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Waves of diverted containers swamping Middle East ports

The UAE port of Khor Fakkan (pictured), situated just outside the Strait of Hormuz, is heavily congested as Jebel Ali-bound containers are offloaded early. Photo credit: Gulftainer.

Greg Knowler, Senior Editor Europe | Mar 10, 2026, 1:19 PM EDT

Congestion from unexpected volumes is building at container ports outside the war-torn Persian Gulf as cargo that was en route to ports located on the west side of the narrow Strait of Hormuz is discharged early.

Ports across the Persian Gulf — including regional transhipment powerhouse Jebel Ali, Abu Dhabi, Doha and Kuwait — were shut down after the US launched air strikes on Iran on Feb. 28. Some of the ports have since resumed operations, but vessel arrivals remain limited as the war rages on.

Bottlenecks are growing at ports closest to the Persian Gulf with mounting congestion at Khor Fakkan on the eastern coast of the United Arab Emirates, Sohar in Oman, Karachi in Pakistan and Mundra and Nhava Sheva in India, according to Destine Ozuygur, senior market analyst at rate benchmarking platform Xeneta.

“Essentially, it’s still a matter of ‘how close can we get to our original destination without putting our crews at risk and what does our insurance coverage allow?’” she told the *Journal of Commerce* Tuesday.

Another wave of containers is inbound as carriers look for ports to discharge cargo that had already departed Asia when booking suspensions were announced for the ports in the UAE, Oman, Iraq, Kuwait, Jordan, Qatar, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.

“[The containers] will be split with some discharging at major transshipment hubs like Singapore, Colombo [Sri Lanka] and Tanjung Pelepas [Malaysia] and others trying to get closer to Indian ports or even to the east coast of the UAE,” she said. “But at this stage the closer you get to the conflict, the more you can expect to face delays.”

According to a Xeneta analysis of AIS vessel positioning data and the number of services at each port, Karachi is currently 80% congested, with average wait times of 2.5 days; Sohar is 100% congested, with average waits of 5.9 days; and Khor Fakkan is at 100%.

Nhava Sheva is currently at 57%, with average wait times of 2.8 days, well above the norm for this port, while Mundra is currently at 55%, with vessels waiting two days on average. Aden has gone from being relatively uncongested to between 77% and 100% since March 3 and is currently at 88%, with average wait times of nine days.

Containers trapped inside Persian Gulf

The US launched an intense wave of air strikes on Iran on Feb. 28 with Tehran retaliating, swiftly plunging the region into a no-go area for air and ocean transport. Container terminals and airports across the Persian Gulf shut down as Iran targeted US bases in the UAE, Oman and Bahrain.

While the regional hub of Jebel Ali in the UAE is now operational, an advisory from Crane Worldwide Logistics notes that vessel arrivals remain limited due to network disruption and the high cost of war risk insurance for any vessel attempting to pass through the Strait of Hormuz.

Sea-Intelligence Maritime Analysis noted that 47 regular deep-sea services call at ports within the Persian Gulf, generating a combined 336 individual port calls in January that represented a total nominal capacity of 1.32 million TEUs entering the region. Half of all the port calls were made at Jebel Ali.

Based on that data, the analyst estimated that 204,159 TEUs of capacity remains trapped inside the Persian Gulf, and with no safe routes into or out of the region, this will inevitably lead to equipment shortages in Asia.

“The Persian Gulf is structurally a net-import region for containerized cargo,” Sea-Intelligence wrote in its Sunday Spotlight newsletter, with deep-sea services discharging laden imports and loading empty boxes to reposition back to Asian manufacturing hubs.

“By trapping over 200,000 TEUs of capacity — and the physical boxes sitting on those vessels and in Gulf terminals — the closure simultaneously starves Asian export hubs of vital equipment, potentially causing container shortages in the Far East,” Sea-Intelligence CEO Alan Murphy warned.

The Asia-Europe trades are already facing a growing equipment imbalance from persistent congestion at European hub ports, and Container Trades Statistics (CTS) CEO Nigel Pusey warned that the US-Iran war will worsen the situation.

“The Middle East and India are interwoven into many schedules of many carriers, so there is going to be a massive impact,” Pusey told the *Journal of Commerce*’s TPM26 conference in Long Beach. “It’s probably far too early to say what’s going to happen, but the imbalance is going to get far worse.”

Rates, volatility on the rise

Meanwhile, rate increases into India, Egypt and East Mediterranean ports are reflecting the conflict-driven disruption in the Middle East. Since Feb. 28, rates from Asia to India are up almost 30% and Asia-East Mediterranean are up 11%, according to Xeneta. Carriers are also hitting shippers with significant surcharges that range between $2,500 and $3,500 per TEU.

“Due to the volatility of the ongoing situation, there is a need for alternative solutions to bringing your cargo to final destination, including finding alternative routing and storage in transit,” Maersk noted in an update Monday.

The Maersk emergency freight rate of $3,000 per FEU will be charged on cargo to or from ports in Iraq, Kuwait, Damman and Jubai in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE and Oman, except Salalah, and covers 14 days of storage in transit.

The closure of the Strait of Hormuz, a strategic chokepoint for global energy and trade flows, has triggered volatility in oil and LNG markets and halted shipping through a route responsible for a significant share of global energy exports.

Ben Farrell, CEO of the Chartered Institute of Procurement and Supply (CIPS), said disruption in such a critical region was rippling rapidly across industries, markets and continents.

"This is not just about shipping routes; it is about energy security, global manufacturing and the cost of moving goods around the world," he said in a statement Tuesday. "Supply chains are more resilient than they were five years ago, but prolonged disruption in such a critical corridor will inevitably create cost pressures and operational challenges across the global economy."

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