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Israel's Campaign against Qatar over Its Support for Gaza and a Ceasefire

Unit for Political Studies

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Unit for Political Studies

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Table of Contents

Qatar and Gaza: A Brief History of the Relationship	1
Qatar's Role Since 7 October 2023	3
Israel's Domestic Conflict and Qatar's role in Gaza	4
Conclusion	6



As Qatar positions itself as the main mediator in the negotiations towards a full prisoner exchange between Israel and Hamas, and pushes for an end to Israel's war on Gaza, Doha's role has been repeatedly misrepresented by some Israeli media outlets, and deployed in political disputes between rival Israeli political forces. It is also receiving growing attention from right-wing forces linked to the Israeli lobby in the United States.

There has been a particular focus on Qatar's support for Gaza's residents since Hamas seized power in June 2007, the fact it has hosted members of the movement's political leadership, and its status as the largest donor of aid to the Strip. All this is part of Israel's efforts to evade the consequences of its occupation policies, and as cover for its procrastination in reaching an exchange agreement.

Qatar and Gaza: A Brief History of the Relationship

Qatar's relationship with Gaza began to strengthen when Israel imposed a blockade on the Strip in response to Hamas' victory in the Palestinian legislative elections of 2006. While many countries began to withhold humanitarian aid they had once provided to more than two million Palestinians in the besieged territory, Qatar emerged (alongside Turkey, Malaysia, the United Nations, and a few other international organizations) as a major actor in the efforts to mitigate the blockade and damage caused by the occupation's failure to fulfil its duties towards the besieged civilian population. Qatar's role in providing humanitarian relief to the Gaza Strip became increasingly important with a series of Israeli wars on Gaza, in 2008-2009, 2012, 2014, 2019, and 2021, especially as concerned reconstruction efforts.¹

In the wake of the 2012 war, Qatar established a special body for this purpose, the Qatari Committee for the Reconstruction of the Gaza Strip. At the same time, it committed to paying the salaries of public sector employees and provided the Gaza Strip with the fuel needed to generate power. Every successive Israeli government since, including those of Netanyahu, Naftali Bennett, and Yair Lapid, agreed that Qatar take primary responsibility for supporting the people of Gaza, for political motives: preventing the humanitarian situation from getting out of hand and attempting to promote stability there, while seeking to evade responsibility for the daily lives of the besieged population.²

It was clear that somebody needed to provide relief to the population of Gaza and support reconstruction efforts following every single war Israel waged on the Strip. Between 2012 and 2021, Qatar allocated \$1.49 billion in aid to the Gaza Strip, including for food, medicine, electricity, and basic services, with monthly payments to 100,000 families in need, funding for teachers and doctors, and

¹ Banafsheh Keynoush, "Unfairly Maligned? The Cost of Mediation on Qatar-U.S. Relations," *Gulf International Forum*, accessed on 23/2/2025, at: <https://n9.cl/elmsy>.

² Qatar's Balancing Act in Middle East is Mediation Amid Crisis," *Voice of America*, 2/10/2024, accessed on 23/2/2025, at: <https://n9.cl/nvogd>.



helping to keep the Strip's infrastructure running.³ All of this was done in coordination with Israel, as the occupying power, along with the US and the UN.

Qatar has also played a political role, hosting the political leadership of Hamas after they left Syria in 2012, having taken a sympathetic position towards the Syrian revolution against the regime of former president Bashar al-Assad.⁴ This was done in coordination with Washington, especially as the administration of former US President Barack Obama wanted to maintain a channel of communication open with Hamas.⁵ This approach was reaffirmed by all successive administrations. The US request at the time was consistent with Western efforts to encourage the movement to adopt a "more moderate" approach to a political process with Israel.

Former British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, participated in these efforts, as the representative of the Quartet on the Middle East – an initiative by the US, the European Union, Russia, and the UN aimed at pushing forward Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts. He visited the Gaza Strip, met Hamas leaders, and called for the adoption of a Palestinian political program, based on a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders, as a final settlement to the conflict with Israel.

Blair acknowledged at the time that Hamas is a Palestinian movement seeking to achieve Palestinian goals and is not part of an international Islamist movement. After Gaza, he visited Doha, where he met with then-head of the movement's political bureau, Khaled Mashal, and held other meetings on the same issues.⁶ On 1 May 2017, Hamas launched its new political program from Doha, in which it affirmed its identity as a Palestinian national movement, and announced for the first time that it could accept a two-state solution.

