

The Qatari Challenge: Strategic Dilemmas and Policy Options for Israel

Yoel Guzansky | No. 1962 | March 17, 2025

Israel's dilemma regarding Qatar stems from the fact that while Qatar has long undermined Israeli interests, its policies, at times, have simultaneously served other Israeli interests. This dilemma is further compounded by Qatar's importance to the United States. Moreover, without the decisive defeat of Hamas and an effort to establish a Palestinian alternative in its place, Qatar may once again become the primary actor influencing events in Gaza. However, if and when Hamas is dismantled, Qatari aid could be redirected as part of a broader Arab-led reconstruction mechanism for Gaza. In any scenario, Israel must coordinate its policy toward Qatar with the United States—both to avoid harming U.S. interests and to leverage American influence over Qatar to its own advantage.

Qatar, Israel, and the Palestinian Issue

The first documented meetings between Israeli and Qatari officials began after the Madrid Conference (1991). The signing of the Oslo Accords accelerated the frequency of these meetings, culminating in the opening of an official Israeli trade office in Doha in 1996—alongside a similar diplomatic presence in Muscat, Oman. Despite pressure from Iran and Qatar's Arab neighbours, Qatar openly maintained its ties with Israel, viewing them as an advantage, particularly given the diplomatic credit it generated from the United States.

However, Israel's policy toward Qatar has exhibited a dual approach over the years. Despite harsh Qatari criticism and even incitement against Israel, mainly through Al Jazeera's broadcasts, Israel only recently (and temporarily) closed the network's offices—a sign of its longstanding preference to “contain” Qatari hostility rather than escalate tensions. Reports indicate that on the eve of October 7, an Israeli cabinet meeting dedicated to Hamas and Gaza reaffirmed the importance of [maintaining ties](#) with Qatar.

Even after the outbreak of the “Iron Swords War,” and despite [criticism by elected public officials](#) of Qatar's support for Hamas, Doha and Jerusalem have continued working-level relations. Intelligence agencies from both sides cooperate, senior officials hold meetings, Israelis visit the emirate, and [limited economic and commercial cooperation](#) exists. Furthermore, Qatar is not officially designated as an enemy state by Israel, although the latter has issued [warnings](#) advising Israeli citizens against traveling there.

Qatar similarly maintains a two-pronged approach toward Israel. On one hand, it strongly criticizes Israeli policies on the Palestinian issue, particularly regarding West Bank settlements, Israeli military actions in Palestinian territories, and perceived violations of the status quo in Jerusalem and the Temple Mount. On the other hand, Qatar serves as a key mediator between Israel and Hamas and actively participates in the humanitarian aid mechanism for Gaza. This

dual policy allows Qatar to sustain its position as a central regional player, balancing support for the Palestinians with its pragmatic ties with Israel.

Israel's stated objective of removing Hamas from power in Gaza is fundamentally at odds with Qatar's interest in keeping Hamas as the governing force. In theory, if the Israeli hostages would to be released, Israel could break free from its dependence on Qatari mediation. However, it is likely that even after such a development, Qatar will continue positioning itself as a mediator—particularly in enforcing agreements and shaping Gaza's reconstruction efforts. Furthermore, in the absence of a clear “day after” plan for Gaza, it remains uncertain whether any Arab actor other than Qatar would be willing to take responsibility for rebuilding the Strip while Hamas remains in power. As a result, Qatari involvement in Gaza is expected to persist as long as Hamas controls the territory.

Qatar's Strategic Use of the Palestinian Issue

For Qatar, the Palestinian issue serves as a tool for demonstrating its regional influence. It leverages its support for the Palestinians—and Hamas in particular—to strengthen its standing both in the Arab world and beyond. Officially, Qatar maintains that it will not establish full diplomatic relations (normalization) with Israel unless an Israeli-Palestinian agreement leads to the establishment of a Palestinian state. Until then, Qatar emphasizes its willingness to engage with all parties—Israel, the Palestinian Authority (PA), and Hamas. Moreover, while Qatar has funnelled significant financial aid to Hamas over the years—[with Israel's approval and even encouragement](#)—it insists on maintaining “balance” by supporting Hamas and the PA equally. However, from the Palestinian Authority's perspective, Qatar presents a major challenge due to its direct financial backing of Hamas. Senior Palestinian officials have long criticized Qatar's financial transfers to Gaza, arguing that they empower Hamas and deepen Palestinian divisions. In early 2025, tensions escalated when the Palestinian Authority announced the suspension of Al Jazeera broadcasts in Palestinian territories. The PA justified this move by claiming that the network [incites unrest](#) and spreads misleading and inflammatory content, accusing it of provocation, incitement to rebellion, sabotage, and interference in Palestinian internal affairs.

Between January and March 2025, as part of the ceasefire agreement and hostage release deal between Israel and Hamas, Qatar [resumed its supply of fuel](#) to Gaza with Israel's approval, just as it had before the war. Qatar also apparently continues to host elements of Hamas' leadership, although some senior figures have relocated to Turkey. At the same time, Qatar remains a key mediator between Israel and Hamas in negotiations over the release of Israeli hostages. These mediation efforts, along with Qatar's role in the broader [Arab coordination mechanism](#) on Gaza, have helped it gain international credit and maintain its influence in Gaza-related affairs. By positioning itself as an indispensable diplomatic player, Qatar ensures its continued relevance on the global stage while reinforcing its strategic leverage in the region.

Qatar's Foreign Policy

Qatar's support for Hamas and its investments in Gaza align closely with its broader foreign policy strategy, which has long included backing political Islamist movements. However,

rather than being driven purely by ideological affinity, Qatar's foreign policy is characterized more often by pragmatism—and at times opportunism—than by deep ideological commitment. The primary goal is to enhance its influence in the Middle East. A prime example of this flexibility is Qatar's strong support for Egypt during the presidency of Mohamed Morsi—a member of the Muslim Brotherhood—followed by its current close ties with President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's regime, which actively opposes and suppresses the Brotherhood.

At first glance, Qatar's foreign policy seems filled with contradictions. Since 1995, it has pursued a strategy of diplomatic hedging—building relationships with multiple, often competing, actors. Qatar's vast wealth and close ties with the United States have enabled it to manoeuvre independently on the international stage, maintaining relations with rival factions, including those that are direct adversaries. Despite being a small state with a native population of only about 300,000 citizens, Qatar exerts disproportionate influence on global affairs. Upon coming to power in 1995, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani leveraged Qatar's massive natural gas revenues to craft a foreign policy aimed at strengthening its position, particularly in relation to Saudi Arabia, its powerful neighbour and regional rival. However, Qatar's pursuit of an independent foreign policy has not been without challenges. The country has faced at least one coup attempt in 1996, allegedly supported by external forces; a diplomatic boycott by neighbouring Gulf states in 2014; and a full-scale blockade by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt between 2017 and 2021.

Qatar is a major global player in the liquefied natural gas (LNG) industry and ranks among the largest exporters in the world. Currently, it exports approximately 77 million tons of LNG per year, with plans to expand production to over 126 million tons by 2027. The country holds massive natural gas reserves—about [13%](#) of the world's total—primarily from the North Field, the largest offshore gas reservoir in the world, which it shares with Iran. Qatar's economic stability and geopolitical leverage stem from long-term supply agreements with key markets such as China, Japan, India, and South Korea. Following the Russia-Europe energy crisis, Qatar has emerged as a key supplier for Europe and continues expanding its global influence through advanced infrastructure and high production capabilities.

Qatar's Diplomatic Strategy: A Global Mediator

Beyond energy, Qatar plays an active role in international diplomacy, engaging in conflict mediation in over 20 regions worldwide. While not all of its mediation efforts have been successful, they have helped boost its international prestige, which it considers vital for its survival among larger and more powerful neighbours. Qatar has participated in mediation efforts in Venezuela, Lebanon, Iran, Afghanistan, and [other conflict zones](#), reinforcing its image as a [neutral broker](#). The strategy behind Qatar's mediation role involves:

- **Claiming neutrality** – Qatar has carefully maintained relations with various opposing parties, enabling it to act as a mediator in global conflicts.

- **Leveraging its wealth** – Qatar’s financial power allows it to offer economic incentives, making it an attractive diplomatic player.
- **Enhancing its security** – Qatar operates under the assumption that the more internationally relevant it becomes, the greater external interest there will be in ensuring its stability and security.
- **Building trust among rivals** – Qatar’s mediator role allows it to win the confidence of competing powers, theoretically shielding it from the consequences of global rivalries.

Qatar’s Strategic Relationship with the U.S. and its Impact on Israel

A critical element of Qatar’s international standing—and therefore a key factor in Israel’s broader strategy regarding Qatar and its support for Hamas—is its complex and strategic relationship with the United States. Qatar has leveraged its diplomatic manoeuvring and dominance in the global energy market to strengthen ties with major international players, particularly the U.S. administration. By proactively mediating on behalf of Washington in disputes with countries hostile to the U.S., Qatar has gradually positioned itself as a [key American partner](#) in the Middle East and beyond.

Despite its small military, Qatar is the [third-largest arms purchaser](#) in the world (2020–2024); the [second-largest buyer](#) of U.S. weapons globally; and the host of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) at the Al Udeid Air Base—the largest U.S. military base outside the United States. Qatar is investing \$8 billion to upgrade Al Udeid, which houses an American X-band radar system critical for detecting and tracking Iranian missile launches. Additionally, Qatar wields significant influence in Washington through lobbying efforts, think tanks, and major financial investments, amounting to over [\\$45 billion](#) in the US market.

During Joe Biden’s presidency, U.S.-Qatar relations flourished, partly due to Qatar’s crucial role in facilitating the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. In January 2022, Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani became the first Gulf leader to meet Biden, where they announced a [\\$20 billion deal](#) with Boeing. After the meeting, Biden [designated](#) Qatar a “Major non-NATO ally,” a status granting privileged access to U.S. military cooperation and advanced technology—a distinction that Saudi Arabia and the UAE have not yet received. In 2024, the U.S. and Qatar renewed their military cooperation agreement (details classified), extending the American military presence in Qatar until 2034. Furthermore, in September 2024, the Biden administration granted Qatari citizens visa-free entry to the U.S.—the only Arab country to receive such a privilege.

It remains unclear how the current U.S. administration will approach Qatar and whether it will diverge from its predecessor’s policies. At the start of his first term, President Donald Trump initially sided against Qatar, supporting the Gulf states that imposed a blockade on Doha. However, he quickly shifted course, and Washington ultimately deepened its ties with Qatar. Even if Trump is more receptive to Israeli concerns regarding Qatar, it is uncertain whether he would take any concrete action against it. In September 2024, before his re-election, Trump met with Emir Tamim and later [praised](#) his leadership. Reports have also suggested business ties between the Trump family and Qatar, as well as [economic connections](#) between Trump’s

Middle East envoy, Steven Witkoff, and Qatari interests. If these reports are accurate, they could constrain the U.S.'s diplomatic flexibility toward Qatar and reduce the likelihood of significant American pressure on Doha, even under a Trump administration.

Alternative Israeli Policy Approaches: The Desirable vs. the Feasible

Israel's strategic objective regarding Qatar should be to influence Qatari policy, specifically by ending Qatari incitement against Israel and cutting off Qatari support for Hamas. However, Israel has limited leverage to pressure Qatar into changing its stance. The main tools at Israel's disposal include coordinating actions with the U.S. administration to exert diplomatic pressure on Qatar; and leveraging Israel's control over Gaza's external borders and its ability to apply military pressure on Hamas and Qatari interests in the Strip. The key challenge is how to effectively use these limited tools to accelerate negotiations with Hamas and secure the release of remaining hostages; shape and stabilize Gaza's governance in the "day after" scenario post-war; and counter Qatar's anti-Israel rhetoric and media influence. Additionally, given Qatar's increasing involvement inside Israel, the latter must conduct a comprehensive internal review aimed at formulating a cohesive and up-to-date national policy on Qatar—one that will guide all governmental bodies interacting with it. Below are possible courses of action, presented at a conceptual level.

Aggressive Approach – Pressure and Restrictions

- **Diplomatic Measures Against Qatar:** Suspending diplomatic ties with Qatar and blocking trade and business activities involving the emirate. Denying Qatari access to Gaza, restricting its role in reconstruction efforts and mediation.
- **International Advocacy Against Qatar:** Promoting initiatives to damage Qatar's international reputation, highlighting its ties with Hamas as a threat to regional stability. Launching a global media and awareness campaign portraying Qatar as a state sponsor of terrorism.
- **Financial and Economic Restrictions:** Monitoring and restricting Qatari financial flows to Gaza, ensuring that funds do not reach Hamas or its affiliates. Imposing sanctions on institutions or individuals facilitating Qatari financial support for Hamas.
- **Strengthening Alliances with Gulf States Opposed to Qatar:** Deepening ties with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the UAE, which have previously opposed Qatari policies. Coordinating regional efforts to counterbalance Qatar's influence in Gaza and beyond.

Balanced Approach – Managing Relations with Conditional Engagement

- **Conditional Coordination with Qatar:** Engaging with Qatar directly to ensure its aid to Gaza benefits only the civilian population, rather than strengthening Hamas. Closely coordinating with the U.S. to align strategies and enforce oversight on Qatari involvement.

- **Utilizing Qatar as a Mediator:** Maintaining Qatar as an indirect communication channel with Hamas, which can be beneficial in negotiating ceasefires and prisoner exchanges.
- **Enforcing Financial Transparency:** Demanding international oversight on Qatari financial transfers to Gaza, ensuring funds do not reach Hamas. Conditioning Gaza's reconstruction on demilitarization—promoting a "Rehabilitation for Disarmament" framework.

Soft Approach – Leveraging Relations to Improve Stability

- **Enhancing Dialogue with Qatar:** Establishing cooperative channels to encourage Qatar to align more closely with Israeli interests. Strengthening diplomatic engagement to influence Qatar's regional policies.
- **Using Qatar to Prevent Escalation:** Leveraging Qatar's influence over Hamas to prevent military escalations and cycles of violence. Encouraging Qatar to pressure Hamas into maintaining long-term stability in Gaza.
- **Promoting Economic Cooperation (Qatar-U.S.-Israel):** Encouraging Qatari investments in civilian projects in Gaza to reduce Hamas' influence over the population. Facilitating joint economic initiatives that integrate Qatar into regional stability efforts.

Given that Hamas continues to control most of Gaza and is gradually rebuilding its military and governing capabilities, and considering Qatar's ongoing ties with the organization, Israel must carefully evaluate Qatar's role in relation to Gaza, Hamas, and its broader relationship with Israel. Furthermore, the beginning of Trump's administration presents a short window of opportunity to attempt to influence U.S. policy toward Qatar.

A complete severance of ties with Qatar—including blocking its access to Gaza and Hamas—could weaken Hamas, given that Qatar (along with Turkey) is one of its primary supporters. However, such a move is unlikely in the near term due to Qatar's critical mediation role between Israel and Hamas, particularly in negotiating hostage releases. Additionally, Israel could face international criticism for exacerbating Gaza's humanitarian crisis if it shuts off Qatari aid. Israeli measures against Qatar could also be perceived as conflicting with U.S. policy, which remains supportive of Qatar as a strategic ally. Qatar's improved relations with its Arab neighbours, Egypt, and Jordan, as well as its growing influence in Lebanon and Syria, make it more difficult to rally regional support against Doha.

Given these constraints, it is essential that Israel coordinates its strategy toward Qatar with the U.S. in advance to avoid undermining American interests in the region, maximize the effectiveness of U.S. leverage over Qatar, which remains the most impactful pressure tool available, and account for Qatar's influence in Washington, as Doha has significant lobbying power and economic ties with the U.S.

While acting directly against Qatar is difficult, its international standing and ties with the U.S. are also the key levers for influencing its policies. Qatar is highly sensitive to its global image and prides itself on maintaining a neutral diplomatic posture. If Israel chooses to undermine

Qatar's reputation, it could target specific aspects of Qatari activity that are problematic from an Israeli perspective. Qatar has demonstrated significant pragmatism in its foreign policy—unlike Turkey, it is not ideologically committed to the Muslim Brotherhood and operates more on the basis of *realpolitik*. If Israel can redirect Qatar's influence away from Hamas, offering it an alternative channel of involvement in Palestinian affairs—one that preserves its regional status without empowering Hamas—Qatar may be open to adjusting its position.

Instead of an immediate break in relations, Israel should therefore seek to reshape Qatar's involvement in Gaza by:

- Encouraging its role in post-war reconstruction, conditioned on non-engagement with Hamas's military wing.
- Positioning the Palestinian Authority or alternative Arab-led governance structures as Qatar's primary partners in Gaza.
- Coordinating closely with Washington to ensure that U.S. leverage is used to shift Qatar's policies rather than entrenching its current role.

By steering Qatar toward an alternative influence model, Israel could reduce its reliance on Hamas while maintaining diplomatic flexibility and avoiding direct confrontation with a U.S. ally.

Conclusion

Qatar's primary objective regarding the Israel-Hamas war is to facilitate its conclusion while ensuring Hamas remains a significant player in Gaza. Such an outcome would allow Qatar to maintain its central role in Gaza, reinforcing its regional influence and enhance its standing on the international stage, particularly with the United States.

Unlike other regional actors, Qatar is willing to provide generous humanitarian aid to Gaza without conditions or restrictions, a stance that may appeal to the U.S. administration. Additionally, Qatar has positioned itself favourably with President Trump by successfully mediating hostage releases, which increases American interest in keeping Qatar as the lead negotiator in the Gaza issue.

Israel should therefore adopt a policy that combines measured pressure with cautious engagement with Qatar. A highly aggressive approach against Qatar at this stage could harm efforts to secure the release of all hostages. Qatar enjoys a strong international standing, making it unlikely that Israel could successfully isolate it on its own—especially given that past attempts by an Arab coalition to marginalize it failed. Trump's apparent support for Qatar, combined with Europe's energy dependency on Qatari gas, further complicates any unilateral Israeli action against Doha.

Israel must understand the Trump administration's position on Qatar and its implications for Israel's strategic interests; identify specific areas where Qatar's actions undermine Israeli security, particularly regarding Gaza and Hamas; and coordinate fully with Washington to ensure that any actions against Qatar align with broader U.S. policy objectives.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Ela Greenberg