

Winter Crosscurrents

Strong global equity markets in February were shrouded by escalating tension in the Middle East

Bradford Long, CFA, Managing Partner, Chief Investment Officer

Rob Lowry, CFA, Principal, Associate Research Director

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Key Observations

- *Global equity markets were positive as cooling inflation hopes clashed with mixed Fed signals and rising geopolitical risk. International equities delivered strong gains, benefiting from the demand for AI related hardware, while U.S. large cap equities slipped on continued concern from AI software disruption.*
- *The U.S. Supreme Court struck down the broad tariffs the President imposed under IEEPA. Policy uncertainty remains and the initial market impact was somewhat muted on the announcement.*
- *Tensions escalated in the Middle East, culminating with a coordinated military strike on Iran by the U.S. and Israel on the last day of the month. The humanitarian and geopolitical impact overshadows the immediate near-term market impact.*

Market Recap

February delivered a mix of optimism and unease, as investors grappled with a host of developments throughout the month. Early on, markets took comfort from signs that inflation was cooling as the January CPI report (released in February) came in lower than expected. That helped keep the conversation alive around eventual rate cuts, even as Federal Reserve communications indicated mixed views on the future path of interest rates. Later in the month the U.S. Supreme Court ruled the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) does not authorize the President to impose broad based tariffs. Volatility ticked higher and inflation concerns reignited as geopolitical tensions escalated in the Middle East when the U.S. and Israel mounted a coordinated military strike against Iran on the last day of the month.

Against that backdrop, large-cap U.S. equities finished slightly lower. The S&P 500 Index fell (-0.8%), pressured by continued anxiety around software disruption from AI. Information technology and financials were among the sectors negatively impacted. Sentiment has shifted from the Magnificent 7 to the “HALO” trade (hard-asset, low obsolescence). Investors favored areas of the market perceived to be more insulated and less susceptible to direct disruption from AI. Asset-heavy sectors such as utilities, energy, materials, and industrials were top performers.

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Small caps held up better, with the Russell 2000 Index producing a slight positive return (+0.80%), a reminder that market leadership broadened beyond mega-cap growth as investors leaned into more cyclical and value-oriented areas.

Outside the U.S., returns were notably stronger. International developed stocks (MSCI EAFE) gained 4.6%, while emerging markets (MSCI EM) rose 5.5%. Part of that strength reflected a market narrative that emerging market exposure to the “hardware side” of AI, especially in parts of Asia, looked more durable than stretched U.S. software valuations. Japan was a standout for developed markets as investors viewed the election outcome favorably due to expectations of increased government spending. In Europe, easing inflation pressures and strengthening economic data helped propel markets.

Financial Market Performance		
Index	February	YTD
S&P 500	-0.8%	0.7%
Russell 2000	0.8%	6.2%
MSCI EAFE	4.6%	10.1%
MSCI EM	5.5%	14.8%
Bloomberg U.S. Agg Bond	1.6%	1.7%
Bloomberg U.S. HY Corp Bond	0.2%	0.7%
FTSE NAREIT All Equity REITS	7.5%	10.5%
Bloomberg Commodity	1.1%	11.6%

Source: Morningstar Direct. As of February 28, 2026.

Bond markets offered welcome ballast. Core fixed income (Bloomberg U.S. Aggregate Bond Index) returned 1.6%, supported by a meaningful rally in Treasuries during the month as longer-term yields moved down. High yield lagged, but still finished modestly positive (+0.2%), as carry remained supportive even with pockets of risk aversion near month-end. Real assets were a bright spot. REITs surged 7.5%, benefiting from falling long-end yields and improving sentiment toward rate-sensitive income sectors. Commodities gained 1.1%, supported by firming inflation expectations at the end of the month as U.S.-Iran tensions grew.

Operation Epic Fury

On February 28, 2026, U.S. and Israeli forces launched coordinated military strikes on Iran (Operation Epic Fury), targeting nuclear facilities, military infrastructure and senior leadership. Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, was killed, and retaliatory strikes have since begun. The situation remains fluid.

