

Examining GCC Investor
Return Expectations: Insights
Amid Elevated Interest
Rate, Global Pressures, and
Geopolitical Tensions



This is the fifth edition of our flagship report on Investor Return Expectations in the GCC. Each year, this study draws feedback from a broad survey of key stakeholders across the region's investment ecosystem, offering a timely snapshot of prevailing investor expectations.

Despite a backdrop of global inflationary pressures, declining interest rates, and geopolitical uncertainty, investor sentiment across the GCC remains broadly resilient. Market participants are actively recalibrating their strategies to adapt to the evolving global and regional landscape as we approach 2026. These intersecting forces continue to shape asset class performance, underscoring the need for closer analysis and strategic agility.

This year's report incorporates responses from 228 participants (208 in 2024), capturing their return expectations across a range of asset classes—including listed equities, government bonds, real estate, private equity, and cash deposits. It also explores their economic outlook for the GCC in 2026 and identifies key areas of concern.

Equities remain the most favored asset class for generating risk-adjusted returns, followed by fixed income and real estate. This preference reflects the anticipated impact of rate cuts on fixed income instruments and the potential for lower capital costs to enhance equity returns in the coming year.

Looking ahead to 2026, the global economic environment remains complex. The IMF has revised its growth forecast to 3.1% for 2026, down from 3.2% in 2025, citing policy adjustments and heightened volatility. Inflation is projected to ease to 3.7% in 2025 from 4.9% last year, supported by tight monetary policies and stabilizing commodity prices despite distortions caused by US tariffs. These macroeconomic trends highlight the importance of adaptive strategies across both public and private sectors.

Geopolitical tensions continue to be the foremost concern for investors across all asset classes, followed by inflation and interest rate movements. Notably, respondents expressed the highest levels of optimism for economic performance in the UAE and Saudi Arabia (similar to previous years), and became

more positive on Oman and Kuwait, driven by fiscal and capital market reforms by governments. However, the level of optimism in Saudi Arabia was slightly lower than previous year, a possible indication of some concerns relating to oil prices, changing regulations, government spending, and tighter liquidity within the Kingdom.

Global uncertainty, US tariffs, and regional geopolitics also impacted precious metals, with Gold and Silver rallying 50-60%+ in the first ten months of the year, which is an unlikely circumstance.

Through these annual surveys, we aim to provide actionable insights into regional market dynamics and investor expectations. As an integrated financial services provider—spanning asset management, brokerage, market making, and investment banking—understanding investor needs is critical to delivering the right products, at the right price, in the right markets.

This report encapsulates the collective intelligence of the GCC investment community and highlights the themes that will shape the region's financial future. We extend our sincere appreciation to all participants for their valuable contributions.

As we navigate the complexities of 2025 and beyond, SICO remains committed to equipping investors with the insights needed to make informed decisions in an ever-changing environment.



**Najla Al Shirawi**Group Chief Executive Officer

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## The Global Economic **Backdrop**

Global growth remains moderate, with notable divergence across major economies. In the U.S., inflation has eased from its 2022-23 peaks but remains elevated in parts of the services sector and labor cost pressures persist. Central banks are balancing growth support, inflation control and financial stability risks. On the fiscal side, government spending is tilted more toward structural priorities (e.g., decarbonization, digitalization) rather than broad cyclical stimulus.

U.S. corporates continue to deliver earnings beats, but forward guidance is becoming more cautious. Consensus earnings growth for the S&P 500 in Q3 2025 is expected at 8.8% y/y, down from 13% in H1. Sectors such as U.S. financials and technology (including Al infrastructure) outperforming, yet analysts remain wary about capex and return on elevated investment. Valuations are elevated: the S&P 500 is trading at 23× forward earnings, above its 10-year average of 18.7×. Earnings are positive but with a smaller margin for error; guidance and capex returns are under closer scrutiny.

#### U.S. S&P 500 Performance

The S&P 500 has risen YTD

14.5%

averages

9-10%

as of mid-November 2025.

the pace has moderated, and market breadth is narrowing.

While this outpaces long-term

With concentration in a few large tech/Al-linked names, the risk of sharper pullbacks in weaker sectors is higher.

Key risks include a weakening labor market, a surprise inflation uptick forcing the Federal Reserve to delay cuts, disappointing corporate guidance (especially capex/Al pay-off), or external shocks (e.g., geopolitical events).

