

The Road to a Gaza Cease-Fire Runs Through Qatar

The emirate has used its influence with Hamas to press for a truce with Israel. But “the last word is with those on the battlefield,” one expert said.



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Reporting from Doha, Qatar, and Washington

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After Hamas’s political leader, Ismail Haniyeh, was assassinated in late July, Hamas officials told Qatari mediators that they had new demands for the already deadlocked cease-fire talks, according to one Arab and one American official.

The suggestion worried the Qatari prime minister, who had spent months urging Hamas to compromise. With the support of his staff, he pushed back in meetings and calls with the Palestinian militant group, the officials said.

Hamas ultimately dropped the idea.

As the talks for a cease-fire and the release of hostages have stalled and sputtered in recent months, Qatar has leveraged its influence with Hamas in an effort to break through myriad impasses, according to interviews with more than a dozen officials with knowledge of the negotiations, including ones from the region and from the United States. Most of the officials spoke on condition of anonymity so they could share details of the closed-door discussions.

Since the war began, Qatar, along with Egypt, has emerged as a crucial mediator between Israel and Hamas, hosting marathon discussions with Palestinian representatives in air-conditioned rooms in downtown Doha, the Qatari capital, and channeling messages from the Biden administration to Hamas. The Qataris have also been working with the Israelis, even though the countries do not have formal diplomatic relations.

The Qatari efforts have taken on more urgency as the negotiations appear at a standstill. Hamas and Israel remain far apart on a deal — and the goal posts seem to be constantly shifting.

Two American officials said Hamas in recent days had added new demands for the release of hostages, asking for more on the release of Palestinian prisoners in the opening phase of the agreement.

The officials hope Qatar can persuade the militant group to again drop those demands and even reduce their request for a prisoner release following the killing of six hostages in Gaza.

It has been an ongoing effort to keep talks on track. Qatar coaxed Hamas back to the negotiating table after Israel invaded Rafah, in southern Gaza, in May, four of the officials said. In the weeks that followed, it pressed Hamas to accept compromise language in the proposal.

More recently, Qatar has persuaded Hamas to stay involved in the talks, even as the militant group says it no longer wants to negotiate. While Hamas has publicly claimed it did not participate in the last two rounds of official talks in Cairo and Doha, it has privately engaged in less formal discussions with Qatari and Egyptian officials about those meetings and offered feedback on specific points, one Arab and two American officials said.

“Qatar has been pressuring both sides to commit to a deal and to make difficult decisions within the negotiations to reach that deal,” said Majed al-Ansari, the Qatari foreign ministry spokesman.

Qatar has maintained close relations with Hamas for more than a decade and has hosted its exiled political leaders since 2012. The former Qatari leader, Emir Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, became the first and only head of state to visit Gaza under Hamas's tenure. And Qatar has funded Al Jazeera's Arabic channel, which has amplified Hamas's messaging.

Emir Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, then Qatar's leader, left, with Ismail Haniyeh, Hamas's political chief, in Gaza City in 2012. Hatem Moussa/Associated Press

Throughout the war, the Persian Gulf emirate, which has a history of ties with Islamists, has tried to present itself as an international interlocutor capable of narrowing the gaps between the warring parties.

Qatar is also host to the largest U.S. military base in the Middle East. And the Gaza mediation efforts have given the country another opportunity to prove to the United States that it can be a strategic ally on important American foreign policy objectives.

"The Qataris always want to show they can be a good partner," said Dana Shell Smith, the U.S. ambassador to Qatar from 2014 to 2017. "The cease-fire talks allow them to do just that."

With a small army, Qatar relies on the United States to provide it with a security blanket, Ms. Shell Smith said, noting that Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, Gulf powerhouses, have occasionally taken hostile positions against

their Qatari neighbors.

U.S. officials have praised Qatar's handling of the cease-fire negotiations, saying it has backed U.S. attempts to put pressure on Hamas at key moments. But the coziness between Hamas and Qatar has also given some American officials pause, two U.S. officials said.

Al Jazeera's office in Ramallah, the West Bank. Qatar's funding of Al Jazeera's Arabic channel has bolstered Hamas's messaging. Nasser Nasser/Associated Press

Qatar's good will with Hamas partly comes from years of financial backing for Gaza. Qatar had sent hundreds of millions of dollars to Gaza — with Israeli approval — for poor families, infrastructure projects and public sector employees' salaries, though Israeli officials have recently said they regretted the decision since it enabled Hamas to divert some money toward military operations.

Since the war began 11 months ago, the Qatari prime minister, Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani, has dedicated a considerable amount of his own time attempting to broker a cease-fire, even at the expense of other government projects, according to three of the officials with knowledge of the talks. The premier, they said, has met with Hamas representatives as frequently as twice a day.

In June, Qatar intervened when it appeared once again that cease-first talks were stuck.

Israel was insisting that a later stage of negotiations focus on multiple issues, while Hamas wanted to limit the scope to the swap of prisoners and captives.

Working with the United States, Qatar presented three possible wording choices to Hamas as compromise language, according to Husam Badran, a senior Hamas official based in Qatar. Hamas representatives chose one of them, he added.

Hamas agreed that the later stage would focus in particular on the swap issue, wording that left the door open to potentially discussing some other issues.

“We did that because we’re keen on the issue of a cease-fire,” Mr. Badran said. “If there are some phrases that will make the negotiations easier and lead to the same result — the end of the war — we have no problem.”

Three of the officials familiar with the negotiations said Qatar had to push hard to get Hamas to agree to that compromise language.

U.S. Air Force personnel loading aid bound for Gaza onto an airplane at Al-Udeid Air Base, Qatar, in late March. It is the largest U.S. military base in the Middle East.

Hussein Malla/Associated Press

Mr. al-Ansari, the foreign ministry spokesman, said Qatar had been exerting pressure by putting ideas on the table, setting deadlines for replies and reminding both sides of the gravity of the situation.

“Qatar is able to interact with Hamas in a serious and open way because of its long relationship with it and its support for Gaza,” said Tamer Qarmout, a professor of public policy at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies. “Hamas realizes that if the Qataris are pressuring them, they need to engage with them and respond positively.”

Qatar’s sway has its limits, with both Israel and Hamas staking out seemingly irreconcilable positions.

Along with the issues over the prisoner exchange, the negotiations have been stuck, in part, over the fate of the Philadelphi Corridor, a narrow strip of land in Gaza along the border with Egypt. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel has insisted the Israeli military should remain in the corridor, while Hamas has said any deal requires Israel to withdraw from Gaza, including that border zone.

Several of the officials familiar with the negotiations expressed concern that Mr. Netanyahu had in recent weeks put forward new demands that could further delay or even torpedo an agreement, including keeping Israeli forces in the corridor.

Hamas, too, has put up roadblocks throughout the process.

At a meeting this summer with Hamas officials, Qatari mediators pressed the Palestinian militant group to agree to the version of a cease-fire agreement with Israel that was on the table.

The Hamas officials responded that even if they were prepared to do so, they could not greenlight it without the approval of the group’s leadership inside Gaza, in particular Yahya Sinwar, the most powerful figure in the territory. The Qataris acknowledged the point and the meeting ended without a breakthrough, according to several of the officials familiar with the talks.

“The last word is with those on the battlefield,” Mr. Qarmout said.

A view of Doha, Qatar's capital. Qatar's influence in negotiations has its limits, with both Israel and Hamas staking out seemingly irreconcilable positions. Diego Ibarra Sanchez for The New York Times

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