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STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS AND STRATEGIC INERTIA

Rethinking Gulf Security After
Israel's Doha Attack



DR MOHMAD WASEEM MALLA

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Dr Mohmad Waseem Malla

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157/9, Block 4, Second Floor,

Kishangarh, Vasant Kunj,

New Delhi-110070

Tel: [91-11] 49989230, +91-9810317972

E-mail: jps@icpsnet.org,

cpsndjps@gmail.com

Website: www.icpsnet.org

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Executive Summary

This *Issue Brief* analyses the structural limitations of the Gulf security framework in light of Israel's unprecedented attack in Doha on 9 September, targeting Palestinian Hamas leadership. While the attack marked a dangerous escalation of Tel Aviv's regional adventurism, it also exposed the enduring structural weaknesses of the Gulf's security architecture which has been defined by entrenched dependency on the United States. The *brief* argues that the failure of Gulf Arab leadership to mount a coherent response is rooted not merely in political hesitation but in the dependency architecture of their security collaborations. The entanglement of these Gulf states with Western security guarantees, their heavy reliance on US- and European-origin defence acquisitions, and the deep integration of their sovereign wealth into Western financial systems have created constraints that severely limit their strategic autonomy. Moreover, their security paradigms remain anchored in an outdated Iran-centric threat perception while Israel emerged as a more immediate and destabilising actor, duly emboldened by Western impunity. The *brief* also analyses India's position vis-à-vis evolving security dynamics while providing recommendations for the GCC states on recalibrating their regional security considerations.

Structural Constraints and Strategic Inertia

Rethinking Gulf Security After Israel's Doha Attack

1. Introduction

In an unprecedented move, Israel attacked yet another West Asian country in recent months by conducting a targeted strike against Hamas leadership in Doha on 9 September. The attack, described by Qatar's Emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, as “blatant, treacherous, and cowardly,”¹ attracted global condemnation. The UN Secretary-General António Guterres called it a “flagrant violation” of Qatari sovereignty,² while the UN Security Council unambiguously condemned the attack, short of mentioning Israel.³ Many interpreted the attack as a deliberate attempt by the Israeli government to sabotage ongoing mediation efforts and foreclose any possibility of negotiations towards ending the war in Gaza. For Tel Aviv, the timing was significant as the operation coincided with its intensifying military campaign to occupy Gaza City, where destruction and mass civilian casualties had already drawn accusations of genocide by various international organisations, including the UN Commission of Inquiry on Israel and Palestine.⁴

The attack brought regional governments to a sort of consensus against what has been Israel's unending military adventurism across the region from Lebanon to Syria to Iran to Yemen over the last two years of the Gaza War. Subsequently, many state leaders and representatives from the region and wider Muslim world travelled to Doha to demonstrate support for the State of Qatar. The President of the UAE, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, along with the Defence Minister and the Crown Prince of Dubai, Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, arrived within 24 hours of the attack on 10 September.

Moreover, the crown princes of Jordan⁵ and Kuwait⁶ also visited Doha on 10 September, followed by Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif⁷ on 11 September and Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto⁸ on 12 September. On his part, Saudi Crown Prince and de facto ruler, Mohammad Bin Salman, while addressing the Shura Council in Riyadh on 10 September, declared that the kingdom was deploying “all of its capabilities” for the “safety and security” of Qatar.⁹

A few days later, on 15 September, Qatar convened a joint emergency meeting as part of the Arab League and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), called the Arab-Islamic Summit, in Doha.¹⁰ It brought together leaders from across the Muslim world, including Turkey’s Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Iran’s Masoud Pezeshkian, Pakistan’s Shehbaz Sharif, Egypt’s Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, and Malaysia’s Anwar Ibrahim, among others. Yet, despite such a high-profile assembly of Muslim World leaders as well as the rhetorical flourish of its communiqué, the Summit accomplished little beyond reasserting their condemnation of both Israel’s regional military adventurism and its devastating war in Gaza.