#### Fed Interest Rates



The Fed remains highly data dependent. While rate cuts are expected, the timing and magnitude are uncertain amid sticky inflation and tight labor markets. Real yields remain elevated, exerting

pressure on non-yielding assets. The expectation of future cuts supports risk assets, though policy normalization still has considerable leeway.

Diversification across stocks and bonds remains prudent. Current target range for the federal funds rate:

**3.75** %-**4.00** %.

#### Gold

Precious metals have regained relevance and appear to be entering a higher-price regime.



Spot gold is trading above

**US \$4,100/oz** in November 2025, after

60% YTD gains. Drivers include anticipated rate cuts, persistent inflation risk, central-bank purchases and safe-haven flows amid geopolitical

According to J.P. Morgan Chase & Co. and others, a base case sees gold averaging

uncertainty.

≈ \$3,675 ≈ \$4,000-5,000

/oz by Q4 2025

/oz in 2026

with upside towards

under favorable conditions.

Technology demand remains weak, but investment demand (ETFs / central banks) is strong. Gold's strong performance has re-established it as a portfolio hedge amid elevated valuations and policy uncertainty. However, if real yields rise sharply or the USD strengthens, or if inflation drops sharply and central banks pivot faster than expected, gold could underperform.

#### **Artificial Intelligence (AI)**

Al remains a dominant thematic driver for corporate capex, investor expectations and structural growth narratives but the backdrop is complex. According to the Stanford Institute for Human © Centered AI 2025 AI Index.

U.S. private-sector Al investment reached

with generative Al

\$109 billion in 2024

**\$33.9** billion (up 19% vs. 2023).

In 2025 many large U.S. corporates significantly increased Al-capex budgets; Al-related capex contributed an estimated 1.1 percentage points to U.S. GDP growth in H1 2025, surpassing consumer-spending growth in that period. That said, many companies are still piloting AI; a McKinsey & Company 2025 survey found 88% of organizations use AI in at least one business function, but only 39% report enterprise-wide EBIT impact.

#### 01. The Global Economic Backdrop

While AI is deeply embedded in the narrative, real earnings-line evidence remains thin. For example, Goldman Sachs notes that although **58%** of S&P 500 companies mentioned **AI in earnings calls, few tied it directly to profits**.

#### Valuation risk is increasingly flagged:

with the S&P 500 multiple elevated, some observers worry that Al expectations are "baked in". The transition from "pilot to scale" remains a major structural hurdle, especially for non-tech firms. Companies that redesign workflows, integrate Al deeply and obtain senior-level buy-in are most likely to succeed. Firms with meaningful Al initiatives may access a growth premium, but the heavy upfront capex and long pay-back horizon present risk.

#### **Private Credit**

Private credit continues to grow rapidly, with global AUM now above US \$2 trillion, driven by demand for alternative yield and reduced bank lending

However, risks are increasing. Refinancing pressure is building as higher rates bite, with greater use of PIK (Payment-in-kind) structures and maturity extensions signaling liquidity stress. Covenants and protections have weakened in some ways, heightening loss risk in a downturn. Opacity in valuations and limited disclosure raise concerns over asset pricing, while certain funds face liquidity mismatches as underlying loans remain illiquid. Borrowers in cyclical sectors and highly leveraged PE-backed firms are most exposed, and defaults are expected to rise into 2026.

The asset class remains compelling, but performance is becoming highly manager-dependent, with wider dispersion expected.

# Oil Prices & Geopolitical Backdrop

As of mid-November 2025, crude oil prices are trading at relatively low levels amid supply concerns and weak demand.

West Texas Intermediate (WTI) futures are around

and Brent Crude around

\$60.27

\$64.35

/barrel (Nov 14)

/barrel (Nov 14)

Ongoing geopolitical tensions (e.g., Middle East conflict, sanctions on producers) could threaten supply, while demand is under pressure from slow-growth major economies. On the supply side, OPEC + continues to signal limited further output cuts and several forecasts point toward a potential surplus.



### GCC Economy Outlook

GCC Economies outlook is broadly mixed. While there is still optimism in KSA, it is lesser than previous years and mostly due to uncertainty regarding government spending and broader policy shift. At the same time, investors are most optimistic about UAE, given the current momentum across sectors driven by population growth, white collar expats relocation, government reforms and broader economic growth. Oman and Kuwait have also seen increase in optimism YoY led by government reforms, better fiscal situation (for Oman) and increasing spending.

