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Doha Wasn't a One-Off:

What Israel's 9 September Strike Signals?

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Introduction

On 9 September 2025, Israel launched an airstrike in Doha targeting Hamas's senior political leadership. The strike killed five Hamas-affiliated figures and a Qatari Internal Security Force (Lekhwiya) officer, while Hamas stated its top leaders survived.[1] Washington described the operation as a unilateral Israeli decision and said the White House was notified only after missiles were already airborne, an account disputed by reporting that Netanyahu briefed President Trump shortly beforehand. Trump publicly said he was "very unhappy" about the attack, an unusually blunt rebuke of Israel.

The Doha strike is best understood not as an aberration but as the latest node in a widening campaign of extraterritorial assassinations. It follows the killing of Saleh al-Arouri in Beirut (January 2024)[2] and Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran (July 2024), and it was immediately followed by Israeli strikes in Yemen.[3] Together, these episodes mark an inflection: assassination has shifted from episodic tactic to sustained strategy, reshaping the regional order by normalising sovereignty violations in the name of deterrence.

What Happened in Doha

Shortly before 4 p.m. local time on 9 September, multiple precision munitions struck a residential compound in Doha's Leqtaifiya district used by Hamas's political bureau during active ceasefire talks. Those killed were identified by Qatari and media sources as: Jihad Labad (al-Hayya's office director), Humam (or Hammam) al-Hayya (Khalil al-Hayya's son), and three bodyguards, Abdullah Abdul Wahid, Moamen Hassouna, and Ahmed al-Mamluk, alongside Corporal Bader Saad Mohammed al-Humaidi al-Dosari of Lekhwiya. Hamas announced that its senior leaders, including Khalil al-Hayya and other members of the political bureau, survived.[4] This contradicted early Israeli suggestions of a successful decapitation strike and underlined the operation's limited tactical payoff.

Disputes over US notification added a diplomatic layer. US officials insisted they were informed only once missiles were already airborne.[5] Israeli accounts suggested Netanyahu had mentioned the strike in a last-minute call with Trump, though too late for intervention.[6] The episode underscored a growing divergence: Washington feared strategic blowback while Israel pressed its deterrence

1 Andrew Mills, Jana Choukeir & Ahmed Elimam, "Israel targets Hamas Leadership in Military Strikes on Qatar, Officials Say," *Reuters*, 9/9/2025, accessed on 1/10/2025 at: https://acr.ps/1L9BPl6

2 "Senior Hamas official Saleh al-Arouri killed in Beirut Suburb," *Al Jazeera*, 2/1/2024, accessed on 1/10/2025 at: https://acr.ps/1L9BPQN

3 "Israel Launches Series of Strikes on Yemen's Red Sea Port of Hodeidah," *Al Jazeera*, 16/9/2025, accessed on 1/10/2025 at: https://acr.ps/1L9BPVf

4 Tim Hume, Maziar Motamedi, Federica Marsi, Brian Osgood and Ali Harb, "Hamas Says Leaders Survived Israel's Attack on Qatar's Doha," *AlJazeera*, 9/9/2025, accessed on 1/10/2025 at: https://acr.ps/1L9BPmj

5 "Israel told Trump of Qatar Attack Despite US Denials: Report," *Daily Sabah*, 16/9/2025, accessed on 1/10/2025 at: https://acr.ps/1L9BOTf

6 "Netanyahu Spoke to Trump before Israel Bombed Qatar," *Axios*, 15/9/2025, accessed on 1/10/2025 at: https://acr.ps/1L9BPvv

narrative. Netanyahu declared, "the days are over when terror leaders can enjoy immunity." Israel's ambassador in Washington warned, "If we didn't get them this time, we'll get them the next time."[7]

The method also matters. Initial reporting suggested Israel may have used air-launched ballistic missiles fired from jets over the Red Sea, thereby circumventing Saudi and Emirati airspace and reducing the probability of interception.[8] This tactic, if confirmed, demonstrates both reach and audacity: the capacity to strike deep into an allied state while avoiding regional radar and conventional air-defence networks.[9]

From Tactic to Strategy: A Year of Extrajudicial Killings

The Doha operation fits a broader trajectory. In January 2024, Hamas deputy Saleh al-Arouri was assassinated in a Beirut suburb by a drone strike, shocking Lebanese authorities who had tolerated low-level Israeli overflights but not such brazen decapitation operations.[10] In July 2024, Hamas's political bureau chief Ismail Haniyeh was killed in Tehran.[11] That strike pierced Iranian sovereignty and underscored Israel's willingness to target leadership figures in capitals far beyond Gaza.

