

Explaining the Unthinkable: Israel's 2025 Airstrike on Qatar Through the Lens of the Rational Actor Model

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Abstract: This study examines a hypothetical Israeli airstrike on Doha, Qatar, on 9 September 2025, targeting Hamas leadership, to explore Israel's decision-making through the Rational Actor Model (RAM). The research aims to understand why Israel might consider military action in a Gulf state despite potential diplomatic and geopolitical risks. Using a theory-driven scenario analysis with secondary data, including official documents, academic publications, and credible news sources, the study reconstructs Israel's strategic objectives, policy alternatives, and expected consequences. Findings suggest that, within the RAM framework, Israel's action could be interpreted as a calculated choice prioritizing national security and deterrence, while balancing potential costs such as regional instability and international condemnation. The study provides practical insights for policymakers on the complexities of preventive military strategies and their broader implications for regional diplomacy. The research contributes to international relations scholarship by demonstrating the application of RAM in analyzing hypothetical extreme security scenarios, highlighting the interplay between rational calculation, strategic objectives, and geopolitical constraints.

Keywords: Airstrike of Israel, Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, Qatar Territory, Rational Actor Model

A. Introduction

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains one of the most protracted and complex conflicts in contemporary international politics. Since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians during the Nakba, the conflict has evolved into a multidimensional struggle involving territorial disputes, contested sovereignty, competing national identities, religious tensions, security dilemmas, and recurring cycles of violence (Gelvin, 2021; Manna, 2013). The persistence of the conflict has generated significant regional instability and has repeatedly drawn the involvement of external actors, including neighboring Arab states, major global powers, international organizations, and non-state armed groups operating within the broader Middle Eastern security environment (Gerges, 2016; Waltz, 1979). Despite numerous diplomatic initiatives such as the Oslo Accords, Camp

David negotiations, and various United Nations resolutions, a comprehensive and sustainable peace settlement has not yet been achieved (Quandt, 2005). Consequently, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict continues to represent one of the central security and geopolitical challenges in the contemporary international system.

The conflict entered a new phase of escalation following the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023. Hamas launched a large-scale cross-border assault targeting Israeli civilian communities and military installations, resulting in substantial casualties, hostage-taking incidents, and widespread psychological shock within Israeli society (Byman, 2024b). In response, Israel initiated extensive military operations in the Gaza Strip under the justification of self-defense and counterterrorism objectives aimed at degrading Hamas's military capabilities (Byman, 2024a; Group, 2024). The subsequent Israeli military campaign generated extensive international debate concerning proportionality, humanitarian law, civilian protection, and the broader implications for regional security and stability (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Furthermore, the war reinforced the perception among Israeli policymakers that Hamas constituted not merely a militant organization but an existential strategic threat requiring long-term neutralization rather than temporary containment (Inbar & Shamir, 2014b).

Within this evolving geopolitical environment, Qatar occupies a highly strategic and controversial position in Middle Eastern politics. Qatar has consistently played a diplomatic role as an intermediary between Hamas, Israel, the United States, and other regional actors. Since 2012, Hamas political leaders have operated from Doha with the awareness and tacit acceptance of multiple international actors in order to facilitate indirect negotiations, mediation efforts, and humanitarian coordination (D. B. Roberts, 2022). Qatar has frequently participated in ceasefire negotiations, hostage exchange arrangements, humanitarian aid distribution, and conflict de-escalation efforts alongside Egypt and the United States (Kamrava, 2022). Consequently, Qatar simultaneously functions as a mediator, humanitarian facilitator, and host of Hamas political representatives, placing the country in a highly sensitive diplomatic position within the regional balance of power (Ulrichsen, 2014).

Against this backdrop, this study examines a hypothetical scenario in which Israel launches an airstrike on Doha, Qatar, on September 9, 2025, targeting senior Hamas leaders allegedly operating within Qatari territory. Although this event is entirely fictional and did not occur in reality, the scenario provides an analytically valuable case for understanding state decision-making under conditions of extreme security pressure and geopolitical uncertainty. The hypothetical operation is theoretically significant because it would represent the first direct Israeli military strike conducted within a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member state. Such an action would likely undermine Qatar's role as a mediator, intensify regional tensions, damage Israel's relations with Arab governments, and potentially trigger broader geopolitical instability across the Gulf region (Kamrava, 2022). Moreover, the hypothetical attack raises critical questions concerning sovereignty, international law, regional

deterrence, and the boundaries of counterterrorism operations beyond national territory (Byman, 2024c; Gause, 2010).

