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Report

Gaza Reconstruction: Can Norway and Qatar help bring Hamas to the negotiations table?

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Palestinian children walk between the rubble of buildings which were destroyed during the summer war in Gaza City [AP]

Abstract

Norway and Qatar could help defuse future conflicts between Israel and Hamas by establishing an expert advisory group that could consult with Hamas, the Palestinian Authority and Israel on how to develop a strategic roadmap in order to prevent the all too familiar on-and-off conflict pattern between Israel and Hamas. Qatar could play an indispensable leadership role by helping to secure clean water access for Gaza's impoverished population by coordinating with Israel to bring in urgently needed supplies while at the same time attempt to negotiate a long-term truce between the two opposing parties.

Introduction

An estimated 100,000 Gazans lost their homes to the latest round of hostilities between Israel and Hamas, leaving much of the coastal enclave's infrastructure damaged. Facing an impending humanitarian catastrophe, Egyptian President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi hosted a donor conference in Cairo last October to solicit international support for the momentous task of reconstructing Gaza. Attending the Cairo summit as co-host, Norwegian Foreign Minister Borge Brende announced that the international community had pledged \$5.4 billion in assistance.⁽¹⁾ "This is a major breakthrough, a very important signal of solidarity to the Palestinian people in general and not at least to the people that are suffering so badly in Gaza," Brende said, adding that his government would give \$12.5 million in assistance.⁽²⁾ While the donor summit drew participants from nearly 90 countries, Qatar became not surprisingly the conference's single largest contributor by pledging \$1 billion in assistance.⁽³⁾

Qatar's Relationship with Hamas: an Asset?

Qatar is facing increasing international scrutiny over its support of Hamas, with Israel charging that Doha had enabled Hamas by providing it with financial assistance while hosting one of its top leaders, Khalid Mashaal. The U.S., for its part, has also accused Qatar of permitting "permissive jurisdictions for terrorist financing."⁽⁴⁾ Qatar's independent foreign policy has also been criticized by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which both harbor deep mistrust of regional Islamist movements, including of Hamas, as they accuse Qatar of favoring Hamas over the moderate Palestinian Authority. Despite these allegations, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry solicited Qatari mediation shortly after the latest Gaza war erupted to use its apparent leverage over Hamas to convince the group to accept a ceasefire agreement with the Jewish state.⁽⁵⁾ While these efforts were ultimately unsuccessful, Egypt once again mediated a truce between Israel and Hamas, the third of its kind since 2009.

How to Help Gaza

Now that a ceasefire has been reached and a successful donor conference completed, it is time to outline a strategy that would bring Israel and Hamas to the negotiation table. Unless a political solution is found, which addresses the root causes of the conflict between the two opposing parties, the well-established – and destructive - pattern of war between Israel and Hamas could once again erupt.

Within this context, Norway and Qatar could respectively - and collaboratively – play constructive roles as mediators between Israel and Hamas. Norway, as the only European country to have formal ties with Hamas, coupled with its role as the chair of the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee⁽⁶⁾ for economic assistance to the Palestinians has since the Oslo Accords of the 1990s demonstrated its commitment supporting the establishment of a Palestinian state based on a negotiated agreement between Israel and the PLO.⁽⁷⁾ The present Norwegian government is also committed to maintaining close and friendly relations with Israel as witnessed by the hosting of President Shimon Peres for his last official state visit before retiring in May 2014.⁽⁸⁾

Meanwhile, drastic measures are urgently required to help improve Gaza's water security as an estimated 90 percent of the groundwater produced in the enclave does not comply with international standards set by the World Health Organization and the European Union. The approximately 1.7 million Palestinians living in Gaza are exposed to very high levels of risk as the aquifer is showing clear signs of imminent failure or collapse, with rapidly advancing saline intrusion, Palestinian officials say.⁽⁹⁾ As part of an effort to address Gaza's water security while seeking to advance the embattled peace process, the European Union with support from the United States and the World Bank is currently building a major desalination plant to provide clean water for Gaza's population. The

plant at Deir al-Balah in the center of the territory is expected to become operational later this year, and will supply fresh water to 75,000 people in Khan Yunis and Rafah in the south.⁽¹⁰⁾

The lack of clean water not only adds to the urgency of taking immediate steps to prevent a large scale humanitarian disaster from erupting, but Gaza's dependency on its neighbors for access to clean water is complicated by Hamas' strained relationships with the Palestinian Authority, Egypt and Israel. While informal water cooperation between the various parties appear to have been somewhat constructive, given the acrimonious relationship between Israel and Hamas in particular, efforts to address Gaza's water security could easily fall victim to future hostilities with devastating consequences for its already struggling population.

Within these complicated dynamics, however, Qatar could potentially carve out a leadership role as it could leverage its relationship with Hamas to serve as a broker between the various stakeholders, including with Israel. Given Israel and Egypt's respective blockades of Gaza, Qatar could play an indispensable role by helping to secure clean water access for the enclave's impoverished population by coordinating with Israel to bring in supplies, including urgently needed food and medicine.