Military action that results in civilian death and displacement is, of course, a grave humanitarian tragedy. We hope for a swift resolution. Turning to our investment remit, the financial market impact of such events often proves far less severe than the human toll, and where material, tends to be concentrated in specific markets and economic sectors. In the Middle East, that nexus is energy production and its transit. Below, we examine the scale of the potential impact and, most importantly, answer the question: how does this affect your portfolio?

Economic Fall Out

A complete accounting is not yet possible while military action remains kinetic, but we can begin to frame for context. The immediately affected region¹ represents approximately 2.6% of global GDP,² with Iran accounting for approximately 0.4%³ on its own. Importantly, even during active conflict, commerce does not halt entirely. It slows but continues. Assuming a 50% decline in Iran's GDP and a 10% decline across the broader region, the drag on global GDP would be approximately 0.4%, roughly equivalent to five days of U.S. economic output.⁴ Significant for those within the region, but not at a scale that alters global economic trajectory.

Country	2024 GDP	% World GDP	GDP Growth (2024)	GDP / Capita	Primary Export
Saudi Arabia	\$1,239.8B	1.11%	+2.0%	\$35,122	Crude Oil
UAE	\$552.3B	0.50%	+4.0%	\$50,274	Petroleum / Trade Hub
Iran	\$436.9B	0.39%	+3.3%	\$5,779	Crude Oil / Natural Gas
Iraq	\$279.6B	0.25%	+1.4%	\$6,277	Crude Oil
Qatar	\$219.2B	0.20%	+2.4%	\$76,689	LNG / Petroleum
Kuwait	\$160.2B	0.14%	-2.6%	\$32,718	Crude Oil
Regional Total	\$2,888.0B	~2.60%	—	—	—

Source: 2024 Nominal GDP - Affected Region | Source: World Bank Open Data (2024); IMF World Economic Outlook, October 2025. World GDP base: \$111.3 trillion.

Collateral Damage

The impact, however, does not stop at regional borders. Energy is the most consequential export at risk. The Middle East accounted for approximately 30% of global oil production and 17% of global natural gas production in 2024.⁵ Material disruption to these facilities would place upward pressure on headline inflation. The more likely friction point, though, is not at the well or refinery. It is in transit. The Strait of Hormuz, a 21-mile passage, is one of the world's most critical chokepoints for seaborne energy. In 2024, flows through the Strait accounted for more than one-quarter of total global seaborne oil trade and approximately 20% of global oil and petroleum product

¹Region defined as: Saudi Arabia, UAE, Iran, Iraq, Qatar, and Kuwait. Source: World Bank Open Data; IMF World Economic Outlook (October 2025) | data.worldbank.org | As of: 2024.

²Aggregate 2024 nominal GDP of the six-country region totals approximately \$2,888B against world nominal GDP of \$111.3 trillion, yielding ~2.60%. Note: the original paper cited 2.4%; corrected to 2.60% based on sourced data. Source: World Bank Open Data; IMF World Economic Outlook (October 2025) | data.worldbank.org | As of: 2024.

³Iran 2024 nominal GDP: \$436.9 billion = approximately 0.39% of world GDP. Original paper cited 0.3%; corrected. Source: World Bank Open Data — GDP (current US\$), Iran | data.worldbank.org | As of: 2024.

⁴U.S. 2024 nominal GDP: \$28.75 trillion. Daily output ~\$78.8B. A 0.36% drag on \$111.3 trillion global GDP equals ~\$401B, approximately five days of U.S. output. Source: World Bank Open Data — GDP United States | data.worldbank.org/country/united-states | As of: 2024.

