



Israel and Qatar: Relations Nurtured by the Palestinian Issue

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Dr. Michal Yaari

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This article focuses on relations between Israel and Qatar, analyzing them in historical context, in the context of Qatari foreign policy and in terms of their potential and the limitations imposed by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The article describes the shift from a mutual conception of hostility to unusual cooperation over the Gaza crisis. While Israel aspires to avoid additional rounds of violence with Gaza, Qatar seeks to strengthen its regional role as a mediator, and mutual interests converge into joint activity to avert an additional military clash between Hamas and Israel. The cooperation between the states illustrates how the Palestinian issue can leverage regional cooperation. At the same time, the untapped diplomatic, economic and civilian potential of Israel-Qatar relations points to the limitations imposed by the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

A. Introduction

In October 2018, a senior Qatari official was asked in his office in Doha about his country's enhanced relations with Jerusalem. "We have excellent relations with Israel, mainly because of Gaza," he said. "Egypt is your neighbor. It is a big country and very important for you, but you rely on us more than on the Egyptians."¹ About a month later, in November 2018, Hamas and other Palestinian factions fired some 300 rockets at communities in Israel's south, bringing Israel and Gaza to the brink of fighting. Qatari mediation defused the tensions, as expressed, inter alia, in Israeli willingness to let Qatar pay the salaries of public servants in Gaza. It was the third transfer of substantial Qatari funding within a short period for rebuilding the Strip, providing humanitarian relief and paying Palestinian employees.²

According to data presented to Israel's security cabinet, from 2012 to 2018, Qatar donated over 1.1 billion USD to Gaza – with the Israeli government's permission. In May 2019, 700 rockets were fired from Gaza at Israel, killing four people. Israeli patience appeared at an end and a military clash inevitable, although neither side wanted it. Qatar and Egypt led the mediation with the UN's help, achieving a deal between the sides, mostly due to a Qatari pledge of 480 USD million in aid to the Palestinian Authority (PA) for the Palestinian people.

The extensive cooperation between Doha and Jerusalem is not to be taken lightly. Qatar became the only Gulf State to allow the opening of an Israeli trade office following the Oslo Accords. However, Israeli diplomats who served in Doha at the time reported that their

* Dr. Michal Yaari is an expert on the Gulf states at Haifa University and the Open University. This article was written as part of a Mitvim Institute project on "Israel's relations with Arab Countries: The Unfulfilled Potential".

¹ Author's interview with senior Qatari official, Doha, October 2018.

² The Qatari money was initially transferred in three installments in November, December 2018 and January 2019. Qatar continued to provide funding for Gaza in the ensuing months for salaries, humanitarian relief for families and infrastructure development.

discourse with senior Qatari officials ranged from limited to non-existent. In fact, relations were largely symbolic, devoid of concrete content. From Israel's perspective, it was an important achievement, although judging by the result, the extent of the relationship remained essentially unaltered. Qatar was careful not to cross the lines of the discourse in the Arab world on Israel and the Palestinian issue, and continued to adhere to an ideology diametrically opposed to Israeli interests.

This changed overnight following Operation Protective Edge in 2014. Doha and Jerusalem both understood that dramatic measures were required to rebuild the Strip, as an essential deterrent to another round of Israel-Hamas fighting. The shift in relations stemmed primarily from a mutual interest in preventing further escalation. Since then, an unprecedented discourse has been taking place between the countries, despite the absence of any official Israeli representation there. The 2018 remark by the senior Qatari regarding the trust between himself and Israeli decision makers faithfully reflects the improved relations, at least as far as the Palestinian issue goes. With Qatar isolated by its Gulf neighbors, and the Arab world largely rejecting normalization with Israel until the Palestinian problem is resolved, Qatari willingness to discuss its ties with Israel openly is not par for the course.

This article outlines the transformation in Israel-Qatar relations and discusses the shift from a conception of mutual hostility to unusual cooperation. It argues that the mutual interest in averting an Israel-Hamas clash lies at the heart of the dramatic change. Israel is not interested in another round of fighting in Gaza, whereas Qatar is using the conflict there to advance national goals: strengthening its regional standing as a mediator and scoring points with the US administration for its contribution to dousing the flames and rehabilitating Gaza. The article reviews the history of the ties, the upheavals they underwent over the years and the limitations under which they exist in the wake of the formative events that shaped them (such as wars and military operations). It also discusses the unfulfilled potential of Israel-Qatar relations. The article is based on media and academic sources, as well as many conversations with top Israeli defense and other government officials involved directly or indirectly in Israel-Qatar relations.

B. Qatar's foreign policy

Qatar is a small state in terms of size and population, flanked by two rival powers – Iran and Saudi Arabia. Its unique geographic location places it in a challenging neighborhood and forces it to maneuver among various forces to ensure its survival. Nonetheless, the Qatari regime enjoys stability and relatively broad freedom in foreign policy, thanks to its quite homogenous population in terms of ethnicity and religion (most citizens are Sunni Muslims).

