



# Gulf Insights

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**Reflections on the Conflict in the Middle East and the Positions of the Gulf:  
Escalation, Diffusion and Mediation<sup>1</sup>**

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**Introduction**

The broader MENA region has been undergoing a wave of instability which is shaping the dynamics of international relations in the Gulf. Confronted with war, political unrest and humanitarian emergencies, some Gulf Arab countries have emerged as pivotal players in the realm of international diplomacy, while others play more direct roles in conflict resolution. This edition of Gulf Insights, which is a collective initiative by members of the Gulf Studies Center, scrutinizes the role GCC Countries in conflict resolution and mediation efforts as well as the challenges the deepening crisis is posing to the region at large.

**Why Mediation Matters for Qatar**

Dr. Maryam Al Kuwari  
Gulf Studies Center Director

Since October 7, 2023, Qatar has been one of the few states relentlessly leading mediation efforts in an attempt to end Israel's genocide on Gaza, mainly by leveraging its close ties with major relevant parties such as Hamas, Iran, and the US. On multiple occasions during the ongoing genocide, Qatar has faced many pressures from factions within the US in addition to Israeli efforts to undermine Qatar's mediation efforts and to force Qatar to distance itself from Hamas. While these pressures may expose Qatar to

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

political risks, the Qatari government remains committed to mediation as part of its diplomacy and international relations strategy for a variety of reasons.

Mediation was first integrated into Qatar's diplomacy and foreign policy in the mid-1990s as the former Emir, Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani realized that Qatar needed to build more strategic ties and to expand its political and diplomatic sphere of influence to bolster its national security in the middle of a turbulent region. This strategic shift in foreign policy may have initially been motivated by national security concerns about attempts by regional actors to undermine the political legitimacy of the state and to interfere in its affairs. Eventually, however, Qatar's mediation efforts became a fundamental and constant component of its foreign policy.

The foundations of this policy were laid down by maintaining close ties with neighbors, hosting a US military base, and developing tools of soft power through media such as Al-Jazeera, organizing major sports and cultural events, expanding economic investments overseas, and actively contributing to emergency relief efforts and programs worldwide. This web of intricate connections enabled Qatar to position itself as an honest mediator and broker in many complex conflicts in which other powers were unable to play an effective role resulting for example in the conclusion of the 2008 Doha Agreement that ended a political conflict in Lebanon, the 2011 Doha Peace Agreement in Darfur in which Qatar successfully brought the warring factions in Sudan to the peace talks table, the US-Taliban peace agreement in 2020, and others. Qatar also played an effective role in multiple [other mediation efforts](#) such as the repeated conflicts between Israel occupation and Hamas in Gaza, between the warring factions in Yemen, as well as in the border dispute between Eritrea and Djibouti, and the internal strife in Chad.

Qatar's motivation for such a foreign policy based on mediation can be inferred from these examples as well as from its [2023 mediation efforts between the US and Iran](#) which resulted in a prisoner swap as well as in releasing billions in frozen Iranian assets that both sides agreed to hold in Qatari banks. Not only did Qatar successfully lead the mediation and talks between the hostile parties, but it also established itself as a trustworthy mediator who could lead the talks to completion and guarantee the terms and conditions of the agreement after its completion, whether through its political capital and

close ties with both parties, or through the trustworthiness of its financial institutions to manage the structured and conditional transfer of frozen assets to Iran.

Examples such as the [US-Iran prisoner swap](#) agreement or the US-Taliban peaceful agreement further reveal that Qatar has positioned itself as an indispensable and reliable player in the international arena with unique connections and ties that enable it to lead mediation between parties who are otherwise unable or unwilling to sit at the same table to talk, including state and non-state actors, regional players and global powers. Such mediation efforts have not only bolstered Qatar's global image and prestige, but also its position and role in the international system, which also reinforces the legitimacy of its government and its political influence.

Although Qatar's initial motivations for developing its position as a mediator were to solidify its state legitimacy and to build political influence in foreign policy, whether by building cultural ties and engaging in humanitarian aid on a global scale, or by cultivating political and strategic ties with world nations, it has now evolved into a global actor that is actively involved in and committed to pursuing peaceful resolutions in regional and international conflicts, a role that the world needs today more than ever. At this point, Qatar is no longer concerned with facing or avoiding diplomatic and political pressures, but with pursuing peace and ending violent conflicts that threaten world peace and devastate communities.

### **The Iranian Response to Israel and the Prospects for Escalation**

Dr. Luciano Zaccara

Research Associate Professor of Gulf Studies

Iran's response to the [assassination of Ismael Haniyeh](#) on their ground was highly anticipated and bore a striking resemblance to the [former's attack](#) in April. A massive missile barrage, launched directly from Iranian soil, targeted Israel, underscoring Iran's military readiness and preparedness for this type of conflict. Notably, the strike was aimed exclusively at military installations, with careful measures taken to avoid civilian

casualties. Iran framed the assault not as an act of war but as a calculated retaliation, signaling their intent to avoid a full-scale conflict while sending a clear message of defiance.