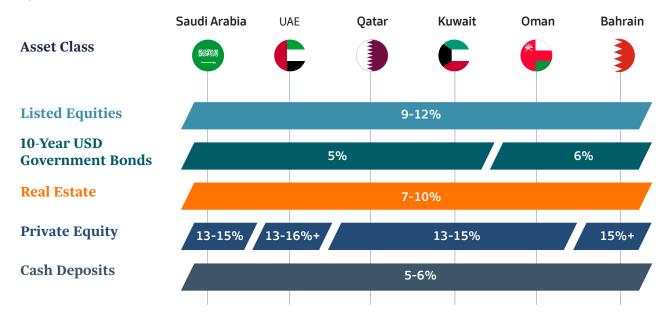
IPO momentum has been relatively tepid in 2025, however, we expect more IPOs at reasonable valuations in 2026 and also more primary activity in Kuwait in particular after a strong recovery in its broader markets in 2026.

### Changing expectations amid geopolitical tensions and inflationary pressures

As part of our annual exercise, we again conducted a survey among C-suite executives, investment and fund managers, business owners, and institutional investors in the GCC to gauge their expectations for investor returns across various asset classes.

#### **Summary of Survey Results**

Minimum Unleveraged Expected Returns by Asset Class in the GCC (reflecting the majority of responses)



The report also examines investor optimism by market, with the highest confidence in

the UAE

and Saudi Arabia

**79**%

**72**%

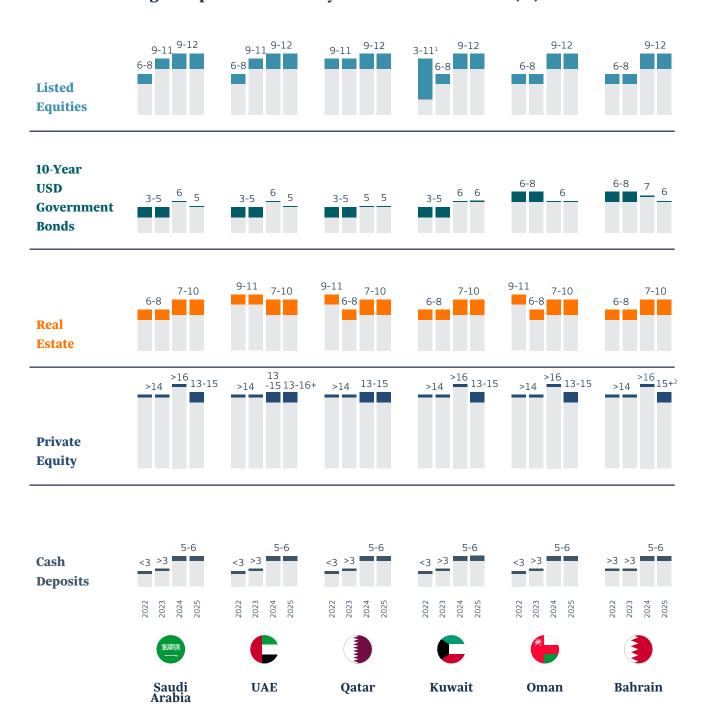
Saudi Arabia's outlook has eased from 83% last year, likely due to uncertainty around some mega projects and government spending.

Meanwhile, the UAE's outlook remained steady, supported by population growth and investor-friendly policies. Oman follows with a more subdued, yet positive, sentiment. While geopolitical risks, inflation, and interest rates rank as the top concerns for investors, there is widespread belief that equities will deliver the best risk-adjusted returns in the next 12 months, followed by fixed income and real estate.

### Changing investor return expectations through the years

Since the report was first published in 2021, the landscape has evolved considerably. In this fifth edition of the Investor Return Expectations in the GCC report, we provide the latest analysis of how investor return expectations have shifted across various asset classes over time.

#### Minimum Unleveraged Expected Returns by Asset Class in the GCCs (%)



 $<sup>^{\</sup>mbox{\tiny 1}}$  an equal number of respondents selected 3-5%, 6-8% and 9-11% for Kuwait in 2022.

Note: The return range in the survey was extended in 2024, bringing up the upper range to >20% from >14% last year, due to investor preference and higher expectations amid inflationary pressures. Year-on-year comparison may

 $<sup>^{\</sup>mathrm{2}}$  an equal number of respondents selected 10-12% and 16%+ for Bahrain in 2025

03.