The Summit Declaration acknowledged Israel’s assault in Doha as a “violation of international norms”, applauded Qatar’s ‘mediation’ role in the region, particularly in Gaza, and warned that Israel’s impunity threatened “regional and international peace and security.”¹¹ But what underscored once again the structural weakness of the regional security mechanisms of the Gulf and Arab World was the absence of actionable measures. It is instructive how, when the Summit was underway, Israel continued its cross-border military aggression in Syria and Lebanon, thereby demonstrating its indifference to rhetorical censure of the Arab governments as well as its Western allies.

Interestingly, apart from Egypt and Qatar’s role, the joint statement also applauded the United States’ “efforts” towards the end of the Gaza war when, in essence, Washington acted as the biggest enabler of Israeli

aggression during the past two years through military aid and diplomatic shielding. It should be recalled that Washington vetoed as many as six UN Security Council resolutions on Gaza over this period. Such a reality demonstrated how the meeting became a mere display of rhetorical unity rather than either coming up with a concrete plan of action against Israel's military bullying or pressuring the United States to force Tel Aviv to put an immediate end to the death and destruction in Gaza.

Nevertheless, while the Arab-Islamic Summit passed as merely symbolic, in another "Extraordinary Session of the GCC Joint Defence Council meeting on 15 September", these states, while emphasising their security as "indivisible", pledged "to activate joint defence mechanisms and Gulf deterrence capabilities" against any external threat.¹² At the individual level, Saudi Arabia signed a bilateral Strategic Mutual Agreement with Pakistan, the only nuclear-armed Muslim state with a strong conventional military strength, which has been described by many as a watershed development and a potential template for strengthening the local security framework of the Gulf.¹³

In this context, this *Issue Brief* analyses the structural limitations of the Gulf security frameworks, arguing that the failure of Arab and Gulf leadership to mount a coherent response is rooted not merely in political hesitation but in the structural dependencies that define their security architecture. The entanglement of Gulf states with Western security guarantees, their heavy reliance on US- and European-origin defence acquisitions, and the deep integration of their sovereign wealth into Western financial systems have created constraints that severely limit their strategic autonomy. Equally important, their regional security outlook — still locked in Iran-centric paradigms — has left them ill-prepared to respond to the emerging challenge of Israeli regional hegemony.

2. Structural Dependency on U.S.-Led Security Umbrella

For decades, the United States has acted as the primary security guarantor of Saudi Arabia-led GCC monarchies. All these countries signed bilateral defence agreements with Washington, particularly after Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, to deter any military adventurism by regional powers like Iraq and Iran so as to preserve their state sovereignty as well as ensure major power support for regime survival. While such arrangements provided the GCC states with access to advanced American weaponry, military training, and security guarantees, they came at a steep cost to their strategic autonomy as well as deeply entrenching the American presence in the region.

Table: Major US–GCC Defence Cooperation Agreements (1990–2025)

Year	Agreement / Event	Countries Involved	Key Details
1990–1991	Gulf War Security Arrangements	All GCC	US deployed forces to defend Kuwait and Saudi Arabia; led to long-term basing agreements.
1991	Defence Cooperation Agreement	Bahrain ¹⁴	Allowed US access to Bahraini military facilities; reaffirmed in 2010.
1992	Defence Cooperation Agreement	UAE ¹⁵	Enabled US military access to Emirati bases; expanded over time.
1993	Defence Cooperation Agreement	Qatar ¹⁶	The US gained access to Al Udeid Air Base, which later became the forward headquarters of CENTCOM.
1994	Defence Cooperation Agreement	Kuwait ¹⁷	Formalised US military presence post-Gulf War.
2000	Defence Cooperation Agreement	Oman ¹⁸	Renewed US access to Omani bases; strategic for Indian Ocean operations.
2004	GCC Intelligence Sharing Pact	All GCC ¹⁹	Formalised intelligence cooperation among GCC states.
2008	US–GCC Strategic Dialogue Initiated	All GCC	Framework for annual defence and security consultations.
2015	Camp David Summit &	All GCC ²⁰	US and GCC agreed to enhance

