



By: TA | AP Insight

How much does the Israeli operation in Qatar complicate stabilisation in the region?



The tiny, gas-rich Gulf Arab state of Qatar hosts the biggest U.S. military **base** in the Middle East.

It has **evacuated** tens of thousands of American citizens from Afghanistan. It has been designated a U.S. "major non-NATO **ally**." It has even lavished a \$400 million **jumbo** jet on President Donald Trump for use as Air Force One.

None of that protected this quiet peninsula in the Persian Gulf from coming under an Israeli aerial **attack** on Tuesday as it mediated U.S.-backed negotiations to end the Israel-Hamas war.

Israel struck a **meeting** of Hamas' exiled political leadership in Qatar's capital of Doha, sending plumes of smoke and debris rising over a city of air-conditioned World Cup stadiums and luxury malls typically shielded by U.S. interceptor batteries.

Since Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attack on southern Israel ignited its war in Gaza, the Israeli military has targeted Hamas leaders far afield.

But while Israel **considers** Tehran and Beirut fair game, it had refrained from striking Hamas' political office in Qatar, the key mediator and U.S. ally that Israeli leadership relied on as a back channel to the Palestinian militant group.

On Tuesday, Israel made a dangerous gamble, analysts say, poisoning Israel-Hamas **ceasefire** talks, sending political shock waves through the region and raising doubts about historical U.S. security guarantees for its Gulf Arab allies.

It didn't immediately pay off for Israel: Hamas **claims** its senior leadership survived the strike.

"This is a broader shock for the international order, raising questions about sovereignty and the free rein being given to Israel," said Sanam Vakil, the director of the Middle East and North Africa Program at Chatham House. "The reliability of the United States in the Middle East will be questioned."

U.S. knowledge of attack roils its alliance with Qatar

Qatar has long come under fire for hosting Hamas and faced rising **pressure** to evict its top leadership.

But it was a U.S.-supported arrangement that allowed Hamas to open its political office in Doha in 2012 as Washington sought to establish indirect lines of communication with the Palestinian militant group it designates as a terrorist organization.

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Hosting Hamas and other armed groups, such as the Taliban, has helped Qatar carve out an influential position in global conflict mediation.

Qatari officials believed that the emirate's designation as a major U.S. non-NATO ally and its Al Udeid Air Base, regional headquarters of the U.S. Central Command, lent it security cover that would restrain Israel.

Israeli strikes shattered that illusion on Tuesday, crashing into central Doha despite all the U.S. missile batteries and radar systems tracking aerial threats from Al Udeid.

The U.S. said Israel alerted it before striking. Whatever warning the White House said it passed to Qatar was too little, too late: Qatari Foreign Ministry spokesman Majed al-Ansari said his country was only notified as the bombs were falling.

Shock reverberates across Gulf Arab states

The apparent U.S. disregard for Qatari security and sovereignty rattled nerves across the sheikdoms of the Persian Gulf, which, despite

past ideological **disputes** over Qatar's Islamist sympathies, marshaled a strong show of unity.

"The security of the Arab Gulf states is indivisible, and we stand heart and soul with the sisterly Qatar, condemning the treacherous Israeli attack," said Anwar Gargash, a diplomatic adviser to the rulers of the United Arab Emirates.

Although the U.S. remains the only country willing to station thousands of troops across the Persian Gulf, the perception of Washington as an unreliable ally to Gulf Arab nations has grown in recent years, analysts say.

The UAE and Saudi Arabia in particular have sought to diversify their relationships, growing closer to China and Russia.

"They don't want to rely solely on the U.S. for security, they want ties with a range of global actors," said Will Todman, a senior fellow with the Middle East program at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies. "(Israel's) strikes will accelerate that trend."

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Gulf Arab countries — with small militaries and oil-dependent economies uniquely vulnerable to shocks of any kind — now see Israel's belligerence as a source of growing concern, even more so than Iran's.

While Emiratis and Saudis view political Islam as a threat and loathe Hamas, experts say they'd prefer a detente with their weakened rivals to the continuation of an ever-widening war that could trigger strikes on their soil.

"The Gulf states are not secretly happy about the strikes on Hamas," said Vakil. "They see Israel's continued military activities as destabilizing for the region."

Traditionally, Iran was the most serious threat, but now — with Iran weakened but not defeated — it's Israel they are worried about."

Israel's "Abraham Accords" thrown into doubt

That doesn't bode well for Israel's ambitions to expand the so-called "Abraham Accords," which **established** ties between Israel and four Arab countries, first among them the UAE and Bahrain in 2020.

Before the Israel-Hamas war, there were signs that regional powerhouse Saudi Arabia might **join** as well, regarding such an alliance as a bulwark against Iran and its unruly regional proxies.

For all intents and purposes, normalization is dead for Gulf Arab states today - Dina Esfandiary

But Israel has since pummeled Iran and its allies. Its devastating campaign in Gaza has ignited anger across the Arab world, prompting Saudi Arabia to revive its insistence on Palestinian statehood as a condition for normalizing ties with Israel.

Tuesday's strike now dashes any lingering hopes that Israel might have of cozying up to other Arab countries, analysts say.

"For all intents and purposes, normalization is dead for Gulf Arab states today," said Dina Esfandiary, the lead Middle East analyst at Bloomberg Economics, a research group. "How do you normalize with the country that's attacking one of your brothers?"

A ceasefire further out of reach

Doha has been a focal point since the war started for delicate negotiations with Israel to end the fighting and free dozens of Israeli

hostages still held captive in Gaza.



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The Hamas leaders targeted in Israel's attack had been meeting to discuss the Trump administration's latest ceasefire proposal, which called for Hamas to immediately release the 48 Israeli hostages still in Gaza — 20 of whom are believed to be alive.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, beholden to his far-right political allies, has resisted calls to end the war and planned a new ground offensive to seize Gaza City — an escalation that many fear will doom remaining Israeli hostages and exacerbate a humanitarian crisis for Palestinians.

Qatari Prime Minister Shaikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani said he thought it wasn't worth continuing the ceasefire negotiations in light of the attack.

Even without killing top Hamas leaders or altering the course of the war, the strike confirmed the worst fears of risk-averse Gulf Arab states, experts said.

"The attack was a message not just to Hamas but to the region," Vakil said. "Military pressure will continue, with Washington seeing Israeli dominance as effective."