



Higher Education in Qatar: Lessons from the U.S.-Israel-Iran War

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COVER IMAGE:

Aerial Shots of Education City. (Qatar Foundation Media Center)

Introduction

The U.S.-Israel-Iran war has disrupted higher education across the region. These effects have been particularly felt in Qatar, where the conflict has revealed the vulnerabilities in the current higher education model. The tensions have highlighted that branch campuses, cannot, on their own, sustain Qatar's status as an education hub or fulfill its long-term vision of transitioning to a knowledge-based economy.

This policy note argues that Qatar can strengthen the resilience and agility of its higher education system by establishing a contingency framework based on pre-emptive strategies and clear response protocols during disruptions. It also recommends increasing investment in local institutions, expanding diversified partnerships, and developing a Gulf-wide student mobility network.

The Evolution of Qatar's Higher Education Landscape

Qatar's higher education landscape has experienced a profound transformation over the past decade, becoming one of the most dynamic and fast-growing education hubs in the region. In line with National Vision 2030, which aims to diversify the country's economy and shift from hydrocarbon dependency towards a diversified, knowledge-based economy, Qatar has made significant investments to expand its education sector, including establishing multiple international and homegrown institutions, to improve academic standards and diversify academic programs.¹ Today, Qatar boasts a broad array of local and international higher education institutions.

Since the early 2000s, Qatar has evolved from hosting a single public university, Qatar University, to hosting diverse higher education institutions, further contributing to key national objectives including local knowledge production, and capacity building.² Qatar has invested in expanding the local higher education sector while also importing prestigious foreign universities through building international branch campuses (IBCs) and establishing global partnerships. This approach was underpinned by the establishment of Qatar Foundation's (QF) Education City (EC) as a major education hub in 2003.

EC is not just a national project. It is a cluster of universities and research centers on a 12-square-kilometer campus.³ The IBCs of this hub support Qatar's National Vision 2030 by strengthening the higher education ecosystem, enhancing the development of a skilled workforce, and encouraging research collaboration and innovation. They also contribute to broader social development by promoting interaction between local and international communities and providing access to world-class higher education locally.⁴ EC, through its affiliate entities, therefore encourages collaboration and knowledge exchange to foster diversity, multicultural exchange, and community engagement, while upskilling local communities.

For almost two decades, Qatar cultivated its role as a stable, well-funded, and safe host for IBCs and regional education hubs.⁵ Disruptions to U.S. higher education institutions raised the appeal of universities in Qatar, which were perceived as an alternative destination for international students and academics unsettled by U.S. visa uncertainty, funding cuts, and political attacks on universities.⁶ Qatar Foundation reported a 12% increase in total enrollment in the fall of 2025 due to visa restrictions introduced by the Trump administration.⁷ Demand on these education hubs increased not only from nearby countries within the Gulf, Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt, but also from other regions including Central and Southeast Asia, Africa, South America, China, and India.⁸

Implications of a Prolonged War

The U.S.-Israel-Iran war, which resulted in the launching of hundreds of missiles by Iran targeting U.S. military assets and civilian infrastructure across the region, has had immediate consequences for the region's stability and security.⁹ These escalations have impacted the perceived image of Qatar as a safe, stable, and insulated environment, creating internal insecurities for the country.

The war has complicated the operation of universities across Qatar, which now find themselves under pressure due to regional insecurity, missile strikes, and emergency campus closures, directly threatening the stability that underpinned their earlier gains.¹⁰ The war unraveled risks to IBCs, which now face heightened concerns about security, reputational risks, and academic disruptions.

These threats were further compounded by Iran's retaliatory strikes which targeted American assets and energy infrastructure across the Gulf, which in turn led the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MOEHE) on February 28, 2026 to issue a directive to all higher education institutions across the country to shift to remote teaching and learning as a precautionary measure.¹¹ The response came as a reactive, precautionary directive to ongoing threats rather than as an activation of pre-existing contingency plans under war protocol.

QF IBCs and local universities rapidly shifted to online or hybrid teaching, suspended activities, and activated continuity plans in response to security threats while coordinating with local authorities.¹² Major higher education institutions' branch campuses, such as Carnegie Mellon University, Georgetown University, HEC Paris, and Qatar University, quickly transitioned to remote learning, relying on their online infrastructure and pre-existing emergency plans during COVID to ensure academic continuity.

IBCs Structural Vulnerabilities and Risks Beyond the Conflict

Regardless of any armed conflict or disruption, IBCs still face several challenges, one of which is the centralization of strategic decision-making in the main campuses. This is a structural vulnerability in which IBCs operate under the terms of their home institutions, meaning that the decision on closure or withdrawal lies with the institution of the main country, independent of Qatar's preferences or investments. The Texas A & M University System Board of Regents' decision in 2024 to close the Texas A & M Qatar branch campus illustrates the conditional presence of IBCs in Qatar, driven by a combination of political pressures and shifted institutional priorities.¹³ Understanding this vulnerability is essential as it highlights the exposure of the system's structure due to rising tensions which preceded the war but are being intensified by the ongoing conflict.