⁵Middle East provided approximately 30% of global oil production and 17% of global natural gas production in 2024. Source: IEA, World Energy Investment 2025, Middle East | iea.org/reports/world-energy-investment-2025/middle-east | As of: 2025.

consumption.⁶ Separately, approximately 20% of global liquid natural gas (“LNG”) trade also transited the Strait in 2024, primarily from Qatar.⁷

That flow, however, is not distributed evenly across the globe. Roughly 84% of crude oil and LNG volumes moving through the Strait are destined for Asia,⁸ with China, India, Japan and South Korea as the dominant oil importers and, to a lesser extent, Asia also absorbing the bulk of LNG flows. Europe is a secondary recipient of natural gas. The U.S. has limited direct exposure, given its status as a net commodity exporter. Even so, oil is priced globally, and rising prices would affect U.S. producers and consumers alike.

Market Impact

History, unfortunately, offers no shortage of data points on how markets respond to military conflict. The pattern is consistent: when conflict remains regionalized, the market impact tends to be transitory. Initial reactions are typically negative, as uncertainty drives investors toward safe havens such as bonds and the U.S. dollar.

Equity Market Selloffs and Recoveries Around Geopolitical Events

	Time to Bottom (trading days)	Time to recover (trading days)	Size of selloff	1w from bottom	1m from bottom	3m from bottom	12m from bottom
Median	17	16	(6.3%)	+3.5%	+6.7%	+6.6%	+13.5%
Average	16	112	(7.6%)	+3.9%	+6.7%	+7.7%	+12.2%

Subset of Geopolitical Events and Market Outcomes

Pearl Harbor	17	201	(10.8%)	+8.6%	+6.5%	(3.8%)	+15.3%
Kennedy Assassination	2	1	(2.8%)	+5.2%	+6.7%	+11.5%	+23.9%
9/11 Attacks	6	15	(11.6%)	+7.8%	+11.1%	+18.5%	(12.5%)
Russia Invasion of Ukraine	20	16	(9.1%)	+2.2%	+7.6%	(1.3%)	(4.3%)

Source: Bloomberg Finance, LP., Deutsche Bank (data through 4/12/2024)

⁶In 2024, oil flow through the Strait averaged 20 million barrels per day, more than one-quarter of total global seaborne oil trade and ~20% of global petroleum liquids consumption. Source: U.S. EIA, "Amid regional conflict, the Strait of Hormuz remains critical oil chokepoint" | eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=65504 | As of: June 2025.

⁷In 2024, approximately 20% of global LNG trade transited the Strait, primarily from Qatar (~9.3 Bcf/d) and UAE (~0.7 Bcf/d). Source: U.S. EIA, "About one-fifth of global LNG trade flows through the Strait of Hormuz" | eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=65584 | As of: 2025.

⁸EIA estimates 84% of crude oil/condensate and 83% of LNG transiting the Strait in 2024 destined for Asian markets. China, India, Japan, and South Korea were the top crude oil destinations. Source: U.S. EIA Strait of Hormuz analyses | eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=65504 and eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=65584 | As of: June 2025.

With limited public appetite for a sustained U.S. military engagement in Iran, and the risk that prolonged conflict could lift headline inflation ahead of an affordability-focused midterm election later this year, we expect either resolution or meaningful de-escalation in the near term. The larger puzzle pieces on the board are connecting the events in Iran with developments in Venezuela, pressure on Cuba and Greenland, and the evolving arc of U.S.-China relations. President Trump and Xi are scheduled to meet in a number of weeks to discuss evolving relations.

Given the transitory and regionalized nature we described above, we believe portfolios are well positioned to navigate near-term volatility. We will continue to monitor and should the situation evolve meaningfully we will follow up with the potential impact.

About the Authors



Bradford L. Long, CFA
Managing Partner
Chief Investment Officer

Brad joined Fiducient Advisors in 2012. He is chair of the firm's Investment Committee and a member of the firm's Discretionary Committee, Research Forum, Capital Markets Team and Mission-Aligned Investing Committee. In 2019, Brad was named a "Rising Star" in City Wire's annual Professional Buyer publication for his contributions in the investment manager research industry. Prior to joining the firm, Brad worked in various research capacities at Citigroup and Wells Fargo in New York. He received a BA in Finance and Minor in Economics from The University of Colorado and is a CFA® charterholder and member of the CFA Society of Chicago and CFA Institute. Additionally, he is active with Greenhouse Scholars, a nonprofit providing financial and personal support to under resourced college students. In his free time, Brad loves cooking and spending time with his wife and young sons.



