Far from Doha
by Haim Malka

Hamas’s security forces have arrested hundreds of jihadists in the Gaza Strip in the last six months. Among them are militants firing rockets into Israel and scores of suspected Islamic State group (ISG) sympathizers. It seems to be a peculiar move for a group that calls for Israel’s destruction. And it all might come to an end if Qatar’s row with its Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) neighbors gets out of hand.

Despite its hostility toward Israel, Hamas maintains order in the Gaza Strip, and the Israeli government relies on it to do so. Without an enforcer in Gaza, Israel fears that the area would be overrun by warring factions posing an even deadlier threat. As a result, Israel facilitates Hamas’s rule by supplying its enemy with electricity and ensuring the steady flow of medicine, food, and consumer goods.

In practice, Israel seeks to ensure that Hamas is strong enough to dominate more radical groups in Gaza like the ISG, but not strong enough to feel emboldened to attack Israel. It is a delicate balance fraught with risk, and Qatar, more than any other external actor, has enabled it. Should the unfolding intra-GCC feud result in pressure on Qatar to end its support to Hamas, it would shake Gaza’s delicate equilibrium. That could potentially trigger another Israel-Hamas confrontation, with dire consequences for Israeli and Palestinian civilians alike.

That’s not the way this is all playing out among the Israeli government and the public. Many are celebrating Qatar’s growing isolation. After all, despite unofficial diplomatic contacts with Israel, Qatar is in league with many of Israel’s enemies. It has hosted Hamas’s leadership for years, and it provides Hamas with tens of millions of dollars in economic aid annually. Qatar also bankrolls a range of other Islamist political movements, from Muslim Brotherhood chapters to jihadi-salafi groups. Further, Qatar maintains close ties to Iran. It would be logical to think that pressure on Qatar to weaken its ties with Israel’s enemies would very much be in Israel’s interests. Gaza, though, is more complicated.

(continued on page 2)

Remembering Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski
Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski passed away last month at the age of 89. He remained active at CSIS until his final weeks, energetically participating in recent internal meetings on Syria and on Iran. Originally a scholar of the Soviet Union, Brzezinski was repeatedly drawn to the Middle East. Initially his goal was finding ways to counter Soviet influence, but he came to see the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Iranian hostility, and the recent eruptions of anger and desperation in the Arab world as matters that require serious U.S. attention. Brzezinski thought a great deal about the problem of U.S. leadership, and in particular how the U.S. government could use a combination of inspiration, pressure, and support to persuade counterparts to align their policies with U.S. interests. He was not sentimental about human rights, but he recognized from his study of the Soviet Union that suppressing human aspirations not only has profound costs, but is also destined to fail. He was a mentor and friend to the Middle East Program, and he will be missed. A brief remembrance is HERE. ■

Fight Club
The fight in Dubai drew combatants from Saudi Arabia, Iran, Syria, and Egypt. Several women even joined the fray. But all of them were struggling for the same cause—to be the next Middle Eastern superstars of World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE).

American professional wrestling has long had a devoted following in the Middle East. As the industry sizes up the regional market’s potential, it is showing more love back. Industry titan WWE, which counts 40 million Facebook followers across the Middle East, is leading the charge. Since opening its third international office in Dubai, the company launched an Arabic website in 2012 and flew out its stars for live-action extravaganzas in Egypt, Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia. In 2017, it debuted a weekly commentary program in Arabic, Wal3ooha (“Light it up”), which airs in prime time on the Orbit satellite television network.

To cater to regional tastes, WWE is diligently localizing its content. Once known for villains such as “The Iron Sheik” (who was actually Iranian-American) the network is recruiting white-hat heroes from the Middle East. Wrestling stars record Ramadan greetings to fans, and Middle Eastern matches are more “family-friendly.” WWE’s ambitions fit well with governments’ own campaigns to broaden entertainment options for their youthful populations.

WWE’s Doha match was sponsored by Qatar’s state tourism bureau, and the Qatari royal family arranged a VIP show when ringside seats sold out. Since Saudi Arabia hosted its first showdown in 2014, authorities have booked matches annually. Unlike in the streets, the fights are pure entertainment. ■ MB
Israel sees no immediate alternative to Hamas’s rule of Gaza. The Palestinian Authority (PA) is based in the West Bank and has no military capability to establish order in Gaza. Egypt had nothing but grief when it occupied the Gaza strip from 1948 to 1967, and it has its hands full with an insurgency in the northern Sinai. The Americans and Europeans have no appetite. In fact, there is no foreign force that is willing to rule Gaza that would improve Gaza’s predicament.

Israel prefers to stay on its side of the border and intervene when necessary. The last war in Gaza in 2014 killed 67 Israeli soldiers and 6 civilians as well as 2,251 Palestinians, including 1,462 civilians. The ceasefire that has endured since then has been tense, but it has endured.

It is secured, in part, with the cooperation of Qatar, which supplies Hamas with diplomatic cover and spends millions of dollars on aid that few others are willing to provide. As part of that effort, Qatari officials coordinate aid shipments with Israel for the transfer of goods to Gaza through Israel’s Ashdod port. This not only ensures that Gaza has the minimum to sustain its population, but it allows Israel to monitor Qatari activities in Gaza. Without Qatar, Hamas would be forced to turn to Iran or Turkey for greater support, neither of which is an improvement. In the absence of Qatari support and cooperation, Israel would have to contend with a Gaza that is more deprived of food, water, medicine, and basic consumer goods. Israel fears that greater deprivation would escalate hostilities, sparking a direct war.

A sharp decrease in the already dismal socioeconomic conditions in Gaza could undermine Hamas, by creating a humanitarian crisis that the government would be unable to control. A collapse of the economy and lack of goods could prompt more radical groups to openly challenge Hamas and launch more sustained attacks against Israeli cities. Israel would be forced to retaliate, but a more fragmented adversary would leave it no clear address against which to direct its operations and no clear interlocutor with whom to reach a ceasefire. Ultimately, this would jeopardize Israeli lives, and leave Gaza in an even deeper humanitarian crisis. The costs of that would inevitably fall to Israel.

Egypt, Gaza’s doorway to the outside world, plays a role squeezing Hamas in Gaza. Egypt rarely opens its Rafah crossing with the Gaza Strip, and maintains a near total blockade. The West Bank PA has also tried to disrupt the delicate balance by putting economic pressure on the people of Gaza. The PA has repeatedly cut public sector salaries in Gaza—which are still paid via Ramallah—and limited the flow of medicine, some of which also flows through channels administered by the PA. More recently, the PA requested that Israel stop providing electricity to Gaza. So far Israel has continued to supply about 30 percent of Gaza’s power needs; it does so because it fears the alternatives to Hamas more than the continuation of Hamas rule.

It is plausible that the Trump administration, Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Saudi Arabia have already worked out a plan for how to replace Qatari support for Hamas and secure Gaza in ways that have not been made public. A future Gaza without Hamas in power would certainly be a better outcome for Palestinians and Israelis if a non-violent Palestinian government were in control. It could open up Gaza, increase the free flow of goods and people, and start rebuilding the economy.

But that is not the only possible outcome. The loss of Qatari patronage could also spark a major crisis on Israel’s border and leave Israel with quite limited tools to respond. Before upending the status quo, countries with a stake in Gaza’s stability should think carefully about the consequences of pulling the plug on Gaza’s economic lifeline. ■ 6/9/17