

Two are Better than One: The Role of Qatar and Egypt in Gaza

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Increasing cooperation between Qatar and Egypt has implications for regional geopolitics and specifically for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Most recently, it contributed to efforts to achieve calm between Israel and Hamas during Operation Guardian of the Walls, and was particularly significant during Operation Breaking Dawn. Enhanced coordination with Qatar was a force multiplier for Egyptian mediation in the Gaza Strip and made the influence of two countries more effective with regard to restraint of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, and regarding reconstruction of the Strip – all of which are in Israel's interest. At the same time, Israel must ensure that rising Qatari involvement does not harm its relations with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, which still view Doha's regional moves with suspicion.

The recognition by Minister of Defense Benny Gantz of Qatar alongside Egypt at the end of Operation Breaking Dawn for their mediation efforts and "[their contribution to the cessation of combat](#)" was highly unusual. US President Joe Biden also [praised](#) the leaders of Egypt and Qatar for their joint diplomatic contribution. Not only did senior Israeli and American officials publicly praise Qatar, after previous Israeli governments attacked it, but Doha's political-diplomatic cooperation with Egypt was also mentioned in positive terms.

This development occurred in the context of tangible changes in policy over the past two years among Middle East states, in a manner that crossed "camps" and blocs" and breached the dichotomous divisions familiar in the Israeli security establishment. One example of this trend is the renewed connection between Egypt and Qatar, which until early 2021 were

considered competitors, if not regional rivals. In 2021 it was already possible to notice [the positive potential for Israel](#) in the cooperation between these two leading actors, which until then were aligned with opposite sides in regional politics. Indeed, Egyptian-Qatari cooperation contributed to efforts to achieve calm during Operation Guardian of the Walls and were even more significant one year, later during Operation Breaking Dawn.

Weakening of Political Islam

A number of Arab countries, including Egypt, viewed Qatar as a destabilizing force in the region. During the regional upheaval of the last decade, resentment arose against Doha for its support of political Islam movements, including the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Hamas, which were perceived by some Arab capitals as both a regional and domestic threat. The tension with Cairo began in 2013 in the wake of Doha's support for Muslim Brotherhood President Mohamed Morsi, who was ousted by the el-Sisi regime, which came to power after Morsi was removed from office.

The current rapprochement between the two states comes after a decade of defeats for movements affiliated with political Islam in the Mideast – from the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, which is [undergoing](#) a severe internal crisis, to the fall of Islamist parties in Tunisia, Morocco, and Sudan. The patrons of political Islam, primarily Qatar and Turkey, gradually began to distance themselves from the Islamic project in order to strengthen political and economic ties with the so-called pragmatic Sunni camp, led by Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. This reconciliation was influenced by economic considerations, and by the reconciliation agreement between Qatar and the Arab Quartet in January 2021, which allowed the sides further flexibility in foreign policy and made it easier for Israel to have relations with Qatar, which is now one of the "good guys."

The increasing coordination between Egypt and Qatar relates to both bilateral and regional matters. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, material issues became more prominent than the ideological disputes among the various competing streams in the region.

Food security, energy, and stability interests highlight shared interests over the differences and encourage joining forces. In May 2021, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and Qatari Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani met and agreed on "[accelerated consultation and coordination](#)." In March 2022 the Qatari Foreign Minister visited Egypt and the two states announced an investment agreement of \$5 billion in a variety of fields, including banking, real estate, energy, trade, agriculture, and aviation.

June 2022 saw a [further warming of relations](#) with the visit to Egypt by the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani; this was the first such visit since 2015. In addition, the finance ministers of the two states met at the Economic Forum in Qatar and signed a Memorandum of Understandings regarding heightened economic cooperation, which focused on preventing double taxation and encouraging investment. The parties even decided to reestablish the Joint Egyptian-Qatari Business Council, with the aim of increasing economic integration and trade between the two countries. Egyptian statistics cite an increase of 76.4 percent in trade between the two states from 2020 to 2021.

