America must change its policy on Qatar

written by Asher Fredman | 03.11.2023

The State of Qatar hosts both the headquarters of U.S. Central Command and the political office of a terrorist organization whose brutality "brings to mind the worst rampages of ISIS," in the words of President Joe Biden.

In light of Hamas's October 7 massacre of 1,400 Israelis, including numerous American citizens, the United States should change its approach and policy towards Qatar. If Qatar is unable or unwilling to bring about the rapid release of the over 200 children, women and men being held hostage by Hamas; expel Hamas leaders; and end its support for the terrorist organization, it should lose its standing as a major American ally.

Qatar has been a prime sponsor of Hamas, a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization, since at least 2012, hosting its senior leaders and offices in its capital, Doha. It is estimated that Qatar supplies Hamas with between $120 million and $480 million annually. Of the estimated $1.5 billion transferred by Qatar to the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip over the past decade, the significant majority — by some estimates, nearly 80 percent — ended up in the bank accounts of Hamas and the group's operatives and employees. On October 18, the U.S. Treasury imposed sanctions on a Qatar-based Hamas operative involved "in the transfer of tens of millions of dollars to Hamas, including Hamas's military wing."

Qatar also gives substantial support to Hamas through its Al Jazeera television network, which provides a central platform for Hamas leaders and incitement against Israel. True to form, while Hamas's rampage against Israeli civilians was ongoing, the Qatari Foreign Ministry issued a statement saying that Israel alone was responsible for the violence.

While hosting and funding Hamas, Qatar has been drawing closer to the United States and European powers. Qatar hosts the largest American military presence in the Middle East at Al Udeid Air Base southwest of Doha. Qatar's trade with the U.S. and its European allies continues to grow. For example, at the end of Q1 2023, the UK reported that trade with Qatar had grown 117 percent year-over-

year. In January 2022, President Biden announced that Qatar would be designated a "major non-NATO ally."

Qatar has also been drawing increasing criticism not only for its support for terror and Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated groups, but also for its dismal human rights record. In November 2022, the European Parliament passed a resolution deploring the deaths of thousands of migrant workers in Qatar due to unsafe working conditions. The resolution also criticized "the abuse perpetrated by the country's authorities on the LGBTQ+ community."

For years, Israel allowed Qatar to provide economic support to civilian sectors in Gaza out of a desire to meet the humanitarian needs of the population and enable basic economic development. Hamas cynically took advantage of the civilian population and this humanitarian approach for its own ends.

Since the attack, Qatar has been working to position itself as a positive force in the hostage negotiations. In practice, it appears that Qatar is working with Hamas to delay or narrow Israel's offensive against the terrorist group through the release of a slow and sporadic trickle of hostages (to date, four out of 230). Qatar's overall goal remains ensuring that Hamas retains control over Gaza following the Israeli operation.

America, Europe and Israel cannot continue to treat a sponsor of a terrorist organization as an ally or positive partner. The U.S. should put all necessary pressure on Qatar in order to ensure that it uses its leverage with Hamas to bring about the immediate release of the hostages. As a first step, Qatar should demand that the Red Cross be allowed to immediately visit and provide medical treatment to all of the hostages.

This pressure on Qatar should include potentially downgrading or cancelling economic, diplomatic and military ties and agreements, and sanctioning all Qatari entities involved in providing support to Hamas. If Qatar fails to act decisively to free the hostages, expel Hamas leaders and cut off support for Hamas, the U.S. should consider replacing Qatar's designation as a major non-NATO ally with a designation as a state-sponsor of terrorism.

The U.S. should also explore relocating military installations from Qatar to other Middle East locations, such as the UAE or Saudi Arabia. While current ties may make the UAE a more viable option, relocating bases to Saudi Arabia would help

provide the security guarantees Saudi Arabia seeks, and could serve to counter inroads being made by China.

Israel should not allow Qatar to have any role in post-war Gaza, unless it demonstrably ends its support for terror, expels Hamas leaders and ends Al Jazeera's venomous incitement.

Of course, Qatar is not the only country that supports Hamas. Similar steps should be taken against all nations that have provided financial or logistical support to Hamas, including Turkey, Algeria, Malaysia and Iran. The U.S. can no longer look away when supposed allies support a terrorist organization that proudly murders, burns, decapitates and kidnaps innocent civilians.

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