# Minimum Unleveraged Expected Return by Asset Class in the GCC

- A. Listed Equities
- B. 10-Year USD Government Bonds
- C. Real Estate
- D. Private Equity
- E. Cash Deposits





# 9-12%

across the GCC

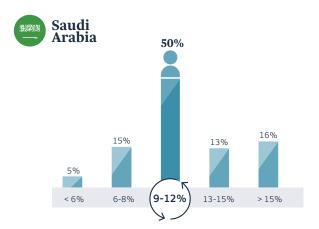
Return expectations across the GCC remain consistent with previous years' expectations, with investors seeking returns between 9-12% for 2025. Based on the 8-9% total return CAGR achieved over the past decade, the prevailing return expectations are not deemed sustainable. In fact, with the US Fed already starting to cut rates, equity as an asset class is expected to become more attractive and could see flows coming in from fixed income. Investor confidence in the GCC capital markets remains somewhat mixed in FY25TD with the biggest market, Saudi Arabia, starkly underperforming other markets. Multiple factors such as liquidity, NIM compression, cost side inflationary pressures, and weakness in the commodities sector have overwhelmed the market. In contrast, Dubai and other markets such as Kuwait and Oman have had a strong year led by both domestic market strength, favorable macros, and positive regulatory reforms.

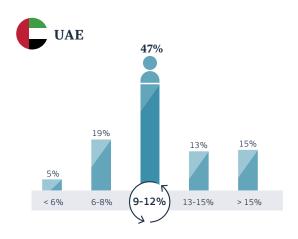
A total return expectation of 9-12% for listed equities aligns with historical trends, not significantly deviating from the 8-9% aggregate CAGR observed across the GCC. The critical question remains the trajectory of the TASI: is the worst performance behind us, or will the market face another year of subpar returns. While IPO markets were relatively subdued in 2025, there is still a strong appetite for quality, fundamentally driven stocks at reasonable valuations.

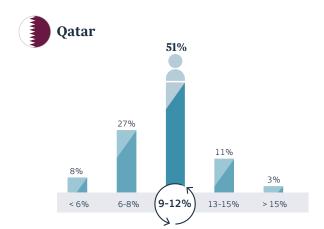


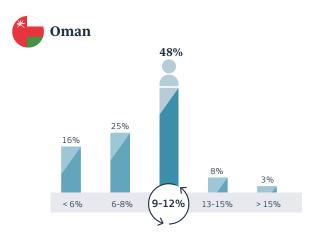
**Nishit Lakhotia** Group Head of Research

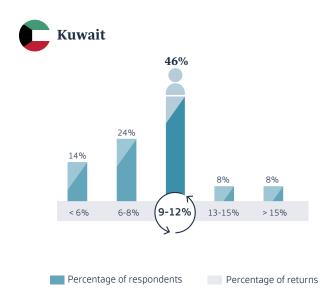
#### **Minimum Investor Annual Returns Currently Expected for Listed Equities, Including Dividend** and Capital Gains

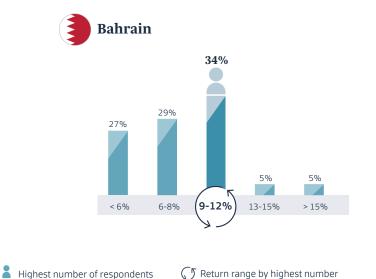












Return range by highest number

of respondents



5%

in Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar

6%

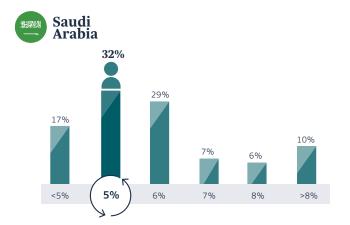
in Oman, Kuwait and Bahrain

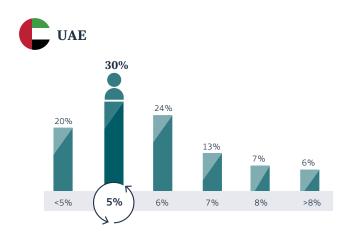
Expected returns across GCC countries currently range from 5% to 6%, which is similar to the previous year, with investors seeking the highest returns in Oman, Kuwait, and Bahrain at 6%. Compared to last year, return expectations have remained unchanged across all GCC countries, except Kuwait, which moved slightly higher from 5% to 6%. Interestingly, Kuwait government finally raised USD 11.25 billion at different maturities, with the USD 5 billion 10-year international bond at 4.65% coupon rate.

