

INSS Insight No. 1391, October 12, 2020

Might Qatar Join the Abraham Accords?

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Recent reports have linked Israel to the conflict between the Arab Quartet (Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt) and Qatar. These reports speculate that in return for United States pressure on the Quartet to end the boycott on Qatar, Doha will agree to join the Abraham Accords framework and normalize its relations with Israel. Reaching an agreement of this kind is not an easy task because of the tension and even hostility between the Saudi and UAE regimes and Qatar. Another hurdle is the need to persuade Doha to lessen its support for the Palestinians, which has recently become stronger. It is not at all certain whether a thaw in the tension between Qatar and its neighbors will lead it to give up its considerable influence with Hamas and with the Palestinian Authority. Even if the United States manages to persuade Abu Dhabi and Riyadh to rescind the boycott on Qatar and secure its entry into the Abraham Accords framework, tension will likely remain between Qatar and the UAE, which has already signed a normalization agreement with Israel. This tension could pose a complex challenge to Israel regarding its relations with both these countries, particularly vis-à-vis the Palestinian issue. An additional challenge for Israel is the need to maintain its qualitative military edge, in light of recent reports that Qatar is eager to purchase F-35 aircraft from the United States.

The normalization process between Israel and the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain is not isolated from the conflict between these Arab states and Qatar. The seeds of the crisis between the Arab Quartet – Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain, and the UAE – lie in the 1995 seizure of power in Qatar by Hamad al-Khalifa from his father, and the establishment a year later of the al-Jazeera network, the mouthpiece of independent Qatari policy. Qatar sought to balance its fears of Iran and its wish to limit Saudi domination of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Since then there have been reports of Saudi attempts to bring about a coup in Qatar. The Saudis are also openly fostering opposition to the current Emir, Sheikh Tamim. Last June, the Qatari Foreign Minister accused the “siege states” of attempting to foment revolution in Qatar. He mentioned a disinformation campaign on Twitter a month earlier, which reported a coup attempt in the Qatari royal house. In the Abraham Accords, apart from the UAE’s wish to improve its image in the US Congress and its access to advanced American weaponry, Abu Dhabi is striving to score points with

the United States administration regarding its conflict with Qatar and to strengthen its status and influence in the regional and international arenas.

The closer ties between the UAE and Israel also allow the Emirates to increase their influence in the Palestinian territories at Qatar's expense, even if not in the short term. Unlike Qatar, the UAE currently lacks leverage in the Palestinian arena because it considers Hamas, an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, an enemy. In addition, the Palestinian Authority leadership is removed from the UAE, mainly due to its support for Mohammed Dahlan, a rival of Mahmoud Abbas for leadership of the PA. This issue was part of the well-orchestrated Qatari media campaign strongly criticizing the normalization with Israel, which even attacked the acting ruler of the Emirates, Mohammed Ben Zayed, accusing him of neglecting the Palestinians. However, officially Qatar maintained its room to maneuver by refraining from official criticism of the normalization process in itself, and even recently expressed support for President Trump's peace plan, while declaring that it would not normalize relations with Israel until there was a settlement with the Palestinians, and that it supported the Arab Peace Initiative as the basis for a solution of the conflict.

For Israel, Qatar is a pipeline for transmitting messages to Hamas and sending essential humanitarian aid to Gaza, which lessens the risk of further outbursts of fighting in this arena. Therefore Israel has a clear interest in the continuation of this aid, despite its own tension with Qatar, and the tension between Qatar and its neighbors in the Gulf. For the United States, a thawing of relations between the Gulf states would be an achievement, for the administration and for President Trump personally, as the implementation of the clear interest in establishing a strong Gulf coalition against Iran – and with Israel's cooperation.

Reaching a dual agreement of this nature – between the Quartet and Qatar, and between Qatar and Israel – is certainly not easy given the tension, if not longstanding hostility, between Doha and Abu Dhabi and Riyadh. Therefore, even if the states reach a compromise, it could be temporary and on paper only. Another hurdle involves the personal enmity between the leaders, and the need to persuade Doha to reduce its support for the Palestinians, which it recently increased. However, a relaxation of the tension between it and its neighbors will not necessarily convince Doha to give up the considerable influence it has, not only over Hamas but also over the Palestinian Authority.

