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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Dorsey, J. M. (2018). The Long Shadow of the Gulf Crisis. *IndraStra Global*, 1-4. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-60123-5>

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The Long Shadow of the Gulf Crisis

indrastra.com/2018/09/The-Long-Shadow-of-Gulf-Crisis-004-08-2018-0002.html

September 3, 2018

Qatar emerges as "Key Player" in "Gaza Crisis"

By Dr. James M. Dorsey



Image Attribute: Palestinians walk inside Qatari-funded construction project 'Hamad City', in the southern Gaza Strip June 7, 2017. REUTERS/Ibraheem Abu Mustafa

Dug in for the long haul in its increasingly bitter dispute with the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, Qatar is emerging as a key player in efforts to prevent tension between Israel and Hamas, the Islamist group that controls Gaza, from spinning out of control.

Qatar's increasing role counters Saudi and UAE efforts to shape Palestinian politics in their mold. It further underlines the two Gulf states' 15-month old failed effort to force Qatar to bow to their will by imposing a diplomatic and economic boycott.

The Qatari role takes on added significance in the wake of the **Trump administration's cancellation of all funding of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA)**

and **a US-Israeli effort to terminate the UN body's mandate** and rejigger the definition of a Palestinian refugee in a bid to restrict Palestinian rights.

The Qatari role is also likely to be a litmus test of the willingness of Gulf states to support US-Israeli policy with the Trump administration asserting that Qatar, Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern and European states would only be allowed to fund UNWRA for the time being.

Israeli media reports said the Trump administration was insisting that **fundors ultimately would have to align themselves with the US goal** of closing down the agency and redefining who is a Palestinian refugee.

The redefinition would exclude the descendants of Palestinians originally displaced in 1948 and reduce the number of recognized refugees from five million to an estimated 500,000. It would undercut long-standing Palestinian insistence on the right of return of the 1948 refugees and their descendants – a demand viewed by Israel as an assault on its existence as a Jewish state and an undermining of its claim to the right of the land.

It remains unclear whether any of the multiple countries stepping in to compensate for the US shortfall are willing to accept US conditions.

But in a possible indication of a shifting playing field, Palestine Authority President Mahmoud Abbas appeared to move away from his insistence on the establishment of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel by saying that he would entertain a **US suggestion for a confederation of Israel, Palestine, and Jordan**.

Mr. Abbas said he had said as much when asked by US Middle East peace negotiators Jared Kushner, a senior advisor to President Donald J. Trump and his son-in-law, and Jason Greenblatt whether he would be interested in a confederation.

Mr. Abbas did not say when the exchange took place. The Palestinian leader **broke off all contact with the Trump administration** after Trump last December recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

Israeli forces have since killed at least 166 Palestinians and wounded 18,000 others who participated in recent months in regular protests along the Gaza Israel border in demand of their right to return.

Israel and Hamas agreed in July to a ceasefire, mediated by Qatar, Egypt and the United Nations, to prevent Hamas rocket attacks and protesters flying kites with incendiary devices into Israel to which Israel responded with air strikes from spiraling out of control.

To make the ceasefire sustainable, economic support for Gaza where growth has been severely stunted as a result of a more than a decade-long Israeli-Egyptian blockade and now further aggravated by the US-Israeli assault on UNRWA is crucial.

Israeli media reported that Israeli defense minister Avigdor Lieberman met in recent months in Cyprus separately **with Qatari foreign minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani** and **Qatar's ambassador to the Palestinian territories Mohammed al-Emadi** to

discuss economic support for Gaza. Qatar, beyond financial muscle, has the longest-standing relations among the mediators with Hamas.

Qatar has also been negotiating the **return by Hamas of two Israeli nationals held captive as well as the remains of two Israeli soldiers** killed in 2014 in Gaza.

Speaking in a series of interviews, Al-Emadi suggested that Qatari funding would depend on Israel and Hamas agreeing on a sustainable ceasefire. *“It is **very difficult to fund the reconstruction of Gaza in an event of yet another destructive war.**”* Al-Emadi said. He said he had *“discussed a maximum of five- to 10-year cease-fire with Hamas.”*

Lieberman’s discussions ironically constitute recognition of the utility of Qatar’s long-standing relations with Islamists and militants that the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Bahrain cited as the reason for their diplomatic and economic boycott.

With exception of recent pledges to support UNRWA, countries like Turkey, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia have focused on gaining political influence in Palestine rather than on economic development.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE have concentrated on the purchase in Jerusalem of real estate adjacent to the Temple Mount or Haram al-Sharif, Islam’s third most holy site, according to **Kamal Khatib, an Israeli Palestinian Islamist leader**, as well as **Arab media reports**.

For its part, Turkey has sent thousands of supporters of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s *Justice and Democracy Party (AKP)* to visit the city. Turkish activists allegedly participated in last year’s protests on Haram al-Sharif.

Saudi Arabia’s position, moreover, on the US-Israeli effort to undermine UNRWA and redefine the Palestinian issue is muddled by apparent differences between King Salman and his son, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who has been vocal in his support for Trump and **empathy with Israeli positions**.

Laying down the law, King Salman King Salman denounced the *“invalidity and illegality”* of the US decision to recognize Jerusalem. He told an Arab summit in Dhahran in April that he was **donating \$150 million to support Islam’s holy places** in Jerusalem.

King Salman’s moves ironically brought the kingdom closer to the outright condemnation by Qatar, Turkey and other Muslim nations of Mr. Trump’s decision to recognize Jerusalem. This, however, has more to do with King Salman’s own views as well as domestic politics in the kingdom. It does little, if anything, to prevent the Gulf crisis from muddying efforts to resolve the Gaza crisis.

“A bumpy road seems to be lying ahead of Qatar...as it faces strong internal and external obstacles that impede its management of the Palestinian dossier and stops it from communicating with the rest of the regional and international parties so long as its opponents keep their veto on its movements,” said **Gaza-based Palestinian historian Adnan Abu Amer**.

About the Author

Dr. James M. Dorsey is a senior fellow at the **S. Rajaratnam School of International**

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