



Gulf Insights

September 9 attacks: Is a paradigm shift in Gulf security underway?

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On September 9, Israel conducted airstrikes in a residential district of Qatar's capital Doha in an attempt to kill the political leaders of Hamas who were gathered to discuss the latest U.S. ceasefire proposal for Gaza.² There were claims that the U.S. administration gave the approval to the Israeli attack that killed at least six people, including a member of Qatar's security forces.³ Some reports also claimed that the attack failed to kill the high-ranking Hamas political officials due to the intelligence provided by the special unit of the Turkish National Intelligence Organization who tracked Israeli air movements throughout the day and alerted the delegation of a possible strike in advance.⁴

Beyond these reports, the September 9 attacks certainly came as a shock because Qatar is one of the key mediators in ceasefire talks for Gaza. Qatar could be the first in the history where a mediator country was deliberately targeted by any of the conflicting sides. In addition, in 2011, it was the U.S. administration, led by Barack Obama, that has asked Qatar to host the political leadership of Hamas.⁵ Moreover, Qatar is a major non-Nato U.S. ally that hosts largest American military base in the Middle East with nearly 10,000 U.S. troops that serves as the forward headquarters for US Central Command (CENTCOM), including 100 aircraft as well as drones.⁶ Despite these facts, Israel's unprecedented attack on Qatar raised serious doubts over American security guarantees in Qatar and the broader Gulf region.

The Israeli attack on a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member state, Qatar, has led to three key understandings about Gulf security. First, both at the state- and societal-levels, the attacks have collapsed a long-standing stereotype that the GCC member states are immune to external threats. Thus, attacks proved that regardless of the U.S. military presence and commitments, the Gulf states could be vulnerable to attacks. Second, Israel, with its growing aggression across the

¹ All articles published under "Gulf Insights" series have been discussed internally but they reflect the opinion and views of the authors, and do not reflect the views of the Center, the College of Arts and Sciences or Qatar University, including the terms and terminology used in this publication.

² Hamas says leaders survived Israel's attack on Qatar's Doha, Al Jazeera, Sept. 9, 2025.

³ Hamas claims leadership survived Israeli attack in Doha, but confirms six deaths, BBC, Sept. 10, 2025.

⁴ İsrail, Trump'ın müzakere masasını bombaladı: Katar'da suikastı Ankara engelledi, Türkiye Gazetesi, Sept. 10, 2025.

⁵ Israel's attack on Qatar eviscerates promise of US security umbrella for Gulf, Middle East Eye, Sept. 9, 2025.

⁶ Mapping US troops and military bases in the Middle East, Al Jazeera, June 12, 2025.

region, has replaced Iran as a major security threat to the Gulf security in the eyes of the decision-makers and society. Third, the attacks may shift the existing security arrangements in the Gulf that would push the GCC states towards other external actors, such as China, Turkey, Pakistan, and even Iran. Currently, Qatar already hosts a Turkish military base on its soil – being the only GCC member state to do so.

Since the September 9 attacks, significant developments that have taken place in the Gulf. Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have signed a mutual defense pact that defines any attack on either nation as an attack on both.⁷ The pact marks the first major defense decision by a GCC member state since the attack in Qatar. There are expectations that the pact may also include Qatar, the UAE, and Turkey in the following phase. Following the September 9 attacks, Iran's top security official, Ali Larijani, visited Riyadh and reportedly held discussions on defense cooperation.⁸ Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian has also attended the emergency summit in Doha that convened due to Israel's attack.⁹ It is noteworthy that when Iran launched a retaliatory strike on a U.S. base in Qatar in June, Pezeshkian has called the Emir Sheikh Tamim, in a sign to prevent the damage for the Qatari-Iranian relations.¹⁰

Within this context, however, U.S. remains the primary security guarantor in the Gulf region despite the growing doubts about its security commitments. Moreover, U.S.' position is unlikely to be replaced by any actor overnight. Although it may push GCC member states toward further security cooperation with global and regional actors, a significant shift towards a robust military alliance, like the one with the U.S., is still distant. Security cooperation with other actors, at this stage, may be limited to defense cooperation through arms sales and joint exercises.

Another significant impact of the attack is on the intra-Gulf dynamics. GCC leaders have condemned Israel's actions, including those that have normalized relations with Israel through the Abraham Accords, namely the UAE and Bahrain. This growing sense of unity and solidarity among GCC member states have led to the activation of a provision in the GCC Joint Defense Agreement, declaring that an attack on one member state will be considered an attack on all- a

7 What's behind the Pakistan-Saudi Arabia defense pact? Deutsche Welle, Sept. 19, 2025.

8 Tehran, Riyadh Plan to Expand Economic, Defense Cooperation: Larijani, Tasnim, Sept. 17, 2025.

9 At rare Doha summit, Iran hopes words will turn into action against Israel, Sept. 16, 2025.

10 HH The Amir Receives Phone Call from Iran's President, Amiri Diwan, June 24, 2025.

NATO-style security commitment.¹¹ While in practice this provision's enforceability remains uncertain due to the U.S. factor, it is symbolically important. It indicates a renewed commitment to GCC unity and the potential for future collective security actions.

The September 9 attacks are expected to push the GCC states toward developing a unified security strategy and enhancing defense cooperation among themselves. Due to the political rifts, they had in the past, a joint defense mechanism within the GCC failed to materialize. Although the Peninsula Shield Force was established in 1984 as a framework for regional defense integration, it has never functioned as a military force that could protect these states from external threats.¹² Following the September 9 attacks, however, the GCC may seek to go beyond this mechanism and deepen their collaboration through intelligence sharing, defense industrial cooperation, and technological advancement through partnerships with actors, such as China and Turkey.¹³

The September 9 attacks became a turning point for the GCC states, which are likely to revisit the existing understandings about the region's security framework. Although the U.S. continues to serve as the top security provider for the Gulf, a gradual paradigm shift appears to be underway, both within the GCC states themselves and in their relationships with external actors.

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About the Gulf Insights series

The "Gulf Insights" series is published by the Gulf Studies Center on a weekly base with the aim to promote informed debate with academic depth. The Gulf Insights are commentaries on pressing regional issues written by the GSC/GSP faculty, staff PhD and MA students, as well as guest scholars, and they can be between 1,200 to 1,500 words.

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¹¹ What GCC's activation of NATO-style joint defence pact means for regional security, TRT World, Sept. 18, 2025.

¹² As Europe Adjusts to Life Without U.S. Security Umbrella, Lessons for GCC Abound, Afkar, April 3, 2025.

¹³ Israel's attack on Qatar shows why it's time for a Gulf defence union, Chatham House, Sept. 19, 2025.