



Malaysia's Response to Israeli Airstrikes on Hamas Leaders in Doha: International and Domestic Contexts

David Han Guo Xiong



The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the authors and RSIS. Please email to Editor IDSS Paper at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

Malaysia's Response to Israeli Airstrikes on Hamas Leaders in Doha: International and Domestic Contexts

David Han Guo Xiong

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's strong criticisms of Israel's airstrikes on Doha to decimate the Hamas leadership are a largely cost-free endeavour, as it is an expected outcome due to Malaysia's pro-Palestinian stance.
- Anwar's firm stance against the airstrikes could serve as a means to enhance Malaysia's voice and stature in the Middle East and the wider Muslim world.
- Anwar's tough rhetoric in the aftermath of the Doha attack appears to be driven by domestic political calculations centred on the strong support in Malaysia for the Palestinian cause.

COMMENTARY

On 9 September 2025, Israel launched airstrikes on Doha in an attempt to decimate the Hamas leadership in Qatar. This military operation has drawn [widespread condemnation](#) not only from Qatar but also from other countries in the Middle East and beyond the region, including Malaysia. Indeed, during the National Gathering of Religious Agencies of Malaysia on 13 September 2025, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim [strongly criticised](#) Israel's actions in Doha.

Anwar's criticism of the airstrikes represents a largely cost-free endeavour as it is an expected outcome arising from Malaysia's pro-Palestinian policy. His public outrage could serve to enhance Malaysia's standing and voice in the affairs of the Middle East. Moreover, Anwar's strong rhetoric against the Israeli attacks on Qatar may have been

driven by domestic political calculations centred on the strong support for the Palestinian cause among the majority of Malaysians, particularly Malay-Muslims.

Malaysia's Condemnation of Israeli Actions on Qatar

The Israeli attack on Doha served Anwar as an event for political exploitation. It was another opportunity to publicly demonstrate Malaysia's unwavering support for the Palestinians and to display tough opposition to Israeli actions in the ongoing Gaza conflict and elsewhere in the Middle East.

Anwar attended the Arab-Islamic Emergency Summit hosted by Qatar on 15 September to forge a united response to the Israeli attacks on Doha and other parts of the Middle East. During the summit, Anwar [called](#) for a unified Muslim front to end Israel's "[barbaric](#)" attacks that violate the sovereignty of Muslim countries and to put a stop to Israeli aggression in Gaza so as to defend the Palestinians. He urged Muslim countries to end trade and economic ties with Israel. In effect, Anwar was reiterating Malaysia's [reluctance](#) to join the Abraham Accords, which are aimed at normalising relations between Israel and some Arab countries.

Anwar's tough stance at the emergency summit is a largely cost-free manoeuvre since it is consistent with Malaysia's existing pro-Palestinian stance. His statement is not likely to trigger serious repercussions against him and Malaysia. Obviously, Anwar's hardline approach could also serve the purpose of enhancing the stature of Malaysia in the Arab/Muslim world.

Malaysia has maintained ardent support for the Palestinian cause and has provided humanitarian aid to the population in Gaza, including taking in injured Palestinians for medical treatment in Malaysia. Last year, Anwar visited Arab countries such as [Saudi Arabia](#) and [Qatar](#) to strengthen bilateral ties and cooperation. On top of that, through Malaysia's role as ASEAN Chair in 2025, the Anwar administration convened the [inaugural ASEAN-Gulf Cooperation Council \(GCC\)-China Summit](#) in May this year to promote multi-sector partnerships among the member states of ASEAN, the Gulf Cooperation Council and China.

Thus, in the context of Anwar's diplomatic activism to bolster relations with the Arab/Muslim world, the emergency summit in Doha might have been an occasion for Malaysia to raise its profile by showing solidarity and deepening engagements with Qatar as well as other Arab/Muslim countries within and beyond the Middle East.