From the perspective of international relations theory, hypothetical scenarios are frequently employed to examine strategic behavior, crisis management, and rational decision-making in situations where empirical cases are limited, politically sensitive, or difficult to observe directly (Allison & Zelikow, 1999). In this context, the hypothetical Israeli airstrike on Qatar provides an analytical framework for evaluating how states may justify risky military operations under the logic of national security and strategic calculation. The scenario also reflects broader debates within security studies regarding deterrence theory, preventive defense, preemption, and counterterrorism doctrines adopted by states confronting perceived existential threats posed by non-state armed organizations (Jervis, 1978; Waltz, 1979).

Israel's security doctrine has historically emphasized deterrence, intelligence superiority, rapid military mobilization, and preventive action against perceived existential threats. Due to Israel's geographical vulnerability, limited strategic depth, and history of interstate conflict, Israeli strategic culture strongly prioritizes survival and national security as the primary objectives of state policy (Inbar & Shamir, 2014). Following the October 7 attack, Israeli policymakers increasingly framed Hamas as a strategic threat that required systematic dismantlement through military, intelligence, and political measures (Byman, 2024a). This strategic perception reinforced the legitimacy of preventive and preemptive military action within Israeli security discourse and expanded the operational boundaries of Israeli counterterrorism policy beyond conventional battlefield environments (Freilich, 2018).

Theoretically, this study employs Graham Allison's Rational Actor Model (RAM) to explain Israel's hypothetical decision-making process concerning a potential military operation targeting Hamas leadership in Qatar. According to Allison and Zelikow (1999), states can be understood as rational and unitary actors capable of identifying strategic objectives, evaluating policy alternatives, estimating costs and benefits, and selecting the option that maximizes national interests and expected utility. Within this framework, foreign policy decisions are interpreted as strategic responses designed to maintain state security, preserve deterrence credibility, and reduce vulnerabilities under conditions of uncertainty and external threat (Allison & Zelikow, 1999). The Rational Actor Model assumes that policymakers engage in cost-benefit calculations before implementing policy choices and that national survival remains the highest priority in state behavior.

The Rational Actor Model has been widely applied in the field of international relations to explain state behavior during military crises, interstate conflicts, counterterrorism operations, and strategic security decision-making (Allison & Zelikow, 1999). Scholars have utilized the framework to analyze how governments respond to threats posed by rival states, militant organizations, and transnational

security challenges (Jervis, 1978). In highly conflict-prone environments, rational calculations concerning deterrence, military credibility, domestic political legitimacy, and strategic signaling often shape state policy choices (Mearsheimer, 2001). Consequently, the Rational Actor Model provides a relevant analytical lens for examining how Israeli decision makers could theoretically justify military action beyond national borders in pursuit of strategic security objectives.

Several previous studies have examined Israeli foreign policy, Middle Eastern security dynamics, and Hamas-Israel relations from a variety of analytical perspectives. Existing scholarship has extensively discussed the humanitarian consequences of the Gaza conflict, including civilian casualties, displacement crises, infrastructure destruction, and the broader implications of prolonged warfare for regional stability (Group, 2024; Watch, 2024). Other studies have focused on Israel's counterterrorism strategies, particularly deterrence policies, intelligence operations, targeted assassinations, and preventive military doctrines aimed at weakening organizations perceived as threats to Israeli national security. In addition, scholars have analyzed the geopolitical role of Gulf states, particularly Qatar, in mediation efforts, diplomatic negotiations, and regional conflict management processes. These studies generally emphasize Qatar's strategic role as a mediator capable of maintaining communication with multiple regional and international actors simultaneously.