These killings marked a shift from battlefield strikes in Gaza to high-profile assassinations abroad. In January 2024, Hamas deputy Saleh al-Arouri was killed in Beirut, and on 31 July 2024, Ismail Haniyeh was assassinated in Tehran, operations that pierced the sovereignty of Lebanon and Iran respectively.[12] These were not isolated incidents: Israel has also conducted targeted operations in Lebanon, Syria, and Iran in recent years.[13]

Beginning the day after the Doha strike, Israeli aircraft struck Houthi positions in Yemen, targeting sites in Sanaa and al-Jawf, signalling that third-party sovereignty was increasingly viewed as a contestable barrier. In one of those strikes, 35 people were reported killed in Yemen's capital, including attacks on alleged military camps and propaganda offices.[14]

What emerges is a campaign architecture in which targeted killings are normalised as standing policy. Rather than occasional or reactive measures, assassinations now appear as a structural

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7 Maayan Lubell, Alexander Cornwell and Patricia Zengerle, "Israel will kill Hamas Leaders Next Time if they Survived Qatar attack, Israeli official says," *Reuters*, 10/9/2025, accessed on 1/10/2025 at: https://acr.ps/1L9BPLP

8 Jon Gambrell and Konstantin Toropin "Israeli fighter Jets Launched Ballistic Missiles from the Red Sea in Qatar Strike, official says," *AP News*, 17/9/2025, accessed on 1/10/2025 at: https://acr.ps/1L9BPGQ

9 "Mossad opposed Qatar Ground Operation; Israel Used Ballistic Missiles in Failed Hamas Strike", *Ynet News*, 12/9/2025, accessed on 1/10/2025 at: https://acr.ps/1L9BP89

10 "Israeli Drone Kills Deputy Hamas Chief in Beirut," *Reuters*, 2/9/2024, accessed on 1/10/2025 at: https://acr.ps/1L9BPJu

11 Ronen Bergman, Farnaz Fassihi, and Mark Mazzetti "Bomb Smuggled into Tehran Guesthouse Months Ago Killed Hamas Leader," *New York Times*, 4/8/2024, accessed on 1/10/2025 at: https://acr.ps/1L9BP9L

12 "Senior Hamas official Saleh al-Arouri killed in Beirut Suburb."

13 ACLED, "Israel's Assassinations Outside Palestine," *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project* (August 2024).

14 "Israeli Strikes against Houthi Rebels in Yemen kill 35," *ABC News*, 10/9/2025, accessed on 1/10/2025, at: https://acr.ps/1L9BPNR

component of Israeli strategy.[15] In effect, Doha was not an anomaly but a predictable escalation, the next logical step in a sequence of operations that progressively erode sovereignty constraints.

Diplomatic Fallout and the Mediation Dilemma

The costs for Qatar were immediate. The Foreign Ministry condemned the strike as "state terrorism" and an attack on sovereignty.[16] Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani warned that it had "killed any hope" for securing hostage releases through negotiation. Qatar paused its mediation role, demanding an Israeli apology and guarantees before resuming.

For Qatar, the strike pierced its carefully cultivated role as mediator and safe harbour for negotiation. Since 2012, Doha has hosted Hamas's political bureau and positioned itself as a hub for ceasefire diplomacy. The strike undermined this function and raised questions about whether Qatar could guarantee neutrality or security for talks.

International responses were striking. The European Union urged restraint and criticised escalation.[17] Saudi Arabia and the UAE, normally cautious about publicly rebuking Israel, issued condemnations.[18] China called the strike a blatant violation of sovereignty.[19] Collectively, these statements highlighted the risk that Israel's actions would alienate not only mediators but also states it seeks to normalise relations with.

For Washington, the fallout was acute. Al Udeid Air Base, the largest US installation in the region, sits only kilometres from the strike site. US officials admitted they were blindsided and that the strike undermined Qatar's credibility as mediator, just as the White House was relying heavily on Qatari channels. Trump privately told Netanyahu the move was "not wise." In effect, Israel not only strained its own diplomacy but imposed collateral costs on its closest ally.

Legal Assessment

International law leaves little ambiguity. Article 2 (4) of the UN Charter prohibits the use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state.[20] Only two exceptions exist: host-state consent or self-defence under Article 51.[21] Qatar did not consent. Israel did not claim Qatar had attacked it or posed an imminent threat.[22]

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15 Daniel Byman, "Do Targeted Killings Work?" *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 90, no. 2 (2011), pp. 95–111.