Qatar has come to play an influential role in everything related to the Gaza blockade and Palestinian reconciliation, notably also supporting the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah. In 2012, the Doha Agreement was signed, which provided for the formation of a national unity government, but this was never implemented.⁷ In 2016, Qatar brought together representatives of Fatah and Hamas in a new attempt at reconciliation, but this effort also failed to produce a workable agreement.⁸ In 2020, it hosted informal rounds of negotiations to find common ground over holding Palestinian elections, but progress on this issue was also limited.⁹

3 Ibid.

4 Qatar first gave refuge and housing to Hamas leaders when they were ejected from Jordan in 1999. See: "The Palestinian Cause at the Heart of the Campaign against Qatar," *AlJazeera.net*, 5/6/2017, accessed 23/2/2025 (in Arabic), <https://n9.cl/23233>.

5 Emma Graham-Harrison, "Western Leaders Look to Qatar to Get Their Citizens Home," *The Guardian*, 21/10/2023, accessed on 23/2/2025, at: <https://n9.cl/z0vbs>.

6 "Abu Marzouk: Blair Set Five Conditions for Improving Living Conditions and Rebuilding Gaza," *Ruya*, 17/2/2015, accessed 23/2/2024 (in Arabic), at: <https://n9.cl/vzqva>.

7 "The Doha Declaration on Palestinian Reconciliation," *AlJazeera.net*, 6/2/2012, accessed 23/2/2025 (in Arabic), at: <https://n9.cl/ay9cg>.

8 "Hamas: Doha Meetings are on Implementing the Reconciliation Agreement, not Exploring New Ideas," *Al-Sharq*, 7/2/2016, accessed 23/2/2025 (in Arabic), at: <https://n9.cl/qs1jk>.

9 "At meeting in Doha, Fatah Affirms Determination to Achieve National Reconciliation with Hamas," *AlJazeera.net*, 9/26/2020, viewed on 2/23/2025 (in Arabic), at: <https://n9.cl/owern>.

Qatar has also played an important role in mediating ends to repeated Israeli attacks on the Gaza Strip, including bringing an end to the war of 2014. In August 2020, Qatar led mediation efforts between Hamas and Israel to de-escalate the situation following the protests near the demarcation fence with Israel. In May 2021, Qatar worked with Egypt, Jordan, and the UN to bring about another ceasefire between Hamas and Israel.¹⁰

Qatar's Role Since 7 October 2023

By 7 October 2023, it had become clear that aid to the Gaza Strip had not changed Hamas' vision of its own role vis-à-vis Israel's siege of Gaza, the occupation more generally, the Israeli settlement project and the Judaization of Jerusalem – and the aid couldn't change the position of the organization towards these issue and had never aimed to do so. It also become clear that Israel's calculations in this regard had been mistaken. In the context of the domestic political conflict, a media and diplomatic campaign was launched in Israel against Qatar. Claims have been made that some of the aid Qatar provided to Gaza's residents was used in the building of the Hamas's tunnel network.¹¹ The truth is that the financial support allocated to pay salaries and support families in need of aid passed through Israel, including the names' lists of aid recipients, which barely sufficed to meet the basic needs of Gaza families. Hamas itself didn't seek Israeli permission in order to gain access to aid from political sympathizers, states, organizations and individuals.

Nonetheless, Qatar moved quickly to contain Israel's genocidal war against Gaza, leveraging its relations with Hamas to push for an agreement that would see the release of female Israeli civilians the group was holding, as well as others of various foreign nationalities, including Americans. This mediation had the full support of the Biden administration.¹² Qatar identified three main goals in its political efforts on Gaza: preventing the conflict from expanding, delivering aid to the civilians, and releasing the detainees.¹³ These goals won public support from Washington. To this end, Doha hosted regular talks attended by Mossad chief David Barnea, and CIA director William Burns. Barnea visited Doha several times from November 2023 onwards, to discuss securing the release of detainees held by Hamas. Subsequent meetings took place in Europe and elsewhere with the participation of Qatar, Israel, and the US.¹⁴

¹⁰ "In Phone Call, Emir of Qatar and King of Jordan Call for Ceasefire and Protection of Al-Aqsa," *Alljazeera.net*, 5/20/2021, accessed 23/2/2025 (in Arabic), at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQmt>.

¹¹ "Qatar's Balancing Act."

¹² "Qatar Expresses Concern over Developments in Gaza Strip, Calls for De-Escalation and Calm," Media Center, Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 7/10/2024, accessed 2/23/2025 (in Arabic) at: <https://n9.cl/0w6q2>.

¹³ "Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Stresses Qatar's Keeness to De-Escalate in Gaza and Spare the Region Further Violence," Media Center, Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 13/10/2024, accessed 23/2/2025 (in Arabic) at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQXe>.