Furthermore, recent scholarship has increasingly examined the legal and diplomatic implications of cross-border military operations, particularly regarding state sovereignty, international humanitarian law, proportionality, and the legitimacy of counterterrorism measures conducted outside national territory (Byman, 2024b; Cronin, 2009). Other analyses have highlighted the fragility of the contemporary Middle Eastern security architecture following the Gaza war, especially concerning shifting regional alliances, intensifying geopolitical rivalries, and the growing risk of broader interstate confrontation (Gause, 2010; Gerges, 2016). Nevertheless, despite the growing literature on Israel, Hamas, and regional security politics, relatively limited scholarly attention has been devoted to systematically examining how Israel's hypothetical strategic calculations regarding a military strike on Qatar could be interpreted through the Rational Actor Model framework. Most existing studies focus primarily on humanitarian, legal, diplomatic, or geopolitical consequences rather than on the internal logic of state decision-making and rational strategic calculation underlying such a controversial policy option. Therefore, this study seeks to answer the following research question: Why would Israel carry out a hypothetical airstrike on Qatar on September 9, 2025? By employing the Rational Actor Model as its primary analytical framework, this research examines how Israeli decision makers could rationally evaluate strategic objectives, available policy alternatives, potential risks, expected consequences, and anticipated benefits associated with a hypothetical military operation targeting Hamas leadership in Doha. More specifically, the study analyzes the extent to which considerations of deterrence, national security, political signaling, domestic political pressure, and regional strategic calculations may

influence Israel's hypothetical policy choices under conditions of perceived existential threat and geopolitical uncertainty.

The study also evaluates alternative non-military options theoretically available to Israel, including diplomatic pressure, intelligence cooperation, covert operations, cyber strategies, and indirect negotiations, before assessing why military action might nevertheless be selected as the preferred strategic alternative. In addition, this research considers the potential diplomatic, economic, and geopolitical costs associated with such an operation, including deterioration of relations with Gulf states, international condemnation, disruption of mediation processes, escalation of regional instability, and the possibility of wider military confrontation within the Middle East. Using qualitative descriptive methods and secondary-source analysis, this article argues that the hypothetical operation may be interpreted as a rational strategic choice intended to maximize Israel's national security interests, reinforce deterrence credibility, and neutralize perceived threats associated with Hamas leadership abroad despite the substantial diplomatic and geopolitical risks attached to the operation. Through this approach, the study contributes to the broader international relations literature by demonstrating how rational choice perspectives can provide deeper insight into state behavior, strategic military decision-making, and the logic underlying controversial foreign policy actions in highly complex regional conflict environments.

B. Methods

This study employs a theory-driven scenario analysis to examine a hypothetical Israeli airstrike on Doha, Qatar, on 9 September 2025, by utilizing Graham Allison's Rational Actor Model (RAM) as the principal analytical framework. The primary objective of the study is to explore how Israel, conceptualized as a rational and unitary state actor, could theoretically formulate strategic decisions under conditions of extreme security pressure, while considering national interests, policy alternatives, and the anticipated consequences of military action (Allison & Zelikow, 1999). The research emphasizes a qualitative and secondary-source-based methodological approach, enabling the study to analyze a plausible but fictional geopolitical scenario in order to understand the strategic logic that may guide state behavior under conditions of perceived existential threat and regional instability (George & Bennett, 2005). By employing hypothetical scenario analysis, the study seeks to illuminate how rational strategic calculations may shape foreign policy choices in highly sensitive security environments where empirical cases are either unavailable or politically difficult to observe directly.

The primary subject of this research is Israel, which is analytically treated as a unified and rational decision-making entity pursuing the maximization of national security, deterrence capability, and state survival. The geopolitical context of the study focuses on the Gulf region, particularly Qatar, which occupies a strategic role as a mediator in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and as a host for Hamas political leadership. This regional setting is highly significant because Qatar simultaneously maintains

diplomatic relations with Western powers, regional actors, and Hamas representatives, thereby creating a complex political environment characterized by overlapping security, diplomatic, and humanitarian considerations (D. B. Roberts, 2022) By situating the hypothetical military scenario within this context, the study captures the interaction between Israel's strategic security priorities and the broader diplomatic constraints embedded within Middle Eastern regional politics (Gause, 2010).

The research relies entirely on secondary data sources selected according to standards of credibility, relevance, and academic reliability. These sources include official government statements, policy reports, strategic doctrine documents, peer-reviewed academic publications, international organization reports, and credible international media coverage published between 2022 and 2026. Such materials provide comprehensive insight into Israel's national security doctrine, perceptions of Hamas as a transnational security threat, Qatar's diplomatic and mediating role, and the broader geopolitical dynamics shaping the Middle Eastern security environment Academic literature on Israeli deterrence strategy, counterterrorism policy, and rational decision-making theory also forms a critical component of the analytical framework employed in this study (Inbar & Shamir, 2014c). All materials were carefully reviewed and cross-checked in order to avoid unverifiable claims, politically biased information, or non-academic references. No primary data were collected for the purposes of this research, and all scenarios discussed remain entirely hypothetical. Consequently, the study does not claim empirical verification of real-world events, but rather seeks to construct a theoretically grounded analytical model for understanding strategic decision-making under conditions of uncertainty.