Qatar's involvement in the Palestinian arena is an important item in the Qatari toolbox to establish its status as an influential and essential regional player. Qatar, a small but rich emirate that feels threatened by its Gulf neighbors, sees its regional status as an insurance policy for its existence in the area. Consolidating its regional status gains it importance in the eyes of significant regional players like Israel, but no less important, to maintain its essential closeness to the United States. However, this in turn exacerbates the tension and

strategic competition with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Thus in addition to its efforts in the Palestinian arena, Qatar is careful to nurture its links with Turkey and Iran, and in effect to operate in all camps in order to diversify its leverage. At the same time, Qatar understands the necessity of links with the United States and the importance of its support, particularly when it is the object of a regional boycott. Although it has managed to overcome many of the restrictions of the boycott with Iranian and Turkish help, it is eager to have the boycott lifted and to return to the GCC.

Even if the United States manages to persuade Abu Dhabi and Riyadh to lift the boycott of Qatar and ensure that Qatar joins the Abraham Accords framework and later normalizes relations with Israel, this will probably not signal the end of the tension between Qatar and the UAE, which has already signed a normalization agreement with Israel, and as a result Israel could face a complex challenge over how it conducts its relations with each of these countries. This complexity would be most prominently expressed in the Palestinian arena.

Israel has a clear interest in thawing relations with the Gulf states, mainly because this will drive a wedge between Turkey and Qatar – in effect breaking the Muslim Brotherhood axis. It would also weaken Turkey's influence in the Gulf arena, damage Ankara's regional standing, and limit the financial assistance flowing from Qatar to Turkey and thence to the Muslim Brotherhood. As long as Qatar chooses an alliance with Turkey, the Israeli interest must be to limit its role and influence in the Palestinian arena, and demonstrate a clear preference for the influence of the UAE. It is an open question as to whether the UAE not only has the tools and the influence but also the desire to invest considerable resources in the Gaza Strip.

Recent reports have cited an official Qatari request to purchase the F-35 from the United States. This in part reflects Doha's competition with the UAE, but might also signal to the US administration its willingness to normalize ties with Israel – though in opposite order from the UAE process. A development of this sort would be an additional challenge to Israel's critical qualitative military edge (QME) and accelerate the regional arms race. This poses a serious dilemma for Israel, as opposition to the sale might impede the prospects for normalization. The US as well faces a dilemma, as sale of the F-35 to Qatar, along with heightened security coordination with Doha and granting it the status of a major non-NATO ally, might erode Israel's QME and harm the relations between Washington and Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. Israel must be prepared for close coordination with the US administration in efforts to address this dilemma and prevent the UAE precedent from recurring with Qatar.

Qatar's ongoing influence in the Palestinian arena ultimately means bolstering the more radical wing of Hamas under the leadership of Ismail Haniyeh and Saleh al-Arouri and

maintaining Turkey's status and influence. Strengthening Haniyeh and al-Arouri and their ambitions to lead Hamas to control of the whole Palestinian arena (and they are also in competition with each other) will cause increasing difficulty for Yahya Sinwar in Gaza. This could translate into deliberate escalation, ending in a widespread military campaign in Gaza, with its various ramifications. These include an Israeli effort to deliver a mortal blow to Hamas's military infrastructures, leading to the collapse of Hamas rule and creating a vacuum that would have to be filled by Israel, in the absence of other reasonable options.

On the other hand, due to the weakened status of the UAE among the Palestinians, whether because of its unpopularity in Gaza or because of the disgust and suspicion it arouses among the leaders of the Palestinian Authority and Fatah in the West Bank, and also because of its declared support for their bitter enemy Mohammed Dahlan, it will not be able to step into Qatar's shoes in the foreseeable future. In this situation, Israel will need the mediation services of Qatar, and Qatar will continue to leverage this need to establish its regional position.

Israel's continuing reliance on Qatar as its preferred broker in the Palestinian arena, together with the ongoing hostility and strategic competition between Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, even if the Gulf boycott is lifted, will put Israel in a difficult position with the UAE. Against its will and due to circumstances, Israel could find itself caught in the struggle between Abu Dhabi and Doha, affecting its relations with them. An escape from this conundrum involves an Israeli move, with regional and US backing, that leads to renewal of the talks and bilateral links with the Palestinian Authority on one hand, and significant progress toward implementation of an arrangement with Hamas in the Gaza Strip on the other hand, in a way that makes the Qatari mediation efforts superfluous. Eliminating or at least limiting Qatari involvement will weaken the radical axis in Hamas, allow Sinwar to determine the local agenda in the Strip, and push Turkey out of the arena. It is not impossible that limiting Qatari influence in the West Bank will also weaken Jibril Rajoub and his camp, and thus help to moderate the tribalism and rivalries in the ranks of Fatah and establish a consensus with regard to Palestinian leadership on the day after Abu Mazen.