Oil Reached Four Countries' Shores. Not Every Slick Can Be Tied to the War



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The clearest cases trace damaged vessels to polluted shores. Others remain satellite anomalies, disputed releases or contamination with no established source.

A 13-case inventory confirms conflict-period pollution at several shores, but satellite uncertainty and disputed sources prevent a reliable war-spill total.

Conflict-period oil pollution demonstrably reached shores in four countries, but unequal evidence prevents treating all 13 entries as confirmed war-caused spills or quantifying a regional total. Saudi exposure remains a documented vulnerability, not a documented impact.

Executive summary

- Oil or oily pollution was reported on shores in Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Iran and Pakistan during the conflict. The source at Gwadar remained unresolved, and evidence tying individual landfalls to attacks varied substantially.
- The 13-entry inventory is not a count of 13 confirmed, war-caused spills. It combines acknowledged releases, shoreline pollution of uncertain origin, satellite signatures consistent with slicks and disputed reports. No reliable total-volume estimate follows from those categories.
- Gem No. 2 provides the clearest sequence: vessel damage on October 9, oil reaching northern UAE shores on October 22 and 23, and an official October 30 announcement that the source had been stopped. Cleanup and hull assessment continued.
- Saudi Arabia faces a plausible cross-border hazard because of its reliance on seawater desalination and the Gulf's physical characteristics. The inventory, however, does not establish pollution reaching Saudi waters, contaminating an intake or interrupting drinking-water production.

Key numbers

13

Mixed-confidence inventory entries

Includes acknowledged releases, unresolved pollution, suspected satellite slicks and disputed reports through October 31, 2026.

4

Countries with reported shoreline effects

Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Iran and Pakistan; the source of the Gwadar pollution remained unresolved.

≈800,000 barrels

Estimated cargo aboard Caroline Bezengi

Cargo aboard the damaged tanker, not an estimate of oil released.

≈2 million barrels

Estimated cargo aboard Gem No. 2

Cargo capacity indicates potential consequence but does not measure the spill.

≈70%

Estimated Saudi drinking-water share supplied by desalination

An Associated Press estimate; it describes infrastructure dependence, not an observed wartime disruption.

Thirteen Cases, Unequal Proof

Gem No. 2 is the strongest documentary starting point. The tanker was reported hit off Sharjah on October 9 while carrying about two million barrels of crude. Oil appeared on shores in Umm Al Quwain, Sharjah, Ajman and Ras Al Khaimah on October 22 and 23. UAE ministries said on October 30 that no new leakage had been detected and that pollution had declined substantially, while cleanup and a structural assessment continued. Images carried by the Associated Press still showed oil on a Sharjah beach on November 1. Stopping a source did not mean every affected shore was clean.

The inventory covers conflict-related incidents and observations from February 28 through October 31, 2026, with limited status updates through November 2. The November 4 Iranian claim that four tankers struck mines south of the Strait of Hormuz falls outside that incident cutoff and is not included among the 13 entries. Three other attacks or warnings—including the July 7 strike on the Saudi-owned Wadiyan—also remain outside the count because a release was not established.

Entries were assessed in four bands: acknowledged releases; observed pollution whose source was unresolved; satellite-detected signatures suspected to be oil; and disputed reports. This distinction prevents an attacked vessel from automatically becoming a spill, a radar signature from becoming confirmed oil, or shoreline pollution from being attributed to the conflict without a credible source link. It also explains why the monthly and geographic distributions below describe reporting activity rather than equivalent environmental events.

> The inventory documents a regional pollution problem, but not 13 equivalent, confirmed war spills.

When the inventory entries were first recorded

Chart data

Category	Inventory entries, not confirmed spills
March	1
April	3
May	3
June	2
July	0
August	1
September	1
October	2

Counts describe mixed-confidence inventory entries and must not be read as a monthly series of confirmed spills.

Where the 13 mixed-confidence entries were recorded

Chart data

Category	Inventory entries, not confirmed spills
Iran	4
Kuwait	2
Oman	2
Oman and Iran	2
United Arab Emirates	1
Pakistan	1
International Strait of Hormuz waters	1

The categories show reported locations, not confirmed national spill totals or responsibility.

> **Evidence note**
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> The charts count inventory entries, not confirmed spills. Each entry retains its separate evidentiary status.

From Damaged Tankers to Four Countries' Shores

The UAE case shows the full evidentiary progression: a damaged tanker, a later landfall across several emirates, an official containment statement and continuing cleanup. The vessel's estimated two-million-barrel cargo indicates potential consequence, not the amount spilled. Officials reported that drinking-water supplies were unaffected and kept some beaches closed as a precaution. The tanker's hull was still being evaluated to determine how it could be handled safely.

Off Oman, Caroline Bezengi presented a different continuing risk. The tanker, reported to be carrying about 800,000 barrels of Russian crude, grounded near the Hallaniyat Islands on June 30 after a suspected earlier explosion. Oil reached Ras Madrakah by August 12. Oman's Environment Authority reportedly assessed a slick of about 390 square kilometres and said roughly 12 kilometres of coast had been cleaned. Satellite imagery dated October 26 no longer showed an ongoing release, but that observation did not establish that the remaining cargo had been removed.

The Iran–Oman cases range from documented shoreline contamination to conditional source matching. Following the August 3 attack on Minwan Pioneer northeast of Khasab, pollution was reported around Qeshm and Hengam, affecting about 32,000 square metres of coast and 90,000 square metres of water; Iranian authorities said most of it was cleaned. In September, Greenpeace reported five large slicks near the last known positions of Resco and Kilo. One suspected Resco-related slick was assessed as expanding from about 200 to 400 square kilometres in a day, but the vessel link and reports that Resco may have sunk remained conditional.