16 "Qatar Strongly Condemns Israeli Strikes on Several Sites in Syria," Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Qatar), 9/9/2025, accessed on 1/10/2025, at: https://acr.ps/1L9BPvi

17 European External Action Service, *Statement by the High Representative on Israeli strikes in Qatar*, 9/9/2025, accessed on 1/10/2025, at: https://acr.ps/1L9BPAT

18 "Reactions to Israel's Attack on Qatar," *Reuters*, 10/9/2025, accessed on 1/10/2025 at: https://acr.ps/1L9BPuY

19 "Chinese Envoy Condemns Israeli Attack in Qatar," *Xinhua*, 12/9/2025, accessed on 1/10/2025 at: https://acr.ps/1L9BPGC

20 United Nations, *United Nations Charter* (New York: 1945), accessed on 1/10/2025, at: https://acr.ps/1L9BPbM

21 Yoram Dinstein, *War, Aggression and Self-Defence*, 6th (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

22 Tom Ruys, *'Armed Attack' and Article 51 of the UN Charter: Evolutions in Customary Law and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010),

Some Israeli commentators floated the "unable or unwilling" doctrine: the idea that if a state harbours armed groups and fails to act, it forfeits sovereignty protections.[23] But this doctrine is contested and lacks codification. Even the United States, which has invoked it to justify strikes in Pakistan, Syria, and Yemen, frames it as applying to direct, imminent threats, a difficult case to make for Hamas's political office in Doha.[24]

The strike thus rests on shaky legal ground. It was not battlefield necessity, nor an act of imminent self-defence. Instead, it was a pre-emptive strike in a neutral state hosting diplomacy. That precedent is deeply problematic: it suggests sovereignty can be overridden at will if an adversary is present.

This raises broader normative concerns. If Israel claims this right, what prevents Iran, Turkey, or other regional powers from doing the same? The erosion of legal norms risks entrenching a world where "precision" counterterrorism becomes an all-purpose justification for interstate aggression.[25]

Strategy and Risk: The Deterrence Paradox

The Doha strike paradoxically weakened deterrence. By failing to kill Hamas's senior leadership, Israel undercut its own message of reach. Instead of demonstrating vulnerability, Hamas emerged claiming resilience. Moreover, normalising targeted killings as routine risks widening the conflict's geography.[26] Lebanon, Iran, Yemen, and now Qatar have all been theatres. Each new strike expands the cycle of retaliation. Rather than isolating Hamas, the campaign risks hardening it within a narrative of survival and martyrdom.

In the Gulf, tolerating such strikes lowers the barrier to aggression. If Israel can strike Hamas in Doha, Iran might claim justification to target dissidents or Israeli officials in Dubai or Manama. This slippery slope invites reciprocal practices and corrodes the tacit immunity of Gulf capitals. Strategically, Israel appears to be signalling that borders, alliances, and diplomatic roles no longer constrain it. But this risks overreach. Expanding battlefronts may entrap Israel in rolling cycles of retaliation, stretching its intelligence and operational bandwidth, while eroding the diplomatic space needed for eventual settlement.[27]

Policy Implications

For the Gulf states, the Doha strike underscores the urgent need to develop a collective security posture that goes beyond rhetorical condemnation. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) should move

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23 Sarah McGibbon, "The 'Unwilling or Unable' Doctrine Unmasked: A Case Study of ISIL in Syria", *Hague Yearbook of International Law / Annuaire de La Haye de Droit International*, vol. *32* (2021) pp. 69-102, accessed on 1/10/2025 at: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004507975_004

24 Daniel Byman, *Deadly Connections: States that Sponsor Terrorism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

25 Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, 4th (ed.) (Philadelphia: Basic Books, 2006).

26 Alex Wilner, "Targeted killings in Afghanistan: Measuring coercion and Deterrence in Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 33, no. 4 (2010), pp. 307–329.

