

# Qatar, Iran, and the United States

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UNITED  
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**IRAN**

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## Introduction

Since the early 2000s, it has been U.S. policy to compel the Iranian regime to abandon its nuclear-weapons ambitions and stop sponsoring terrorism.

However, while claiming to be a U.S. ally, Qatar has undermined American policy on Iran through Doha’s ties to the Islamic Republic, support for Islamist terrorist groups like Hamas, and an adversarial approach to U.S. allies in the Gulf.

Nonetheless, the U.S. has rewarded Qatar with an American security and diplomatic umbrella, from the locating of U.S. Central Command at Al-Udeid base in 2003 to the decision to [designate](#) Qatar as a major non-NATO ally in 2022.

This resource explores how the Qatari government’s behavior has aided Tehran and harmed American interests.

### 1. Qatar’s Partnership with the Islamic Republic of Iran

First, Qatar obstructs U.S. Iran policy through Doha’s extensive engagement with and support for Tehran in the security, political, diplomatic, and economic spheres. Qatar has long engaged in a regional hedging strategy that neither fully embraces the Islamic Republic nor Qatar’s Arab neighbors in the Gulf. Doha’s policy motivation appears geared towards extending diplomatic influence and in projecting “[subtle power](#).”

In 2006, while a member of the United Nations Security Council, Qatar [voted](#) against sanctions on Iran for its nuclear program. Further, throughout the late 2000s, Iran and Qatar [engaged](#) in high-level security and economic diplomacy, which produced several tangible initiatives to boost commercial ties, including reducing trade barriers and reopening shuttered shipping lines. On December 24, 2010, Qatar’s commander of the Navy Mohamed Nasser Mubarak al-Mohannadi announced an opening for potential “cooperation in intelligence, security, and training fields.”

Qatar and Iran also [share](#) ownership of the South Pars/North Dome natural gas condensate field, the world’s largest natural gas field. The South Pars field is part of Tehran’s territorial waters, and the North Dome field is part of Doha’s territorial waters. Nevertheless, in December 2013, Reuters [reported](#) that Qatar offered to support Iran’s development of South Pars. Qatari Energy Minister Mohammed Saleh Al

Sada said at the time that the two countries had “established channels of communications and established teams” for cooperation on the gas fields.

In June 2017, after several Arab states instituted a blockade against Qatar (see section 3), Iran immediately stepped in to help Doha ride out its isolation. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani denounced the “siege” of Qatar and [pledged](#) to Qatar’s emir that “Iran’s air space, ground, and sea will be always be open to Qatar as a... friendly nation.” In August 2017, Qatar and Iran [restored](#) full diplomatic relations. Iran also gave Qatar an economic lifeline by permitting Qatar to use Iranian airspace and shipping lanes, and exported [increased foodstuffs](#) to Qatar to offset the Saudi cutoff of food exports. Qatar Airways also [paid](#) Iran \$100 million annually in overflight fees, boosting Tehran’s battered economy.

According to Iran’s Chamber of Commerce, Iranian exports to Qatar [jumped](#) from \$60 million to \$250 million over the 2017–18 fiscal year after the regional boycott took effect. Bilateral trade between Qatar and Iran in non-oil commodities [doubled](#) between March and August 2018, helping Tehran withstand the Trump administration’s “maximum pressure” campaign.

In August 2023, Qatar leveraged its ties with the U.S. and Iran to mediate hostage negotiations between the two adversaries, which led to Washington unfreezing [\\$6 billion](#) in sanctioned Iranian funds to ransom five Americans held by Tehran. The cash windfall incentivized further Iranian hostage-taking.

Doha [hopes](#) the ransom deal will set the precedent for additional Qatar-mediated deals or “informal understandings” that would exchange Western sanctions relief for temporary Iranian concessions on its nuclear program. These terms guarantee the Islamic Republic’s access to funds, which, in turn, support its global terror enterprise and its brutal repression in Iran. Iran’s pathway to a nuclear weapon would remain open under these terms, and its other malign behaviors which threaten international peace and security would remain unaddressed.

Qatar’s partnership with the Islamic Republic was further exposed during the biannual Doha International Maritime Defense Exhibition and Conference (DIMDEX) in March 2024. In a repeat of the 2022 show, [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps \(IRGC\)](#) officials and sanctioned Iranian military officials [were](#) in attendance, alongside Iran’s Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics’ (MODAFL) exhibit of missiles, drones, and other weapons systems. Iran also [unveiled](#) a new submarine at the conference. In 2022, the U.S. State Department [said](#) it “reject[ed]” the IRGC’s presence to DIMDEX.

During the conference, Qatar’s prime minister was engaged in the Sixth U.S-Qatar Strategic Dialogue in Washington, D.C. Qatar reaps significant benefits from its status as major non-NATO ally to the U.S., including via its extensive purchases of advanced weapons from American manufacturers, many of whom were also once again present at DIMDEX. At the same time, Qatar has advanced Tehran’s efforts to proliferate arms to bad actors around the world.