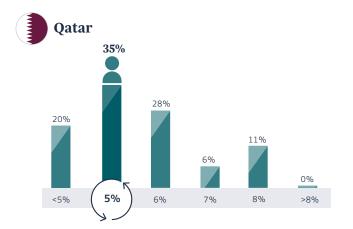
Investors seem a bit too optimistic about how high yields will remain, especially concerning some of the GCC investment-grade papers. We believe that 10-year treasuries are likely to fall below 4% next year, with three more rate cuts priced in and a potentially more dovish Fed, especially when you consider easing inflation and lower base effects. However, it's important to note that both Kuwait and Oman received upgrades this year, and their 10-year yields are expected to be in the mid-4% range. Qatar and the UAE will likely have slightly lower yields, while Saudi Arabia could be a bit higher but they would still all below 5%, while Bahrain possibly in the low 6% range based on how things stand.

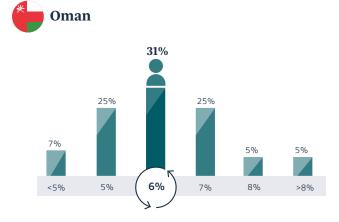


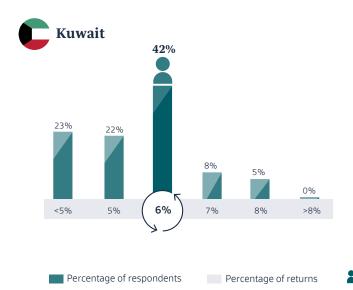
#### Investor Annual Returns Currently Expected for 10-Year USD Government Bonds, Including Coupons and Held to Maturity

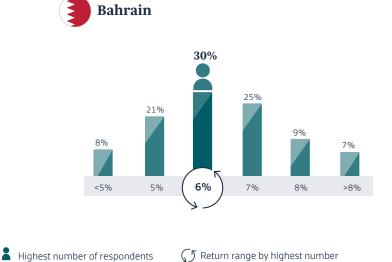














# 7-10%

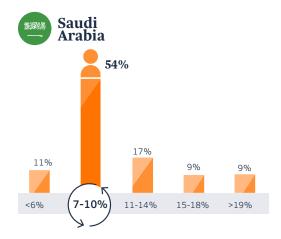
### across the GCC

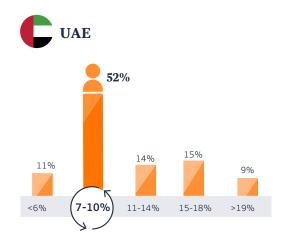
Expected returns for real estate investments across all GCC countries have remained consistent with previous years, ranging from 7% to 10%. There continues to be significant flux in this sector with multiple government reforms and intervention in KSA particularly, especially around "the white land tax" and rental freeze. While the Saudi government has intervened to curb unnecessary speculation in the capital Riyadh and curtail prices, real estate in Dubai and the broader UAE continues to boom on back of population and tourism growth. Even Kuwait's government has rolled out plans to develop large scale community and new cities. A stable asset class and declining interest rates implies that the majority of investors are content with 7-10% returns.

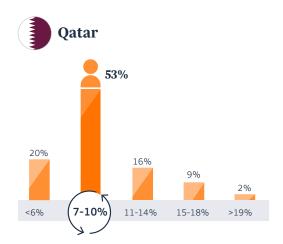
Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 continues to define investment focus in the Kingdom. Recent regulations that include activating vacant land plots and slowing down the cost of living through rental controls, coupled with opening real estate ownership to foreigners, should contribute positively to the long-term maturity of the sector, albeit with some short-term volatility"

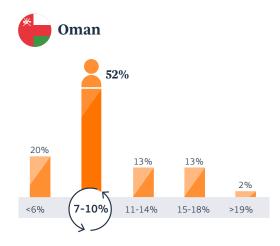


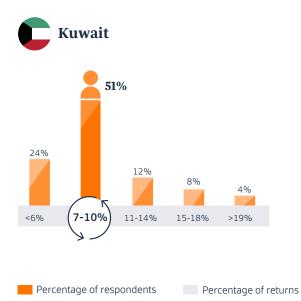
#### Investor Annual Returns Currently Expected for Real Estate, Including Total Distributions and Capital Gains

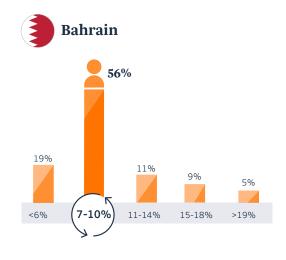














# 13%+

#### across the GCC

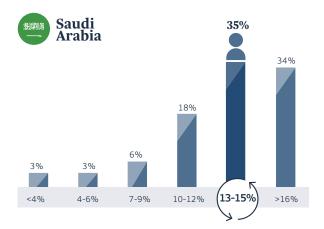
While Bahrain had a positive response in the 10-12% range, the majority (46%) still expected more than the 13% return. Given the illiquidity and inherent risks in private equity, it is natural to expect higher return expectations over listed equities.