Under the rule of the Emir Khalifa Bin-Hamad Al-Thani (1972-1995), Qatar was a marginal player in regional politics and enjoyed the patronage of its Saudi neighbor to compensate for its clear military disadvantage, certainly compared with regional powers. This policy changed immediately with the unseating of the Emir by his son, Hamad Bin-Khalifa Al-Thani. Border disputes between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, which began in 1992 and reached their peak in 1995, led to a rift within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Unlike his father, the new ruler wanted to distinguish Qatar from Saudi Arabia by expanding and deepening its position and influence in the region. He launched a foreign policy characterized by flexibility, pragmatism and independence, and which is less dependent on Saudi Arabia. Instead of sheltering under the Saudi defense umbrella, the presence of an American military base on its territory guaranteed a comprehensive American defense for Qatar. Recognizing his

country's military weakness, Al-Thani focused on developing its soft power underpinned by two key elements: economic capacity (oil and gas) and the Al-Jazeera television network.

Unlike its neighbors, which are identified with a specific ideology that influences their conduct in the Middle East, Qatari foreign policy is an anomaly in the Arab world due to its persistent refusal to align itself with any bloc of nations. Despite its small size and military weakness, certainly compared with the regional powers, Qatar does not accept their dictates and regards its independence as an overarching value. Over the years, it has forged ties with various states and organizations, some of which are engaged in lengthy conflicts with each other. For example, Qatar maintains close ties with Iran, the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, along with its enhanced relationships with the US and Israel. Its ideological economic support for subversive states and organizations has generated anger among its Gulf neighbors, which culminated in an embargo they imposed on Qatar in 2017. Despite the heavy price it paid, Qatar is determined to push back against Arab pressure and refuses to modify its positions. Not only that, it views the crisis with its neighbors in the Gulf as an opportunity to prove independence and resilience vis-à-vis bigger and more powerful forces.

Along with political pragmatism, Qatar's foreign policy continuously strives to expand and deepen its role as a regional mediator, with two key goals in mind: one is to deal with its security challenges, as if to say, "no one kills the messenger"; the other is to expand its regional and international influence. Despite its demographic and military disadvantages, Qatar seeks to provide an alternative to the region's traditional mediators (chief among them Egypt and Saudi Arabia), while making use of its economic levers. Over the last decade and a half, Qatar has increased its involvement in local disputes (for example, Lebanon in 2008, Darfour in 2010 and Yemen in 2011)³ and even provided economic aid to jihadist groups that led the overthrow of Gaddafi in Libya and challenged the Assad regime in Syria. It also transferred large sums of money to the Morsi government in Egypt to ensure its political survival, and was the only Arab state to stand by its side.⁴

Relations with the US

Qatar attributes much importance to relations with the US, especially as long as Washington's Arab allies continue to boycott the regime in Doha. Qatar is therefore constantly seeking to ensure sustained US interest, using two key levers. The first is hosting the regional headquarters of the US Central Command (Centcom), providing the Americans with a strategic perch from which to combat terror organizations in the Gulf. Qatar not only enables the American presence on its territory, it also pays for it. In 2018, Qatar was reported to be planning a 1.8 billion USD upgrade of the American facilities. Qatar is also buying extensive quantities of US weapons. For example, in 2017 it finalized a 12 billion USD deal for 36 F-15 fighter jets, as well as other military procurement deals.⁵ In return, the US provides Qatar with a strategic umbrella, which is crucial for its survival, sustainability and ability to increase its diplomatic influence in the Middle East.

The second tool Qatar employs to bolster ties with Washington is closer relations with Israel in order to enhance its image in the eyes of the American public and its leadership. Qatar

³ Sultan Barakat, "Qatari Mediation: Between Ambition and Achievement," *Brookings Doha Center*, Number 12, November 2014.

⁴ Faisal Mukhyat Abu Sulaib, "[Understanding Qatar's Foreign policy, 1995-2017](#)," *Middle East Policy* 24(4), Winter 2017.

⁵ Karen DeYoung and Dan Lamothe, "[Qatar to upgrade air base used by U.S. to fight terrorism](#)," *The Washington Post*, 24 July 2018.

donated 250,000 USD to Zionist American, pro-Israel organizations, hired a media adviser identified with the Jewish right in the US and launched extensive lobbying among Jewish communities. It also hosted leading American Jewish figures that enjoy close ties with the White House.⁶

The Qataris assumed that the Jewish lobby in the US could provide a counterweight to the Gulf boycott and highlight Qatar's importance to American interests in the Middle East. In this sense, ties with Israel help Qatar shake off its image as a supporter of terrorism and portray itself as a central player in defusing tensions between Israel and Hamas, due to its ability to restrain Hamas. The US, for its part, continues to maintain close ties with the Saudi monarchy, even as it recognizes Qatar's value as a mediator.

C. Israel-Qatar Relations, 1991-2009

Qatar has always demanded full Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories and supported the right of the Palestinian people to a state achieved through negotiations.⁷ At the opening session of the 48th Shura Council in early November 2019, Emir Hamad Al-Thani declared, "the normalization of relations with Israel without a just solution to the problem of Palestine is a mere illusion."⁸ However, Qatar has adopted a pragmatic attitude toward Israel over the years, dictated by its national interests. Its roots date back to the 1990s and the erosion of the steadfast Arab rejection of any contact with Israel as long as the Palestinian issue was not fully resolved. Qatar's participation in the 1991 Madrid Conference signaled the start of a slow thaw in relations with Israel.