## 2. Qatar’s Support for Terrorist Groups

Qatar frustrates U.S. policy on Iran through extensive support for Iran-backed terrorist organizations. [According](#) to one leaked U.S. Department of State cable from 2009, Qatar is the “worst in the region” in terms of its lack of cooperation with U.S. counterterrorism efforts.

Qatar provides financing and/or sanctuary to multiple U.S.-sanctioned terrorist groups, including but not limited to al-Qaeda; al-Nusra Front; and, particularly,  [Hamas](#), which is sponsored by the Iranian regime. Qatar’s financial and diplomatic support for such groups mirrors and complements the financial and military support provided by Iran, the world’s biggest state sponsor of terrorism.

In 2015, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, the Qatari emir, praised Hamas, [saying](#), “We believe Hamas is a very important part of the Palestinian people.” He has denied his government’s ongoing support to terrorist groups, suggesting instead that groups like Hamas were not in fact terrorist groups but legitimate government actors.

Qatar supports Hamas in multiple ways. Over the past decade, Qatar has funded Hamas to the tune of [\\$1.5 billion](#), propping up its rule in the Gaza Strip. Qatar also conducts extensive private fund-raising efforts in-country which are disbursed to Hamas. Doha also hosts Hamas leaders and political offices, and platforms the group’s propaganda on the state-owned Al Jazeera media network.



*Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian (L) shakes hands with Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh before their meeting in Doha, Qatar, on October 31, 2023 (Source: [Fars News Agency](#))*

Senior Hamas leadership figures live in luxury in Qatar. They include [Khaled Meshaal](#), the former Hamas political bureau chief and the group’s current second-in-command, who has been in Qatar since [2012](#), as well as [Ismail Haniyeh](#), chief of Hamas’ political bureau, who arrived in Qatar in [2019](#).

On October 7, 2023, Hamas terrorists invaded Israel and killed 1,200 people—mostly civilians—including babies, children, women, and the elderly. Hamas also abducted around 240 hostages, bringing them back to the Gaza Strip.

Immediately after the October 7 attack, Qatar laid the blame for Hamas’ assault squarely on Israel, [stating](#) that “Israel [is] solely responsible for the ongoing escalation due to its ongoing

violations of the rights of the Palestinian people.” On October 10, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei [said](#), “We kiss the hands of those who planned the attack” on Israel, in reference to Hamas.

On October 15, 2023, Qatar allowed Iranian [Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian](#), who has close ties to the IRGC, to coordinate with Hamas leadership on Qatari soil. Hamas political bureau chief Ismail Haniyeh, currently residing in Qatar, [met](#) Abdollahian in Doha. Abdollahian praised the vicious October 7 terrorist attack as “an historic victory.” After this meeting, Hamas released a statement saying that the Iranian foreign minister and Haniyeh discussed Iranian cooperation with Hamas to achieve the group’s goals.

On October 18, 2023, the U.S. Department of the Treasury [sanctioned](#) a Hamas operative based in Qatar with close ties to Iranian elements. The sanctions noted that the operative, Muhammad Ahmad ‘Abd Al-Dayim Nasrallah, had been involved in transferring tens of millions of dollars to Hamas and its military wing, the Izz al-Din al-Qassim Brigades, underscoring how Qatar enables and supports Iran’s efforts to finance Hamas.

Qatar is also home to the Al Jazeera Media Network. Al Jazeera has favorably reported on Hamas' terrorist activities against Israel, consistently platformed Hamas propaganda, and sought to galvanize world opinion against Israel. Hamas itself [awarded](#) Al Jazeera a prize and has praised its "high professionalism" and its "affiliation with the cause of the oppressed Palestinian people" after clashes between Israel and Palestinian terrorist groups in 2021. Al Jazeera also favorably covers Iran, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and Tehran's network of proxies and partners.

In addition to supporting Hamas, Qatar has [backed](#) violent Islamist groups in Syria, including Al-Nusra Front, an Al-Qaeda affiliate. Iran also has [longstanding ties](#) to Al-Qaeda, despite religious differences between the radical Sunni terrorist group and the Shia theocracy in Tehran. In fact, [according](#) to the United Nations, the current de facto leader of Al-Qaeda, [Saif Al-Adel](#), is based in Iran.

Ultimately, Qatar's ability to simultaneously aid or undermine U.S. policy on Iran improves its diplomatic leverage. Qatar claims to be providing the U.S. with significant value as the chief mediator between the U.S. and Hamas, emphasizing it is capable of delivering the hostages' release. This approach has enhanced Qatar's standing and diplomatic influence.

### 3. Qatar's Rivalry with the Gulf Cooperation Council

Although a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) group of countries, Qatar has taken a frequently adversarial non-cooperative approach to the other GCC states in order to project power far beyond the state's tiny size and to distinguish itself on the regional and world stages. Qatar's sophisticated pursuit of what is commonly [described](#) as "subtle power" – in contradistinction to traditional "hard" and "soft" variants – has impaired America's ability to build a united GCC coalition to increase economic and political pressure on the Iranian regime.

