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Israel's Qatari Dilemma

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In late February 2018, Israeli Minister for Regional Cooperation Tzachi Hanegbi met in Jerusalem with Muhammad al-Emadi, the Qatari envoy to the Gaza Strip in charge of the Gaza rehabilitation project on behalf of the emirate. The meeting, like similar previous encounters, took place, even though there are no official diplomatic relations between Israel and Qatar. However, Israel and Qatar have a shared interest in transferring humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip. For Israel, the aid contributes to a possible postponement of the next round of hostilities with Hamas. For his part, al-Emadi stated in an interview that "without Israel, sending aid to the Strip would not be possible," adding that "our work in Gaza prevents the next war." Qatar's aid boosts its status, particularly with the American administration, and draws the US closer to Doha's position - so the latter hopes - in the crisis between Qatar and some of the other Gulf states.

While Qatar denies it is aiding Hamas directly, at least part of what it sends to the Strip almost certainly reaches the organization. The emirate is also home to the head of the Hamas Political Bureau, Ismail Haniyeh (even if Haniyeh is not in Qatar all the time, as was his predecessor, Khaled Mashal). Qatar's link with the Strip was tightened in 2012, after the visit by then-Emir Hammad bin Khalifa to Gaza. According to Qatari sources, since the end of Operation Protective Edge in August 2014 the emirate has invested some \$800 million in the Strip. Qatar's support for Gaza, in the form of aid that exceeds aid from any other Arab state, strengthens Hamas's ability to control the Strip, particularly by paying salaries and promoting humanitarian and infrastructure projects in the region.

Qatar has an interest in improving its image by increasing the humanitarian aid to Gaza, particularly as a way of moving closer to the United States and gaining its support in the crisis between Doha and some of its neighbors in the Gulf. Washington too is trying to reconcile between the hawks in the Gulf, and President Trump's envoy to the Middle East, Jason Greenblatt, said recently that cooperation between Israel and Qatar could help the Gaza population. Greenblatt also shared Emadi's interview on his Twitter page.

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Qatar's actions in the Strip occur with Israel's approval and assistance. There are trade contacts between Israel and Qatar, albeit limited and largely indirect. Qataris visit Israel,

mainly for religious reasons, and Israelis visit the emirate. Emadi himself said he has visited Israel 20 times since the end of Operation Protective Edge. In addition, in spite of legislative initiatives, Qatar itself is not defined in Israel as an enemy state, even though the National Security Council issues a travel warning, based on a concrete threat, for Israeli citizens not to visit the emirate. At the same time, in recent years senior Israeli officials have spoken strongly against Qatar and sought to isolate it, claiming that it supports terror. Nonetheless, cooperation between Israel and Qatar regarding humanitarian efforts in the Gaza Strip has become stronger in recent years. Thus at least in Israel's declared policy toward Qatar and its involvement in the Strip, there is a certain ambivalence, if not outright contradiction.

It appears that underlying Israeli policy toward Qatar is the recognition that such cooperation has more benefits than drawbacks, including reducing Iran's room to maneuver and weakening its influence on Hamas and developments in the Gaza Strip. In addition, Qatar could serve as a channel for communication and a mediator with influence on Hamas. Indeed, there have been reports of attempts by Qatar to mediate between Hamas and Israel, including regarding prisoner exchanges. Other matters mentioned in this context are a seaport off the Gaza shore and an airfield within its territory. Media sources have also reported that at the request of Israel and the United States, the emirate has ceased to host Hamas senior commander Saleh al-Arouri, who has moved to Lebanon. Moreover, Israel has an interest in directing Qatar's aid to civilian/humanitarian directions, based on an understanding that this aid can alleviate the severe humanitarian plight and postpone possible hostilities with Hamas, which could seek military escalation in order to divert public criticism from itself to Israel, and as a means of legitimizing its status in the Strip.

Disagreements among Gulf states are reflected in their respective policies toward Gaza. Qatar's neighbors would like to undermine Doha's connection to Gaza, and their efforts in this respect include the transfer of aid from the UAE to the Strip through Mohammed Dahlan. Dahlan has influence and status in the Gazan street not only because of his origins there, and his known opposition to Mahmoud Abbas, but also because of his ability to channel money from the UAE (where he has lived in recent years) toward community projects and needy families. The UAE would like to see him replace Mahmoud Abbas as leader of the PLO and the Palestinian Authority. Indeed, the PA is afraid that Hamas will gain additional support if more aid reaches the Strip. Emadi has contended that the PA harms Gaza reconstruction efforts, particularly with regard to the supply of electricity. Israel, which wanted to help Abbas promote the reconciliation between the PLO and Hamas, cooperated with the Palestinian Authority and restricted the supply of electricity to the Strip. However, after some time, when conditions there grew increasingly severe, Israel exerted pressure on the PA to change its policy, and renewed

the supply of electricity at the former level. Israel's conduct in this case reflects the duality between the desire to support the Palestinian Authority and the need to provide a solution to the humanitarian distress in the Strip, which means strengthening Hamas and weakening the PA.

Increasing the influence of Qatar in the Strip also means increasing the tension between Israel along with some of the Gulf states and the el-Sisi regime in Egypt. However, strategic cooperation with Egypt is vital for Israel, as it is with the three other members of the Arab Quartet – Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain, which have placed a boycott on Qatar since June 2017, and with which Israel seeks to upgrade relations as part of a regional front against Iran. Thus there is a basic tension between the Israeli interest in improving the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip and the need to maintain proper strategic relations with Egypt, highlighted by the recently signed gas agreement, and with some of the Gulf states, which do not look kindly on Qatar's influence in the Strip. There is also a Turkish angle to the Qatari connection to Gaza, given the close ties between the two countries. Turkey and Qatar form an axis of support for political Islam in the region, and their involvement in the Strip is part of a broader strategy, reflected in other arenas as well. For example, they were prominent in fanning the flames following the conflict over metal detectors on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem in July 2017. Their support of the Muslim Brotherhood is reflected in Gaza with reference to Hamas, but it also applies to the Muslim Brotherhood movement in Egypt, which is outlawed in Egypt and is a sworn enemy of the el-Sisi regime. The Qatari-Turkish presence in the Gaza Strip is therefore highly provocative for Egypt, and could well enhance the tension between Israel and Egypt.

Since the imposition of the boycott on Qatar, bringing Qatari aid to Gaza has become more complicated, because Egypt no longer allows goods and raw materials from Qatar through the Rafah border crossing. In effect, Israel remains Qatar's only means of transferring aid to Gaza. This gives Israel significant leverage over both Hamas and Qatar. It is therefore possible that Israel could use the importance that Hamas attaches to Qatari aid in order to exert Qatari pressure on Hamas to return the bodies of slain IDF soldiers and Israeli citizens held by the movement. In addition, through moves coordinated with the American administration and Egypt, Israel must explore the possibility of softening the Qatari refusal to meet the demands set by the Arab Quartet as a condition for lifting the boycott, above all cooling its relations with Iran. In this context, Israel must maintain close coordination with the United States, with regular updates for Egypt, in the attempt to soften Egyptian opposition to the integration of Qatar in the response to the humanitarian distress in Gaza – including through greater flexibility in the operation of the Rafah crossing. This Israeli effort should join the assistance to the American effort to lower the tension inside the GCC, and between Qatar and Egypt.