

With the Iran War, Hamas Tilts Toward the Brotherhood

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Brief Analysis

The monthlong conflict and developments in Gaza have weakened the terrorist group's connection to Tehran, offering Washington an opportunity to achieve its goals by working through Qatar and Turkey as well as Egypt.

The Iran war has both exposed and widened a longstanding division between Hamas officials aligned with Iran and those aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood. While the two camps diverge regarding regional orientation, neither can be considered “moderate,” given their shared endorsement of terrorism and ultimate goal of destroying Israel. Yet the current weakening of the Iran enthusiasts will inevitably boost Qatar and Turkey, which have backed the Brotherhood side, thus empowering the United States to urge these two countries to exert more pressure on Hamas.

However it responds to recent shifts, Washington must be careful not to inadvertently strengthen Hamas by offering political incentives, particularly through direct engagement with the terrorist group. Any direct U.S. engagement with Hamas should still be conditioned on the latter's full implementation of the Trump administration's 20-point plan as well as adherence to the international standards articulated in the 2006 “Quartet” [principles \(https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-204615/\)](https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-204615/)—namely, a commitment to nonviolence, recognition of Israel, and acceptance of previous Israeli-Palestinian agreements.

Background

Since the beginning of the Iran war, Hamas's few statements have been overwhelmingly supportive of Tehran. But a divergent example occurred on March 14, when the group called on Iran to refrain from targeting “neighboring countries,” even as it expressed support for its “right of self-defense.” This message represented a rare public break—at least in recent years—between the Islamist group and the Islamic Republic.

The statement specifically demonstrates the movement's concern about its future in Doha. Like other Gulf

Cooperation Council states, Qatar has been targeted by Iranian projectiles and has adopted a firm stance against public expressions of support for the Islamic Republic. Signs of Qatari displeasure with Hamas are evident in recent [arrests \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/qatar-arrests-more-than-300-people-for-disseminating-misleading-information/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/qatar-arrests-more-than-300-people-for-disseminating-misleading-information/), including of regular commentators on Al Jazeera television and media influencers affiliated with Hamas who have voiced support for Iran.

But the March 14 statement also reflects a longstanding power struggle within the organization. Those aligned with Iran include Hamas's military wing and Gaza-based leadership, who justify their view by pointing to Tehran's provision of training, arms, and direct support for the group's terrorist and military capabilities. The most prominent individual in this camp is Khalil al-Hayya, effectively succeeding Yahya al-Sinwar and other leaders of the al-Qassam Brigades. Meanwhile, the pro-Brotherhood side, comprising mainly the diaspora leadership headed by former Political Bureau chief Khaled Mashal, believes that alignment with Sunni, Brotherhood-oriented states—namely, Qatar and Turkey—will facilitate Hamas's acceptance in the Arab world, which will pave the way for its takeover of the Palestinian national movement and future international mainstreaming.

Neither camp, it bears repeating, is remotely “moderate.” While the Brotherhood adherents have occasionally signaled tactical flexibility, they have never deviated from the rejectionist principles of the movement. For example, they have expressed a willingness to accept a Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders and consider a long-term truce with Israel, but explicitly reject any recognition of Israel and insist on retaining “the right to resistance.” Both camps were and remain supportive of the October 7 terrorist attack. When it comes to disarmament, Mashal recently stated that removing Hamas's weapons is tantamount to “removing its soul.”

The balance of power between the two centers has oscillated over the years. From 2017 through the Gaza war, the Iran camp dominated. But the October 2025 ceasefire, the death of key Iran-aligned Hamas leaders, and the severe degradation of the al-Qassam Brigades have pushed the pendulum back toward the Brotherhood side—a trend that will likely be reinforced by the Iran war. Not only has Iran been materially weakened by the conflict, but it will also emerge regionally isolated after targeting numerous Arab states.

The Brotherhood orientation will have political implications for the group. With Hamas scheduled to elect new leaders this year, Mashal will likely attempt to take the opportunity to reassume his former role. Regionally, as noted, a break with or even a downgrade of Hamas's relations with Iran will deepen its reliance on Qatar and Turkey, increasing their leverage vis-à-vis the organization. A Brotherhood-aligned leadership will also seek to extend its reach to other regional capitals. Mashal has long sought to open channels with Riyadh, although without any success, and he and like-minded officials will likely follow a similar path this time, citing the group's break with Tehran—even though Saudi officials have given no indication of increased interest in such overtures.