Shortly after the first Gulf War in 1991, Qatar expressed a unique willingness to re-examine the Arab Boycott policy toward Israel if it were to freeze settlement construction. Following the 1993 Oslo Accord, further progress was made. The Qatari media softened its tone on Israel, and a series of meetings between Israeli and Qataris was held to discuss economic cooperation. Toward the end of 1994, Deputy Israeli Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin met with the Qatari Ambassador to the US Abd Al-Rahman.⁹ The Qataris were involved in the multilateral talks launched after the Madrid Conference, and were keen to meet with Israeli representatives. According to Beilin, Al-Rahman made it clear that his country would be happy to cooperate and support the peace process. The message that emerged from such meetings was that Qatar was interested in progress on the Israeli-Palestinian track so that it could upgrade its ties with Israel.

In 1995, the Qatari Emir took part in the signing of the Oslo 2 agreement and the two countries launched commercial ties, which constituted de facto Qatari recognition of Israel's existence. What is more, a representative of the Qatari government attended the funeral of Yitzhak Rabin. That same year, an Israeli trade office opened its doors in Doha, and Qatar became the only Gulf state to allow a permanent, official Israeli presence on its territory. According to Eli Avidar, head of the Israeli representation from 1999 to 2001, the office provided the services of an embassy but was forbidden to fly the Israeli flag or hang a sign at the entrance.¹⁰ In 1996, acting Prime Minister Shimon Peres arrived on an official visit to Qatar, and visits by other senior Israeli representatives ensued (among them Tzipi Livni as

⁶ "[Qatar funding pro-Israel US organizations](#)," *Middle East Monitor*, 12 July 2018.

⁷ "[Israel's efforts can't change history, Palestinian rights](#)," *Qatar Tribune*, 5 March 2019.

⁸ "[HH The Amir Inaugurates the 48th Ordinary Session of Shura Council](#)," 5 November 2019.

⁹ Author's interview with Dr. Yossi Beilin, October 2018.

¹⁰ Author's conversation with Member of Knesset Eli Avidar, September 2019.

Foreign Minister in 2008). In 1997, Doha hosted the Middle East and North Africa Economic Summit devoted to advancing a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a follow-up to Madrid. Israel was among the participants.

The ongoing meetings between Israeli and Qatari officials, as well as the opening of the trade office in Doha, were supposed to pave the way for a dramatic rapprochement between the two states, but that did not occur. Though the importance of the meetings lay in their very existence, no significant change occurred in the status of the relationship. Foreign Ministry representatives who headed the Israeli trade office in Doha over the years reported a persistent unwillingness on the part of key Qatari figures to acquiesce to their requests, whether small or large, and more than once described relations as tense and fraught. The sense was that the Qataris did not really want the Israeli presence. According to Yaakov Hadas, the former commercial consul in Qatar, "This was the period that Al-Jazeera broadcasted non-stop footage of morgues in the territories. It was clear that what they wanted was to get rid of us. There was dialogue on a commercial level and a little on the diplomatic level, but what was most important was keeping up appearances. I would go around Doha in order to be seen. The point was to survive, not to be thrown out of there."¹¹

The presence of the Israeli trade office did not result in the desired breakthrough. At the same time, Qatar turned a cold shoulder to Israel and rejected attempts to deepen relations. While Qatar did adopt an independent line on Israel, compared to other Arab states, it did so in measured and cautious steps, and avoided overly challenging the dominant positions in the Arab world. In general, Qatar's policy toward Israel in the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s was complex. On the one hand, Qatar stood out in its willingness to begin a process of normalization with Israel in complete contradiction to the views of its Arab neighbors, and even made clear that it would not give in to their dictates on this issue. Reflecting this stance, Prime Minister Ehud Barak met in September 2000 with his Qatari counterpart at the Millennial Conference at the UN.¹² On the other hand, Qatar's unusual stance led it to express harsh criticism of a series of Israeli government decisions, in order to prove its loyalty to its Arab brethren, and especially to the Palestinians. For example, the Qatari media was harshly critical of the decision by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to open the Western Wall tunnel in 1996, and supported protests by Qataris against Israel during the Second Intifada that started in the year 2000.¹³

Eventually, Qatar had to follow the policies demanded by regional Gulf powers. When Qatar was preparing to host a November 2000 summit of the heads of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, Saudi Arabia and Iran made clear that they would boycott the event as long as an official Israeli presence remained in Doha. Responding to their pressure, and following the eruption of the Second Intifada, Qatar decided to shut down the Israeli trade office in Doha.¹⁴ However, the move did not significantly alter relations between Doha and Jerusalem. While Qatar agreed to pay lip service to its neighbors, it maintained a dialogue with Israel. A month after the expulsion of the Israeli diplomats from Doha, a clandestine meeting was held in Geneva between Israeli Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami and a senior Qatari official.¹⁵ Subsequently, Qatari Foreign Minister Hamad Bin-Jassim met in Paris in

¹¹ Author's conversation with Yaakov Hadas, November 2018.