27 Byman, "Do Targeted Killings Work?"

toward codifying clear red lines against cross-border military operations on its territory.[28] Formal declarations, reinforced through joint communiqués, would help establish a deterrent posture by communicating unequivocally to external actors that Gulf sovereignty is not negotiable. Equally important is the operational dimension: enhancing integrated air defence systems and early-warning networks. The method Israel employed, air-launched ballistic missiles fired, reportedly, from over the Red Sea, demonstrates that traditional defence postures are insufficient. Without greater integration of surveillance and rapid-response mechanisms, Gulf capitals will remain vulnerable to surprise attacks that can alter diplomatic balances in minutes.[29]

Legal and diplomatic responses are also essential. The GCC should consider creating a task force dedicated to documenting sovereignty violations, framing them in legal terms, and raising them in multilateral fora such as the United Nations. This would not prevent future strikes outright, but it would increase the reputational and political costs for violators. By placing Gulf sovereignty at the centre of international debate, the GCC can help shift the narrative away from ad hoc condemnations and toward the development of binding norms. Such an initiative could also draw support from partners in Europe and Asia who have an interest in preserving the sanctity of mediation capitals and the integrity of international law.

For Washington, the Doha strike presents a test of alliance management. US officials admitted they were blindsided by an operation carried out in the capital of a state that not only hosts America's largest regional base but also plays a central role in US diplomacy with Hamas. To protect both its equities at Al Udeid and its credibility as a mediator, Washington must move beyond expressions of dissatisfaction. Aligning leverage with rhetoric will be critical: placing conditions on intelligence sharing, restricting the use of US-supplied munitions in extraterritorial operations, or recalibrating political support when Israeli actions directly undermine American diplomacy. Without concrete consequences, Israel has little incentive to coordinate, and US credibility risks further erosion in a region already questioning US reliability.[30]

Finally, the international community bears responsibility for reinforcing the principle of mediator inviolability. The Doha strike highlights a dangerous precedent: if capitals hosting negotiations are treated as legitimate battlegrounds, mediation itself becomes untenable. The European Union and the UN should push for formal reaffirmations that third-party mediators must be shielded from attack. Embedding this principle in Security Council debates or EU-GCC dialogues would help restore some boundaries in an increasingly boundary-less conflict environment.[31]

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28 "Statement of the Extraordinary Session of the Joint Defence Council," *GCC*, 18/9/2025, accessed on 1/10/2025, at: https://acr.ps/1L9BPOD

29 Lawrence Freedman, *Deterrence* (Cambridge/Malden: Polity Press, 2004).

30 Center for Strategic & International Studies, *U.S. Security Commitments and Gulf stability* (2025).

31 United Nations Security Council, *Debate on Protection of Mediators in Armed Conflict* (2025).

Conclusion

The Doha strike should not be dismissed as a tactical failure or as a singular event in the long arc of Israel's war on Gaza conflict. It is better understood as a harbinger of a strategic shift: the normalisation of extraterritorial assassinations in the Middle East. By striking in Doha, Israel crossed a symbolic and practical threshold. The choice of target, a mediation office in a neutral capital hosting both US forces and high-level diplomacy, demonstrates a willingness to disregard the traditional protections afforded to sovereign states that serve as intermediaries. This is a profound departure from established norms, one that risks embedding a new regional logic where any space, no matter how neutral, may be transformed into a battlespace.

The consequences are manifold. For Israel, the short-term message of reach and determination may be undercut by the longer-term paradox of diminished deterrence. By failing to eliminate Hamas's leadership, the strike reinforced the narrative of resilience and survival. For Qatar, the attack was more than a security breach; it was an assault on its identity as a mediator and on its claim to regional diplomatic centrality. For the Gulf more broadly, it raises the spectre of future violations, by Israel, Iran, or others, under the banner of counterterrorism. And for Washington, it represents a diplomatic embarrassment that calls into question the very foundations of coordination with its closest ally.

More broadly, the strike signals the erosion of the thin membrane separating warfare from diplomacy. If "anywhere" strikes become normalised, mediation channels will atrophy, and states will hesitate to host or facilitate negotiations for fear of becoming targets themselves. The long-term effect is corrosive: not only will sovereignty lose meaning, but diplomacy itself will be progressively delegitimised as a tool of conflict resolution. The region risks sliding into a future where military action substitutes for political settlement, and where kinetic shows of reach define statecraft more than dialogue or compromise.

Doha, then, is not simply a case study in failed deterrence. It is a bellwether for a regional order in which assassination replaces negotiation, sovereignty is treated as conditional, and great-power allies struggle to restrain their partners. Unless checked, through legal reaffirmation of norms, diplomatic coordination among allies, and operational measures to protect neutral spaces, the 9 September strike may be remembered less for what it achieved tactically than for what it revealed strategically: the advent of a more dangerous Middle East in which assassination, not diplomacy, sets the pace of events.

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