

Does Qatar's Return to the Arab World Run through Egypt?

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Recent months have witnessed changes in inter-Arab dynamics in general, and in relations between Qatar and Egypt in particular, which have been tense and even hostile in recent years. Warming relations between Doha and the Arab Quartet (Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Bahrain), which boycotted Qatar until January 2020, is expected to affect the nature of Qatar's involvement in the Gaza Strip and its ties with Hamas after Operation Guardian of the Walls – and hence the importance to Israel. This trend gains momentum precisely at a time when there are some in Israel who want to distance Qatar from the understandings toward the arrangement with Hamas taking shape (under Egyptian auspices) in the wake of the operation. The struggle over Qatar's role in the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip may emerge as one of the stumbling blocks in the discussions between Jerusalem and Cairo. Moreover, Cairo's relations with Doha will be a critical variable in shaping Israeli policy toward the Gaza Strip.

In recent months, relations have warmed between Qatar and the Arab Quartet (Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Bahrain), which boycotted it until January 2021. This development is expected to affect Qatar's involvement in the Gaza Strip and its ties with Hamas, and hence the importance to Israel. Qatar's regional aspirations and close ties with Turkey are a problem for Israel as well as most Arab countries due to Doha's and Ankara's support for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Abu Dhabi sees this policy as a substantive threat not only at the regional level, but first and foremost in the domestic arena, given the aspiration of political Islam to undermine the existing political order and establish Islam as the exclusive source of authority in all spheres of life.

The Reconciliation Process

The Arab boycott of Qatar erupted soon after the visit by former US President Donald Trump to Saudi Arabia in May 2017, in which he [identified publicly](#) with the charges against Qatar by the leaders of the Arab Quartet. The rift between the Quartet and Qatar strengthened Qatar's ties with Turkey, which subsequently established a military base in the emirate; closing the base was one of 13 demands presented to Qatar as conditions for lifting the boycott. Additional demands included an end to the incitement against the Quartet in the al-Jazeera network and the severance of ties with Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood. President Joe Biden's different agenda and the understanding, especially in Riyadh, that the boycott of Qatar has seen more disadvantages than advantages, led Saudi Arabia to promote reconciliation between key actors in the Arab world and end the siege of Qatar in January 2021, despite the ambiguity regarding Doha's fulfillment of its requirements.

Since the end of the siege, Qatar's relations with Egypt have warmed, and in May Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi met with Qatari Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani. It was [reported](#) that two agreed on "intensifying joint consultation and coordination" in order to promote bilateral relations between the countries. In his remarks at the conclusion of the visit, Abdulrahman acknowledged Egypt's leading role in the agreement taking shape in the Gaza Strip following Operation Guardian of the Walls, [noting](#) that Egypt has "a strategic and pivotal role...in protecting the Arab national security and defending the Arab World's causes." This followed his delivering an invitation from the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, to el-Sisi visit Doha. Such a meeting, if it takes place, would be the first between the two leaders.

During Operation Guardian of the Walls, Qatar also accepted Egypt's leading the mediation between Israel and Hamas and coordinated positions with Cairo – evidence of the formation of agreements between the parties regarding the Gaza Strip and the cultivation of normal working relations between them. Egypt has pledged \$500 million to reconstruct the Strip (probably not directly, but rather through Egyptian construction companies, engineering tools, and raw materials), and Qatar was quick to match this amount, in addition to the annual \$360 million that it provides for ongoing support.

Another leap in relations was recorded in mid-June, when Qatar hosted an extraordinary Arab League summit of foreign ministers, which, at the request of Egypt and Sudan, discussed the Renaissance Dam crisis with Ethiopia. During his visit to Doha, Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry met with the Emir of

Qatar, discussed with him the strengthening of bilateral relations, and invited him to visit Cairo. In an unconventional interview with al-Jazeera, he [noted](#) that his trip to Doha was not intended solely for the purpose of attending a conference on the Ethiopian Dam – whose impending unilateral filling was perceived in Cairo as a serious threat to the Egyptian water security – but also to put difficulties in the Egypt-Qatar relationship behind them. In June, for the first time in four years, ambassadors from Egypt and Saudi Arabia were also appointed to Qatar.

The rapprochement with Qatar serves a range of Egyptian interests relating to several regional and bilateral issues: unifying an Arab stance around its regional leadership, particularly on the issue of an arrangement in Gaza, which is supposed to enhance Egypt's value in the eyes of the Biden administration; driving a wedge in the Turkish-Qatari Islamist axis; curbing widespread criticism since 2013 of the Egyptian regime on the al-Jazeera network; and strengthening economic ties through Qatari investments in various Egyptian industries, including real estate, tourism, and finance.