¹² Gawdat Bahgat, "The New Middle East: The Gulf Monarchies and Israel", *The Journal of Social, Political, and Economic Studies* 28(2), Summer 2003, p. 123.

¹³ Uzi Rabi, "[Qatar's Relations with Israel: Challenging Arab and Gulf Norms](#)", *The Middle East Journal* 63(3), Summer 2009, pp. 443-459.

¹⁴ Rabi, *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Author's conversation with Prof. Shlomo Ben-Ami, October 2018.

2003 with his Israeli counterpart Silvan Shalom to discuss the US roadmap for Middle East peace.¹⁶ Two years later, following Israel's pullout from the Gaza Strip, an Israeli trade office was opened once again in Doha, a move that paved the way for a meeting between Bin-Jassim and Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York. That, in turn, led to Livni's historic 2008 visit to Qatar, despite strident Arab public protests.

During the 2006 Second Lebanon War, Qatar backed Lebanon in demanding an Israeli withdrawal to the international border. Qatar was critical of what it called Israel's disproportionate use of force and donated money for post-war reconstruction in Lebanon. At the same time, Qatar preserved its diplomatic and commercial ties with Israel, arguing that peace in the Middle East could only be achieved through diplomacy, not by military resistance. Three years later, in December 2008 and January 2009, Israel's Operation Cast Lead in Gaza once again challenged relations between Doha and Jerusalem. Qatar was vehemently opposed to Israeli actions and announced the closure of the trade office in Doha. At the same time, it offered to mediate between Israel and Hamas.

The decision to cut ties with Israel did not have a concrete impact on the situation on the ground, because at that point, relations between the two had been downscaled in any case. In 2010, Qatar proposed renewing its ties with Israel on condition that Israel allowed material for reconstruction to enter Gaza. It also wanted Israel to accept Qatari mediation in the Israeli-Arab conflict. Israel dismissed the offer because of opposition by Egypt's then-President Mubarak, as well as concern that Hamas would abuse the Qatari aid to mount terror attacks on Israeli targets.

From an Israeli standpoint, ties with Qatar from 1991 to 2009 were important largely as a milestone in Israel's relations with Arab and Muslim countries, with the majority of which it does not have official diplomatic ties. According to Hadas, the goal was to "ease the chokehold of hostility and boycott, and thereby take away the Palestinians' most important weapon: preventing normalization with the Arab-Muslim states".¹⁷ At the same time, Qatar was not considered then a key player in the region, nor as one that can lead efforts to resolve the Israeli-Arab conflict. Israel focused its attention mostly on security threats, for example from Iran and Hezbollah, and therefore Qatar was a secondary issue. Qatar did not have a strong military, nor real influence in the Arab world. That meant that the importance of relations with it was mainly symbolic for Israel, and did not generate exaggerated hopes.

D. Israel-Qatar Relations, 2010-2019

1. Diplomatic and security relations

Qatar has rightly earned its reputation as the "enfant terrible" of the Middle East. Since the Second Intifada, and more so during the Arab Spring, Qatar turned into an inciting, provocative force threatening the stability of Arab regimes and seeking to undermine them. It led a confrontational line encouraging extremism and supporting jihadist activity, using its financial resources and Al-Jazeera to do so. This policy was particularly obvious vis-à-vis Egypt, where Qatar provided broad economic and diplomatic backing to the Muslim Brotherhood in its efforts to topple the Mubarak regime. The tendentious use of the Al-Jazeera network, as well as Qatar's identification with organizations and states that other

¹⁶ Rabi, *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Author's conversation with Yaakov Hadas, November 2018.

Gulf states and Israel defined as enemies, led to its rapprochement with Turkey, and pushed it out of the circle of Sunni Gulf states. In 2014, Saudi Arabia adopted the Egyptian policy and declared the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization. In June 2017, it launched a boycott of unprecedented harshness against Qatar over its close affinity with this movement and Iran. The boycott, joined by its Gulf neighbors and Egypt, isolated Qatar and caused it significant economic and diplomatic damage.

Along with its support for the Muslim Brotherhood, Qatar provided significant financial support to Hamas. It offered to host Hamas' top leaders after they were forced to flee Syria when civil war broke out there in 2011. Among those who enjoyed Qatari auspices at the time were Khaled Mashal, the head of the Hamas political wing, Salah Al-Arouri, the man responsible for establishing the movement's military infrastructure in the West Bank, and some of the detainees Israel freed in the 2011 prisoner exchange.¹⁸ During Operation Protective Edge in 2014, Qatar and Turkey attempted to mediate between Israel and Hamas. It was a mission doomed to failure from the start. Despite Washington's blessing for Qatari mediation, Israel rejected the initiative out of hand due to the close affinity between Qatar and Israel's enemies. In choosing between Egyptian and Qatari mediation, there was no doubt whatsoever about Israel's preference. The congruity of interests between Cairo and Jerusalem on the Gaza issue led to the removal of the Qatari initiative from the table, resulting in Qatar's failure to leverage its influence with the warring sides.