The analysis is structured around the four sequential stages of Graham Allison's Rational Actor Model, which conceptualizes states as rational actors capable of strategically calculating policy choices in order to maximize national interests and expected utility (Allison & Zelikow, 1999). These four stages provide a systematic analytical framework for reconstructing Israel's hypothetical decision-making process and evaluating the extent to which military action against Hamas leadership in Qatar could theoretically be interpreted as rational behavior. The stages consist of goals and objectives, alternatives, consequences, and choice, each of which is operationalized within the context of the hypothetical scenario.

The first stage, Goals and Objectives, focuses on identifying Israel's core strategic priorities and national interests, which serve as the baseline criteria for evaluating alternative policy options. Central objectives include the survival of the state, deterrence against hostile actors, territorial security, preservation of military credibility, and protection of Israeli civilians from perceived threats (Waltz, 1979) Within the hypothetical scenario, special emphasis is placed on the impact of the Hamas attack on 7 October 2023, which significantly intensified Israel's perception of Hamas as an existential security threat requiring long-term strategic neutralization.

By clearly defining these objectives, the study establishes the strategic benchmarks against which all policy alternatives are measured and rationality is assessed.

The second stage, *Alternatives*, examines the range of policy options theoretically available to Israel prior to selecting a particular course of action. The study identifies four primary alternatives concerning Hamas leadership operating within Qatari territory. First, Israel could pursue diplomatic engagement through intermediaries such as the United States or Egypt in an effort to pressure Qatar to restrict Hamas activities. Second, Israel could conduct covert intelligence operations targeting Hamas leadership without direct military escalation. Third, Israel could continue limiting military operations exclusively to the Gaza Strip without extending operations beyond Palestinian territory. Fourth, Israel could implement cyber operations, financial disruption measures, and intelligence-based sanctions targeting Hamas-linked financial and communication networks (Cronin, 2009). Each alternative is systematically evaluated according to its feasibility, effectiveness, strategic utility, and compatibility with Israel's national security objectives. Through this stage, the study reconstructs the decision-making environment faced by Israeli policymakers and highlights the trade-offs associated with each available option.

The third stage, *Consequences*, analyzes the anticipated benefits, risks, and strategic implications associated with each policy alternative. Potential benefits include the strengthening of Israeli deterrence credibility, disruption of Hamas command structures, elimination of external leadership networks, and reinforcement of Israel's regional strategic position. However, the study also considers substantial risks, including diplomatic backlash from Gulf states, international condemnation, deterioration of relations with strategic allies, escalation of regional instability, and possible violations of international norms concerning sovereignty and proportionality. Secondary-source evidence regarding previous Israeli military operations, regional political responses, and alliance dynamics is incorporated to provide a nuanced understanding of the possible outcomes of each policy choice. In addition, counterfactual reasoning is employed to evaluate what might theoretically occur if Israel were to prioritize non-military alternatives rather than direct military action. This comparative approach enriches the analysis of costs, risks, and strategic utility within the Rational Actor Model framework.

The fourth and final stage, *Choice*, synthesizes findings from the previous stages in order to identify the policy option most likely to maximize strategic utility while minimizing risks and vulnerabilities. Within the Rational Actor Model, a "rational" choice is defined as the policy alternative that most effectively advances national objectives under conditions of uncertainty, military constraints, and geopolitical pressure (Allison & Zelikow, 1999). In the context of the hypothetical scenario, the study evaluates the strategic rationale that could motivate Israel to conduct an airstrike targeting Hamas leadership in Doha despite the considerable diplomatic and geopolitical risks involved. The analysis explores how such an operation could

theoretically be interpreted as a calculated, objective-oriented strategic decision rather than an impulsive or ideologically driven act. This stage therefore emphasizes the role of strategic calculation, deterrence logic, and national security prioritization in shaping hypothetical Israeli behavior.

