The International Community Must Change its Approach to Qatar

written by Asher Fredman | 28.10.2023

On December 26, US President Biden and Qatari Emir Al Thani held yet another call to discuss the situation in Gaza. Unsurprisingly, while the American readout of the call emphasized efforts to bring about the release of the hostages held by Hamas, Qatar's statement highlighted "joint mediation efforts to calm the situation and reach a permanent ceasefire." This discrepancy reflects the fact that while Qatar is investing extensive resources to cultivate a positive image in the West, its primary goal in the current conflict remains ensuring the survival of Hamas.

Qatar's strategy in the Israel-Hamas conflict stems from its desire to play a double game. On the one hand, Qatar is a prime sponsor of Hamas, a designated terrorist organization whose brutality, in the words of President Biden, "brings to mind the worst rampages of ISIS."

Qatar's financial, logistical and communications support for Hamas is not a new phenomenon. Qatar has hosted Hamas leaders and offices since at least 2012. Of the estimated $1.5 billion transferred by Qatar to the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip over the past decade, the majority ended up in the bank accounts of Hamas, its operatives and employees. While a significant percentage of these funds were transferred in coordination with Israel, Qatar also facilitated the transfer of funds directly to Hamas' terrorist arm. For example, on October 18, 2023, the US 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 provides Hamas with critical public relations, communications and even operational support via its Al Jazeera network. Al Jazeera provides a key platform for Hamas propaganda and incitement, while also broadcasting Israeli troop positions and movements. Qatar's approach towards Hamas was demonstrated clearly when, on October 7, while the terrorist organization's massacre was ongoing, the Qatari Foreign Ministry issued a statement saying that

Israel alone was responsible for the violence.

At the same time, Qatar has invested tremendous resources in expanding its ties, cultivating its image, and deepening its influence in Western countries.

Less than twenty miles from where Hamas leaders lounge in the hotels of Doha, the US has its most important military base in the Middle East at Al Udeid, which hosts the regional headquarters of US CENTCOM. In January 2022, President Biden designated Qatar as a 'Major Non-NATO Ally'.

Qatar's economic ties with Western powers are expanding, particularly as Europe looks for alternatives to Russian gas. Together with strengthening its military and economic ties, Qatar has been investing heavily in deepening its influence on Western discourse and policies towards the Middle East. Qatar's huge profits from liquid natural gas sales, together with its small population of approximately 300,000 citizens, enables the emirate to channel extensive funds to Western universities, think-tanks, civil society organizations, sports entities, businesses and investment vehicles.

Qatar's efforts to cultivate and protect its image in the West have at times created issues for the country. Qatar is currently embroiled in a series of scandals in the EU, dubbed 'Qatar-gate', stemming from accusations that it bribed or attempted to bribe European officials in order to improve its public image.

It should be noted that Qatar has drawn criticism not only for its support for Hamas and other 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 criticizes, "the abuse perpetrated by the country's authorities on the LGBTQ+ community."

In light of Hamas' October 7 rampage of murder, rape and kidnapping, and the war which has followed, it has become clear that Western countries can no longer allow Qatar to play this double game. Israel must also change its approach to Qatar, and cease to view Qatar as a stabilizing force in Gaza.

The US and Western allies should put all necessary pressure on Qatar in order to ensure that Qatar employs all of its leverage on 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 or facilitating support to Hamas

The US should also explore relocating military installations from Qatar to other Middle East locations, such as the UAE or Saudi Arabia. US legislation could be amended to make it easier for victims of Hamas terror to file lawsuits against complicit Qatari entities. Private sector actors, universities, policy centers, civil society bodies and politicians should refuse to take part in events organized or funded by Qatar, at least until the hostages have been freed and Qatar ends its support for Hamas. A similar approach should be taken *vis a vis* all nations that have provided financial or logistical support to Hamas, including Turkey, Algeria and Malaysia.

Israel should oppose Qatari involvement in post-war Gaza, unless and until Qatar cuts off support for Hamas, expels Hamas leaders and ends Al-Jazeera's incitement. Qatar must be forced to choose what it wants to be – a Western ally and constructive partner in the region, or a state sponsor of terror.

Published in The Jerusalem Press Club, December 28, 2023.