Qatar's Support for Arab Peace Initiative

While Qatar is the only Arab country to openly support Hamas, its previous emir, Hamad al-Thani, also became the first Arab leader to visit Gaza since Hamas resumed power where he pledged \$400 million in assistance.⁽¹¹⁾ Not surprisingly, his visit led many critics of Qatar's assertive foreign policy to question its motivations as the energy rich emirate was accused of meddling into Palestinian politics by favoring Hamas over the Palestinian Authority (PA). At the same time, Qatar has also pushed for the revitalization of the Arab Peace Initiative (API),⁽¹²⁾ in which Israel is promised "normal relations" with the Arab world if it meets a number of conditions related to withdrawing to its 1967 borders and reaching a solution on the Palestinian refugee issue that would be in accordance with the UN General Assembly resolution 194. The API also calls for the implementation of UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, reaffirmed by the Madrid Conference of 1991. According to the land for peace principle, and Israel's acceptance of an independent Palestinian state, with East Jerusalem as its capital, full normalization will be granted by all Arab states in the context of a comprehensive peace with Israel.

Qatar's commitment to Mideast peace was particularly bold during its 2013 chairmanship of the Arab League's API Follow-up Committee when then prime minister Sheik Hamad bin Jassem al-Thani outlined a proposal that for the first time eased the Arab League's

demand that Israel return to its pre-1967 borders. "The Arab League delegation affirms that agreement should be based on the two-state solution, on the basis of the 4th of June 1967 line" with the possibility of a "comparable and mutual agreed minor swap of the land," al-Thani said at a joint press conference with Secretary Kerry and the secretary general of the Arab League, Nabil Elaraby.⁽¹³⁾ The proposal came after U.S. administration officials had held wide ranging discussions on how to modify the API in order to bring Israel and the PA to the negotiation table. If the revisions had been accepted by Israel at the time, it would have given Israel the chance to continue holding on to large settlement blocs.

Nearly a year later, in January 2014, Secretary Kerry once again praised Qatar's commitment to help advance the peace process by thanking Foreign Minister al-Atiyah for his "leadership" and willingness to keep the API debate "active and engaged." At the same press conference in Paris, France, Secretary Kerry also praised the API Follow-up Committee, a group charged with securing acceptance of the API by Israel and others, by stressing, "It's very hard to overstate the importance of Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Kuwait, Bahrain – all of the countries that are taking part in this effort – in order to bring the Arab world to the table saying a simple thing: We are prepared to make peace now in 2014." Given Qatar's leadership role while chairing the API committee, it was therefore not surprising that the top U.S. diplomat once again turned to Doha to seek its assistance to help mediate a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas at the peak of last year's Gaza war.

While Washington's quest to advance peace talks between Israel and the PA are currently dormant partially over President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu's failure to bridge personal differences, Qatar is apparently facilitating indirect contact between Hamas and Israel in order to cement a long-term truce between the opposing parties.⁽¹⁴⁾

On the surface, Qatar's support for Hamas and for the API seems irreconcilable, especially since Hamas refuses to recognize Israel's right to exist. At the same time, through its demonstrated commitment to the API, by facilitating apparent backdoor conversations between Israel and Hamas, Qatar could help bring about the necessary political solution needed for Gaza reconstruction work to begin. With its \$1 billion pledge to Gaza, Qatar appears to prove its critics wrong as it attempts to execute a dual strategy focusing on combining a long-term truce with its stated objective to help rebuild Gaza. With this apparent strategy in place, Qatar seems determined to make its pledge to Gaza reconstruction conditional on Hamas' willingness to modify its extremist position vis-a-vie Israel in order to receive the desperately needed aid. Hamas, for its part, may not have a choice but to accept these conditions as Mideast turmoil and Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen have inevitably pushed Gaza's crisis towards the bottom of the Arab League's priority list.

Should Qatar succeed, an added benefit would be that Qatari financial support for Hamas could potentially help reduce Iran's influence over the group as Doha could subsequently use its leverage to push the group out of its extremist shadow. Within this context, Norway could also be helpful to Qatar's apparent confidence building measures between Hamas and Israel by cooperate with Doha to oversee that international pledges for Gaza reconstruction are transparent and adhere to the highest anti-corruption practices.

Conclusion

As part of an effort to prevent future wars between Israel and Hamas, Norway and Qatar could use their respective relationships with Hamas to set up a joint early warning center; Norway and Qatar could also establish an expert advisory group that could consult with Hamas, the Palestinian Authority and Israel on how to develop a strategic roadmap in order to prevent the all too familiar on-and-of conflict pattern between Israel and Hamas. By collaboratively working on establishing an early warning center coupled with establishing an expert group with close ties to Hamas, the Palestinian Authority, and Israel, Qatar and Norway would become indispensable actors to help Washington push for the resumption of the API. But whether the political leaders inside and outside the region possess the wisdom, the perseverance, and the ability to seize this chance remains to be seen.

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