili said over the past few weeks, shippers have experienced reliability in transit times and predictability of GCC overland corridors and will likely keep a portion of their volume on land as a permanent diversification strategy.

“Optionality is now a strategy for traders and manufacturers and carriers,” he said. “Single corridor dependency is no longer acceptable as a risk option and boards of directors are demanding dual corridor strategies.

“In the last 49 days, we have stress tested the optionality of different corridors and optionality works,” Ellili added. Optionality has moved from a nice to have to a must have.”

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