Furthermore, Malaysia's support for Qatar in the aftermath of the Israeli attacks may also reflect a commonality that both Malaysia and Qatar share, namely projecting regional influence by performing the role of a third party in facilitating negotiations for conflict resolution. Qatar has undertaken the role of a mediator in negotiations between Israel and Hamas. For its part, Malaysia had the experience of reconciling differences among warring factions in Myanmar and Timor-Leste, and most recently acted as a mediator when Thailand and Cambodia engaged in a brief border clash.

From this vantage point, as Malaysia's foreign policy values mediation in conflict resolution, it was not surprising that during the emergency summit, Anwar mentioned

that Israeli airstrikes on Doha were undermining Qatar's role as mediator in the Israel-Hamas conflict.

Admittedly, one possible repercussion for Malaysia arising from Anwar's firm stance against Israel and support for Palestinians at the emergency summit is the political cost in foreign relations with Western powers, especially if it becomes a source of contention between Malaysia and the United States. Indeed, the difference in stances between Malaysia and the United States over the Gaza conflict, including Israeli actions in Gaza, was one reason for the strain in bilateral ties during the early years of the Biden presidency.

However, deepening of the strain in Malaysia-US relations because of the Israeli attack on Doha is highly unlikely. For one, Anwar has been putting in substantial diplomatic efforts to improve ties with the United States. Moreover, Israel's action against Qatar is highly questionable under international law. Indeed, the Trump administration itself has essentially [told](#) Israel not to strike Qatar again, and has reiterated the US commitment to maintain relations with Qatar. As such, notwithstanding the differences between the United States and Malaysia on the Gaza issue, there are some similarities in terms of concerns over Israel's attacks on Doha.

Going forward, it is possible that Anwar could, at the upcoming ASEAN Summit in October, urge the Trump administration to do more to restrain Israel on the Gaza issue. How the Anwar government is likely to convey this message to US President Donald Trump remains debatable, but both Anwar and Trump are masters at making political deals.

Domestic Implications

Additionally, Anwar's tough stance at the emergency summit in Doha appears to be shaped significantly by domestic political calculations. Specifically, Anwar continues to lack popularity on the home front, and as such, what he does or says in the realm of foreign policy does invite domestic criticism. Consequently, Anwar has to continue showing support for the Palestinian cause and Hamas in order to be seen on the side of the Malays.

When Anwar had sought to rely on his strong support for Palestinians and Hamas soon after the Gaza conflict erupted to enhance his political legitimacy, there was some [domestic criticism](#) due to Hamas's terrorist tactics in its fight with Israel. Consequently, Anwar had to tone down his strong rhetoric on the Gaza issue.

However, while such domestic criticisms represent concerns among non-Malays regarding Hamas, the majority of Malaysians generally support the Palestinians. Although there is less support for Hamas in Malaysia, in contrast to some other countries, there is also more understanding among Malaysians on the issue of Hamas and the Palestinian resistance. On this point, Anwar himself is known to have a personal attachment to the Muslim Brotherhood.

Thus, even if Anwar's pro-Palestinian stance at the emergency summit does not gain much domestic support for his government, his alignment with the majority view of

Malaysians on the Palestinian issue may help to deflect some of the opposition's critiques.



Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's pro-Palestinian stance, publicly aligning with the majority view of Malaysians, may help deflect some opposition critiques and enhance Malaysia's standing in the Middle East. Image source: Zahirul Nukman, [CC BY-SA 4.0](#), via Wikimedia Commons.

Conclusion

As Israeli airstrikes on Doha have been a shocking development in the ongoing unrest in the Middle East, Malaysia's strong condemnation of Israel's actions signified the magnitude of such a blatant violation of international law and its portents for a wider conflagration. The strong criticisms by Malaysia against Israel highlighted the Anwar administration's steadfast solidarity with the Palestinians and the Arab/Muslim world. This stance is not just a personal preference of the incumbent Malaysian prime minister but is rooted in Malaysian popular support for the Palestinian cause.

David Han Guo Xiong is a Research Fellow with the Malaysia Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS).

Please share this publication with your friends. They can subscribe to RSIS publications by scanning the QR Code below.