To ensure analytical consistency and transparency, the study employs a systematic process of secondary-source categorization and theoretical triangulation. Relevant materials are organized according to their contribution to each stage of the Rational Actor Model, allowing for a coherent reconstruction of the hypothetical decision-making process. Although no formal coding procedures such as open coding, axial coding, or selective coding are employed due to the fictive nature of the scenario, the study follows a clearly defined theoretical logic connecting strategic goals, policy alternatives, anticipated consequences, and final choices (George & Bennett, 2005). This methodological structure ensures that the analysis remains grounded in established international relations theory while acknowledging the limitations associated with hypothetical scenario analysis.

The rationale for employing scenario analysis lies in the rarity, sensitivity, and speculative nature of the event under study. Within strategic studies and security analysis, hypothetical scenarios are frequently used to explore extreme cases, evaluate crisis decision-making processes, and generate insights into rational behavior under conditions of uncertainty and incomplete information. By applying the Rational Actor Model to a simulated Israeli airstrike scenario, the study contributes methodologically by demonstrating how theoretical frameworks can be utilized to examine state decision-making in contexts where empirical observation is either impossible or politically constrained. At the same time, the study explicitly recognizes that its conclusions are limited to the hypothetical context and should not be interpreted as empirical predictions or factual claims regarding future events.

In conclusion, this methodological framework combines theory-driven scenario analysis, extensive secondary-source research, and a structured application of Graham Allison's Rational Actor Model. The study systematically conceptualizes Israel as a rational unitary actor, identifies plausible strategic alternatives, evaluates anticipated risks and benefits, and reconstructs the potential rationale behind a hypothetical military operation targeting Hamas leadership in Qatar. Through this approach, the research provides a coherent, transparent, and ethically responsible analytical framework for understanding state behavior under extreme security conditions while simultaneously highlighting both the analytical utility and theoretical limitations of the Rational Actor Model within international relations scholarship.

Operationalization of the Rational Actor Model



Figure 1. Operationalization of the Rational Actor Model

C. Results and Discussion

This section critically analyzes Israel's hypothetical airstrike on Doha, Qatar, on 9 September 2025, through the analytical lens of Graham Allison's Rational Actor Model (RAM). The discussion integrates strategic, military, diplomatic, legal, and geopolitical considerations in order to evaluate the extent to which such an operation could theoretically be interpreted as a rational policy choice under conditions of extreme security pressure and regional instability. The analysis relies entirely on secondary sources, including academic literature, official policy documents, strategic studies, and credible international reports, while situating the discussion within a hypothetical yet theoretically plausible scenario.

Israel's Strategic Environment and National Security Imperatives

Israel's national security environment has historically been shaped by persistent regional instability, asymmetric warfare, and threats originating from both state and non-state actors. Since its establishment in 1948, Israel has developed a security doctrine centered on survival, deterrence, rapid mobilization, and preventive action due to its limited territorial depth and complex geopolitical environment (Freilich, 2018). Within the framework of the Rational Actor Model, these security imperatives constitute the primary criteria through which policymakers evaluate strategic alternatives and calculate expected utility (Allison & Zelikow, 1999).

The October 7, 2023, Hamas attacks significantly intensified Israel's perception of existential vulnerability and reinforced the strategic belief that Hamas represents not merely a militant organization but a transnational security threat requiring long-term neutralization. Consequently, Israeli strategic calculations increasingly prioritize the elimination of Hamas leadership structures wherever they are perceived to operate. In this hypothetical scenario, the presence of Hamas leadership in Qatar would be interpreted by Israeli decision makers as a structural extension of the threat environment, potentially enabling Hamas to maintain operational coordination, financial networks, diplomatic access, and strategic resilience outside Gaza.

Under RAM assumptions, Israel's hypothetical consideration of military action against Hamas leadership in Doha would therefore emerge from a rational assessment of national survival and deterrence credibility. The Rational Actor Model assumes that policymakers systematically calculate whether the strategic benefits of neutralizing perceived threats outweigh the associated military, diplomatic, and geopolitical costs. From this perspective, the hypothetical airstrike could be understood as part of Israel's broader deterrence doctrine, which seeks to signal both capability and willingness to act decisively against perceived existential threats regardless of geographical distance (Inbar & Shamir, 2014b).