¹⁴ "CIA, Mossad Chiefs Meet in Qatar as Israel-Hamas Truce is Extended," *Al Jazeera*, 28/11/2023, accessed on 23/2/2025, at: <https://n9.cl/fc2cvm>; Isabel Debre, "Qatar is the Go-to Mediator in the Mideast War. Its Unprecedented Tel Aviv Trip Saved a Shaky Truce," *Associated Press*, 28/11/2023, accessed on 23/2/2025, at: <https://n9.cl/7a5w7>; "Mossad and Qatar Officials Meet as Israel Bombards Gaza," *Voice of America*, 16/12/2023, accessed on 23/2/2025, at: <https://n9.cl/jwo1y>.

On 22 November 2023, mediation efforts – in which Qatar played a central role – resulted in a temporary truce, under which about 100 detainees held by Hamas and other Palestinian factions were released in exchange for 240 Palestinians held by Israel, along with a four-day ceasefire, which Qatari mediators succeeded in extending for a further three days.¹⁵

Over the subsequent 15 months, Qatar led intensive diplomatic efforts to mediate an end to the war in the Gaza Strip and the release of the remaining detainees. On 15 January 2025, the Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that a ceasefire and prisoner exchange agreement had been reached between Israel and Hamas, which was scheduled to go into effect on Sunday, 19 January. The agreement included an exchange of detainees between the two parties, and aimed to bring in a period of sustainable calm that could pave the way for a permanent ceasefire in Gaza. The first phase of the agreement stipulated that the ceasefire would continue as long as negotiations were underway over the implementation of the second phase, with the guarantors (Qatar, Egypt, and the US) pledging to continue efforts to reach an agreement.¹⁶

Israel's Domestic Conflict and Qatar's role in Gaza

Qatar's role as a mediator between Hamas and Israel over the Gaza war has made it the target of a systematic Israeli smear campaign with the purpose of blackmailing it into pressuring Hamas to release the detainees in a manner consistent with Netanyahu's policies, in addition to dragging its name into domestic Israeli political disputes. Over the past decade, Qatar has repeatedly adopted positions aimed at holding Israel responsible for the consequences of its policies, and has consistently sought a just solution to the Palestinian issue. This has prompted Israel to take an increasingly tough line towards it, which has escalated to the point of direct incitement against Qatar.¹⁷

The Israeli opposition sought to undermine Netanyahu's position by holding him responsible for the fact Hamas had continued to cling on throughout the blockade, as he had allowed Qatar to provide aid to Gaza.. Netanyahu, for his part, sought to avoid having to defend his strategy of prioritizing the Gaza war over freeing Israeli captives, by criticising Qatar, which he claimed was capable of forcing Hamas – a movement whose leaders have not hesitated to risk death in defence of their beliefs – to act against its interests.

For example, in January 2024, seeking to cover up his failure to reach a prisoner exchange deal, Netanyahu lashed out at Qatar for its role as a mediator. During a meeting with the families of Israeli captives held in Gaza, he accused Qatar of taking up a "problematic" role, claiming that Qatar could pressure Hamas to release the Israeli captives, but was not doing so. He voiced disappointment that

¹⁵ "The Humanitarian Pause in Gaza, 2023: Its Terms and Details," *Aljazeera.net*, 1/12/2023, accessed 23/2/2025 (in Arabic), at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQFO>.

¹⁶ "Qatar, Egypt and the United States Announce the Two Sides in Gaza Have Reached a Deal to Exchange Hostages and Prisoners and Return to a Sustainable Calm," Media Center, Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 15/1/2025, accessed 23/2/2025, at: <https://n9.ci/iusck>.

¹⁷ "Why is Israel leading an anti-Qatar propaganda campaign?" Situation Assessment, *Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies*, 15/1/2025, accessed 23/2/2025, at: https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/PoliticalStudies/Pages/Why_is_Israel_leading_an_anti-Qatar_propaganda_campaign.aspx.

the US had not exerted more pressure on Doha, which hosts Hamas leaders and supports them financially, a false claim.¹⁸

Some of Israel's friends in the US joined this campaign, calling on Qatar to intensify its pressure on Hamas to reach an agreement to release the detainees. In a statement published on 15 April 2024, US Congressman Steny Hoyer called on the US government to "reassess its relations with Qatar" unless Doha's pressure on Hamas achieved a breakthrough in the negotiations that were underway.¹⁹

On 16 October 2023, a group of 113 US lawmakers from both the Republican and Democratic parties sent a letter to President Biden, calling on him to put pressure on countries that "support Hamas," including Qatar. They also urged Doha to expel the Hamas leadership.²⁰ This chimed with a series of baseless allegations emanating from Israel, including statements by Israel's extremist Finance Minister, Bezalel Smotrich, who claimed that Qatar was "the main sponsor" of Hamas, and that the West's position towards Qatar was hypocritical.²¹ Israeli former Foreign Minister Eli Cohen also accused Qatar of supporting Hamas and harbouring its leaders, adding that Qatar "could achieve the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages held by the terrorists."²²

