



Can Biden move Qatar away from Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood?

ACCORDING TO the US State Department, American-Qatari “bilateral relations are strong... coordinating closely on a wide range of regional and global issues. Qatar has played a constructive financial, political, and military role in addressing regional turmoil... has contributed to progress, stability, and prosperity in the region. The United States and Qatar also cooperate on security in the Persian Gulf region, notably via hosting the Al-Udeid Air Force Base and CENTCOM Forward Headquarters, and Qatar’s support of North Atlantic Treaty Organization and US military operations in the region. Qatar is a major staging ground for air operations... in Iraq and Syria.”

So it was no surprise with this glowing assessment of the partnership between the two nations, that Qatar’s Al Jazeera media outlet reported that US deputy assistant secretary of state for Gulf affairs Timothy Lenderking said, “We’re going to move ahead... designating Qatar a major non-NATO ally... a status that provides foreign nations with benefits in defense trade and security cooperation with Washington.”

Knowing how American administrations of both parties view Qatar as valuable, the Emir and his advisers felt secure enough to formally ask the US for permission to buy America’s most advanced state of the art F-35 stealth fighter weapons system, especially after the US agreed to sell the game changing weapons system to their Gulf rival, the UAE, as it normalized relations with Israel.

But is America making a mistake in not differentiating between Qatar and the other Gulf states, treating all simply as Sunni monarchies, despite Qatar’s long history of undermining its Gulf neighbors’ interests and unlike them, allying with America’s Middle East adversaries, especially Iran, which fundamentally threaten American and Israeli security interests.

A few years ago, I was discussing Qatar with a leading member of the foreign policy team for the chairman of the Senate Foreign

Relations Committee, and I highlighted my concern over Qatari money-laundering for Iran, which to my mind completely crossed an American national security line. The response was that other Gulf nations also play both sides of street, so they aren’t particularly worse than any other Gulf state.

But is that true, can America trust and rely on Qatar as much as the UAE, especially with weapons that will diminish Israel’s qualitative military edge (QME)?

Qatar’s association with Iran is complicated. They share the world’s largest gas field, and Iran hovers over Qatar like a crouching leopard. Qatar shrewdly uses the presence of the al Udeid American airbase on their territory as a shield against Iranian encroachment. But have they cozied up to Iran too much, as well as other American adversaries like the transnational Muslim Brotherhood, whose political Islamist theology is anti-American, inspiring American adversaries from Turkey to Libya?

Is Qatar really deserving of such elite status as a major non-NATO ally with all its military preferences, and if it is, shouldn’t it pay some tangible price beyond the tens of billions of dollars that will enrich the US arms industry to receive this status, in light of the fact that the most advanced American arms could fall into the hands of Qatar’s friend Iran, America’s primary adversary in the region?

As you read this article, Iran is threatening American soldiers in Iraq and Syria through its Shi’ite controlled proxies (Popular Mobilization Units) with decades of American blood on its hands. Do we really want to take the risk of allowing Iran to get a peek at our state-of-the-art weapons systems? Would the money alone be worth the price of changing the balance of arms power in the Middle East and undermining Israel’s qualitative edge, which has been legislatively mandated by Congress?

Now that the UAE, Bahrain and Sudan have normalized relations with Israel, and the Saudis, Oman and Morocco are on the

flight path to diplomatically recognizing the Jewish state, could Qatar be next, as a price it will have to pay for receiving the F-35 and major non-NATO status? Not likely. Even if it did normalize relations with Israel, it be an icy normalization that was nothing more than a photoshoot embassy opening without the people-to-people interactions the UAE and Bahrain are encouraging.

A Biden administration is less likely to value the importance of fostering relationships between Arab nations and Israel than the Trump administration, as it will be at odds with its primary goal for the Middle East, getting the Iranian nuclear agreement back on track, and possibly reviving the Obama/Biden policy of rebalancing the Middle East toward Iran and away from Israel and the Gulf states, lead by Saudi Arabia. The Obama-Biden administration said that the Saudis and Israel need to learn to share the “neighborhood” with Iran.

That would be fine if the State Department that sees no evil in Qatar didn’t also designate Iran as a state sponsor of terror. Knowing the Iranians despise the Sunni states and Israel, State is more likely to prioritize relations with the Ayatollah than with friendly autocrats who want to do business with Israel, in hopes of reviving the nuclear deal and resurrecting the Obama foreign policy legacy.