It is also important to distinguish between two types of IBCs: tuition fee-dependent universities and funded universities. Tuition fee-dependent branch campuses rely on student enrollment, and a decline in enrollment poses existential risks to such universities, leading to their withdrawal or closure. Conversely, funded universities such as IBCs operating in EC, including Carnegie Mellon University, Georgetown University, HEC Paris, and others, are funded by QF, making them more operationally resilient to short-term disruptions such as low enrollment and restricted mobility. Despite this operational resilience, reputational and strategic risks, such as accreditation pressures, faculty recruitment, and perceptions of Qatar's safety and security, remain salient. One potential long-term consequence of these reputational and strategic risks is a decrease in international students' enrollment.

Since the beginning of the conflict, interest in studying in the GCC has declined by 30%, with a 43% drop from the peak reached in December 2025.¹⁴ These results reflect the gradual materialization of risks previously identified, namely prospects for lower enrollment rates. Moreover, faculty recruitment may also become difficult as geopolitical uncertainty persists. While no Qatar-specific data has yet been presented, similar behavior has been observed in other countries or regions, where faculty recruitment and retention are harder to sustain when considering security, safety, and uncertainty.¹⁵ Furthermore, persistent conflict will affect institutional accreditation, as quality evaluations come under the strain of conflict and insecurity.¹⁶ These dynamics represent real challenges if regional instability persists.

In-person education also remains important for modernization and social change, creating opportunities for academic collaboration and social interactions that support Qatar's national development vision.¹⁷ Travel restrictions, safety concerns, and impeded mobility in a region in conflict undermine the strategic rationale that drove investment in these IBCs. Student mobility is an important factor in strengthening the global connectivity and competitiveness of universities. For instance, students enrolled in Qatar's branch campuses can study abroad at the main campus, thereby demonstrating EC IBCs' visibility and connectivity and promoting Qatar itself.¹⁸

The Post-War Higher Education Landscape in the Gulf

Post-war, it is important to assess the vulnerabilities and gaps in Qatar's higher education sector that were revealed by the U.S.-Israel-Iran war rather than created by it. The real challenge is not how to teach during disruption, but how to maintain a resilient education system that can weather any disruption. Though the MOEHE quickly reacted to the escalation by requesting the closure of higher education institutions, the response was reactive and precautionary, rather than the activation of a preexisting comprehensive contingency plan. Thus, the MOEHE should establish emergency preparedness and response strategies for the higher education sector with specific guidelines on teaching and learning delivery methods, protocol coordination with local authorities, students, faculty, and staff safety frameworks, coordinated communication plans and retention of academic standards during disruptions. The availability of such a framework would support higher education institutions in Qatar in maintaining continuity while supporting communities' recovery and resilience.

Though the EC IBC model is relatively less fragile and reliant on student numbers than the tuition fee dependent model, emergency closure, shifting to online learning, and concerns over safety and welfare have a direct impact on home campus decisions. Thus, MOEHE should create frameworks to strengthen national universities and reduce the dependence on prestigious IBCs. The experience of the College of North Atlantic University in Qatar (CNAQ), which shifted from operating a branch campus to supporting the development of a local institution, the University of Doha for Science and Technology (UDST), is one such model that can be replicated.¹⁹ UDST showed that Qatar can build institutional governance autonomy and localization while maintaining international standards.

In this context, locally governed institutions should be oriented toward Qatar's strategic priorities. In line with the MOEHE decision on March 30, 2026, to develop plans to expand the government scholarship program lists to include broader strategic specializations, MOEHE should also conduct a labor market assessment to ensure alignment between majors supported and labor market needs.²⁰ The scholarships provided should be comprehensive, without overemphasizing studying one major, which can lead to a lack of employment in later stages.



A potential decline in interest in studying in the GCC countries likely means that Qatar will also be affected. Additionally, the ability to attract new faculty and students will also be affected, highlighting the need to identify an alternative mechanism for student flows and academic connectivity. A GCC student mobility framework could fill this gap. An ERASMUS like program in the GCC, potentially initiated through Qatar's MOEHE's International Cooperation Office and scholarship department, aiming to create structured student pathways across GCC higher education institutions, aligning academic majors with labor markets, may result in reducing Qatar's dependency on foreign IBCs.

Building a stronger academic network across the region may position Qatar as a convening regional hub rather than just a host of IBCs. Importantly, the foundation for such a framework already exists. The Gulf Network for Quality Assurance of Higher Education (GNQAHE) has launched an initiative to develop a unified Gulf qualifications framework across the Gulf states, identifying the EU model as a point of reference, and emphasizing multilateral cooperation.²¹ This program would further signal the maturity of the region's higher education sector and cultivate new partnerships.

Conclusion

The U.S.-Israel-Iran war will likely leave a lasting impact on the region's higher education landscape, as it is not just a security challenge. The war is likely to transform the sector's internationalization model; a turning point for how Qatar imagines the relationship between higher education and stability, security, and a shifting geopolitical order.

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