The mutual hostility between Israel and Qatar underwent a dramatic shift due to the results of the 2014 warfare in Gaza. The destruction and ruin inflicted by Israel's artillery bombing of Gaza required extensive reconstruction, at a time when Arab states dramatically cut their economic aid to the Palestinians. While the IDF accomplished most of its goals, chief among them dealing a deadly blow to Hamas military capabilities, it realized that the chaotic situation in Gaza was explosive and if not dealt with properly, could generate additional anti-Israel terrorism.

Qatar shared that insight and offered over a billion dollars to rebuild the Strip. As far as it was concerned, an investment in Gaza was an expression of a moral and ideological commitment to its Palestinian brothers. It was also an opportunity for Qatar to assume a key role in mediation between Israel and Gaza, especially at a time when Saudi Arabia and Egypt, the traditional mediators, decided to lie low and focus on national, domestic issues. This allowed Qatar to boost its standing in the region. Israel would no doubt have preferred Saudi or Egyptian aid for Gaza, but the lack of such an option set the stage for unusual and anomalous cooperation between Israel and Qatar, based on mutual interests.

In other words, the main impetus for the shift in the positions of both Doha and Jerusalem was the urgent need to rebuild Gaza and defuse tensions there. Both countries assume that this would reduce Hamas's motivation to act militarily in order to divert public attention in Gaza from existential problems. Essentially, Israel and Qatar seek the same outcome, but for different reasons. Israel is aiming for calm with Gaza, whereas Qatar is using the aid to enhance its influence in the region. Israel is aware that Qatar cannot lead to a diplomatic breakthrough in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict due to the limits of its power and influence, but that does not annul its importance as a mediator. The fact that Qatar is the only state allocating an unprecedented fortune to support Gaza, while other states are steering clear,

¹⁸ Jack Houry, "[Palestinians Confirm: Top Hamas Officials Have Left Qatar at Country's Request](#)," *Haaretz*, 5 June 2017; Avi Issascharoff and Amir Tibon, "[Report: Qatar expelled Khaled Mashal; Hamas denies](#)", *Walla News*, 5 January 2015 (Hebrew).

pushed Israel and Qatar into each other's arms. Their understanding that if they do not act jointly they would be significantly undermining their national interests is the basis for their relationship. Israel also assumed that absent the Qatari financial aid, Hamas would tighten its relations with Iran in a bid to obtain additional funding.

Despite calls by Israeli cabinet ministers to topple the Hamas regime (among them by former defense minister Avigdor Lieberman and then-Education Minister Naftali Bennett), Israel facilitated the transfer of Qatari money into the Strip. In doing so, it contributed to Hamas' political survival. Although Israel has reiterated that it was not conducting discussions with Hamas, it did hold indirect contacts with it through Qatar, Egypt and the UN. The Gaza Rehabilitation Mechanism (GRM), established after Operation Protective Edge, provides an unusual framework for cooperation among the UN, Israel and the Palestinian Authority.¹⁹

The aim of the GRM is to enable reconstruction and development in Gaza by transferring materials into the Strip. So far, the GRM has enabled the construction of housing, hospitals, community centers, and more. Although not part of the mechanism, Qatar is a key player in the process thanks to its financial investments. In addition to funding reconstruction projects, Qatar has transferred millions of dollars for the salaries of civil servants in Gaza and funded a regular supply of diesel fuel to provide residents with up to eight hours of electric power a day. Israel has given permission for all these moves. In addition, Qatar and Israel have been considering the construction of a port across from the Gaza coast and an airport in the Strip. Qatar is also said to be mediating between Hamas and Israel in negotiations for the return of the bodies of soldiers Hadar Goldin and Oron Shaul, as well as several Israeli civilians believed to be in Gaza.

Israel and Qatar have been conducting frequent talks on the Gaza issue since 2014. The mediation by Mohammed Al-Emadi, Qatar's envoy to Gaza, assisted in repeatedly preventing rounds of fighting between Israel and Hamas, even when it seemed Israel was no longer willing to practice restraint. In May 2019, after a heavy barrage of 700 rockets fired at Israel, killing four people, many in Israel demanded a military offensive to restore Israeli deterrence. An offensive seemed inevitable, even at a heavy cost to both sides. However, once again, mediation by Qatar, Egypt and the UN envoy Mladenov, along with a Qatari pledge of extensive funding for Gaza and the Palestinian Authority, resulted in a ceasefire.

Ironically, the humanitarian disaster afflicting Gaza has created a unique reality in which mutual interests are overcoming past enmity between Jerusalem and Doha and providing an opportunity to re-examine their relationship. Qatar's dual role in the Gaza Strip, both as a financial contributor and a key player in Hamas-Israel mediation, has made it a strategic partner of Israel's leadership on this complex issue. Netanyahu is subject to harsh domestic criticism over his support for the transfer of suitcases packed with Qatari money into Gaza, funding perceived as aid to the enemy. But, so far this has not significantly undermined the process. Israeli decision makers appear willing to deal with the public pressure at home in order to avoid the next war. According to Minister Tzachi Hanegbi, "If limited humanitarian aid can help prevent escalation we do not care who is helping, even if it's Micronesia."²⁰ Qatar understands that without Israeli permission, its money would not be reaching Gaza.

