

The Gulf States, Israel, and Hamas

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The foreign policy of the six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council – Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Oman – is not a good example of consistent cooperation and unity, and policy on Hamas and the Gaza Strip is no exception. In the first few years of the Arab Awakening, differences between each of the participating Gulf states grew increasingly apparent, including over the issue of support for political Islamic movements. Indeed, the focus of most Gulf states has been on internal problems, regional struggles both near and far, conflicts of interest, and issues of prestige. All of these matters, and particularly their discomfort with the success by political Islam movements, have prevented the Gulf Cooperation Council from developing and agreeing on joint Gaza Strip policy. These differences narrowed in light of the improved relations between the six since 2014, but surfaced again in light of the crisis that some of the states have had with Qatar since June 2017.

Despite the traditional tendency of the six states to display solidarity with Palestinian national aspirations and reflect the opinions of the “Arab street,” most are suspicious, if not hostile, toward Hamas and the ideology it represents. Hamas is considered a militant wing of the Muslim Brotherhood that undermines Egyptian national security and the government of the Palestinian Authority. In addition, Hamas is perceived by some of these countries as a hostile organization because it maintains contacts with Iran. Indeed, Hamas was blamed, especially during Operation Protective Edge, for the harm caused to Palestinian national interests and Palestinian civilians. Nevertheless, both Hamas and several of the Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia, have made efforts to improve relations between them, and this has had an indirect impact on Israel’s relations with Hamas and the situation in the Gaza Strip.

Political Islam in the Gulf

Analysts and researchers tend to divide Middle East actors (both states and non-state entities) into two main camps, according to their stance toward the Muslim Brotherhood and political Islam in general. However, this division is hard to reconcile with the region's dynamic nature and with the difficulty in fully defining each player's orientation. In practice, several of the regional players have changed their policies in order to adapt to the regional turmoil and to manage the risks latent in the swiftly evolving regional reality.

The Qatari royal house, for example, which was identified with the ideology of political Islam and funded many of the political Islam movements in the region, including the Morsi regime in Egypt, has made some changes to its policy, primarily due to pressure from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The favorable coverage provided to the Muslim Brotherhood on *al-Jazeera* has decreased, and several people identified with the movement have been asked to leave the emirate. Conversely, until the summer of 2017, it seemed that Saudi Arabia softened its stance toward the Brotherhood and sought to improve its relationship with some of the group's supporters, including Qatar, Turkey, and Hamas. This shift was driven by Saudi Arabia's perception of Iran as its greatest threat and its wish to develop a large and united Sunni bloc in the region.¹

The pragmatism demonstrated by Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz and his son, Crown Prince and Minister of Defense Mohammed bin Salman in their approach to Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated movements in the region is also reflected in the kingdom's improved relations with Hamas. Riyadh believes that these relations will assist the kingdom not only in distancing Hamas from Iran and positioning itself as a mediator between the Palestinian factions, but also in strengthening its influence over Gaza. The civil war in Syria, Hamas's opposition to the Assad regime, and the subsequent crisis in Hamas-Iran relations have also contributed to this rapprochement.

From Hamas's perspective, the deteriorating relations with Iran pushed it, out of necessity and not out of ideological compatibility, to seek close relations once again with Saudi Arabia, which until 2004 transferred significant sums to Hamas. In July 2015, a Hamas delegation, led by Khaled Mashal, visited Saudi Arabia, and in September 2016, another delegation, this time led by Ismail Haniyeh (who subsequently replaced Mashal as the head of the political bureau) paid a visit to the kingdom. The visit's official purpose

was the Hajj pilgrimage, but apparently, it was also an attempt to receive the kingdom's blessing for Haniyeh's new position.

The relations between Hamas and Saudi Arabia are more a reflection of political pragmatism than a sign of deep strategic change. Evidence of this is the fact that Saudi Arabia's suspicion of the Muslim Brotherhood has not entirely disappeared. The Muslim Brotherhood proposes an alternative to the Kingdom's structure of a political framework alongside religious legitimacy. Political Islamist movements are likewise based on a religious foundation, but they support democratic elections and popular political participation, and as such are considered a threat. They propose a viable and attractive alternative to the old regime and have proven, in Egypt and Tunisia, for example, that they are able to overthrow governments.² As a result, the Muslim Brotherhood was added to the list of terrorist organizations in Saudi Arabia as early as 2014, and a number of its activists – including Hamas activists – have been arrested in recent years. Riyadh is also demanding that Qatar end its relations with the movement, a precondition to ending the boycott of the emirate that began in June 2017. For its part, Hamas is dissatisfied with the relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel, but can overlook this element, hoping that Saudi Arabia will pressure Egypt to change its policy toward Hamas. So far it is unclear if Riyadh is again supporting Hamas financially and to what extent.

