

Indispensable Qatar?

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One of the challenges that Israel faces when it comes to formulating strategy – regarding both the war and the “day after” – is its policy toward Qatar. While the connection between Qatar and Hamas harms Israel’s fundamental interests, Qatar, thanks to this very connection, serves other Israeli interests and may well play a role in the reconstruction of Gaza after the war. Israel must examine its ties with Qatar and create effective leverage – direct and indirect – and in any event, prepare to deal with the Qatari dilemma after the war is over.

One of the challenges that the State of Israel faces as it formulates its strategy in the current war and for the “day after” is the policy it should adopt vis-à-vis Qatar, its involvement in the Gaza Strip, and its relations with Hamas. Under the guise of humanitarian and civilian aid, the tiny but wealthy Gulf state funds Hamas’s activities in Gaza, while allowing the organization’s overseas leaders to reside in its territory and providing Hamas with a diplomatic safety net. In part through the al-Jazeera television network that it owns, it provides the terrorist organization with valuable propaganda. As far back as 2007, when the organization seized control of Gaza, Qatar recognized that “adopting” Hamas would be a worthwhile opportunity: connections with Hamas in Gaza grant Qatar influence and status in the Middle East and beyond. In addition, they bolster the popular Arab perception of Doha as working for the Palestinian cause, unlike those Arab regimes that abandoned it in favor of normalization with Israel.

Israel’s Qatari dilemma is thus: Although the connection between Qatar and Hamas harms Israeli interests, at the same time, thanks to its ties with the organization, Qatar has and continues to serve other Israeli interests. The Qatari transfer of money to Hamas was welcomed by Israel, which was beguiled by the false quiet that it bought. In accordance with Qatar’s pragmatic approach, which believes in being in contact with all sides, tens of millions of Qatari dollars entered the Gaza Strip through the front door: Israel hoped that these funds would encourage Hamas to maintain the security calm, perpetuate the split between the Hamas rule in Gaza and the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, and counter Iranian influence over Hamas. The Qatari envoy to Gaza, Mohammed al-Emadi, was seen by Israel as a convenient channel for relaying messages to Hamas. While

other countries in the region distanced themselves from the Gaza issue, given the lack of a political horizon, the Qataris became the exclusive mediators between Israel and Hamas. Even Egypt, which until a few years ago tried to balance Qatar's influence over Hamas, has accepted Doha's preeminence in Gaza.

The October 7 terror attack changed the equation significantly. Not only is it unclear whether Qatar had any prior knowledge of the attack, but it also proved that Qatari involvement in Gaza did not contribute to Israeli security – in fact, precisely the opposite. Moreover, Israel's stated goal in the Swords of Iron war, which it launched in response to the October 7 attack, is to topple Hamas's rule in Gaza. This puts Israel in a direct conflict of interests with Qatar, which will not easily relinquish what it sees as a strategic asset in which it has invested heavily.

Not surprisingly, therefore, since the Hamas attack there have been calls in Israel to declare Qatar an enemy state and take action against it. Israel, however, will find it hard to do so. The Israelis held by Hamas in the Gaza Strip have effectively turned Israel into Qatar's hostage. Qatar has the ability – or, at least, so Israel hopes – to influence Hamas on this very painful issue. Israel's reliance on Qatar in this context was the reason, for example, that it backed down from plans to bar al-Jazeera from operating in Israel. The Qataris have two interests at play: they want to curb the Israeli military operation in the Gaza Strip in order to try and safeguard the Hamas regime, and they seek to score points – especially from the United States – for helping resolve the hostage crisis.

To be sure, Qatar already has close ties with the United States. The largest US military base in the region, the headquarters of the United States Central Command, is in Qatar. Doha enjoys especially good relations with the current US administration, which it helped in the withdrawal from Afghanistan and in mediating with Iran and even Venezuela. Although the Hamas attack reflected poorly on Qatar on the international stage, Doha was quick to try to make amends by engaging in the hostage negotiations and by using its relations with Iran and Hezbollah to prevent an escalation on the Lebanese front, thereby safeguarding its image as a stabilizing factor in the region.

It seems that Qatar will continue to play a central role even after the war against Hamas and in any successful resolution of the entire hostage crisis. No other country has the same drive as Qatar to be deeply involved in Gaza and to fill the vacuum created if Israel does indeed topple Hamas, and Qatar will certainly aspire to maintain its influence over post-war Gaza, even if Hamas is no longer the main power. The US administration is reportedly finding it hard to convince countries like Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates to be part of the

reconstruction of Gaza due to Israeli ambiguity with regard to plans for the Strip and its opposition to the proposal that the Palestinian Authority resume control. As happened following Operation Protective Edge in 2014, this time, too, Qatar will be the address when it comes to rebuilding Gaza – whether Israel likes it or not. Therefore, there is tension between Israel's desire to distance Qatar from the Gaza Strip, and the ongoing need to define concrete goals vis-à-vis Hamas and Gaza, during and after the combat.

A fatal blow to Hamas by Israel will confront Qatar with a dilemma: Should it support a new government in Gaza, be it a government of technocrats or one affiliated with the Palestinian Authority? Experience suggests that there is a chance this will happen, given that Qatari policy is both pragmatic and opportunistic. Qatar is sensitive to its international standing and image, and these could be tainted by any connection to Hamas's atrocities.

Given that the most effective way to apply pressure on Qatar is through the United States, Israel should appeal to the Biden administration to pressure the Qatari regime to change its policy. For example, Israel should ensure, in part by appealing to Washington, that the presence of Hamas leaders in Qatar becomes a burden for Doha. However, since Washington sees Qatar as an asset, Israel should lower its expectations – even when it comes to the [American promise](#) that it has agreed with Doha that the Qataris will “reexamine” their ties with Hamas after the war. Consequently, any change in Israeli policy toward Qatar – for example, by trying to assassinate senior Hamas figures who have been given refuge in Qatar – could encounter stiff US opposition, especially in the short term.

Moreover, it is vital that Israel define what model of government it wants to see in the Gaza Strip after the war, to prevent the creation of a dangerous political vacuum that would afford Qatar the opportunity, once again, to be the exclusive savior of the Gaza Strip. The Israeli model must be based on the cooperation of international and regional states in rebuilding Gaza, primarily Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, as well as on putting the civilian mechanism in the Strip under the control, if only symbolic, of the Palestinian Authority. This is a vital element without which it would be impossible to secure the cooperation of these countries, as well as US support for such a plan. One possibility is to couple this with the American effort to jumpstart the normalization process between Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Although Saudi Arabia is far from enthusiastic about taking any responsibility for Gaza, the US administration can offer carrots as part of a normalization deal with Israel, which would encourage it to show some willingness to play a more

significant role. At the same time, it is clearly in Israel's interests that Qatar continues or even increases its financial assistance to Cairo, since Egypt, which is geographically close to Gaza and is well acquainted with the workings of the Strip, will play a central role in the reconstruction process. Similarly, Egypt has close ties with Hamas and controls the Rafah border crossing. Qatar can be part of an Arab and/or international taskforce that would take temporary control of Gaza, but it cannot lead it.

In any case, Israel must condition Qatari involvement in post-war Gaza on a change in its policy toward Hamas. Given Qatar's pragmatic approach and its desire to maintain its influence on the Palestinian issue, this is a possible scenario - if Israel indeed manages to turn the alliance between Qatar and Hamas into a diplomatic burden and to form an opposing and competing power to its influence in the Gaza Strip.

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