¹⁹ [The Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism](#), An Agreement between the Government of Palestine (GoP) and the Government of Israel (GoI).

²⁰ Author's conversation with Minister Tzachi Hanegbi, October 2018.

The importance of Israel-Qatar ties is best illustrated by their endurance despite the displeasure of Gulf states and Egypt, especially since they declared a boycott of Qatar in 2017. Qatar's isolation by its neighbors placed Israel in the uncomfortable position of being expected to choose sides. Its natural inclination was to remain neutral and avoid a clash of interests. On the one hand, Israel backed the Saudi-led boycott, both because of its desire for closer ties with Saudi Arabia and because it supported what it viewed as the justified reason for the boycott – Qatar's links with terror organizations and with Iran. Israel was also seeking a closer relationship with Egypt, especially on defense and security. On the other hand, the Qatari money had proven an effective tool in averting further escalation between Israel and Hamas. Israel has thus far successfully maneuvered between the cross pressures, inter alia by downplaying its contacts with the Qataris. For example, the February 2018 talks²¹ between the Qatari ambassador and Minister Hanegbi, as well as the June 2018 meeting²² in Cyprus with then-Defense Minister Lieberman, were kept secret and were only reported after the fact. However, it is unclear how long Israel will be able to keep up this duality, and it would prefer to see a speedy resolution of the Arab-Qatari crisis.

2. Civilian relations

Along with their diplomatic cooperation over Gaza, Israel and Qatar maintain a certain degree of cultural-civilian cooperation, mainly in media coverage and sports events. Civilian relations also include Israeli presence at international conferences held in Qatar, although this does not necessarily attest to a significant change of ties between the two states.

In the media arena, Al-Jazeera is at the focal point of relations between Israel and Qatar. Israel has consistently expressed harsh criticism of the network and its coverage of Israel and Israel-related issues, but nonetheless allowed it to maintain an office and operate in Israel. Israel often felt that the network's reporting was biased and incorrect, especially at times of escalation with Gaza. For example, during Operation Protective Edge, Al-Jazeera focused on loss of life and damage to property in Gaza, while its coverage of the damage to Israel from the fighting was limited and minimal. While the network did give airtime to Capt. Avichay Adraee, head of the Arab media department at the IDF Spokesman's office, even as he was speaking and presenting Israel's case, the backdrop showed graphic footage documenting the casualties and destruction in Gaza.

Al-Jazeera also occasionally aired and reported items apparently designed to portray Israel in a negative light²³, although it did give a platform to some Israelis, such as Dr. Mordechai Kedar and Dr. Nimrod Goren.²⁴ The hawkish line it took on Israel generated a harsh response by Netanyahu in 2017, when he accused Al-Jazeera of fomenting severe unrest on the Temple Mount and said he would seek ways to shut down Al-Jazeera's Israel office.²⁵ This was not the first time Israel had seriously considered such an option. As previously mentioned, during Operation Cast Lead, Qatar shut down Israel's trade office in Doha and expelled the Israeli diplomats, prompting Israeli measures against Al-Jazeera. The sanctions included refusal to renew visas for the network's non-Israeli workers, withholding visas from

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Anna Ahronheim, "[Lieberman secretly met with Qatari FM to talk Gaza](#)", *Jerusalem Post*, August 23, 2018.

²³ Itamar Eichner, "[Al-Jazeera aired fake testimony: 'I shot dead children during my military service'](#)", *Ynet*, 29 August, 2017 (Hebrew)

²⁴ Jonathan Cook, "[US embassy relocation to Jerusalem 'a war crime'](#)", *Al Jazeera*, 1 February 2017.

²⁵ "[Netanyahu demands al-Jazeera offices in Israel be shut down](#)", *Times of Israel*, July 27, 2017.

new workers or from network representatives wanting to come to Israel, and revoking permission for the network to take part in official Israeli briefings and news conferences.²⁶

As for sports, Qatar has hosted Israeli athletes over the years as part of international competitions,²⁷ despite criticism, both domestic and in the Arab world. Qatar donated funds for the construction of a football stadium in the Israeli town of Sakhnin, although it probably did so to help Israel's Arab citizens and not to signal a shift in its position toward Israel. The presence of Israeli athletes in Qatar was unusual at first. Saudi Arabia, for example, refused to allow the participation of Israeli chess players at a 2018 tournament it hosted. Moreover, Hassan al-Tawadi, the head of Qatar's World Football Cup organizing committee, met with US Rabbi Marc Schneier in December 2018 to consult with him regarding the hosting of Israeli and Jewish players and fans at the 2022 event.²⁸ There is some opposition in Qatar to the regime's openness toward Israeli participation in sporting events. The participation of Israeli tennis player Dudi Sela at a 2017 tournament in Qatar generated furious reactions on social media, especially in light of the event's timing soon after the US declaration of its recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. While some posts did refer to the desired separation of sports from politics, they argued against such a distinction in Israel's case because of its policy on the Palestinian issue.²⁹

3. Economic relations

Economic ties between Israel and Qatar are minimal, conducted either through third parties (often at state level) or through Israeli companies not registered as such. Consideration was given in the past to possible Israeli purchase of gas from Qatar, but the idea was dropped in its initial stages for various reasons, chief among them lack of economic viability. The Qatari market is limited in scope, certainly compared with the Saudi market on which Israelis have set their sights. Therefore, even if Israel and Qatar were to expand their economic cooperation, its impact on the Israeli economy would still be limited.