Furthermore, Hamas has not entirely forsaken its relations with Iran. This can be seen in the choice of Yahya Sinwar, a former member of the military arm of Hamas with close connections to Iran, to the position of Hamas's leader in Gaza in February 2017.³ Sinwar's selection will likely have negative consequences for Hamas-Saudi relations, and for the Kingdom's ability to meet some of its foreign affairs objectives regarding both Iran and the Palestinian issue.

The United Arab Emirates also has reservations about Hamas. Particularly out of concerns regarding the federation's internal stability, the second largest economy in the Middle East has remained the most hawkish of the six Gulf countries vis-à-vis political Islam movements. The UAE is the most significant political and financial supporter of the el-Sisi government in Egypt, and acts as the main supporter of Mohammed Dahlan, in part due to his standing in the Gaza Strip. The UAE hopes to see him replace Mahmoud Abbas as the leader of the Fatah movement and the Palestinian

Authority. In Gaza, Dahlan is able to derive significant influence partly due to his ability to direct funds from the UAE (where he has also lived for the last few years) to community projects and needy families.

Against this backdrop, the past year has been characterized by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates' deteriorating relationship with the Palestinian Authority leadership and with Mahmoud Abbas. The Gulf states have no interest in the fall of the PA, and over the years have provided it with generous aid, on the condition that the PA align itself with their policies. So, for example, when Yasir Arafat supported the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, aid to the PLO was cut off and Palestinians living in the Gulf states were deported. In 2016-2017, Saudi Arabia, the largest donor to the PA, once again conditioned its continued financial support on solving the dispute regarding Abbas's successor.⁴

The Qatari Role

Qatar's support for Hamas and its investments in the Gaza Strip suit the emirate's opportunistic foreign policy and its attempts to increase its influence in the Middle East. American security support, strengthened by the fact that the United States regional command center (CENTCOM) is in Qatar, enables the country's diplomatic activism. Qatar, the richest country in the world in GDP per capita, knows that its national security is assured. In several cases, the US has asked to make use of Qatar's connections to various players, including organizations such as Hamas, and use its "good services" as a mediator. Qatar also believes that its relations with actors like Iran, Taliban, and Hamas are an insurance policy against attacks by them.⁵

As part of its activism, Qatar invests in the West Bank (for example in the new Palestinian city Rawabi) as well as Israel's Arab sector. However, most of its support, which increased in 2012 after a visit to Gaza by then-Emir Hamad bin Khalifa, is directed to the Strip. In addition, Qatar, vying for Egypt's leadership role, now seeks to serve as the primary mediator between the Palestinian factions. Khaled Mashal found shelter in Qatar in 2012 after fleeing Syria. He settled in Doha, and from there managed Hamas's political arm. Support for Hamas by Qatar, the largest of any Arab country, helps strengthen Hamas's capabilities in Gaza, primarily through salary payments, as well as promotion – with the approval and assistance of Israel – of humanitarian and infrastructure projects in Gaza. Attempts

at mediation between Israel and Hamas have even been reported, with the goal of exchanging prisoners, establishing a Gaza seaport, and transferring aid to Gaza residents.

During Operation Protective Edge, the rivalry between Cairo and Doha confronted Hamas's leadership with a dilemma: should it accept Egyptian mediation, and risk losing Qatar's aid, or prefer the support of wealthy Qatar and risk cutting Gaza off from its Egyptian lifeline? Indeed, the hardline stance of Hamas's leadership regarding Egyptian mediation during the Operation – primarily the demand to remove the blockade around the Strip – was attributed to Qatari influence over the organization. However, in the end, and under significant Egyptian pressure, Hamas was forced to accept the Egyptian proposal when it seemed that the extent of destruction and loss in Gaza threatened its rule.

The US administration, which did not take direct part in the ceasefire negotiations, initially supported the Qatari-Turkish mediation initiative. Apparently, behind the scenes, the US position was influenced by both economic and security interests in Qatar as well as by the cool relations between the Obama administration and Cairo following the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood regime in Egypt, which the administration defined as a military coup. In the end, however, Qatar did not succeed in the ceasefire negotiations as it had hoped, and Egyptian diplomatic efforts prevailed.

There is a certain duality in Israeli policy – at least its declared policy – toward Qatar and its activities in Gaza. In recent years, Israeli officials have publicly attacked Qatar and sought to isolate the terrorism-supporting country.⁶ As an MK, Avigdor Liberman opposed Qatar participation in the reconstruction efforts in Gaza, claiming that “one of the major problems is that we have turned Qatar into a legitimate mediator. They host the Hamas command center and vilify us on *al-Jazeera*.”⁷ However, Israel's cooperation with Qatar on Gaza reconstruction has grown. Apparently, behind the adjustments in Israeli policy on Qatar is the recognition that cooperation with Qatar has more advantages than disadvantages. These include hindering Iran's actions and weakening Iranian influence over Hamas and developments in Gaza. In addition, Qatar might serve as a channel of communication and an influential mediator over Hamas, alongside Turkey. Qatar is also one of the only countries that actively and consistently support and funds humanitarian projects in Gaza, thereby easing economic pressure

on its residents. On the other hand, Qatar's growing influence in Gaza means increasing tension between the el-Sisi government in Egypt, which sees Qatar as supporting the Muslim Brotherhood movement, and opposes Qatar's regional aspirations, which seem to far exceed its size of 250,000 citizens.