The strategic objective behind Iran's actions appears to be multifaceted. On one hand, the attack aimed to dissuade Israel from escalating its offense against Iranian interests and its proxies in the region. However, Iran's efforts to project strength and deterrence have been largely ineffective, as Israel continues its aggressive posture. On the other hand, Iran seeks to preserve its image both domestically and regionally, portraying itself as a force capable of responding to threats while simultaneously signaling a desire for de-escalation and stability in the Gulf.

Following the normalization of relations with the [UAE](#) and [Saudi Arabia](#), Iran expected some economic and commercial gains. Yet, these benefits have failed to materialize, and instead, Iran finds itself being incrementally pulled into a direct confrontation with Israel. The initial political capital Iran gained at the outset of the war on Gaza—where it positioned itself as a champion of the Palestinian cause and a key player in regional geopolitics—is rapidly dissipating. The missile strikes, rather than enhancing Iran's standing, are eroding its influence due to the disappearance of the deterrence capability of the 'axis of resistance'. Moreover, Pezeshkian's initial intentions of resuming to some extent the dialogue with Europe are now compromised due to Iran's direct actions against Israel.

While it is not expected that the conflict escalates into a full-scale war, the territorial extension of the confrontation already happened, with military actions involving Israel, Lebanon, Iran, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq. But it would be difficult for the involved actors to constrain their actions and de-escalate if the main problem, which is the unacceptable situation in Gaza, the lack of a ceasefire negotiation and the lack of prospects for a permanent establishment of a two-state solution—both as a result of Israel's unwillingness—is still unsolved.

## **Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Qatar's Regional Mediation**

Dr. Pinar Akpınar

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A full-scale regional conflict has been looming in the Middle East for some time, driven by [multiple flashpoints](#) such as the Israel-Iran rivalry, ongoing tensions in Lebanon, and the war in Gaza. As tensions escalate, the risk of regional conflict grows, particularly due to the involvement of proxy forces and the volatile geopolitical landscape. Qatar finds itself between a rock and a hard place, as its diplomatic efforts are critical in [managing](#) these risks, though their success remains uncertain amid rising hostilities. Qatar faces significant internal and external pressures, complicating its [mediation efforts](#).

Domestically, Qatar is under increasing pressure to take a stronger stance against Israel which puts Qatar in a delicate situation, balancing [domestic sentiments](#) with its geopolitical realities. Externally, Qatar's close relationships with both the [United States](#) (U.S.), a key ally of Israel, and [Iran](#), Israel's adversary, further complicate its role. While this places Qatar between conflicting interests, it also positions it as a unique mediator with access to both sides.

Despite these challenges, Qatar's ability to engage with all parties involved makes its role crucial. Its strong ties with the U.S., Iran, and other regional actors, including Hamas and Hezbollah, allow Qatar to serve as a neutral intermediary. This diplomatic reach, coupled with its history of [mediation](#) in conflicts like those in Lebanon and Afghanistan, enhances Qatar's credibility. However, growing regional criticism of Israel, particularly after Gaza War, could threaten Qatar's ability to maintain neutrality, potentially undermining its mediator role.

Beyond Qatar, other Gulf states like [Oman](#) and [Kuwait](#) could also play a role in mediation. Oman, with its long-standing policy of neutrality and quiet diplomacy, has maintained good relations with Iran and could complement Qatar's efforts by providing an additional channel for dialogue. Kuwait, though less active, has also historically positioned itself as a mediator that enjoys close relations with the U.S. in regional disputes and could

offer support in brokering talks. However, other Gulf states such as [Saudi Arabia and the UAE](#), which have normalized ties with Israel, are less likely to play a neutral role due to their closer alignment with Israeli and U.S. interests.

Ultimately, whether Qatar and other Gulf states can mediate depends on their ability to balance competing pressures. While challenges are significant, their strategic positioning could help de-escalate tensions if diplomatic efforts are carefully managed.

### **Gaza Genocide: Arab Gulf States' Commitment to De-escalation**

Dr. Amna A. Sadiq

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The world currently has its eyes fixed on the Arab Gulf states in the aftermath of the Iranian attacks on Israel. While Gaza genocide initially appeared geographically distant from the Gulf, the recent escalation has positioned the Gulf states in the war zone. According to latest reports, the Gulf states sought to reassure Iran of their neutrality in case of an Israeli counterattack. They claimed that this position will protect the Gulf states' energy sectors from any attacks while confirming their goal to [de-escalate](#) tensions in the Middle East.