Implications for U.S. Policy

Amid a Hamas shift toward the Muslim Brotherhood, Qatar and Turkey will no longer be able to rely on their narrative from the war years and even afterward. According to this narrative, Iran-linked operatives on the ground, and the leverage afforded by the hostages, prevented Hamas's Brotherhood-aligned interlocutors from delivering results. While the Iran camp will not disappear and will retain some power in Gaza, this argument has lost purchase, and the United States can bring accountability.

Washington should use its leverage to push Doha and Ankara to exert additional pressure on Hamas. For Qatar, such pressure can encompass funding, access to media and political platforms, and—most important—basing in the Qatari capital. At the same time, the United States should ensure that Turkey does not provide an alternative safety net for Hamas, as it has during past episodes of Hamas-Qatar stress. U.S. officials should also ensure full engagement from Egypt, which sees Hamas as a threat to its national security and has opposed any measures that

might grant it legitimacy. Qatar and Turkey, by contrast, have often used their mediation roles to secure political gains for Hamas in exchange for flexibility from the group.

The most immediate demand should relate to Hamas's disarmament. A proposal issued in late March by the High Representative to the Board of Peace—the U.S.-led entity [overseeing the transition process \(https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/2026/01/statement-on-president-trumps-comprehensive-plan-to-end-the-gaza-conflict/\)](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/2026/01/statement-on-president-trumps-comprehensive-plan-to-end-the-gaza-conflict/)—calls for full but gradual disarmament. This approach may be unsatisfactory, but it reflects reality. Disarmament will be complicated by a number of factors, not least that even an ascendant Brotherhood-aligned camp may lack full control over all armed elements in Gaza. Hamas will likely try to postpone an official response to the proposal until the Iran war ends.

Some might be tempted to strengthen the Brotherhood-leaning “pragmatists” by delivering political wins to facilitate implementation of the 20-point plan. This would be a mistake. Hamas is at one of the weakest points in its history—akin to the Palestine Liberation Organization after the liberation of Kuwait in 1991 amid its support for the Iraqi invasion. The Islamist group has lost one backer (Iran) and angered another (Qatar), and the United States should press its advantage.

Thus, while a gradual approach to disarmament may be necessary, the United States should avoid any steps that empower or legitimize Hamas. The group is likely to use a protracted disarmament process to secure further direct engagement with the United States under the guise of resolving outstanding disarmament issues. In the last several months, U.S. officials including hostage envoy Adam Bohler, Middle East envoy Steve Witkoff, and most recently, according to reports, Witkoff aide [Aryeh Lightstone \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/trumps-peace-board-hands-hamas-disarmament-proposal-sources-say/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/trumps-peace-board-hands-hamas-disarmament-proposal-sources-say/) have engaged directly with Hamas.

The administration may believe, with some justification, that direct engagement through envoys facilitates progress on Gaza-related issues. Yet given Hamas's weakness and the increased leverage of Qatar and Turkey, such an approach is not only unnecessary but counterproductive. Engagement with the United States is a long-held goal of Hamas, heralding entry into the mainstream as viewed by regional actors; it also provides a veneer of legitimacy and strengthens the group's position vis-à-vis Palestinian adversaries such as the National Committee for the Administration of Gaza and the Palestinian Authority. Moreover, if Hamas senses it can bypass the Board of Peace's High Representative through direct engagement with the United States, it will do so.

U.S. engagement should be presented as the ultimate prize once Hamas has met its obligations in Gaza and beyond. Specifically, such engagement should take place only once Hamas fully implements the 20-point plan and complies with the Quartet principles.

Recommendations

Hamas's historically weak position creates opportunities for the United States to increase pressure on the group through Qatar and Turkey—but it also creates risks. An overeager approach that rewards Hamas politically for the sake of implementing the 20-point plan may end up strengthening the terrorist group and providing it a way out of its current predicament.

To address these risks, the United States should:

- **Reiterate that political engagement with Hamas will happen only once it accepts the Quartet principles.** This position needs to be clearly transmitted to regional and international partners to discourage them from taking any steps that could facilitate mainstreaming of the terrorist group.
- **Refrain from directly engaging Hamas.** Any issues relating to Gaza or the implementation of the 20-point plan should be addressed only by the High Representative of the Board of Peace.

- **Engage Qatar and Turkey to ensure they use their increased leverage with Hamas.** In the immediate term, pressure should focus on full implementation of the 20-point plan. At the same time, the United States should ensure that Egypt remains a key mediator, given its view of Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood as a threat to national security.

Hamas is distancing itself from Iran out of necessity and weakness. The United States should exploit this shift to support American interests in Gaza and the wider region, not reward the group with opportunities it does not deserve.

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