E. The Unfulfilled Potential of Israel-Qatar Relations

1. Diplomatic potential

Even if Israel sought to develop cooperation with Qatar in the field of diplomacy, Qatar lacks the necessary levers to create real regional impact, especially given the partial Arab boycott against it. While the bags full of Qatari money have proven effective in preventing additional rounds of Israeli fighting with Gaza, Egypt and Saudi Arabia were and remain the key players in efforts to reach a diplomatic breakthrough in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. That means Qatar's power is limited, and its diplomatic services are likely to be less useful in aspects not directly related to Gaza.

2. Civilian potential

Broad cooperation on civilian matters is unlikely under the current circumstances. Some segments of the Qatari public oppose a warming of relations with Israel and regard such a

²⁶ Barak Ravid, "[Qatar severed ties, Israel cracks down on Al-Jazeera in response](#)", *Haaretz*, December 31, 2008 (Hebrew).

²⁷ For example, the participation of Israeli tennis player Shahar Pe'er at a 2008 tournament and the hosting of an Israeli team at a 2018 high school handball tournament.

²⁸ Itamar Eichner, "[Qatar preparing to welcome Jewish, Israeli fans for World Cup](#)", *Ynet*, December 24, 2018.

²⁹ "[Israeli tennis player's presence in Qatar infuriates citizens](#)", *The National*, 7 January 2018.

process as disloyal to the Palestinian interest. While Al-Jazeera has softened its hostile tone on Israel in recent years, this does not necessarily attest to a significant change of direction in the prevailing attitudes toward Israel. Israel is perceived in Qatar as responsible for Palestinian suffering, and as long as that is the case, there are few prospects of building bridges between the two societies. On the Israeli side, too, lack of information regarding Qatar's activities in Gaza, as well as its branding as a terror-supporting state, make it difficult to forge people-to-people ties. Qatar is rarely mentioned in Israeli public discourse other than in the context of its money transfers to Hamas. Given these circumstances, Israelis have little motivation to seek dialogue, and therefore, without a change in the depiction of the two states in the media and political discourse, the negative narrative is likely to stay.

3. Economic potential

Qatar and Israel share an interest in developing economic ties, even under the existing restrictions, especially since both countries face similar challenges in terms of climate and water shortage. Groundbreaking technologies have been developed in Israel in response to these challenges, for example in water efficiency and conservation. Israeli firms offer a broad range of solutions for sewage treatment and the use of treated water for farming and drinking, reducing vaporization of desalinated water, effective water-saving irrigation systems for stadiums and large spaces, purification of polluted water derived from oil drilling, hydroponic cultivation based on desalinated water, and more.

Israeli technological innovation in arid-area agriculture could benefit Qatar greatly in developing local produce, especially given its intense efforts to reduce food imports. Israeli technologies could also be relevant for the Qatari market in terms of alternative energy, among them an Israeli invention that turns domestic garbage into electric power. As Qatar gears up to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup, it is also displaying keen interest in solutions offered by Israeli companies for "smart cities". The special advantages of Israeli companies stem not only from advanced technologies, but also from the proven and cumulative experience of their systems, especially in the field of security.

Beyond specific areas in which Israel can offer an added value, Qatar is also displaying great interest in the innovative and entrepreneurial nature of the Israeli economy. Studying and understanding the way Israel creates innovation and implements it could help Qatar, especially as it engages energetically in independent production capacities and integrating the private sector. This knowledge could serve Qatar in its humanitarian endeavors around the world. From an Israeli standpoint, economic cooperation with Qatar is vital on two levels: first, Qatar is an oil power, and various Israeli industries, especially plastics, are interested in the chemical products it manufactures. Second, Qatar invests huge amounts of money in developing industry and high-tech, and in this sense, its economic resources could help the development and growth of Israeli companies, especially of start-ups.³⁰

F. The Impact of the Palestinian Issue on Israel-Qatar Relations

The Gaza issue has shaped Israel-Qatar relations ever since Operation Protective Edge. This is manifested in a regular, focused and circumscribed dialogue largely aimed at humanitarian reconstruction of the Strip as a tool to avert an Israel-Hamas military clash. Thus far, absent a resolution to the Palestinian issue on the horizon, the Israeli-Qatari dialogue is breaking through past obstacles and has been successful in blocking Israel-

³⁰ Conversation with Dr. Yitzhak Gal, a Mitvim Institute expert on Gulf economies, November 2018.