Above all this is the Renaissance Dam crisis, which is currently at the forefront of Cairo's concerns and with negotiations at a dead end for many months. Egypt, frustrated by the reluctance of the UAE and Saudi Arabia to use their full weight in its interest, is pinning its hopes on Qatar. Doha enjoys close ties with Ethiopia and economic leverage over it (Addis Ababa is an attractive destination for Qatari investments), and Egypt hopes that they will be channeled into mediation and effective diplomatic pressure. Egypt has benefited from Qatar's joining of the united Arab front, which calls for the Security Council's intervention in the crisis, as well as the Qatari Foreign Minister's [statement](#) that "water security is a matter of life for the Egyptian and Sudanese peoples, and there is Arab agreement around this goal."

The weight of these common interests may be enough to put aside the tensions that still plague Egypt-Qatar relations, chief among them the political, media, financial, and logistical backing that Qatar gives to the Muslim Brotherhood, which is considered a terrorist organization in Egypt. Egyptian-Qatari reconciliation is also progressing faster than parallel efforts recorded in recent months for Egyptian-Turkish reconciliation. Cairo seems to prefer to accelerate its rapprochement with Doha in view of its current role as the rotating president of the Arab League, the enormous economic power it possesses, and the pragmatic approach of its leaders, free from rigid ideologies.

Implications for Israel

Since Operation Protective Edge, Israel and Qatar have deepened their cooperation, based on the transfer of humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip and mediation with Hamas. Israel has a clear interest in the continuation of this assistance, as long as it is not used to build a terrorist infrastructure. In Israel's view, improving the humanitarian situation in Gaza will help prevent a confrontation with Hamas. It was [reported](#) that former Mossad chief Yossi Cohen visited Doha to ensure that the financial assistance provided by the emirates to Gaza – over \$1 billion since 2012 – continues. Prior to Operation Guardian of the Walls, Israel [advocated](#) an increase in Qatar's role in the Gaza Strip beyond its serving as a financial conduit, and becoming a leader in the arrangement with Hamas.

Until now there has been tension between Israel's interest in improving the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip and the need to maintain normal relations with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, which are troubled by the Qatari influence in Gaza. The measured rapprochement between the Arab states and Qatar may make it easier for Israel to gain Arab legitimacy for continued cooperation with Qatar on issues related to the Gaza Strip – while concurrently enhancing its ability to curb negative aspects of Qatar's policy with increasing effectiveness, in coordination with Cairo. However, the question arises as to how much Israel can really expect Egyptian-Qatari cooperation in the Gaza Strip not to come at its expense. This matter also depends on the nature of Israeli coordination with both. Israel may lose some leverage over Hamas if it uses the Egyptian channel, because until now Qatari money has passed through Israel.

Israel has a clear interest in the United Arab Emirates deepening its involvement in the Gaza Strip at the expense of Qatar. However, the UAE currently lacks leverage in the Palestinian arena because of its view of Hamas as an enemy and because of the rift with the Palestinian Authority leadership, mainly due to UAE support for Mohammad Dahlan. In addition, Cairo views Abu Dhabi's possible involvement with suspicion, fearing that it will seek to undermine Egypt's patronage in the Gaza Strip. In such a reality, Israel will need Qatar's mediation services, and Doha will continue to leverage this to establish its regional position.

Involvement in the Palestinian arena is an important tool in Qatar's toolbox for consolidating its regional status. As a tiny and rich emirate that feels threatened by its neighbors, it eyes this as an insurance policy for its very existence. It is

therefore important for it to be perceived as essential in the eyes of significant regional players, including Israel, and more importantly, to maintain a necessary proximity to the United States. Israel has an interest in providing humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip for civilian purposes and not allow Hamas's military buildup, and thus will ensure that the money passes through Cairo or Ramallah (and no longer directly to Hamas) as part of a new monitoring mechanism. Qatar, for its part, wants to continue to transfer the funds directly to the Gaza Strip, so the issue may be a source of disagreement in discussions in Cairo about an arrangement for the Gaza Strip.

The new inter-Arab dynamics entail additional advantages, including the possibility of a wedge between Turkey and Qatar – which might thereby weaken the Muslim Brotherhood "axis." This thaw will also keep Turkey away from the Gulf arena, hurt Ankara's regional status, and reduce the economic aid flowing from Qatar to Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood. Erosion of Turkey's status may lead it to adopt a policy that is less confrontational vis-à-vis Israel.

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