



General Portolano: “The safety of our service members is the priority.” The reasons for Italy’s presence in Saudi Arabia explained by the Chief of the Defence Staff

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Eurofighter fighters of the Aeronautica Militare continue to be key assets, deployed on multiple fronts to contribute to international security and stability. From airspace patrol missions over Lithuania to Middle Eastern theaters, Italy’s presence demonstrates a sustained and multifaceted commitment.

Providing an update on the situation and assessing the risks associated with international operations is **General Luciano Portolano, Chief of Defence Staff**, in an interview with *Corriere della Sera*, in which he explains the strategic rationale for Italy’s presence in the Gulf

region and the measures taken to protect military personnel.

The deterioration of the Middle Eastern situation

Since February 2026, stability in the Middle East has deteriorated rapidly. The escalation, marked by **ballistic missile and drone attacks by Iran and allied armed groups (proxies)**, has required a reorganization of Italian contingents deployed in the region.

The personnel were operating as part of well-established international missions, including *NATO Mission Iraq*, the European Union's *Aspides* mission in the Red Sea, and the U.S.-led *Inherent Resolve* operation.

In response to the rising threat level, the Ministry of Defence promptly adopted precautionary measures. The priority was to **secure Task Force Air at Ali Al Salem, Kuwait**. The base, which also hosted U.S. assets, was among the most exposed to attack.

General Portolano personally travelled to the site on **March 19**, during a particularly intense phase of the attacks, to assess the operational situation and the protective measures in place. **Non-essential personnel were repatriated, service members were sheltered in bunkered facilities, and aircraft were tactically dispersed** on the ground.

Risk management and redeployment to Ta'if

Despite the effectiveness of the protective measures, which prevented loss of life unlike in other allied contingents, the intensity of the attacks resulted in the **destruction of an Aeronautica Militare MQ-9 remotely piloted aircraft**.

Responding to criticism in the press over an alleged underestimation of the dangers, the Chief of Defence Staff reiterated a fundamental principle of military operations: «**In military operations, there is no guarantee of "zero risk"**».

The need to ensure operational continuity while providing the highest possible level of protection for personnel led to the **transfer of assets from the Kuwaiti base to Al Ta'if, Saudi Arabia**.

A decision supported by the **parliamentary resolution of March 5, 2026** and confirmed by subsequent summer extensions. The mandate granted by Parliament to the Government provided for the deployment of air defense and surveillance systems to protect citizens, support partner countries, and safeguard national energy infrastructure and strategic interests.

Portolano clarified that **this was not a «new mission», but rather a technical redeployment** within an already existing operational framework.

The Al Ta'if base was selected because of the availability of protected infrastructure, layered air defense systems capable of countering missile and drone threats, and its geographical location in western Saudi Arabia, which had until then been considered less exposed to attacks.

The evolving threat and damage to the Eurofighter

In September, however, the situation changed again as **Houthi actions from Yemen intensified**, with military facilities in Saudi Arabia also coming under attack. The Al Ta'if base was among the targets.

Italian security procedures were activated immediately, with personnel moved into bunkers and aircraft further dispersed.

Despite the measures adopted, **a drone managed to penetrate the base's defenses, damaging an Italian Eurofighter.**

«Even an advanced system such as Israel's Iron Dome has at times proven vulnerable to this type of threat,» Portolano explained, stressing that even the most advanced air defenses cannot guarantee absolute protection.

The general also emphasized that **Italian assets were not directly targeted** by the hostile actions, although they remained exposed to the consequences of attacks against the military infrastructure hosting them.

The absolute priority: personnel safety

In his concluding remarks, General Portolano reiterated a fundamental principle of military command in high-risk environments: every operation inevitably entails a degree of danger, but

the priority of any commander remains to bring home safely the women and men entrusted to his or her responsibility.

Risk-mitigation measures, the dispersal of assets, and the sheltering of personnel in protected facilities helped limit the consequences of the attacks. Without these measures, the material damage and, above all, the risk of loss of life could have been far more serious.

The **Italian military presence in the Gulf** therefore continues to address regional security requirements, support partner countries, and protect national strategic interests in a scenario where evolving threats require the constant updating of protective measures.

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