Moreover, the opposition accused Netanyahu of encouraging Qatar to provide aid to the Gaza Strip, and thus finance Hamas. However, the reality is that Qatar coordinated its financial aid to the Strip²³ with all Israeli governments since 2009; the funds were always transferred across Palestinian land borders and Israeli airports and into Gaza, guarded by Israeli security forces. While Qatar provided aid to Gaza for humanitarian reasons or in solidarity with a besieged people, the Netanyahu, Bennett, and Lapid governments facilitated and encouraged the delivery of this aid in the belief that it would maintain calm in Gaza and push Hamas to focus on governance, rather than resistance. This has been widely discussed in the Israeli media, becoming known as part of the strategy of "buying quiet" adopted by Israel's political, military and security leadership. All this is based primarily on the assessment that Hamas is more interested in ruling than in resisting occupation.²⁴

This policy has been clearly demonstrated to be misguided. In fact, certain terminology such as "buying quiet" acts as a kind of pretext. A state cannot simply besiege an entire people for years, refrain from providing them with the basic needs to survive, and also prevent others from doing so.

18 "It Funds Hamas and Shelters its Leaders': In a Leaked Recording, Netanyahu Calls Qatar a Problematic Mediator," *Euronews*, 24/1/2024, accessed 23/2/2025, at: <https://n9.cl/fucmb>.

19 "The Paths of Hamas' Political Presence in Qatar," *Strategiecs*, 29/4/2024, accessed 23/2/2025 (in Arabic), at: <https://n9.cl/56llqa>.

20 "Qatar Open to Reconsidering Hamas Presence in Qatar, US Official Says," *Reuters*, 27/10/2023, accessed on 23/2/2025, at: <https://n9.cl/eui1v>.

21 "In Response to Al-Ansari, Smotrich Attacks Qatar," *Al-Jazeera.net*, 25/1/2024, accessed 23/2/2025 (in Arabic), at: <https://n9.cl/y4beq>.

22 Yoel Guzansky, "Qatar's Balancing Act in Gaza Doha Will Have to Cut Ties With Hamas—but First It Can Broker a Hostage Deal With Israel," *Foreign Affairs*, 5/1/2024, accessed on 23/2/2025, at: <https://n9.cl/ml8px>.

23 Qatar has provided regular, public financial support to the Gaza Strip on a monthly basis. For several years, it has provided \$30 million per month to support impoverished Gazans, pay the salaries of civil servants, finance some of the fuel needed to run Gaza's power plants, and to fund the reconstruction of Gaza after several rounds of destruction by Israel, bringing Qatar's support to the Gaza Strip to several billion dollars. See: "Qatar Plans to Resume Gaza Funding with New Mechanism," *Al Jazeera*, 6/9/2021, accessed on 23/2/2025, at: <https://n9.cl/dlgqq>.

24 Mark Mazzetti & Ronen Bergman, "'Buying Quiet': Inside the Israeli Plan That Propped Up Hamas," *The New York Times*, 10/12/2023, accessed on 23/2/2025, at: <https://n9.cl/ckpyd>.



Moreover, the provision of enough aid to keep them alive cannot be expected to push the Palestinian people to accept the siege of Gaza, occupation of Palestinian lands including east Jerusalem.. These are miscalculations and misinterpretations of the role of aid, for which Israel bears responsibility.

If a people are ruled by a political movement, then any support for the people can be seen as contributing to the survival of the ruling movement. This applies to the work of any international charity in the Gaza Strip, and to the entry of fuel from Israel into the Gaza Strip, and of goods through Israel. In this context, Israel has not only besieged the Strip and failed to meet its obligations as an occupying state but has also sought to benefit economically by selling its goods there.

Conclusion

Qatar is facing a systematic smear campaign by political forces in Israel, who claim that it was funding Hamas and has not used its influence enough to pressure the movement to release the Israelis it is holding. Yet Qatar has never funded Hamas and it expended every possible effort to reach a deal to free the Israeli hostages while Netanyahu instead depended on military means that killed several Israeli hostages; Qatari aid, despite helping Palestinians to remain on their land and blocking Israeli plans to displace them, is treated by Israel as an necessity, because it is Israel that is imposing the blockade and failing to fulfil its obligations towards the besieged population. It justified allowing aid deliveries before 7 October, in coordination with those who provide it, by claiming that this is preventing the besieged territory from exploding in its face, as well as perpetuating Palestinian division between West Bank and Gaza.

However, Israel's continued blockade of Gaza and its expansionist policies in the West Bank have undermined its calculations regarding the Strip. Qatari aid has nothing to do with that. The Netanyahu government is now trying to evade responsibility for its policies that have marginalized the hostage issue for 15 months, in order to perpetuate the war, by inciting against Qatar – an actor that has played an indispensable role in efforts to stop the war and reach an exchange deal.