Hamas escalation. The Qatari regime is also removing more and more obstacles to its ties with Israel. For example, on a February 2018 visit to Jerusalem, the Qatari envoy to Gaza gave an interview to the Reuters news agency laying out the extent of the changed relations between the two countries, as well as their commonality of interests. The interview appeared designed to address the Israeli public with a view to paving a way for normalization. The ambassador told his interviewer that this was one of his many visits to Israel (over 20 since 2014). He emphasized that the money his country was giving Gaza was being supervised and monitored to ensure it only serves humanitarian interests. It was a remark likely designed to ease Israeli fears that the Qatari aid was serving Hamas to mount terror attacks and dig terror tunnels. The envoy also noted that Qatar was no longer hosting Salah Al-Aroui, the deputy head of the Hamas political wing, following Israeli-American pressure.³¹

The interview, as well as the fact it was held in Israel's capital, was undoubtedly rare and unusual. It corresponded with Qatar's willingness to host Israeli athletes on its soil within the framework of international tournaments, without stuttering or apologizing. While some Qataris express opposition to these gestures, they do not seem to constitute a critical mass that could potentially overshadow the development of these relations. In general, economic relations will presumably remain limited in their nature and extent in the absence of progress in talks on resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As is the case with other Arab states, this issue was previously and continues to be a real obstacle to tapping commercial potential in light of local hostility to Israeli products. Nonetheless, one can assume that the growing Qatari need for Israeli technology and expertise would enhance willingness to find roundabout ways for cooperation, even without a concrete change in the status of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Palestinian issue continues to pose a significant hurdle to tapping the potential of Israel-Qatar relations. Qatar repeatedly says that as long as the establishment of a Palestinian state does not resolve the conflict, there will not be full peace between the two countries. In his speech at the 2019 Munich Security Conference, Qatar's foreign minister insisted that granting the Palestinians their rights was a key issue in his country's foreign policy that could not be ignored.³² In other words, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict imposes a cap on the development of relations between Israel and Qatar. Nonetheless, the volatile reality in Gaza was what led to the development of ties between the two countries to begin with. Were it not for the urgent need to rebuild Gaza and prevent war, as well as recognition of the centrality of Qatar and Israel in easing the humanitarian crisis there, cooperation between Doha and Jerusalem would have been non-existent. The Palestinian issue dictates the bounds of bilateral ties, but at the same time constitutes the platform on which they were born.

G. Summary

In examining the entirety of relations between Doha and Jerusalem, their cooperation appears to take place mostly when there are no other options, in other words, when exigent circumstances overcome ideology and cultural-religious distances. These are functional, localized relations mostly designed to achieve calm in Gaza by providing economic and humanitarian aid. Even if there were potential for expanding and deepening the relations, it would be difficult to implement in the near future. Although Qatar conducts an independent

³¹ Dan Williams, "[Qatar says Gaza aid spares Israel war, shows Doha does not back Hamas](#)," *Reuters*, 22 February 2018.

³² Tova Lazaroff, "[Qatar: Palestinian issue core stumbling block to ties with Israel](#)", *The Jerusalem Post*, 17 February 2019.

foreign policy and refuses to give in to the dictates of regional powers, it is nonetheless not sufficiently strong to withstand on its own the prevailing concept that opposes official ties with Israel as long as the occupation continues. Not only that, there is no certainty that even if its standing in the regional arena were different, Qatar would have done so, given the antagonism toward Israel among significant segments of the Qatari public.

From Israel's point of view, Qatar has great importance as regards Hamas and Gaza, but Israel cannot overlook Qatar's past and current relations with its enemies. This point is not relevant to the economic sphere, since Israel is interested in developing commercial cooperation despite other constraints, but it definitely influences civilian ties between the two states, as well as security and diplomatic cooperation. The Israeli public, as well as the security establishment, is still suspicious and reluctant to expand relations, certainly, as long as Qatar does not step back from its links with Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood. Israel's tendency was and remains to promote and tighten relations with Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and to turn to Qatar only when there are no alternatives to advancing its interests. In the final analysis, Israel is not comfortable with its troubling relations with Doha, but recognizes that it must deal with this reality.

If the Gulf boycott of Qatar continues, Israel will find it hard to preserve the current format of the relationship with Doha. Although it has thus far managed to maneuver between the rival sides, a point may come when Egypt and Gulf states are less tolerant of the Israel-Qatar rapprochement. The strategic importance of Saudi Arabia and Egypt to Israeli interests could cast a major shadow over the quiet revolution in Jerusalem-Doha ties. Israel will be unable to advance its relations with Qatar in the face of opposition by most Arab states. Its cooperation with Qatar will therefore continue to focus on the Gaza issue.

In summing up, there is a long road ahead to official diplomatic ties between Israel and Qatar. But, this does not negate the change that is taking place in their relations. Within several years, Israel and Qatar have turned from being hostile states on two sides of the divide, to strategic partners in shaping the reality in Gaza. That does not mean Qatar has shed its historic ties with Israel's enemies, but that its view of the Palestinian issue no longer rests on binary concepts of aggressor and victim; rather on recognition that responsibility for the problems lies with many different parties. As for the Israeli leadership, it will likely continue to harbor suspicions about Qatar in the coming years. Nonetheless, as opposed to the past, it no longer precludes links with Qatar but simply defines their borders.