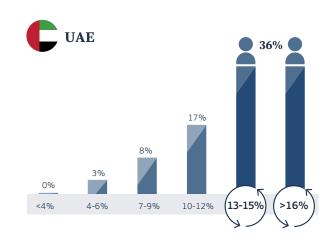
On a YoY basis, more investors in KSA now expect 13-15% return, while last year the return expectation was mostly in the range of 16% and over. Similarly, in the UAE, close to 36% of the respondents expect an over 16% return versus only 23% last year. The return expectation in Qatar has increased from 10-12% last year to 13-15% this year. Only Oman has seen a relatively lower return expectation, possibly a reflection of lower yields as Sovereign was upgraded to investment grade.

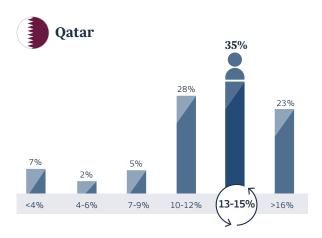
With softer IPO markets and numerous PE investments reaching maturity, private equity firms are finding it more challenging to exit. Continuation funds are now a popular solution allowing investors to swap for a new fund or bring in new capital to benefit from the continued growth of underlying assets.

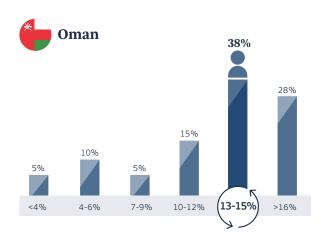


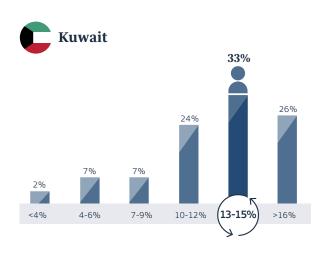
#### Investor Annual Returns Currently Expected for Private Equity, Including Total Distributions and Capital Gains





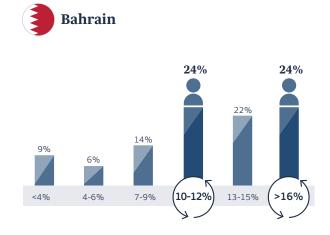






Percentage of returns

Percentage of respondents



Highest number of respondents

Return range by highest number of respondents



5-6%

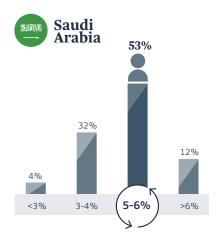
across the GCC

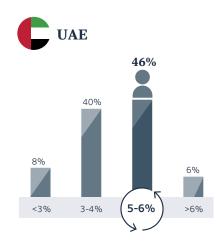
Compared to last year, there has been a rise this year in respondents expecting a 5-6% return on cash deposits. This is unexpected given that interest rates are now on a downward trajectory. Qatar has seen an incline to 5-6%, up from the previous year's 3-4% expectation. The next most favored range is 3-4%, which we find justifiable.

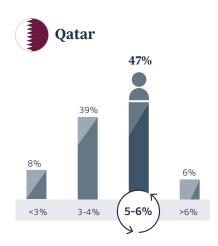
It's interesting to note that median return expectations for cash deposits are still in the 5-6% range. Investors have become accustomed to these high rates for quite some time and may be underestimating the likelihood of upcoming rate cuts. However, this part of the curve remains sensitive to incoming data and monetary policy changes, which have historically shown to be quite volatile. Currently, the path seems clearer, with three more rate cuts priced in. As a result, whatever pays you 5% today is likely to yield around 4.25% in a year.

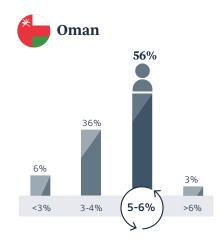


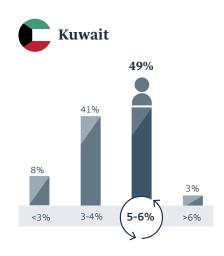
#### Investor Annual Returns Currently Expected for Cash Deposits, Including Total Distributions and Capital Gains

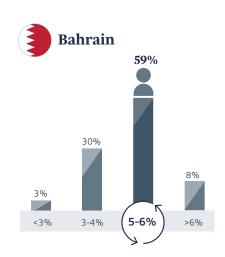












Percentage of respondents Percentage of returns

Highest number of respondents

Return range by highest number of respondents



### **Economic Outlook**

Respondents that are positive about the economic outlook,

79% in UAE

in Saudi Arabia

51% in Oman

# Market participants remain broadly optimistic of the GCC as a whole, with greater optimism witnessed in the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

Positive sentiment in Oman and Kuwait has increased this year, while sentiment in Saudi Arabia has slightly decreased, and optimism on UAE is similar to last year. The majority are broadly neutral for Bahrain.