Operation Breaking Dawn

The first buds of cooperation between Egypt and Qatar regarding Gaza were evident during Operation Guardian of the Walls, when the two coordinated stances, in contrast with their actions during Operation Defensive Shield (2014) when they competed for the role of mediator. At that time Israel preferred Egypt over Qatar, due to Cairo's basic hostility toward Hamas as an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood; the trust between Israeli and Egyptian security officials; and effective Egyptian leverage given its geographic border with the Strip, which gives it control over the Rafah border crossing, the movement of people and goods into Gaza, and the ability to monitor its reconstruction process. At the same time, over several years Israel also enjoyed the stabilizing role of Qatari financial assistance to Gaza (some \$5 billion in total), in spite of public criticism of this funding. In August 2021, in response to Israeli demands, a [new mechanism was established](#) for transferring Qatari funds to Gaza, with

the involvement of Egypt, which eliminates the phenomenon of suitcases of dollars for Hamas officials. The mechanism entails transferring Qatari funds of \$10 million per month to Hamas indirectly, by purchasing fuel in this amount from Egypt, intended for Hamas.

Due to its involvement in the Palestinian arena and primarily due to its financial assistance to the Gaza Strip and Hamas as the local sovereign, Qatar has forms of leverage that it used early in Operation Breaking Dawn to send messages of mediation between Israel and Hamas directly, and to Islamic Jihad via Iran. The Egyptian mediators [reportedly](#) even threatened that Israel would prevent Qatari aid from reaching the Strip. Qatari involvement this time, as during Operation Guardian of the Walls, took place by Egypt's side, and Doha did not try to contest Egypt's role as in the past – additional evidence of improved relations between the two. Qatar primarily attacked and condemned Israel on the al-Jazeera network, as is its wont. However, it was also [reported](#) that Qatar conducted dialogue with Iran, possibly in order for Tehran to influence Islamic Jihad to agree to a ceasefire.

Each of the mediating states has its own interests. Egypt has a security interest – separating the Gazan factions from terrorists in the Sinai Peninsula and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and ensuring its hegemony in the Strip over other regional rivals; a political interest – exploiting the role of mediator to strengthen its status within and beyond the region, with an emphasis on the US, and portraying the regime domestically as the protector of the Palestinians; an economic interest in relation to Egyptian companies, which are involved in reconstruction in Gaza and in increasing trade between Egypt and the Strip; and an interest in strengthening stability Gaza, which has positive outward effects on Sinai and the region.

Qatar for its part wanted to advance a ceasefire between Islamic Jihad and Israel in order to prevent damage to its reconstruction efforts in the Gaza Strip and to score points, primarily from Washington, as one of the parties contributing to regional calm and stability thus strengthening its status and

influence. Presumably Qatar's rapprochement with Egypt and Saudi Arabia contributed to this moderating role, and were it not for the good relations between them, Qatar might well have tried to challenge Egypt. A senior Israeli security official even [said](#) that "Israel sees Qatar as a state with significant potential to assist, not only in the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip, but in maintaining regional stability." It was also [reported](#) that Qatar has begun relaying messages between Israel and Lebanon/Hezbollah regarding gas drilling in the Mediterranean and the maritime border demarcation dispute between the states.

Implications for Israel

Increased coordination between Egypt and Qatar is a force multiplier for the two states and opens new possibilities for Israel. It gives Cairo a variety of avenues of influence over the relevant parties, primarily Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Iran, thanks to the substantial economic leverage that Qatar brings with it. Instead of competing for the role of mediator, Egypt and Qatar can use their joint action to refine their formula of carrots and sticks – politically and economically.

The relations between Egypt and Qatar are not merely economic relations; they are also relations of foreign policy and security, and they may impact numerous regional issues beyond the Gaza Strip, including energy supplies, the crisis in Libya, nautical security in the Red Sea, and the Iranian issue. Doha's rapprochement with Cairo on these matters is likely to converge with Israeli interests and to moderate problematic elements of Qatari policy. The cooperation between the two may contribute to the reconstruction of Gaza and give both additional points of leverage ahead of future rounds of escalation between Israel, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip.

On the other hand, the renewed closeness of Doha and Cairo may also challenge Israel given that it creates a new regional reality – the potential for a new axis of influence, whose policy will not always overlap with Israel's and might specifically contravene it. For example, Qatar may encourage Egypt to take a more compromising approach to the Muslim Brotherhood

in general and toward Hamas in particular. Likewise, the growing footprint of Qatar may negatively influence Israel's relations with the UAE and Bahrain, which still regard Doha with much suspicion.

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