

After bombing, time to demystify ‘Qatar lobby’

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ANALYSIS

On Tuesday, September 9, Israel bombed Doha, killing at least five Hamas staffers and a member of Qatari security. Israeli officials initially claimed the US green-lit the operation, despite Qatar hosting the largest US military in the region. The White House has since contradicted that version of events, saying the White House was given notice “just before” the bombing and claiming the strike was an “unfortunate” attack that “could serve as an opportunity for peace”. The fallout from the bombing is still unclear, but the US decision to merely chalk up Israel’s attack on a major non-NATO ally to an “unfortunate” attack should at least put to rest one persistent myth: that the Qatar lobby holds more sway over the US than the pro-Israel lobby in Washington.

The “Qatar lobby” is oftentimes invoked as an epithet by pro-Israel hawks to explain away why Americans are suddenly skeptical about Washington’s support for Israel. In an August interview, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu recently blamed Qatar for what he claimed was an increase in antisemitism among the American conservative commentariat. They “spent billions on American universities, vilifying, vilifying Israel, vilifying Jews, and also, frankly, vilifying the United States... and all that was left to accumulate primarily in academia, you know, and from there, it sort of distributes itself elsewhere,” Netanyahu argued. In this, Netanyahu was parroting a trope spread by pro-Israel — and some Israeli cabinet-funded — organizations that shifts the blame for nationwide pro-Palestine protests away from the Israeli military’s civilian slaughter and forced starvation in Gaza to Qatar, which allegedly has pushed US college students down a path of raging antisemitism.

The problem with this story is that, while Qatar has spent billions of dollars on American universities, nearly all of that money has gone to American universities within Qatar. In fact, more than 90% of Qatar’s more than \$6 billion in higher education funding has explicitly been earmarked to fund higher education in Qatar, where American college students are a distinct minority at schools overwhelmingly filled with Qatari’s and expats living in the country.

Undeterred by this simple fact, Netanyahu and pro-Israel groups have continued to spread the tale that Qatar’s higher education spending is driving students on US college campuses down an antisemitic road. Perhaps no organization has done this more often than the Institute for the Study of Global Anti-Semitism (ISGAP). The institute’s scholars have repeatedly testified to Congress about Qatari funding causing antisemitism, despite ample evidence that their research on this topic is, at best, flawed. Just as importantly, the organization has not publicly disclosed that it had been funded by the Israeli cabinet as recently as 2020.



Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Qatar Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani (front-2nd L) stands with several of his ministers during the opening of the 33rd edition of the Doha International Book Fair in Doha, Qatar, on May 9, 2024.
● NOUSHAD THEKKAYIL/NURPHOTO

This exemplifies the inherent contradiction of Qatar’s influence in America: While the Middle East monarchy does have enormous influence in America, its alleged omnipresence is often wildly exaggerated by Qatar’s critics. Nick Cleveland-Stout and I sought to demystify Qatar’s influence in America in our just-released Quincy Institute brief, “Qatar’s Influence in America.” We found that in just eight years — after being nearly invaded by then rivals Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates — Qatar has transformed from something of an afterthought in the influence game to one of the biggest players around. Just consider the highlights of this massive operation that we document in the brief:

- Qatar currently has more than two dozen Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) registered lobbying and public relations firms working for it.
- Scores of revolving door all-stars have been lobbying for the Qatari’s, headlined by former representatives Tom Davis (R-Va.), Jim Moran (D-Va.), Tom Reynolds (R-N.Y.), and Bart Stupak (D-Mich.).
- No country’s lobbyists report more in-person meetings with policymakers than Qatar.
- Qatar is the third most gen-

erous foreign donor to think tanks in the US.

- Multiple Trump administration officials have previously worked for Qatar, including Lee Zeldin, the director of the Environmental Protection Agency, and Kash Patel, the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Patel’s boss — Attorney General Pam Bondi — was a registered foreign agent for Qatar until 2021.
- Trump’s family and companies have also inked billions of dollars in deals with the Qatari’s. And, of course, Qatar gifted the president a luxury jumbo-jet dubbed “the Palace in the Sky”.

At the same time, Qatar has been doing a lot of things that are quite beneficial for US interests, most notably serving as a mediator for conflicts around the world, including in Afghanistan, Congo, Darfur, Lebanon, Yemen, and, of course, Gaza. All of this led The Guardian to dub Qatar “The global capital of diplomacy”. Our analysis of all FARA-reported political activities conducted by Qatar’s lobbyists since the Israel-Gaza war began revealed that Qatar’s lobbyists spend much of their time touting Qatar’s mediator prowess and sending a clear, yet unspoken, message: While Israel is dragging the US into wars, Qatar is trying to end them.

For instance, a one-pager distributed to media contacts by GRV Strategies, on behalf of Qatar, states that “Over the past year, Qatar has worked tirelessly with the United States, Egypt, and other international partners to de-escalate the crisis in Gaza, mediating between Israel and Hamas to try to end the bloodshed, ensure humanitarian aid reaches innocent Palestinian civilians, and secure the release of hostages.” Another Qatari firm, Lumen8 Advisors, facilitated Qatar’s Prime Minister appearing on Tucker Carlson in a segment entitled, “War with Iran? The Prime Minister of Qatar Is Being Attacked in the Media for Wanting to Stop It.” Carlson was far from the first conservative commentator Qatar’s lobbyists and public relations firms have courted. As early as 2017, Qatar’s agents have been targeting MAGA influencers, with one of the architects of Qatar’s influencer campaign explaining to the Wall Street Journal that, “We want to create a campaign where we are getting into his [Trump’s] head as much as possible.” This is at least partially why Netanyahu’s disdain for Qatari influence overlaps with his aggressive attacks on any conservative who doesn’t recommend unflinching US sup-

port for Israel. Despite Netanyahu and pro-Israel groups’ attacks, however, more and more conservatives are publicly speaking out against Israel’s war on Gaza and questioning how Israel fits into the “America First” mantra. Just recently, for example, at a National Conservatism Conference panel, Curt Mills, editor of The American Conservative, argued, “Why are these our wars? Why are Israel’s endless problems America’s liabilities?... Why should we accept America First — asterisk Israel? And the answer is, we shouldn’t.” Yet, while there’s currently significant alignment between US interests and Qatar’s interests — namely, peace and stability (i.e., not letting Israel pull the US into wars) — this isn’t cause for ignoring Qatar’s influence in the US. As we write in the brief, “Qatar’s unprecedented access to and influence on Trump, at the very least, presents a risk of the president putting personal gain over national gain when it comes to Qatar.” While their efforts did not help stave off an attack from the more influential Israel, that is no reason not to keep a watchful eye on Qatari influence in America.

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The various lounges, kitchens, and bathrooms of the luxury jumbo-jet, dubbed “the Palace in the Sky,” are connected by a luxurious staircase. The plane was gifted by Qatar’s royal family to US President Donald Trump as a replacement for the current Air Force One plane.
● AMAC AEROSPACE