Since the 1990s, the Arab Gulf states have defined themselves as neutral nations in most conflicts between Iran and the West regardless of their scattered foreign policies. Countries such as Oman and Qatar often mediate between the two parties and have been vocal in developing effective mechanisms for regional peace and security.

The Arab Gulf states' strong commitment to de-escalation has played a pivotal role in ensuring international peace and security. It has helped stabilise global energy supplies while protecting their Western allies' interests in the Middle East. It has even proven vital in executing evacuation plans and providing humanitarian aid during emergencies such as the Arab Spring and the Sudanese crisis.

The Gulf–Western security doctrine remained immune to change for decades. However, although the Arab Gulf states have asserted that this doctrine is still intact



despite the regional impacts of the genocide on Gaza, it is unclear whether the West is currently committed to protecting the Gulf from Israeli actions.

In many ways, Gaza genocide threatens the Gulf–Western security doctrine, as it may not hold strong against the West’s security doctrine with Israel. The genocide has begun to put pressure on and push the boundaries of a large number of parties in the international community. It is expected to change the shape of the Middle East in the medium term – a change that the Gulf–Western alliance and other middle-ground countries will not be exempt from. The following question remains unanswered: To what extent will Gaza genocide test the Gulf–Western security doctrine?

Gaza genocide may be a sign for the Gulf states to begin questioning the global commitment to their protection. It is time for the Arab Gulf states to adopt a more robust approach to securing their interests beyond the Western approaches to the Middle East. Instead, the Gulf states must attempt to bolster self-sufficient regional security approaches and institutions.

While a solid regional security approach is difficult to materialise in the short term, it is necessary for the Arab Gulf to launch a difficult yet much-needed dialogue on the region’s future beyond its alliances with the West. This process can begin with these states overcoming their competing interests and rivalries and establishing a conducive ground to uphold their regional visions. It will not be possible until the Gulf states can concentrate on the security of the Gulf and acknowledge their vulnerability to global changes.

### **One Year on: a New ‘New Middle East’ is in Order**

Farah Al Qawasmi

Research Assistant, Gulf Studies Center

Two weeks prior to the Hamas led attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu presented a map of the ‘New Middle East’ at the United Nations General Assembly on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of September, 2023. The New Middle East

map portrays the Israeli State, with no reference to the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and Gaza. Immediately after the attacks, Israel begun its war on Gaza, with air, ground, and sea strikes on the city, displacing millions of civilians, kidnapping and killing thousands, and starving the entire population; resulting in one of the most aggressive genocidal wars in modern day history. For the past 12 months, the international community has watched Israel continue its aggression on the civilians by increasing its military intensity on Gaza, and actively escalating it to other parts of the occupied territories of Palestine, as well as neighboring countries such as Syria, Yemen and Lebanon.

Since October 7, 2023, it became evident that Israel's genocidal war against Gaza is not a direct response at Hamas, and it is not to bring back the Israeli hostages that are held captive in Gaza. On the contrary, it is an attempt to enforce the plan of achieving the 'New Middle East'. On the day of the attack, Israel deployed the [Hannibal Doctrine](#), and ordered its troops to perform any military act that would prevent the capturing of Israeli hostages by Hamas, even if it meant killing them. Applying the Hannibal Doctrine at the initiation of the war is a deliberate indication of Israeli's intentions to prevent itself from being pressured by the local Israeli community to engage in a hostage deal with Hamas, or to even deescalate the force of the attacks on Gaza.

Furthermore, regional players such as Qatar proposed numerous ceasefire talks and peace agreements in attempt to arrive at a ceasefire and contain the turmoil in the region. Receiving pressure on multiple fronts, the Qatari Prime Minster Shaikh Mohammed Bin Abdelrahman Al-Thani worked relentlessly with the leaders and intelligence agencies of the USA, Israel, Egypt, as well as the leaders of [Hamas](#) to contain the conflict. Instead, Israel obstructed all peace deals proposed, and assassinated a number of Hamas's leading political figures, along with the head of the political bureau office, [Ismail Haniyeh](#) in July of 2023 in the city of Tehran.

In September 2024, while Israel was participating at the United Nations General Assembly, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu gave a speech on his desire to achieve peace in the region, while simultaneously ordering the bombing and assassination of the leader of the Hezbollah, [Hassan Nasrallah](#). The strike on Nasrallah led to the killing of

tens of innocent civilians in the south of Lebanon. By ignoring UN resolutions, and engaging in war while simultaneously speaking on peace at the UNGA, Israel undermined the United Nation's agencies, as well as the International community's efforts in ending the genocide on Gaza.

In conclusion, no mediation effort will contain Israel's war schemes and land acquisition strategies unless one of three scenarios takes place. These scenarios would include, a. countries in the region coming together to stop the rising threats of Israel and put an end to Netanyahu's the 'New Middle East' plan, b. the USA limits its financial and political support to Israel; b. a Divine intervention.