Robert Lowry, CFA
Principal, Associate
Research Director

As a member of the Global Public Markets Team, Rob researches and performs due diligence on fixed income investment managers. He is also a member of our Capital Markets Team. Rob joined Fiduciary Investment Advisors LLC in 2011, which combined with Fiducient Advisors in 2020. Prior to joining the firm, he was an Investment Analyst at USI Advisors, Inc. He received his BA from Bucknell University, is a CFA® charterholder and a member of the CFA Institute and the Hartford CFA Society. Rob volunteers as a member of the Finance and Investment Committee for Chrysalis Center, Inc., a nonprofit organization in Hartford, CT providing support to those struggling with poverty, mental health issues and other challenges. In his free time, Rob enjoys biking with his wife and son, golf, running and platform tennis.

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- **The S&P 500** is a capitalization-weighted index designed to measure performance of the broad domestic economy through changes in the aggregate market value of 500 stocks representing all major industries.
- **Russell 2000** consists of the 2,000 smallest U.S. companies in the Russell 3000 index.
- **MSCI EAFE** is an equity index which captures large and mid-cap representation across Developed Markets countries around the world, excluding the U.S. and Canada. The index covers approximately 85% of the free float-adjusted market capitalization in each country.
- **MSCI Emerging Markets** captures large and mid-cap representation across Emerging Markets countries. The index covers approximately 85% of the free-float adjusted market capitalization in each country.
- **Bloomberg U.S. Aggregate Index** covers the U.S. investment grade fixed rate bond market, with index components for government and corporate securities, mortgage pass-through securities, and asset-backed securities.
- **Bloomberg U.S. Corporate High Yield Index** covers the universe of fixed rate, non-investment grade debt. Eurobonds and debt issues from countries designated as emerging markets (sovereign rating of Baa1/BBB+/BBB+ and below using the middle of Moody's, S&P, and Fitch) are excluded, but Canadian and global bonds (SEC registered) of issuers in non-EMG countries are included.
- **FTSE NAREIT Equity REITs Index** contains all Equity REITs not designed as Timber REITs or Infrastructure REITs.
- **Bloomberg Commodity Index** is calculated on an excess return basis and reflects commodity futures price movements. The index rebalances annually weighted 2/3 by trading volume and 1/3 by world production and weight-caps are applied at the commodity, sector and group level for diversification.

Material Risks

- **Fixed Income** securities are subject to interest rate risks, the risk of default and liquidity risk. U.S. investors exposed to non-U.S. fixed income may also be subject to currency risk and fluctuations.
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- **Domestic Equity** can be volatile. The rise or fall in prices take place for a number of reasons including, but not limited to changes to underlying company conditions, sector or industry factors, or other macro events. These may happen quickly and unpredictably.
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- **Real Assets** can be volatile and may include asset segments that may have greater volatility than investment in traditional equity securities. Such volatility could be influenced by a myriad of factors including, but not limited to overall market volatility, changes in interest rates, political and regulatory developments, or other exogenous events like weather or natural disaster.
- **Private Real Estate** involves higher risk and is suitable only for sophisticated investors. Real estate assets can be volatile and may include unique risks to the asset class like leverage and/or industry, sector or geographical concentration. Declines in real estate value may take place for a number of reasons including, but are not limited to economic conditions, change in condition of the underlying property or defaults by the borrower.
- All investing involves risk including the potential loss of principal. Market volatility may significantly impact the value of your investments. Recent tariff announcements may add to this volatility, creating additional economic uncertainty and potentially affecting the value of certain investments. Tariffs can impact various sectors differently, leading to changes in market dynamics and investment performance. You should consider these factors when making investment decisions. We recommend consulting with a qualified financial adviser to understand how these risks may affect your portfolio and to develop a strategy that aligns with your financial goals and risk tolerance.