

# Qatar Challenges Washington on Hamas

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## Brief Analysis

**S**peaking last week in Qatar, Hamas leader Khaled Mashal thanked Qatar for its support and declared that Palestinian fighters had "won the war [in the Gaza Strip] by defeating Israeli plans." Mashal also lauded controversial Islamic scholar Yousef al-Qaradawi as the "shaikh of resistance." By tolerating such an event, Qatar, which hosts a vital U.S. command center as well as a substantial air wing and storage facilities, highlighted its diplomatic journey away from the Arab consensus -- via support for Islamist extremists -- toward an alliance with Syria and Iran. Qatar's developing stance hampers Washington's policies on Iran and the Middle East peace process.

## Background

Under the leadership of Shaikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, Qatari diplomacy has always been quirky. With a coterie of loyal aides, Shaikh Hamad ousted his father in 1995 while he was vacationing in Switzerland. Seeking better relations with the United States, Hamad allowed Israel to open a trade office in Doha. Perhaps his most significant move was permitting the establishment of the widely watched al-Jazeera satellite television service, which broke broadcasting conventions across the region with a provocative and often inflammatory style that upset many governments. A particular target of al-Jazeera reporting has been neighboring Saudi Arabia, with which relations remain poor and a border dispute lingers.

After the September 11 terrorist attacks, Washington was grateful when Qatar effectively handed over the giant al-Udaid air base for U.S. use at a time when Saudi Arabia was asking most American forces to leave its territory. From a reinforced command center, U.S. forces monitor all air movements over Iraq, while B-1 bombers take off to provide close air support to U.S. troops in Afghanistan. But Qatari cooperation has always come at a diplomatic cost, and now it is increasing.

## Qatar's Embrace of Hamas

Individual Qatari officials have supported radical Islamists in the past. For example, in the 1990s, September 11 plotter Khaled Shaikh Muhammad worked in Qatar as an engineer. When the United States discovered his presence and demanded his arrest, a Qatari minister aided his flight to Pakistan. In the case of Hamas, however, Qatari support has been official policy. Qatar allows Hamas to maintain official offices in the country, permits Hamas to raise funds there through charities and telethons, and regularly hosts Hamas officials. Over the past few years, official government support for Hamas has increased drastically. Mashal and other Hamas leaders divide their time between Doha and the Syrian capital, Damascus. According to Mashal, Hamas "established a relation with Qatar ever since Prince Hamad bin Khalifa was the heir to the crown. A good relation[ship] developed with the people of Qatar. After he held the reins of power, the relation[ship] remained good. I had a personal relation with the prince and his minister of foreign affairs, Shaikh Hamad bin Jasem bin Jabr."

Following Saudi crackdowns on charitable financial flows exiting the kingdom, overt Qatari financial support for Hamas increased dramatically. Qatar pledged to donate \$50 million to the then Hamas-run Palestinian Authority after the United States and European Union discontinued their support following Hamas's victory in the January 2006 legislative elections. Following the Hamas takeover of Gaza in 2007, Qatar began citing the humanitarian crisis caused by the international financial isolation of Hamas in Gaza to justify its support for the group. In early 2008, however, a senior aide to Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas stated that Qatar gives Hamas "millions of dollars a month," some of which may be used to purchase weapons.

#### The al-Qaradawi Factor

Prominent Muslim Brotherhood theologian Shaikh Yousef al-Qaradawi, who shared the podium with Mashal in Qatar last week, uses the platform of a regular show on al-Jazeera to proselytize his conservative and violent interpretation of Islam. Qatar openly tolerates his extremist views and Hamas fundraising, as al-Qaradawi noted at last week's event: "I have been living in Qatar for many years and the Qatari government has never interfered in my activities." He is perhaps best known for his religious rulings calling on Muslims to murder American and other civilians in Iraq and justifying Hamas suicide bombings against Israeli civilians.

In October 2000, al-Qaradawi founded an umbrella organization called the Union of Good (Itelaf al-Khair, also known as the Charity Coalition). According to Palestinian intelligence, "The Union [of Good] is considered -- with regard to material support -- one of the biggest Hamas supporters." Israel outlawed the Union of Good in February 2002, and the United States designated it as a specially designated global terrorist entity in November 2008. According to the U.S. Treasury Department, the Union of Good was created by the Hamas leadership "in order to facilitate the transfer of funds to Hamas."

#### Qatari Motives

Qatar's diplomatic energy is often credited to Foreign Minister Shaikh Hamad bin Jasem bin Jabr al-Thani, a distant relative of the emir, who also now serves as prime minister. But there is little doubt that the veering of current alliances reflects the personal sentiments of the emir, Shaikh Hamad, who found chemistry with President Bashar al-Asad of Syria, but did not appear to bond with President Bush. Some observers say the emir judges that Qatar should side with Hamas, in line with his own conservative Islamist inclinations, calculating that the United States can do little in retaliation and that Iran is the power of the future in the Persian Gulf, with which Qatar must develop good relations.

Thus, in January, Qatar led the bid to break Egyptian and Saudi leadership of the Arab world by attempting to hold a summit in Doha in support of Hamas following the Israeli military action against Hamas in Gaza. The meeting, which narrowly failed to reach a quorum, was also attended by President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad of Iran. At a subsequent Arab summit in Kuwait, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia engineered a reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Egypt on one side, and Syria and Qatar on the other, but had to qualify his previous commitment to work toward peace with

Israel.

## U.S. Options

The vital importance of the al-Udaid air base certainly reduces Washington's room to maneuver. Alternatives to the air base exist -- the U.S. Air Force also uses runways in Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates -- but would most likely come with conditions. Qatar's vast gas reserves also appear to have emboldened Qatari leaders in their drift away from Arab unity toward Iran and Islamist extremist groups.

Given the personal nature of Qatari diplomacy, one way of encouraging change helpful to the United States could be direct contact with Shaikh Hamad. With the arrival of the new Obama administration, an opportunity exists to overcome disagreements attributable to the Bush administration. With so many other issues crowding in on the White House, finding time for a small Gulf country will be difficult. But Qatar's unhelpful stance on Hamas and its teetering position on Iran place the tiny emirate in the middle of several Obama administration priorities. The challenge is to decide whether a visit, perhaps by Middle East special envoy George Mitchell, would change or reinforce Qatari behavior.

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