

Qatar's Regional and International Standing is on the Rise

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Qatar's regional and international standing has greatly improved of late. This development, a result of the country's reconciliation agreement with a number of its Gulf neighbors and its closer ties with the United States, could affect Israel's interests. Qatar is likely to exploit the war in Ukraine and the accompanying global energy crisis to raise its international status, especially its relations with the United States, and is already attempting to seize the opportunity to convince the US to supply it with F-35 stealth fighters.

Qatar's network of foreign relations has improved significantly over the past year, thereby enhancing its standing and influence. Underlying this change are, inter alia, the 2021 reconciliation agreement signed by Doha and a number of neighboring Gulf states; Qatar's assistance to the United States in Afghanistan and in mediating between the US and Iran; the war in Ukraine, which highlights Qatar's importance in the global energy market; and Qatar's hosting of this year's World Cup soccer tournament in Qatar, which will make it the first Arab country to do so. These developments are also likely to affect Israel's interests.

A small principality with 300,000 citizens and the world's highest per capita GDP, Qatar regards its involvement in various theaters as a kind of insurance policy for its existence and prosperity in a hostile region. In addition to strengthening its direct relations with the United States, it is therefore important for Qatar to be perceived as essential by important regional players, including Israel, in order to score additional points in the international theater in general, and in Washington in particular.

Qatar's status has been on the rise for the past year, in particular, its relations with the United States. Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani was the first Arab Gulf leader to meet President Joe Biden, and in their meeting on January 31, 2022, Biden praised Qatar's key role in promoting the "[most vital interests](#)" of the United States. The President emphasized

Qatar's assistance in the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan and maintained stability in the Gaza Strip, and designated Qatar as a "[major non-NATO ally](#)." In order to further increase its potential as an asset, in advance of the emir's visit to Washington Qatar announced that it would procure \$20 billion of aircraft from Boeing, and President Biden highlighted this contribution to American employment. Highlighting the tightened relations between Washington and Doha, Qatar was awarded a range of benefits as a non-NATO ally, including access to American technology and prestige not granted to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which were close to the preceding US administration.

The United States Central Command (CENTCOM) is located in Qatar, and Qatar performs an array of tasks for the United States in the Middle East, with the help of its relations with most of the countries and sub-state organizations in the region – including those classified as terrorist organizations. In this context, Qatar delivers messages and mediates, including between the United States and Iran in a parallel channel to the talks between Iran and the major powers in Vienna. In order to preserve and foster close ties with the United States, Qatar is upgrading the largest American base in the Middle East, Al Udeid, at its own expense, and is expanding Hamad Port for the American fleet.

Now, at a time when the crisis in Ukraine is highlighting (again) the Gulf's strategic importance for the global energy market and the value of the Arab Gulf states, Qatar is handed another opportunity to prove its importance. President Biden asked Qatar, the world's largest exporter of liquefied natural gas (LNG), to increase its exports to Europe in order to compensate for a possible disruption in the supply of Russian gas to European customers. Qatar announced that it was willing to help, but is bound by long-term supply contracts with China, Japan, and South Korea, and can therefore immediately cover only 10-15% of the Russian gas shortage from the markets. At the same time, Biden asked Saudi Arabia, the world's largest oil exporter to increase its oil production in order to moderate the dramatic increase in oil prices. King Salman, who spoke with Biden, rejected the request, emphasizing his kingdom's commitment to agreements on oil

production quotas it had concluded with Russia, a fellow member in the OPEC+ cartel. Qatar will likely take advantage of the energy crisis accompanying the crisis in Ukraine to further increase its value to the United States, thereby enhancing its international status.

Significance for Israel

The rapprochement between Arab countries and Qatar following the end of the Arab boycott is likely to make it easier for Israel to gain Arab legitimacy for its continued cooperation with Qatar. It could also provide Israel with a more effective means of restraining negative aspects of Qatar's policy, particularly in coordination with Cairo – especially involving Qatar's support for Hamas.

Involvement in the Palestinian theater is an important tool for Qatar in diversifying its influence and consolidating its regional status. The connection between Israel and Qatar is centered on matters pertaining to the Palestinian question, mainly in the Gaza Strip. Qatar's economic power is its principal instrument for influencing both Israel and Hamas. At the same time, tension still exists between Israel's interest in aid from Qatar to alleviate the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip in order to achieve peaceful borders and Israel's interest in preserving good relations with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and UAE, which wish to prevent Qatar from assuming the leading role in the Gaza Strip. Currently, however, there is no substitute for Qatar's money. Most of the tension between Qatar and countries in the Arab world results from the financial, political, and media backing provided by Qatar to the Muslim Brotherhood, which Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and UAE regard as a terrorist organization. Still, Cairo, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi are pushing for closer relations with Doha at the same time they are testing the waters with Turkey – another supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood in general, and Hamas in particular.

Qatar was a pioneer among the Gulf states in relations with Israel, and a permanent Israeli economic mission operated in the country as early as 1996. The two countries have economic relations, including in the [diamond](#) industry, and the country has committed to allow Israeli tourists to attend

the World Cup tournament. Following the signing of the Abraham Accords, [it was reported](#) that Qatar was Israel's next target for normalization of relations. Qatar, however, severely criticized the Abraham Accords, and stated that it amounted to no less than a betrayal of the Palestinian idea. Qatar has since emphasized that it remains loyal to the Arab Peace Initiative, and that it would not join the agreements in the absence of a settlement between Israel and the Palestinians. Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani recently reiterated that Qatar's accession to the Abraham Accords was possible only if Israel showed that it [was serious](#) about a two-state solution. At the same time, Qatar is working under the radar with less than a formal agreement, and is also maintaining a "working relationship" with Israel outside of the Gaza Strip context.

Due to the weakening of the UAE's standing in the Palestinian theater, whether because of its refusal to engage in dialogue with Hamas or the hostility between the UAE and the PA leadership on the West Bank, Abu Dhabi will be unable to fulfill Doha's role in this context for the foreseeable future. Since Israel also will need Qatar's financial assistance and mediation services, disputes may arise between Israel and UAE on this matter.

Conclusion

Qatar's policy is expected to continue to challenge Israel. Qatar is striving to leverage its improved standing and increasingly warm relations with the United States – with the help of its actions in the energy crisis accompanying the war in Ukraine – in order to exert pressure on Washington to supply it with attack UAVs and F-35 stealth fighters. It is possible that Qatar, like the UAE before it, is also seeking linkage between the sale of the aircraft and its willingness to improve its relations with Israel. It is doubtful, however, whether the current US administration will prove as "generous" as its predecessor. A possible sale of advanced aircraft to another Arab country that competes against its neighbors and has military ties with China, Iran, and Turkey is liable to jeopardize American technological supremacy, accelerate the regional arms race, and detract from Israel's qualitative military edge.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen