**Qatar, Hamas and the Gaza War**

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One of the most notable aspects of the current conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza is the prominent role being played by the Emirate of Qatar in supporting the terrorist organization, whose genocidal charter calls for the murder of Jews and destruction of Israel.

Emir Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad al-Thani, the leader of the Emirate of Qatar, is acting as Hamas’ “channel of communication” to the international community. Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal is now in the Qatari capital of Doha directing his organization’s war effort in Gaza, where the Qatari royals welcomed him with open arms after his welcome in Damascus came to an abrupt end. Qatari funds have been crucial to Hamas’ military build-up in recent years, as they were to the Muslim Brotherhood’s attempted take over of Egypt under Mohammed Morsi. And the Doha-based satellite channel Al-Jazeera is energetically backing Hamas, as it has other terrorist-connected and supporting movements.

Yet Qatar is not part of the regional bloc of anti-Western states and movements led by the Islamic Republic of Iran. While Qatar has a far warmer relationship with Tehran and Hezbollah than others Arabs states, it also remains America’s landlord, handsomely leasing the U.S. military its largest foreign air base in the world—Al-Udeid. Nor has Qatar consistently pursued a policy of unremitting, unambiguous hostility to Israel. In fact, Doha maintained a trade mission in Israel until the 2008 Operation Cast Lead, also aimed at stopping Hamas rocket attacks on Israel.

At least for now, Qatar’s clear support for a designated terrorist organization does not appear to be hampering its flourishing relations with the West. In recent days, at a time when Hamas was openly engaged in attempts to murder Israeli civilians, it was announced that Qatar had sealed an arms deal with the U.S. worth $11 billion. The deal includes the purchase of Apache attack helicopters, as well as Javelin and Patriot air defense systems. Indeed, last December, the U.S. signed a 10-year Defense Cooperation Agreement with the Emirate.

Ironically, Qatar’s relations with fellow Arab states have been far less cozy, even downright hostile. Qatar’s massive funding of terrorists and support of islamic radicals seeking to destabilize neighboring Arab governments, has sharpened tensions in the region, highlighting the three way divide in today’s Middle East – moderate and Western-oriented Sunni Arab states, like the Egypt, Jordan, UAE, Saudi, Bahrain, Kuwait and others; the Sunni extremists terrorist supporting states, Qatar and Turkey, who fund and promote forces like the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas; and the dangerous and radical axis of Iran, Assad, and Hezbollah. In recent weeks, the U.S. appeared to momentarily favor the Qataris—alongside the Hamas supporting government of Turkey —over Egypt in the diplomatic effort to end the Gaza conflict. On July 26, Secretary of State John Kerry met with the foreign ministers of Turkey and Qatar in Paris as part of his attempt to broker a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas. Egypt and Israel were furious—and so was the Palestinian Authority. PA officials blasted the U.S. for “appeasing” Qatar, and referred to the Paris meeting as a gathering of “friends of Hamas.”

This move, fronted by John Kerry, was especially ironic, given his personal record on the fundamental contradiction posed by Qatar and its support for terrorism. It was Kerry himself, speaking at the Brookings Institution in March 2009, shortly after the last defensive war Israel waged against Hamas, who warned that “Qatar cannot continue to be an American ally on Monday that sends money to Hamas on Tuesday.”

In one of the most telling responses to the disturbing shift on ceasefire terms, an unnamed PA official quoted by the respected Sharq al-Awsat newspaper said that Kerry was seeking to sabotage the Egyptian peace effort by offering his own plan “in order to restore the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in the region.”

The official explained the U.S. stance by suggesting that the Americans “wrongly believe that moderate political Islam, represented by the Muslim Brotherhood, would be able to combat radical Islam.” He further contended that PA President Mahmoud Abbas was furious with the attempt to hold “Palestinian blood” hostage to “regional rivalries.”

More substantively, the ceasefire proposal formulated by the U.S. and rejected by Israel on July 25 was seen by many observers, in Israel and beyond, as leaning toward the Qatari-Turkish ceasefire plan, and away from that proposed by Egypt, which Israel had already accepted.

The proposal did not refer to the need to dismantle the tunnel system built by Hamas or ensure the demilitarization of the Gaza Strip—both key war aims for Israel. Yet Kerry’s proposal did support a number of Hamas’ key demands, including the opening of border crossings and the need to pay the salaries of civil servants in Gaza.

So what is going on? Why has Qatar emerged as the key backer of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Hamas and its control of Gaza? What are the implications for Israel and the West of this stance? Why has the U.S. tolerated Qatar’s increasingly shift away from longstanding American interests and allies in favor of adversaries like Hamas and Tehran? And why is Qatar’s pro-Hamas position so far having no effect on its relations with the U.S. and the West in general, who regard Hamas as an unrepentant terrorist organization?

Qatar’s support for Hamas is part of a broader regional policy of building a strategic partnership with the Muslim Brotherhood movement, of which Hamas is an offshoot. Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the movement’s most famous and influential preacher, is a resident of the Qatari capital. His sermons, broadcast on Al-Jazeera from Qatar, replete with anti-Semitic hatred and loathing for Israel, are listened to by millions. Qatar supported the Muslim Brotherhood in its push for power in Egypt, and was a major financier of the Morsi government during its chaotic and disastrous year in power. Many Egyptian Brotherhood leaders have now found refuge in Qatar. The Emirate has also promoted militias supportive of Muslim Brotherhood-type ideology in the Syrian civil war, such as the Tawhid Brigade in Aleppo, and alongside Turkey, supported groups even more radical.

From 2011 to 2013, it looked like the alliance between Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood was about to emerge as a major Middle Eastern power bloc. In early 2013, the movement held power in Egypt and Tunisia. The Syrian rebels looked set for victory, having taken control of much of Aleppo and broken into the eastern suburbs of Damascus. Qatar’s enormous wealth, deriving from its extensive natural gas reserves, was financing all of this. And its influential Al-Jazeera channel was celebrating it.

In this period, Hamas drew closer to Qatar. Hamas found itself facing a dilemma when the Arab revolutions of 2011-12 took place, particularly as the attempted Syrian revolution became a bloody civil war. Since the early 1990s, Hamas, which emerged out of the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, had been a member of the so-called “resistance axis” led by Iran. This alliance included the Assad regime in Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and a number of other elements.

The growth of a new, Brotherhood-centered regional bloc represented both a dilemma and an opportunity for Hamas. On the one hand, the movement was thrilled by the bloc’s emergence, and particularly by the Brotherhood’s rise to power in Egypt. For Hamas, this represented a potential game-changer. It now expected to have an overtly sympathetic regime to the immediate south of Gaza.

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But the importance of the Brotherhood’s rise in Egypt was not merely geographical. With its ideological confreres in power in the most populous and traditionally most influential Arab country, Hamas could begin to seriously contemplate a future in which it would entirely eclipse its Fatah rivals and emerge as the dominant party among the Palestinians.

Due to its Iranian leadership, the “resistance bloc” had always been vulnerable to the charge that it represented a “foreign” non-Arab and non-Sunni interest. No such charge could be leveled against Qatar or a Muslim Brotherhood-led Egypt. Hamas was a natural fit for this emerging Sunni extremist Islamist bloc. But moving toward this bloc also meant that the movement would in effect be distancing itself from its mainly Shia allies in the “resistance” bloc. Because the two blocs were effectively at war in Syria, it seemingly eased the decision.

Hamas made its choice. Over the course of 2012, following Hamas’ condemnation of Assad’s shelling of Palestinians in Syria which precipitated a schism with Assad and strained their ties with his backers in Tehran, the movement’s leadership cadres departed the Syrian capital of Damascus. Doha and to a lesser extent Cairo became the new home of the Hamas leadership.

Ties with Iran were not entirely severed, however. Teheran remained a crucial source of arms to Hamas’ Gaza enclave. But Qatar and Turkey were set to emerge as Hamas’ main political and financial backers.

Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, the then-Emir of Qatar, visited Gaza in October 2012, cementing the new alliance. At the same time, Qatar pledged $400 million to Gaza. Because the alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood was undertaken in order to acquire regional diplomatic and strategic influence, and support for the Palestinians remains an important tool to generate legitimacy in the Sunni Arab world, sponsorship of Hamas formed an important part of this larger project.

But in recent months, a problem has emerged for both Hamas and Qatar: Things have not turned out as they had hoped. Their regional ambitions are largely in ruins. And their enemies have proved more resilient than they expected. General Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi’s military takeover of July 3, 2013 abruptly ended the Brotherhood’s rule in Egypt. In Tunisia, the Nahda party peacefully gave up power. The Syrian rebellion has run aground and is now in disarray—pushed back by both the Assad regime and the murderous Islamic State (IS) forces.

Today, the alliance of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and other moderates is the strongest force among the Sunni Arab states. Qatar has few regional allies left. Neither does Hamas. Indeed, over the last year, the movement has been trying to regain favor with the Iranians. So the war on Israel, supported by Qatar, was a desperate move by Hamas. Broke and presiding over a failed economy, unable to break through Egypt’s sealed border and restored power, the terrorist group and it’s allies sought escalation with Israel. It was a way for the Emirate and its Muslim Brotherhood partner to try and achieve a return to relevance and influence, and to end a period in which Qatar’s regional star appeared to be fading. Notably, of Hamas’ initial five demands to end the conflict, only one was of Israel, while four were of Egypt.

Qatar’s aid to Hamas is not military, but it is hugely important nonetheless. It doesn’t supply weapons to Hamas, and as a purchaser of U.S. weapons systems, it is not in a position to do so. Instead, Hamas acquires its weapons from Iran and Syria, or its own domestic production capacities.

Qatar’s support is financial, and very considerable indeed. Hamas has been in financial straits since 2012, when Iranian financial support declined. Then, after the Egyptian military coup of July 2013, the Sisi government in Cairo began to destroy the tunnel system which had served as a lucrative source of income for Hamas members. The movement controlled access to the tunnels and charged Gazans for using them. Hamas itself also used the tunnels to smuggle in weapons and funds.

The tunnels’ destruction thus left the movement increasingly strapped for cash. Qatar attempted to step in by transferring funds to Hamas in order to help pay the salaries of 40,000 civil servants in Gaza. (The transfer was blocked by the U.S., and so far no bank has been willing to risk sanctions to do so. Getting the money has been one of Hamas’ key demands for ending the recent conflict.)

Qatar also championed the cause of Hamas in Arab diplomatic forums. In recent days, for example, the Arab League backed the Egyptian ceasefire plan, which effectively called for a restoration of the status quo ante bellum. But Qatar formulated its own plan, together with non-Arab, pro-Brotherhood Turkey, which was far more favorable to Hamas’ demands.

As can be seen from the resulting diplomacy, Qatari support for Hamas has had the effect of “sanitizing” the movement, allowing it to present itself as a normal political actor, rather than a terrorist group committed to the destruction of Israel and the murder of Jews.

This is partly because Qatar is regarded in Western capitals as a legitimate regional actor. The fury now felt toward it by the main bloc of Sunni Arab states is not shared in Europe or the U.S. As a result, Qatar is able to insert Hamas’s demands into the negotiations for ending the current conflict between Hamas and Israel.

It is noteworthy, for example, that the controversial ceasefire proposal supported by Secretary Kerry specifically mentioned only three countries that might play a role in the implementation of the plan. According to the leaked wording of the proposal:

Members of the international community, including the United Nations, the Arab League, the European Union, the United States, Turkey, Qatar, and many others, support the effective implementation of the humanitarian ceasefire and agreements reached between the parties.

Qatar and Turkey, both supporters of Hamas, are thus placed alongside the U.S. as the key implementers of the proposed deal, while Egypt is nowhere to be found. Moreover, the deal itself, as noted above, privileges Hamas’ demands over Israel’s. Presumably the insertion of these demands is the result of successful diplomacy on the part of Hamas’s “interlocutor” with the international community, which faithfully communicated the minimum the Hamas feels willing to accept. That interlocutor is Qatar.

So while Qatar cannot match the “hard power” of the Shia resistance bloc in providing arms and weaponry to its clients, it possesses a diplomatic power and influence in the West of a very different kind. The current war between Israel and Hamas has demonstrated for the first time, perhaps, the pernicious role this influence can play. But it is in the nature of diplomatic power that it works by consent, rather than coercion. Qatar is able to play an outsized role because the West, and most importantly the United States, permits it to do so. Why is this the case?

First, it is vital to remember Qatar’s role as a provider of natural gas to Europe, and its investments in both Europe and the U.S. Qatar sits on 26 trillion cubic meters of natural gas—the world’s third largest reserve. It has a sovereign wealth fund of $85 billion. And European countries are currently seeking private investment as they emerge out of austerity into growth.

The Qataris have money to spend, and have already invested heavily. They own, for example, London’s tallest skyscraper, the Shard, and London’s most exclusive shop, Harrods. This is a friendship which the British and other Europeans naturally wish to preserve. If this means permitting Qatar to play the outsize role it seeks in Mideast diplomacy, there are few signs of objection from the Europeans. If it includes championing an organization the European Union considers a terrorist group, at least one aligned against Israel, this doesn’t seem to present too much of a problem either.

Among Western European countries, the notion that the appropriate response to terror groups is dialogue, or at least keeping the possibility of dialogue open, is prevalent. Thus the Qatari desire to promote Hamas is easy to accept.

But the Europeans are only peripheral players in Mideast diplomacy, despite their substantial economic relationship with the region.

The central actor is the United States. And the U.S. is far less dependent on Qatari money and natural gas. Yet it is this U.S. administration that has been most visible in welcoming and encouraging Qatar’s role as a mediator in the current conflict—as evidenced by Kerry’s high profile meeting with the Qatari and Turkish foreign ministers, the wording of his ceasefire proposal, and so on. What is the reason for this stance?

There are two, related explanations. First, as noted above, Sunni Arab regional politics are currently dominated by an alliance of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia with the Sisi government in Egypt. U.S. relations with Sisi are particularly bad, and there is a legacy of mistrust felt by Cairo, Riyadh, and their regional partners toward the current administration. In the Saudi case, this derives from what the Saudis regard as the failure of the Obama administration to adequately back its allies and contain Iranian regional and nuclear ambitions.

With regard to Sisi, the differences are perhaps deeper. The Egyptian military holds the administration responsible for toppling former President Mubarak and the rise to power of the Muslim Brotherhood — a rise to power the White House supported after helping engineer then demise of a longstanding ally. It is easy to see the continued mutual distaste and incomprehension between Sisi’s government and the Obama administration. Washington views Sisi as essentially grabbing power through a military coup and engaging in severe political repression of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Cairo sees Obama as inexplicably championing the forces of instability in Egypt against elements long allied with the U.S. who are interested in continuing that alliance. Given the strained relationship between Cairo and Washington, it becomes easier to understand U.S. acceptance, if not preference, for the Qataris as mediators.

Such a view only makes sense, of course, if Hamas is viewed not as an enemy to be vanquished or at least contained, but rather as a player whose desires and needs must be met on some level. This is the final part of the picture.

The U.S. administration in the 2011-12 period regarded the Muslim Brotherhood as a legitimate movement with a legitimate hold on power, despite its extremist and anti-Western ideology. Thus, the U.S. championed the Brotherhood’s right to stand in the presidential and parliamentary elections, and continued to relate to the Morsi Administration as a partner, in spite of Morsi’s openly antisemitic remarks and his demanding the release and return to Egypt of “The Blind Sheikh,” Omar Abd al-Rahman, convicted in the U.S. for his involvement in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing and effort to blow-up the Holland Tunnel, Lincoln Tunnel and George Washington Bridge, as well as assassinating a U.S. Senator.

American agreements to supply sophisticated weapons systems to the Morsi government were strictly fulfilled, despite the Muslim Brotherhood-dominated government’s clear lurch toward the construction of an Islamist regime, evidenced by, for example, Morsi’s awarding of broad, new, pharaoh-like powers to himself in November 2012, and by the passing of a new, repressive, Islamist-drafted constitution in December of that year. After 30 million Egyptians took to the streets objecting to the Islamic radicalism being imposed on the secular country, and the Egyptian military stepped in to reestablish calm by removing the Muslim Brotherhood from power, the White House called for Egypt “to move quickly and responsibly to return full authority back to a democratically elected civilian government as soon as possible.”

All of this took place in spite of the clear and available evidence regarding the nature of the Muslim Brotherhood regime and its ambitions. The Brotherhood seeks not to participate in democratic politics, but rather to re-construct the Islamic “caliphate.” Thus, a book published in 1995 by Muslim Brotherhood leader Mustafa Mashhur called Jihad is the Way openly notes this objective. Mashhur writes that Brotherhood founder Hassan al-Banna “felt the grave danger overshadowing the Muslims and the urgent need and obligation which Islam places on every Muslim, man and woman, to act in order to restore the Islamic Caliphate and to reestablish the Islamic state on strong foundations.” Mashhur’s foundational work contains a vision of jihad until all lands formerly under the control of Islam are returned to it.

Jihad for Allah…is not limited to the specific region of the Islamic countries, since the Muslim homeland is one and is not divided, and the banner of Jihad has already been raised in some of its parts, and shall continue to be raised, with the help of Allah, until every inch of the land of Islam will be liberated, and the State of Islam established.

These are not the messages of a movement committed to a pragmatic path of liberty and tolerance. They, and the Brotherhood’s track record in power in Egypt in the 2012-13 period, confirm its extremist nature. The Brotherhood has, for the most part, lost power and influence over the course of 2013 and 2014. This does not, however, mean that there has been a fundamental change in the way the movement is seen by the administration. In fact, it appears that in the mind of the Obama White House, this basic acceptance of the Muslim Brotherhood’s legitimacy, as well as the willful denial of its true nature, remains unchallenged. As a result, the U.S. administration appears keen to work alongside and in cooperation with the two main champions of the movement—Turkey and Qatar—in resolving the current Gaza conflict in a way that, at least partly, addresses Hamas’ wants and needs.

Qatar has emerged in recent years as the main diplomatic and financial backer of Hamas and its enclave in the Gaza Strip. The current conflict shows how this is reflected in regional diplomacy, as Qatar uses it to carve out a central role in the Mideast, to the dismay and anger of the rival Sunni bloc of Cairo and Riyadh.

Qatar’s regional strategy is based on support for and sponsorship of the Muslim Brotherhood, the destabilizing of its fellow Sunni Arab neighbors, and hedging its bets on American regional leadership with warmer ties with Tehran. Support for Hamas constitutes a part of this. The Muslim Brotherhood is an anti-Western, anti-Jewish movement, and Hamas is a designated terrorist organization.

Yet, for the present time at least, Qatar’s deep links to this movement, far from incurring penalties, are enabling it to reap rewards. This worrisome trend derives from a short-sighted Western attitude toward Hamas, and to a lesser extent toward the Muslim Brotherhood in general. Hamas is not favored, but neither is the extent of the movement’s commitment to its genocidal ideology—or the danger it represents—properly acknowledged, let alone accepted in various capitols.

In the U.S. case, strained relations with the government of Egypt, which fiercely opposes Hamas, are further contributing to the willingness, if not outright desire, to award a central diplomatic role to Qatar, in spite of its championing of violent anti-Western, anti-Israel, and anti-moderate-Arab forces across the region. This indulgence of terror sponsoring Qatar ought to end, and there are small signs that this complacency is ebbing, at least outside the confines of the White House and Foggy Bottom. U.S. legislators are circulating a letter questioning Qatar’s behavior, beginning to voice deep objections to their dangerous and unacceptable actions. Congressional leaders must continue to call out Qatar for its support for Hamas, and the administration for its apparent support for Qatar. In Europe, it is possible that Qatari financial investment and gas exports make adequate opposition to the Emirate hard to imagine. But neither of these constraints exist in the U.S., where the main reason for its stance toward Qatar and its terrorist allies is a naïve view of the region.