Year	Agreement / Event	Countries Involved	Key Details
	Joint Statement		missile defence, counterterrorism, and maritime security.
2017	US–Qatar Defence Cooperation Expansion	Qatar ²¹	Signed agreement to deepen military cooperation; reaffirmed US presence.
2021	US–Saudi Arabia Strategic Dialogue	Saudi Arabia ²²	Focused on counterterrorism, arms sales, and regional stability.
2022–2023	US–GCC Defence Working Groups	All GCC ²³	Focused on Integrated Air and Missile Defence (IAMD) and maritime security.
2024	US–UAE Defence Sales & Training Expansion	UAE ²⁴	\$29.3B in active FMS cases; Gulf Air Warfare Center hosts joint training.
2025	Riyadh Multilateral Security Summit	All GCC ²⁵	Renewed commitment to collective defence amid rising regional threats.

Remember the crude remarks of President Donald Trump during his first term, that the Saudi regime would “not be there for two weeks” without American support, which reflected the level of American security dependence that these governments subsisted on.²⁶ Interestingly, given Trump’s reputation for employing strong-arm trade tactics against rivals and allies alike, Riyadh promptly responded by signing billions of dollars’ worth of defence acquisitions with American defence companies, thereby cementing its dependency rather than reducing it.

A cursory examination of the military hardware and economic investments reveals an overwhelming dependence of GCC states on the US-led Western bloc. In the case of Saudi Arabia, nearly 72–80 per cent of its military arsenal is sourced from the United States, followed by Britain (6–8 per cent). Riyadh signed a record-breaking \$142 billion deal with Washington in May 2025, which further illustrates the scale of this reliance, which is unlikely to decrease anytime soon.²⁷ This new package includes modernisation of the F-15SA (Saudi Advanced) fighter fleet, expansion of Patriot PAC-3 MSE systems, enhancement of naval defence systems, and upgrades to the command-and-control

platforms. As such, this deal further entrenches the kingdom's operational reliance on American logistical and technological support.

Table: Share of Foreign Countries in Saudi Arabia's Military Hardware

Country	Estimated Share (%)	Key Systems Supplied	
United States	~72–80%	F-15 fighters, Patriot missiles, Apache helicopters	Largest supplier via Foreign Military Sales (FMS); longstanding ally
United Kingdom	~6–8%	Eurofighter Typhoon, naval systems	Strategic partner; BAE Systems active in Saudi defence sector
France	~4–6%	CAESAR howitzers, naval equipment	Moderate supplier; expanding footprint
Germany	~3–5%	Border security systems, armoured vehicles	Limited exports due to political constraints

Sources: SIPRI – Arms Transfers to MENA (2020–2024)²⁸, US International Trade Administration – Saudi Defense Sector²⁹, & Dimensions Center – Saudi Arms Procurement Diversification³⁰

Likewise, Qatar also presents a similar picture, albeit with a semblance of diversification in its military hardware, but within the Western bloc of countries. While 40–45 per cent of its defence systems are of US origin, 20–25 per cent are of French origin, like its Rafale fighters, and 10–12 per cent are of German origin. Interestingly, what distinguishes Qatar's military arsenal is the gradual increase of Turkish systems, which currently form 5–7 per cent of its hardware.

Table: Share of Foreign Countries in Qatar's Military Hardware

Country	Estimated Share (%)	Key Systems Supplied	
United States	40–45%	F-15QA fighters, Patriot missiles, Apache helicopters	Largest supplier; extensive Foreign Military Sales (FMS) agreements
France	20–25%	Rafale fighters, AMX-10RC, VAB APCs	Strong air and ground systems presence

Country	Estimated Share (%)	Key Systems Supplied	
Germany	10–12%	Leopard 2A7+ tanks, Panzerhaubitze 2000 howitzers	Heavy armour and artillery systems
Turkey	5–7%	Ejder Yalçın, Kirpi-2, BMC Amazon vehicles	Rapidly growing footprint; joint ventures and training cooperation
United Kingdom	<5%	Training aircraft, support systems	Limited but strategic presence

Sources: Observatory of Economic Complexity – Qatar Military Imports³¹ & US-Qatar Business Council – Defence Sector Overview³²

Other Gulf states also mirror this pattern, which is something that ensures their military doctrines, interoperability, and even maintenance cycles are structurally tied to Western defence ecosystems. In practice, therefore, this gives Washington, both because of its individual significance and as the leader of the Western bloc, leverage in fashioning the local security frameworks. Any deviation from this status quo and regional security posturing will require its concurrence.