Paper macheing over the nuclear deal with claims that it has been improved with new negotiations won’t hold water except to those who choose to close their eyes, i.e. the mainstream media and political partisans who will spin the facts to agree with their policy preferences. However, if it is true that the Biden team of Jake Sullivan and Michèle Flournoy are coordinating with the Israelis, something Obama specifically choose not to do, then perhaps the new administration won’t agree to a new deal without significantly more safeguards on export of Iranian missiles and restraints on their nuclear project.

Although Qatar and the UAE are both Sunni Gulf monarchies bathed in fossil fuel



MORTEZA NIKOUBAZL/REUTERS

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (right) gestures as he attends an official meeting with Qatar's Foreign Minister Adviser Khalid Mohammad al-Atiyeh in Tehran on October 13, 2011

wealth, they are light years apart in their alliances and attitude toward their fellow Gulf states, the Muslim world, and the West. Just a few years ago lead by Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states boycotted Qatar with little success, but the message was and is clear, they see Qatar as part of the political Islamist world, allied with the political Sunni Islamist Turkish PM Erdogan, and the Shi'ite political Islamist revolutionary regime in Iran. The Sunni political Islamists support the Muslim Brotherhood and like-minded groups like Hamas that are anti-American, anti-Israeli, and opposed to the Gulf monarchies, who want to ally with Israel to thwart the hegemonic ambitions of Iran.

Israel's position on the sale of F35s is more complicated. Although they at first refused to acquiesce in the sale of F35s to the UAE, they are confident that the UAE is a good calculated risk knowing that as long as there is a shared adversary in Iran, they are unlikely to break with Israel over issues like another Palestinian Intifada. But selling F-35 sales to more dangerous neighbors like Qatar is another story. Yet the Israelis seem to be resigned to this inevitability.

Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz, who is a close confidant of the prime minister, said, "I have no doubt that if they [Qatar] want it and

are willing to pay, sooner or later they will get it... This is a supposition that we must take into account... ultimately looks out for American interests."

So is it in American interests to sell the F-35 to Qatar, or perhaps more importantly upgrade a nation to the elite status of a major non-NATO ally, that financially supports and give shelter to radical Islamists, some with American blood on their hands?

As Efraim Inbar, president of the Jerusalem Institute for Strategic Studies said, "Qatar spends enormous amounts of money in systematic support for the nefarious activities of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and its branches all over the world. The Muslim Brotherhood is an anti-Western and anti-democratic organization. Qatar also funds numerous jihadist groups, and many Qatari citizens have been convicted of regional terrorist activities. Qatar also uses its influential Al Jazeera television network to undermine the stability of its pro-Western Arab neighbors. The US recently concluded that Al Jazeera is not a media outlet, but a lobbying outfit." Qatar's media outlet Al Jazeera, which is directly under the control of the government, has played a double game of offering reasonable news coverage on its English language station, and a profoundly

anti-American, anti-Israeli voice on its Arabic station.

According to Sam Westrop of the Middle East Forum, the "Qatari funded Muslim Brotherhood has linked arms with those who promote very left-wing agendas... funding the agendas that the Islamists want. We see Qatar funding groups like Western Muslim charities, such as CAIR and ISNA and Islamic Relief, with Islamist ties abroad to places like Hamas in Gaza."

If Qatar is a major supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood shouldn't we also be concerned that Qatar is also the largest foreign funder of American universities, even giving tens of millions of dollars to American K-12 education for Arabic studies?

So what can we do to move Qatar closer to our orbit and truly ally with our interests?

Like the rest of the Middle East we must remember that we share interests rather than values with these nations, and when dealing with totalitarian regimes and autocrats, any negotiated deal may be built on a foundation of quicksand. Israel learned that lesson in trusting Arafat to uphold the Oslo Accord.

A more beneficial and untried strategy for the Biden administration is to use the leverage of a threat to move our al Udeid base to a friendlier nearby location like the UAE, who would, by the way, fund the cost of the transfer. If we pressure Qatar, they will need to reevaluate their security arrangement, worrying that the loss of an American presence makes them vulnerable to the Iranians. They know Turkey, China, and Russia are not long-term partners to ensure their safety, as all are tied to Iran. Deep down they know their natural alignment is with the other conservative Gulf states, and the sooner we decide to pressure them and make them choose, the better it is for all parties, including the Qataris. ■

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