Qatar's economic outlook is between Positive and Neutral, similar to last year.

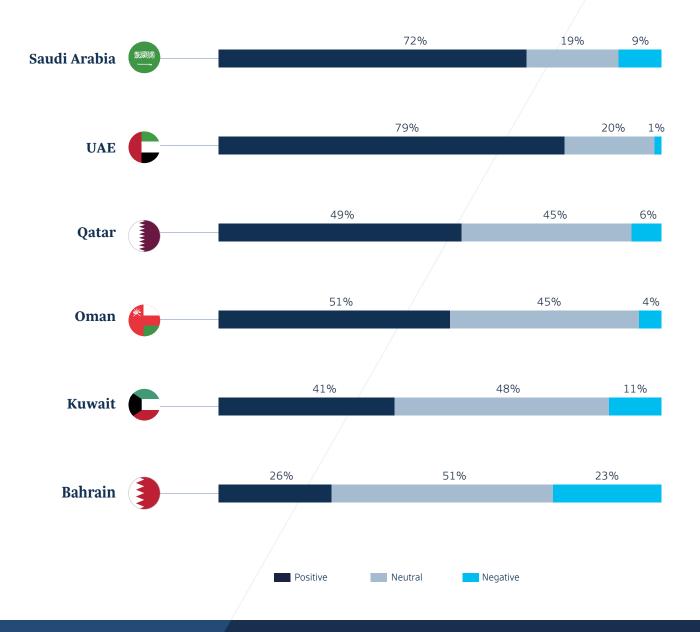
The optimism in Saudi Arabia is lower this year, now at 72% of respondents being Positive, down from 83% last year. This is likely due to uncertainty on some mega projects, government spending, and current pressure on the disposable income of consumers.

At the same time, optimism in Kuwait has increased from a 28% positive response to 41% this year, led by broader reforms, regulatory changes, government spending, and further positive expectations.

Higher optimism in Oman is also not surprising, given fiscal reforms and government efforts to now boost spending and undertake more IPOs along with capital market reforms.

UAE remains the country where respondents are most optimistic – and for good reason. Population growth, investor friendly policies, reforms promoting tourism, and the migration of UHNI families are all driving overall positive tailwinds. The real estate sector has had another successful year and does not show any material signs of slowdown.

#### **GCC Economic Outlook Over the Next 12 Months**





46%

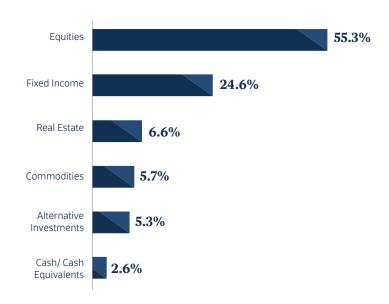
in Bahrain

in Saudi Arabia
72%
vs.
83%
YoY

### Asset class offering the best risk adjusted returns over the next 12 months

# Equities are expected to provide the best risk-adjusted returns over the next 12 months, followed by fixed income and real estate.

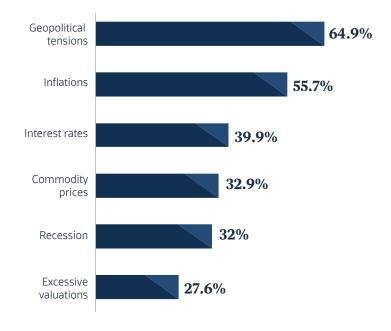
Listed equities were the preferred asset class in terms of risk-adjusted returns over the next 12 months across all GCC countries. Fixed income emerged as the second most preferred asset class overall, being favored more in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. Real estate ranked third, also showing notable preference among investors in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.



#### **Issues Concerning Investors**

#### Geopolitical tensions remain the primary concern among respondents, followed closely by inflation and interest rates, and then commodity prices.