3. Economic Interdependence and Sovereign Wealth Exposure

It is not that the Gulf monarchies demonstrate heavy dependency on military hardware alone; it is equally compounded by the extreme exposure of their financial resources in Western economies. They have heavily invested their sovereign wealth funds (SWFs), which are among the largest holdings in the world, in Western markets. This dynamic could create vulnerabilities that can be weaponised by Washington and its allies whenever required, as they did with Iran following the 1979 revolution.

Take the case of Saudi Arabia, whose Public Investment Fund (PIF), valued at approximately \$1.07 trillion, has approximately 20 per cent of its portfolio invested internationally and predominantly concentrated in Western economies, particularly the United States.³³ Although recent years have seen Riyadh redirect its wealth inward to diversify the Saudi national economy through projects like NEOM, yet its international

portfolio remains under-diversified, making it a risky enterprise.

Similarly, Qatar's sovereign wealth fund, with over \$557 billion as of 2025, managed by the Qatar Investment Authority (QIA), remains extremely exposed abroad, with over 70-75 per cent of its assets concentrated in Western markets (both Europe and the US).³⁴ Likewise, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which holds the third-largest sovereign wealth assets of over \$2.49 trillion, has nearly 60-65 per cent of its assets concentrated in Western markets.³⁵

As such, these funds are not merely passive investments but are integrated into Western financial markets, stock exchanges, and corporate structures. It provides Washington with immense leverage that can be exercised as needed, especially with someone like Donald Trump, who has employed strong-arm tactics with US allies and competitors alike.³⁶ Should Gulf states adopt policies that contravene US or European interests through such means as pursuing meaningful sanctions on Israel globally, these financial channels could easily be weaponised.

Iran's experience of financial exposure with the West is instructive in this case. Before the 1979 revolution, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, a pro-US monarch, heavily invested Iranian oil revenues in Western banks and institutions. But when his regime was ousted and replaced by a Shia theocratic government under Ayatollah Khomeini, these assets were frozen by Western governments led by US President Jimmy Carter.³⁷ As Iran-US relations broke and subsequently worsened due to the hostage crisis that lasted nearly two years till 1981, these national assets invested abroad became bargaining chips against the new Islamist government. And, when the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on Iran's nuclear programme was signed in 2015, a major attraction for Tehran was the promise of unfreezing over \$120 billion worth of assets.³⁸ Therefore, with their financial exposure even deeper, Gulf monarchies risk similar vulnerabilities should they attempt to defy

the strategic interests of the United States.

4. The Redundancy of an Iran-Centric Security Paradigm

While these structural dependencies constrain policy options of the Gulf States, the outlook of their current security architecture further limits their adaptability. For a long time, the GCC security narrative has revolved around Iran as a principal regional threat. This Iran-centric paradigm emerged following the 1979 revolution and its subsequent Islamisation, with Shia clergy consolidating power in Tehran, which threatened to export its revolutionary fervour to Gulf states against the pro-Western monarchies.³⁹ It subsisted during functional during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88), and increased as Tehran back various Shia groups such as Hezbollah besides its purported nuclear weapon ambitions. However, this framework has failed to adapt to the evolving landscape where Israeli ambitions represent a more immediate and expansive threat.⁴⁰

The “Greater Israel” project, rooted in biblical territorial claims, openly contests the legitimacy of the Sykes-Picot borders that demarcated the post–World War I West Asia.⁴¹ As such, Israel’s actions in Gaza, the West Bank, and its airstrikes in Syria and Lebanon are not isolated military campaigns but part of a broader hegemonic strategy. By contrast, Iran — while assertive — remains primarily defensive in posture, seeking deterrence against US and Israeli encirclement.