Strategic Complexity of Qatar's Mediating Role

Qatar occupies a highly complex and controversial position within Middle Eastern geopolitics. On one hand, Qatar functions as a key mediator in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by facilitating ceasefire negotiations, hostage exchanges, humanitarian coordination, and indirect diplomatic communication between Hamas, Israel, Egypt, and the United States (D. Roberts, 2022). On the other hand, Qatar also hosts Hamas political leadership in Doha, creating ambiguity concerning the relationship between mediation efforts and political accommodation of Hamas representatives.

This dual role generates significant strategic complexity for Israeli policymakers. From a Rational Actor Model perspective, Qatar's position introduces both opportunities and constraints within Israel's strategic calculations. While military action against Hamas leadership in Qatar could theoretically disrupt Hamas's external command infrastructure, such action would simultaneously risk undermining Qatar's role as a diplomatic intermediary and destabilizing broader regional diplomacy (Kamrava, 2022). In addition, a direct military strike on Qatari territory would likely constitute a serious violation of state sovereignty and could provoke widespread regional and international condemnation.

The hypothetical operation would also create substantial uncertainty regarding Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) responses. GCC states may perceive the attack not merely as an anti-Hamas operation but as a precedent for external military intervention within Gulf territory, thereby increasing regional insecurity and diplomatic tensions

(Gause, 2010). Consequently, the scenario illustrates a key principle of RAM: rational decision-making requires balancing immediate tactical gains against long-term strategic consequences. Even if the strike successfully eliminated Hamas leaders, the resulting diplomatic fallout could potentially outweigh short-term operational advantages.

Policy Alternatives and Counterfactual Scenarios

A central component of the Rational Actor Model involves the systematic evaluation of available policy alternatives before selecting a final course of action (Allison & Zelikow, 1999). Within this hypothetical scenario, Israel theoretically possesses several strategic options other than direct military action. The first alternative involves diplomatic engagement through intermediaries such as the United States or Egypt. Under this approach, Israel could pressure Qatar to restrict Hamas political activities or limit logistical support structures operating within Doha. This strategy minimizes immediate military escalation and preserves regional diplomatic stability. However, its effectiveness depends heavily on third-party cooperation and may produce uncertain or delayed outcomes. Counterfactual analysis suggests that successful diplomatic coordination could theoretically reduce the need for military escalation while preserving Qatar's mediating role and regional stability.

The second alternative involves covert intelligence operations targeting Hamas leadership abroad. Such operations provide plausible deniability and reduce the visibility of Israeli involvement, thereby minimizing overt diplomatic backlash. Nevertheless, covert operations carry operational risks, including intelligence failure, exposure, retaliation, and incomplete disruption of Hamas organizational structures. Additionally, covert action may fail to generate the same deterrent signaling effect associated with overt military force. A third option involves maintaining military operations exclusively within Gaza. This strategy avoids cross-border escalation into sovereign Gulf territory while sustaining military pressure against Hamas's internal operational infrastructure. However, Israeli policymakers may perceive this option as strategically insufficient because Hamas leadership operating abroad could continue facilitating financial coordination, international communication, and strategic planning outside Gaza's operational environment.

The fourth alternative involves cyber operations and economic disruption targeting Hamas-linked communication systems, financial networks, and logistical infrastructure. Such measures could gradually weaken Hamas operational capacity while avoiding direct military confrontation. However, cyber and economic strategies often require extended implementation periods and may lack immediate deterrence value or visible strategic impact. Counterfactual analysis demonstrates that these alternatives could potentially achieve partial strategic objectives with lower diplomatic and geopolitical costs. Nevertheless, under the Rational Actor Model, Israeli decision makers may still perceive direct military action as the most effective

means of maximizing deterrence credibility and demonstrating strategic resolve under conditions of heightened threat perception.

Critical Assessment of Potential Benefits

The hypothetical Israeli airstrike presents several potential benefits across operational, strategic, psychological, and domestic political dimensions. Operationally, targeting Hamas leadership in Doha could temporarily disrupt external command structures, communication channels, and strategic coordination mechanisms. The removal of senior leadership figures may create short-term organizational confusion and reduce Hamas's ability to coordinate transnational activities. However, research on leadership decapitation strategies demonstrates that eliminating high-ranking leaders rarely guarantees long-term organizational collapse, particularly among decentralized non-state actors capable of adaptation and regeneration (Byman, 2006). Hamas's organizational resilience, ideological networks, and distributed operational structure may limit the long-term effectiveness of such an operation. Strategically, the hypothetical strike could reinforce Israeli deterrence by signaling that Israel possesses both the capability and willingness to target perceived threats beyond its immediate borders. This message may influence the strategic calculations of both state and non-state adversaries by increasing the perceived costs of supporting or facilitating Hamas operations (Inbar & Shamir, 2014a). The strike may also reassure domestic audiences that Israeli leadership remains committed to aggressively protecting national security following the trauma of the October 7 attacks.

