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Barry O'Halloran: Doha strike sends shock waves through Gaza peace talks and puts entire Middle East region on fresh alert

Bombing has cast doubts on the real extent of America's influence on Israel



The aftermath of the Israeli attack on Doha, Qatar. Photo: PA

Barry O'Halloran

Yesterday at 05:30

The tiny Persian Gulf state of Qatar has made itself central to Middle Eastern politics in recent years.

It has a foot in both camps — with an enormous US air base close to the capital, Doha, while also hosting the external political headquarters of Hamas.

As a result, it has the dubious distinction of being bombed by both Iran for the US base, and by Israel last week because of Hamas.

Since the Gaza war began almost two years ago, Israel has established a pattern of wiping out the senior leadership of its terrorist enemies — the Houthis in Yemen being the latest.

In its war against Hezbollah last year, Israel assassinated its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, in his bunker in Beirut. It also eliminated most of its political leadership and top military command structure.

In a similar vein, Israel's Doha bombing last week targeted all of Hamas's senior political leadership, who were gathered there to discuss the latest US ceasefire and hostage deal proposal.

Hamas said the attack was unsuccessful and that none of the five people killed were senior officials. It is widely accepted that Israel did not achieve its objective.

The attack was widely condemned as a blatant breach of international law. More significantly, it risked bringing the ever-fragile Gaza peace talks to a bloody and abrupt end.

Last weekend there was considerable speculation that a deal was in the offing. Last Saturday, Israel's Channel 12 News reported Donald Trump had put forth a new ceasefire proposal to Hamas.

Under the deal, Hamas would free all the remaining 48 hostages, dead and alive, on the first day of the truce in exchange for thousands of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails.

It further stipulated the cancellation of Israel's planned military occupation of Gaza city. A 60-day ceasefire would then be used to negotiate a permanent end to the war.

The US president is ever the optimist when it comes to his own deals.

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“We’re working on a solution that may be very good. You’ll be hearing about it pretty soon. We’re trying to get it ended, get the hostages back,” he wrote on his online platform.

“The Israelis have accepted my terms. It is time for Hamas to accept as well. I have warned Hamas about the consequences of not accepting. This is my last warning; there will not be another one.”

An Israeli official said Israel was “seriously considering” the proposal but did not elaborate.

On Monday, Qatari officials pressed Hamas’ political leaders to “respond positively”.



American president Donald Trump. Photo: Reuters

Saudi newspaper *Asharq Al-Awsat* reported the Hamas leadership appeared less enthusiastic about the deal. The terrorist group confirmed the proposal as presented to them contained “many traps and pitfalls that need to be dismantled”.

Then, last Tuesday, these proposals looked like had been buried under the dust and rubble of the Hamas residence in Doha’s embassy district.

Trump professed himself dismayed by what had happened.

“I’m not thrilled about the whole situation,” he told reporters on Tuesday evening.

“I was very unhappy about it, very unhappy about every aspect, and we got to get the hostages back, but I was very unhappy about the way that went down.”

Aside from the immediate damage to the Gaza peace talks, the strike also risks seriously rupturing Israel’s long-term goal of achieving stable relationships with the all-important Gulf states, including Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.

These countries are the cornerstone of Israel’s hopes to secure wider diplomatic acceptance in the Middle East.

The Doha bombing has also raised doubts regarding America’s ability to restrain a resurgent Israel in the future.

The attack would seem to indicate that Israel has made a strategic decision to secure itself in the short-term through force of arms — even if that means jeopardising its longer-term regional security prospects.

The momentum for Arab-Israeli normalisation was already badly damaged by Israel’s war in Gaza, but the Doha attack could derail it entirely.



Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu

The wealthy Gulf nations are trying to come to grips with a newly scrambled geopolitical order, and are assessing whether to view Israel as a potential partner, a security risk, or both.

Meanwhile, Trump is busily trying to put the Humpty Dumpty of the Middle East normalisation process back together again.

To that end, Benjamin Netanyahu's office issued a statement saying: "Today's action against the top terrorist chieftains of Hamas was a wholly independent Israeli operation. Israel initiated it, Israel conducted it and Israel takes full responsibility"

It was a position echoed by Trump.

"This was a decision made by prime minister Netanyahu. It was not a decision made by me."

The US president also went out of his way to empathise with Qatar.

"I view Qatar as a strong ally and friend of the US and feel very badly about the location of the attack."

Asked by a reporter if he was surprised by the attack, he said: "I'm never surprised by anything, especially when it comes to the Middle East."

The mounting death toll in Gaza has caused much of the initial enthusiasm for Arab-Israeli "normalisation" to dissipate. Whether Trump can revive its flagging prospects is very much an open question at this point.

In the short-term, the priority is to get the peace initiative back on track. If that fails, then Netanyahu has made it very clear that the ground operation to occupy Gaza city and root out Hamas from its last remaining stronghold will go ahead as planned.

The inevitable outcome will be a hugely increased death toll in Gaza, and a real risk that things could spiral out of control.

At the time of writing, it's impossible to say which way events will go – but in the Middle East, everything can change in a moment.