The recent years of the US-backed normalisation process of Israel in the region, through the Abraham Accords, though briefly offered the possibility of integrating Tel Aviv into a regional security framework. Under this framework, the UAE and Bahrain established relations with Israel in September 2020, followed by Morocco in December 2020 and Sudan in January 2021.⁴² Such a normalisation spree did briefly raise speculations that Saudi Arabia, with its pan-Islamic influence as the host of two of the three holy Mosques, might join the bandwagon, which

could create a domino effect. Yet Israel's "genocidal" war in Gaza following the Hamas attack of 7 October 2023 derailed this trajectory.⁴³

In the current climate, any effort at normalising Israel may now risk both backlash from within the region and legitimacy issues for Gulf monarchies. As such, the decades-old Iran-centric security paradigm has undermined the ability of these states to recalibrate toward a more balanced security approach that takes into consideration new threats, particularly Israeli expansionism.

5. Emerging Alternatives: Pakistan and the Limits of Strategic Recalibration

Recognising the inadequacy of the current framework, Saudi Arabia has recently signed a Mutual Strategic Defence Agreement with Pakistan, the Muslim world's only nuclear power.⁴⁴ While this agreement is bilateral in scope, it did signal Riyadh's search for complementary, if not alternative, security arrangements. Pakistan, with its conventional military strength, complemented by its nuclear arsenal, and a previous role in the regional security frameworks, has the potential to serve as a credible security stabiliser against Israel's growing military hegemony in the region.

However, the effectiveness of this approach remains uncertain. Because Pakistan not only faces economic and political fragilities back home, but its military remains overinvested and overburdened in fighting violent Islamist groups like Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Islamic State Khorasan, besides battling a surging Baloch nationalist insurgency.⁴⁵ For instance, it lost 61 soldiers in just two months of August and September in anti-militancy operations across its tribal hinterland of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and restive Balochistan. In comparison, it could only neutralise 21 militants in this period, thereby demonstrating the surging capacities of these groups to inflict casualties on its armed forces. Nevertheless, the question also remains whether the

Pakistan Army can look beyond its old paradigm of providing rental military services and seize the opportunity to play a potential stabilising role in the region against both Israeli expansionism and largely humbled Iran, following recent years of regional setbacks.

Moreover, such bilateral arrangements cannot substitute for a coherent regional security architecture without broader integration of countries like Iran. There is no doubt that Tehran's exclusion from Gulf security frameworks has historically undermined its stability, and continuing this exclusion only benefits actors like the United States, which seeks to continue its dominance in the region, and by extension, Israel, which wants to settle for no less than a role of a Washington-blessed regional military hegemon.

However, in theory, the Gulf security system that could bind together Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, and Qatar (something like Muslim NATO) would have the potential to serve as a strong deterrent to Israeli expansionism. However, in practice, their own rivalries, sectarian divisions, and structural dependencies on US-led Western governments make this scenario unlikely to occur. The result is a fragmented security landscape where Israel will continue to act with impunity, shielded by American patronage and Arab powerlessness.

6. India's position

India does not possess much strategic bandwidth to offer any substantive security umbrella to the Gulf states. Its engagement with the GCC countries has traditionally been defined by oil and gas trade-driven economic interdependence and the welfare of its large expatriate community. However, recent years have witnessed a gradual diversification which is marked by increased security and intelligence cooperation, especially with countries like the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Yet, despite these developments, New Delhi has yet to conclude any major defence agreement with any GCC country that would integrate it

meaningfully into the Gulf's evolving regional security architecture.

India's growing strategic partnership with Israel further circumscribes its willingness to assume a visible security role in the Gulf. New Delhi is wary of joining any regional framework that could potentially strain this relationship, which has become a cornerstone of its defence and technological cooperation in West Asia. In contrast, Pakistan, whose role has been qualitatively reduced over the past few decades, is seeking to reintegrate itself into regional security frameworks through measures such as the Strategic Mutual Defence Pact with Saudi Arabia.⁴⁶ But India continues to maintain its arm's-length approach by preferring equidistance and selective engagement rather than deep entanglement in regional rivalries that could jeopardise its interests.