Psychologically, overt military action against external Hamas leadership may alter adversarial risk calculations by demonstrating Israel's readiness to pursue perceived threats internationally. From a domestic political perspective, decisive action could strengthen support for the Israeli government by projecting an image of strength, competence, and strategic decisiveness under conditions of national insecurity. Nevertheless, these benefits remain conditional and uncertain. The Rational Actor Model assumes rational calculation, but it cannot guarantee that operational outcomes will align with expectations. Adaptive adversaries, unintended escalation, and complex diplomatic reactions may significantly reduce the strategic utility of the operation despite initial tactical success.

Analysis of Costs and Risks

The potential costs associated with a hypothetical Israeli strike in Qatar are extensive and multidimensional. Diplomatic risks are particularly significant because violating Qatari sovereignty would likely damage Israel's relations with Gulf states and potentially undermine ongoing normalization efforts between Israel and several Arab governments (Kamrava, 2022). Qatar's mediating role in ceasefire negotiations and hostage diplomacy further complicates the strategic environment, as disrupting these channels could intensify broader regional instability.

Alliance dynamics also introduce substantial uncertainty. The United States maintains strategic partnerships with both Israel and Qatar, including military cooperation, intelligence sharing, and regional security coordination. Consequently, a hypothetical Israeli strike in Doha would place Washington in a diplomatically difficult position, potentially generating tensions between alliance commitments and regional stability objectives (Miller & Verma, 2021). This illustrates how alliance politics can create strategic paradoxes within rational decision-making processes. Reputational costs represent another major consideration. A strike perceived internationally as disproportionate or unlawful could provoke international condemnation and weaken Israel's diplomatic legitimacy. Legal scrutiny concerning sovereignty violations, proportionality, and international humanitarian law may further damage Israel's international standing and complicate future diplomatic initiatives.

Operational risks are equally important. Cross-border military operations inherently involve the possibility of intelligence failures, collateral damage, escalation with third parties, and retaliation by regional actors. Miscalculation or operational failure could transform a limited strike into a broader regional crisis. Within the Rational Actor Model, these risks must be carefully weighed against anticipated strategic gains to determine whether the operation can genuinely be considered rational.

Role of the United States and Strategic Uncertainty

The hypothetical scenario also highlights the critical role of the United States in Middle Eastern security politics. While the United States maintains strong strategic and military ties with Israel, it simultaneously relies on Qatar as a regional security partner and host of major U.S. military facilities. This dual relationship creates strategic ambiguity regarding how Washington might respond to an Israeli operation inside Qatari territory.

Under the Rational Actor Model, allied reactions constitute an essential component of strategic calculation because state decisions rarely occur in isolation from alliance structures and geopolitical constraints. Israeli policymakers would therefore need to consider whether U.S. support for Israel's security objectives would outweigh Washington's broader interest in maintaining Gulf stability and preserving relations with Qatar. This uncertainty illustrates a broader limitation within rational calculation: decision makers must frequently operate under incomplete information regarding allied reactions, regional responses, and escalation dynamics. As a result, even theoretically rational decisions may generate unpredictable geopolitical consequences beyond policymakers' expectations.

Limitations of the Rational Actor Model

Although the Rational Actor Model provides a structured analytical framework for evaluating strategic decision-making, it also possesses important limitations. One

major limitation concerns the psychological and emotional dimensions of policymaking. Political leaders may be influenced by fear, trauma, domestic political pressure, ideological considerations, or desires for retaliation following major security crises. These emotional factors may shape decisions in ways that deviate from purely rational cost-benefit calculations.

Another limitation involves bureaucratic politics and organizational complexity. States rarely function as perfectly unitary actors; instead, policy outcomes often emerge from competition among military institutions, intelligence agencies, political leaders, and bureaucratic organizations (Allison & Zelikow, 1999). Internal disagreements, institutional rivalries, and organizational interests may significantly influence final policy choices.