The GCC is a political, economic, and security bloc comprised of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. The partnerships between the U.S. and the Gulf monarchies in the GCC constitute a cornerstone of America's strategy to counter and contain Iran. Indeed, the rationale for the GCC's founding in 1981 was largely based upon confronting the growing threat from the Islamic Republic. At the time, Iran had already established itself as the nerve center of radical Shia movements and ideology following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, threatening Sunni powers in the Gulf.

At odds with the GCC's original purpose, however, Qatar pursues its regional ambitions at the expense of other members of the GCC. Amid the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings across the region, Qatar sought to capitalize and enhance its geopolitical influence. Qatar [supported](#) Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Ennahda in Tunisia—organizations that are ideologically [opposed](#) to Gulf Arab states. The Muslim Brotherhood [won](#) democratic elections in Egypt in 2012, and Ennahda [came to power](#) in Tunisia in 2018.

Like Qatar, Iran welcomed the political transitions in Egypt and Tunisia, believing they represented a setback for the U.S., which had longstanding relations with the deposed Mubarak regime in Egypt and cooperative relations with the deposed Ben Ali regime in Tunisia. Supreme Leader Khamenei [said](#) during Friday prayers in February 2011, "The awakening of the Islamic Egyptian people is an Islamic liberation movement and I, in the name of the Iranian government, salute the Egyptian people and the Tunisian people."

The Arab Spring posed a domestic threat to monarchies in the Gulf, including [Saudi Arabia](#) and [Bahrain](#). The Iran-backed Al-Ashtar Brigades and other violent Shia opposition groups, which are operational in Bahrain, mobilized against the Bahraini monarchy. In March 2011, the Saudi military intervened to suppress the uprising in Bahrain, [deploying](#) tanks and military personnel to protect the monarchy. Partly because of the Saudi intervention, the protests didn't unseat the monarchy. This outcome benefited Saudi Arabia, which was concerned about subversive actors in its own borders that could have been further radicalized if Bahrain's uprising met with success.

That same month, newspapers in Bahrain [accused](#) Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim Al-Thani of demanding the right to demonstrate for Bahraini citizens. The demands were part of a plan titled the "Qatari Initiative," intended to shift the narrative from terrorism and subversion to government repression. The prime minister was also believed to have extensive contact with Al-Wefaq, a banned Shia opposition political party in Bahrain. The allegations, if true, point to Qatar's deviance from the positions of the Gulf monarchies during this tumultuous period.

In January 2015, the Houthis [ousted](#) the internationally recognized government of President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi in Yemen. In March of that year, Saudi Arabia [intervened](#) militarily to restore him. Qatar has [sought](#) to play the "neutral mediator" role, adopting a position on the war that would make it palatable to both warring parties. In effect, Qatar's policy again diverged from the rest of the coalition, weakening resolve to win the proxy war in Yemen against Iran.

On June 5, 2017, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt (the "Quartet") took action against its fellow GCC member Qatar, imposing an air, land, and sea blockade in the hopes of compelling it to correct course. Saudi Arabia and the others were concerned by the potential for Qatar to destabilize the region in partnership with Tehran. On June 23, 2017, the Quartet issued thirteen demands for Qatar to meet as a condition for lifting the blockade. Among other things, the Quartet [demanded](#) Qatar cease its support for terrorism and the Muslim Brotherhood; downgrade its ties with the Islamic Republic; and close Al Jazeera—or else face a coordinated economic and diplomatic blockade.

The Saudi-led pressure campaign ultimately failed to change Qatar's behavior, in large degree because of Iran's willingness to aid Qatar. In January 2021, Qatar's relations with the Quartet were [restored](#), without any concessions from Qatar. All of the Quartet's 13 demands were effectively papered over, while the U.S. has remained quiescent about these developments.

## Conclusion

The U.S. seeks to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon and from destabilizing the Middle East through its terrorist proxies and partners. Qatar, designated as a Major Non-NATO Ally of the U.S., has undermined these objectives through its partnership with Iran, support of Iran-backed terrorist organizations, and adversarial approach to American allies in the Gulf.

Given Iran's ongoing aggression—including Iran-backed militia strikes against U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria—Qatar must stop playing both sides and unequivocally join the U.S. and its Gulf allies in standing up to Iran. Until such time, the U.S. should impose costs on Qatar unless it remands Hamas terrorist leaders into the custody of the U.S. or Israel; severs ties with terrorist groups; and stops providing diplomatic cover to the Islamic Republic.

Such costs should include the U.S. revoking Qatar's designation as a major non-NATO ally and designating Qatar a state sponsor of terrorism instead. The U.S. should also expel Qatari diplomats and ban business with Qatar. Finally, the U.S. should notify Qatar that the Hamas operatives in their territory are legitimate military targets, and should initiate military action to detain and, if necessary, kill the leadership figures stationed in Qatar. For a complete list of immediate action that the U.S. should take against Qatar, please find UANI's list of recommendations [here](#).