At Gwadar, Pakistan, a dense oily layer was reported along about 20 kilometres of coast, with four green turtles found dead. Pakistani officials investigated possible links to the war and to fuel smuggling from Iran; the International Maritime Organization said it could not confirm the source. Lower-confidence entries near Kuwait, Qeshm, Lavan, Khark and Jask relied mainly on satellite imagery or were disputed. Baraka stands out among them because its operator acknowledged a small release of bunker fuel after the empty tanker was struck.

> A tanker's cargo describes what was at risk, not how much entered the sea.



Caroline Bezengi remained on rocks off Oman after pollution reached Ras Madrakah. Later imagery showed no visible continuing release, but cargo-removal status remained material. anews.az

Selected published slick-area estimates

Chart data

Category	Published slick-area estimate, square kilometres
Caroline Bezengi – Greenpeace estimate, September	600
Suspected Resco-related slick – September	400
Caroline Bezengi – Oman authority estimate, August	390

Slick area is not oil volume. The estimates were issued on different dates and their methodologies were not shown to be directly comparable.

> **Evidence note**
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> Area estimates refer to observed or assessed surface extent on different dates. They do not measure released oil volume and are not directly comparable.

A Slick Is Easier to See Than to Attribute

The attribution chain has four separate steps. Analysts must first detect a surface feature, determine whether it is oil, match it to a vessel or facility, and then establish why the release occurred. Several entries stop at the first step. Radar signatures near Shuaiba, Qeshm, Lavan and Jask were described as consistent with slicks, but imagery alone could not identify the material or quantify an oil release. An expanding feature is evidence of changing surface extent, not proof of a particular released volume.

Specific counterevidence further weakens a uniform war-spill count. After the March incident southeast of Kuwait, UKMTO reported oil in the water, but the operator said the damaged tank was for ballast water and denied an oil release. An Iranian official denied an oil spill west of Khark and suggested tanker wastewater as the more likely explanation. At Gwadar, investigators had competing source theories. Limited tracking data and under-reporting by opaque fleets can leave releases undiscovered or unmatched, but those gaps cannot be converted into a numerical estimate of additional spills.

> Detection, substance, source and cause are four different findings.

> **Evidence note**
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> Satellite imagery can reveal a surface anomaly or its extent without necessarily identifying the substance, source vessel, release volume or cause.

Saudi Exposure Without a Documented Landfall

No entry establishes oil reaching Saudi shores or territorial waters, contamination at a Saudi seawater intake, or an interruption at a desalination plant. The closest Saudi-linked casualty was the July 7 attack on Wadiyan near the Strait of Hormuz. Bahri said the tanker remained seaworthy and its cargo was safe; no release was announced. That is evidence against counting the attack as a spill, not proof that regional exposure is negligible.

The exposure is nevertheless consequential. The Associated Press has estimated that desalination supplies about 70% of Saudi drinking water. The Gulf is shallow and semi-enclosed, and the International Union for Conservation of Nature has said its conditions can allow pollutants to persist. A major release in the northern Gulf or near the Strait could therefore become operationally significant if monitoring showed movement toward eastern Saudi intakes. The 1991 Gulf spill offers historical context, but differences in scale, location and circulation make it an unsuitable direct forecast.

Saudi authorities conducted the April 2026 “Response 22” exercise in Jazan, simulating a 35,000-barrel spill with 28 public and private entities. It demonstrates that a large scenario was rehearsed on the Red Sea coast; it does not by itself establish Gulf-coast readiness or likely performance in wartime. Records that would change the present assessment include a verified trajectory toward Saudi waters, contamination detected at an intake, an operational restriction at a plant, or authoritative monitoring ruling out those conditions. Cleanup financing may also become a decision point because international compensation funds were reported to exclude war damage.

> Saudi Arabia’s vulnerability is plausible and important; a Saudi spill impact is not established.



A non-predictive exposure map should locate major Saudi Gulf desalination facilities and documented pollution sites, without drawing unsupported slick paths. svasek.nl

> **Evidence note**
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> No modelled trajectory toward Saudi waters was available for this assessment; no such trajectory is inferred from the locations of regional incidents.

The regional pattern may overstate conflict causation

The strongest competing interpretation is that a conflict-period inventory combines several kinds of marine pollution that should not be treated as one phenomenon. The Khark anomaly had an attributed alternative explanation—wastewater discharged by a tanker—while Pakistani officials considered both conflict-related pollution and fuel smuggling as possible sources at Gwadar. Those explanations materially weaken any claim that every observed slick resulted from an attack.

That challenge does not erase the better-supported cases. The acknowledged fuel release from Baraka, the casualty and shoreline sequence involving Gem No. 2, and the pollution and cleanup associated with Caroline Bezengi establish that vessels damaged during the conflict released pollutants. The defensible finding is therefore narrower than a 13-spill war toll: conflict-related pollution occurred, but its regional frequency and total volume remain unresolved.

A documented regional hazard, not a documented Saudi impact

The evidence supports a regional pattern of conflict-period marine pollution and confirms that damaged vessels released oil or fuel in several cases. It does not support presenting every listed slick as oil, every release as attack-caused, or the cargo aboard Gem No. 2 and Caroline Bezengi as spilled volume. A defensible regional total remains unavailable.

For Saudi Arabia, the prudent judgment is exposure without demonstrated impact. Dependence on desalination, sensitive intakes and persistent Gulf pollution justify close monitoring and contingency planning. The evidentiary threshold for a stronger conclusion has not been crossed: no Saudi landfall, intake contamination or water-supply restriction is documented in the inventory.

Confidence: Moderate confidence in the regional shoreline finding; low confidence in any total war-attributable spill count or volume; high confidence that the inventory does not establish a Saudi impact.