Information limitations further constrain rational calculation. Intelligence assessments may be incomplete, biased, or inaccurate, leading policymakers to miscalculate risks, underestimate consequences, or overestimate operational success. Additionally, international norms, legal frameworks, and third-party reactions introduce uncertainties that are difficult to quantify within a purely rational framework. Recognizing these limitations is essential because it demonstrates that RAM should not be interpreted as a predictive model guaranteeing accurate outcomes. Rather, it functions as a theoretical tool for understanding how states may attempt to calculate strategic choices under conditions of uncertainty and perceived threat.

Integrated Assessment and Strategic Paradox

Combining the potential benefits, costs, and theoretical limitations reveals a significant strategic paradox. From one perspective, the hypothetical strike may appear rational because it seeks to neutralize perceived threats, reinforce deterrence, and demonstrate strategic resolve. From another perspective, the same action risks undermining regional stability, damaging alliances, provoking diplomatic isolation, and generating long-term geopolitical costs that may ultimately outweigh immediate tactical gains. This paradox highlights an important insight within international relations theory: rationality is contextual and conditional rather than absolute. Decisions considered rational under conditions of acute security threat may simultaneously produce unintended strategic consequences that undermine broader national interests over time. Counterfactual analysis reinforces this conclusion by demonstrating that alternative strategies such as diplomacy, covert action, cyber disruption, and economic pressure could potentially achieve similar objectives with lower diplomatic and geopolitical costs. However, such alternatives may also appear less decisive, slower, or less credible from the perspective of deterrence politics.

Implications for Policy and Research

The hypothetical scenario offers important implications for both policymakers and academic researchers. For policymakers, the analysis illustrates the complexity of balancing immediate security objectives against long-term geopolitical stability. Preemptive military action may generate short-term operational advantages, but it also risks producing broader diplomatic and regional consequences that could undermine strategic interests. The discussion also highlights the limitations of leadership decapitation strategies against decentralized non-state actors. Although such operations may temporarily disrupt organizational coordination, they rarely eliminate ideological movements or permanently destroy resilient transnational networks. From a scholarly perspective, the analysis demonstrates the usefulness of scenario-based approaches and counterfactual reasoning in international relations research, particularly when empirical cases are unavailable or politically. At the same time, future research could benefit from incorporating alternative theoretical frameworks such as the Organizational Process Model or Bureaucratic Politics Model in order to better capture internal state dynamics, institutional competition, and bureaucratic complexity. Future studies may also examine empirical cases involving cross-border military operations conducted against targets located within third-party or mediator states

Consequences of Israeli Airstrikes <i>Data based on scenario analysis; hypothetical</i>			
Operational	Strategic	Diplomatic	Reputational
• Disrupt Hamas external leadership • Temporary coordination disruption • Limited long-term impact	• Demonstrate deterrence • Reduce Hamas planning • Signal resolve	• Strain Israel-GCC relations • Risk crisis with Qatar • Affect US alliance	• International condemnation • Media scrutiny • Legal review • Regional trust erosion

Figure 2. Analyzing the Consequences of Israeli Airstrikes on Qatar

D. Conclusions

This study, using the Rational Actor Model (RAM), analyzes a hypothetical Israeli airstrike on Doha, Qatar, on 9 September 2025, demonstrating that Israel's decision could be interpreted as rational in pursuing national security objectives, including deterrence, disruption of Hamas's external leadership, and state survival. The analysis

highlights the significant trade-offs and limitations of such action, including potential diplomatic backlash from Qatar and other Gulf states, risks to strategic alliances, reputational and legal consequences, and uncertainties in operational outcomes. Counterfactual reasoning indicates that alternative strategies, such as diplomatic engagement, covert operations, or targeted cyber and financial disruption, might achieve similar objectives with lower geopolitical and operational costs. The study acknowledges limitations: the scenario is entirely hypothetical, relies exclusively on secondary sources, and RAM does not fully account for bureaucratic politics, human error, or incomplete intelligence. Future research should explore alternative frameworks, such as the Organizational Process or Bureaucratic Politics models, and examine empirical case studies of cross-border strikes on third-party or mediator states to validate theoretical insights. Overall, this study demonstrates the utility of RAM in analyzing extreme security scenarios while emphasizing that rationality is context-dependent, constrained by systemic, diplomatic, and informational factors, and should be interpreted alongside broader geopolitical considerations.

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