Israel and Qatar do not have official diplomatic relations. However, officials in both countries are in contact, and limited indirect commerce exists. Small numbers of Israelis visit Qatar and vice versa.⁸ Moreover, Israel has a basic interest in directing Qatar's aid to civilian humanitarian matters, as it understands that it may improve the population's condition and postpone a potential confrontation with Hamas. However, there is basic tension between the Israeli interest in improving the humanitarian situation in Gaza and the need to preserve good relations with the el-Sisi government in Egypt. Joining Egyptian opposition is the opposition by the PA. The PA is not satisfied with Qatar's aid to the Gaza Strip, and suspects that Hamas will gain additional support for succeeding in increasing aid to Gaza. Muhammad al-Amadi, Qatar's emissary to Gaza, who also serves as a kind of mediator between Israel and Hamas, claims that the PA undermines reconstruction efforts in Gaza with its attempts to block Hamas achievements.⁹

Postponing the Next Confrontation

The situation in Gaza has worsened since Operation Protective Edge. Although primarily a consequence of the destruction caused by the fighting, most of the aid promised by donor nations was never transferred, and Egyptian policy towards Hamas, which included attempts to destroy the tunnel infrastructure, has aggravated the situation. Thus, there is concern that Hamas will once again opt for conflict with Israel as a way to escape its predicament, though conflict will further worsen its population's condition. Rocket fire toward Israel, which stems from conflict between Hamas and Salafist organizations in Gaza, likewise serves Hamas by drawing the attention of the Gulf states back toward the Palestinian issue and Gaza, whereas today the Gulf states are focused on the various arenas in the struggle against Iran.

It is in Israel's interest to encourage deeper involvement of the Gulf states in Gaza, if only to counterbalance Iran. In recent years, Israel has deepened its cooperation with several Arab countries both near and far, including those with which it has no official diplomatic relations. However, the strategic perspectives Israel shares with Cairo, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi

do not always help Israel meet its policy objectives. For example, during Operation Protective Edge, the el-Sisi government sought to further the political and economic isolation of Hamas, even at the price of continued conflict between Hamas and Israel.

Since Operative Protective Edge Israel has not succeeded in creating a mechanism in Gaza to prevent future Hamas military growth; little has changed strategically between Israel and Hamas. Hamas's military has been weakened, but this is primarily a function of Hamas's weakened relationship with Iran, given the civil war in Syria; Egyptian efforts against the smuggling tunnels; and Saudi pressure on Sudan – one of the primary smuggling routes to Gaza – to distance itself from Iran. It is doubtful that Israel would choose to topple the regime in Gaza during the next conflict against Hamas, if only because of the political and military implications of such a move. With no good alternative to the Hamas government, Israel must continue to deter Hamas militarily and postpone the next confrontation as long as possible via financial and humanitarian assistance to the Gazan civilian population – an additional interest shared by Israel and the Gulf countries.

Notes

- 1 Gallia Lindenstrauss and Yoel Guzansky, "Weaving a Stronger Sunni Axis," *INSS Insight* No. 799, February 18, 2016, <http://www.inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=4538&articleid=11448>.
- 2 Oded Eran and Yoel Guzansky, "Political Islam on the Defensive," *INSS Insight* No. 530, March 20, 2014, <http://www.inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=4538&articleid=6776>.
- 3 Fahd al-Otaibi, "Has Hamas Completely Forgotten Saudi Arabia?" *al-Monitor*, February 26, 2017.
- 4 "Kingdom Stance on Palestinian Issue," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.
- 5 Kobi Michael and Yoel Guzansky, "Countering Qatar's Negative Regional Impact," *INSS Insight* No. 591, August 17, 2014, <http://www.inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=4538&articleid=7520>.
- 6 Ron Prozor, "Club Med for Terrorists," *New York Times*, August 25, 2014.
- 7 Arik Bender and Dana Somberg, "MK Liberman: Hamas is Beating Us to It, Haniyeh Needs to Prepare his Grave," *Maariv*, April 20, 2016.
- 8 Dozens of Qatari citizens have entered Israel since 2009, most for religious purposes. See Itamar Eichner, "Israel Sees Sharp Rise in Tourists from Arab States," *Ynet*, November 11, 2014.
- 9 Avi Issacharoff, "Qatar's Gaza Envoy Hails his Ties with Israel, Says PA is Stalling on Solution to Gaza Power Shortage," *Times of Israel*, February 12, 2017.