This is not surprising given the disruption caused during the year by geopolitical events and the possibility of further events affecting market sentiments in 2026. Inflation also has been one of the top concerns like last year, as pressure on disposable income affects purchasing power and tariff-related uncertainties. With GCC Central Banks largely aligned to Fed rates and relative to previous years, concerns around interest rates have eased compared to previous years, as participants are anticipating rate cuts. On a YoY basis, concerns of a recession have also taken a back seat, with only 32% of respondents stating it as a concern versus close to 40% previously, suggesting investors have a more confident outlook on the GCC's economic resilience moving into 2026.



## Survey Background

SICO's



annual Investor Returns **Assessment survey** 

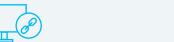
15 September - 27 October 2025



#### **Objectives**

- Maintain a pulse on market participants' economic outlook,
- Return expectations across GCC countries and across asset classes, including stocks, government bonds, real estate, private equity, and cash deposits.







Responses were collected completely anonymously.



Participants had the option to receive a USD 25 Amazon gift card upon completing the survey.

#### Survey Questions, Responses and Mode:

The survey was distributed to participants via a

web-based link, with the option to complete it in

#### **Question #1**

either English or Arabic.

#### What is your current job title?

Participants selected their answers using radio buttons, allowing only one choice, with an "other" option also available.

#### **Question #3**

What minimum total annual returns, without debt or leverage, would you currently expect if you were to invest in: (if you do not invest in certain areas, kindly provide your best estimate) Stocks, 10-Year Government Bond (USD), Real Estate, Private Equity, and Cash Deposits for Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, and the UAE?

Response options ranged from < 3%, to over 20%.

Participants used drop-down boxes where only one answer could be selected. Respondents provided answers for the countries and asset classes relevant to their investment mandates and areas of expertise, without being required to answer questions that did not apply to them.

#### **Question #5**

How do you feel about the economic outlook over the next 12 months for Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, and the UAE?

Response options: positive, negative, or neutral.

Participants used radio buttons, but with one response required per country.

#### **Question #2**

#### In which country are you currently based?

Participants selected their answers using radio buttons, allowing only one choice, with an "other" option also available.

#### **Question #4**

#### Which asset class offers the best risk adjusted returns over the next 12 months?

Response options: Equities, Fixed Income, Real Estate, Commodities, Alternative Investments (e.g. private equity, hedge funds), Cash/Cash Equivalents.

Participants selected their answers using radio buttons, allowing only one selection.

#### **Question #6**

#### Which issues are of the most concern to investors now?

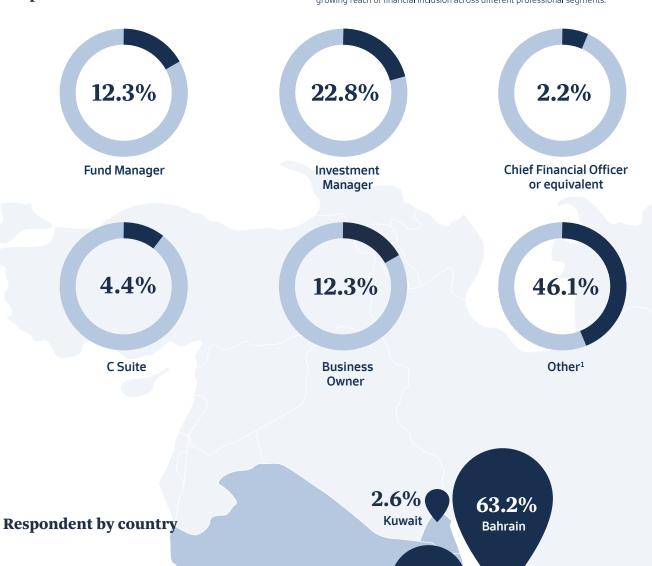
Response options: inflation, commodity prices, recession, interest rates, excessive valuations, geopolitical tensions.

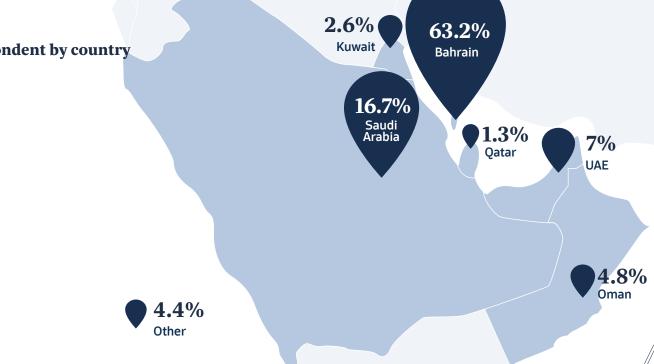
Participants used radio buttons, allowing multiple selections.

# 228 Respondents



#### **Respondent Profile**





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