This calibrated stance also explains New Delhi's measured responses to various regional crises, wherein India typically emphasises dialogue and diplomacy over confrontation. For instance, in the case of the Israeli attack in Doha, on one hand, Prime Minister Narendra Modi condemned it as a "violation of sovereignty" of Qatar while on the other hand, he did not name Israel for its aggression. Moreover, he reiterated India's established stance of "resolution of issues through dialogue and diplomacy" and the need to "avoid escalation" to preserve regional stability.⁴⁷

7. Policy Options

The failure of the Arab-Islamic Summit to propose a tangible roadmap against Israel's military adventurism in the region highlights urgent lessons for Gulf Arab policymakers:

1. These states need to gradually reduce their overreliance on the United States and its Western allies in both military and economic matters. It would require diversification in defence acquisitions away from Western countries and bring in Asian

major powers, such as China and India, into the equation, redirecting their investments to indigenous military industries and rebalancing sovereign wealth portfolios away from Western markets.

2. There needs to be a change in the Gulf fixation on Iran as a primary threat, and a new recalibrated framework must acknowledge Israel as a regional destabiliser. Without such a change in thinking, regional strategies will remain misaligned and continue to overlook actual threats.
3. Gulf policymakers must realise that any long-term security framework must be inclusive and that the non-participation of Iran in such an arrangement will not only render it ineffective but counterproductive.
4. The OIC and Arab League must evolve beyond rhetorical condemnation and instead establish binding mechanisms, such as sanctions, collective defence agreements, or coordinated diplomatic initiatives.
5. With Western capitals structurally biased toward Israel, Gulf states should deepen ties with rising powers in the Global South, such as China, India, Brazil, and South Africa (BRICS), which are more sympathetic to multipolarity and hence pose lesser risks.

8. Conclusion

Israel's strike in Doha was not just an attack on Hamas leadership; it was a test of Arab sovereignty and regional will. The tepid response of the Arab-Islamic Summit underlines the structural paralysis that grips the region's security architecture. As long as Gulf states remain ensnared in US-led security guarantees, financially dependent on Western markets, and fixated on Iran as the primary threat, they will remain incapable of confronting the more pressing challenge, which is Israeli expansionism. For Gulf rulers, the choice is very straightforward.

They can either stick to the present dependency and keep making meaningless protests while Israel continues its regional adventurism and expansionist policy, or they can do the hard but necessary work of changing their security outlook. Although it is a fact that the road to strategic independence is fraught with risks, neglecting to undertake such changes will ensure their prolonged subordination without guaranteeing regional stability.



Dr. Mohamad Waseem Malla is a Research Fellow at the International Centre for Peace Studies (ICPS), New Delhi, where he also serves as Associate Editor of its quarterly peer-reviewed publication, the *Journal of Peace Studies (JPS)*. He holds a PhD in International Studies from the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), India, with a specialisation in Media and West Asian (Middle Eastern) Studies. His doctoral research examines the intersections of media and foreign policy, providing a media-centric perspective on Saudi-Iranian relations within the broader context of political and global communication. His research interests include political communication in West and South Asia, geopolitics, media–state relations, and the evolving dynamics of populism and digital authoritarianism in South Asia. Dr. Malla’s academic work has appeared in journals such as *Middle East Policy*, *Journal of Media & Communication Studies*, and *Springer* publications, while his commentaries have been featured on platforms including *East Asia Forum*, *The Diplomat*, *Asia Times*, *The Indian Express*, and the *Middle East Policy Council*. He is also the Founder and Editorial Director of *Middle East Outlook (MEO)*, an online, research-driven platform that offers analysis on developments in West Asia and beyond. At ICPS, Dr. Malla monitors geopolitical trends in West and South Asia, with a particular focus on Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and the strategic implications of China’s regional rise. He also maps the discourses of extremism and peace in digital spaces.

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