

UK Allows Key Hamas Funder to Have Military Base in Northern England

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As Gaza continues to endure all-out war, UK ministers have been lining up to say they "stand with Israel". They have unequivocally condemned as terrorism the actions of Hamas, whose militants moved into southern Israel from Gaza on Saturday.

The Israeli military's now massive bombardment of Gaza, which is deemed by international bodies to be under Israeli occupation, threatens to engulf Gaza in its most brutal conflict yet.

The UK's extensive [military support](#) of Israel has been all but erased by the British media in recent years – but so too has Whitehall's new special relationship with a key Hamas supporter, the authoritarian Gulf regime of Qatar.

While Iran is Hamas' main funder, Qatar's financial support of the group dates back to at least 2008 and has involved hundreds of millions of dollars for Hamas' political and humanitarian wings.

In the past Qatar has also funded Hamas "military personnel", one of the group's leaders [said](#) in 2016. The UK designates the whole of Hamas, including its military wing, the al-Qassam Brigades, which is also mainly funded by Iran, as a terrorist organisation.

Yet the RAF operates two joint squadrons with Qatar, the first with any nation since the Second World War when Polish pilots helped fight the Battle of Britain.

One squadron operates out of RAF Coningsby in Lincolnshire and was agreed in 2017. It was part of a £6bn arms deal in which the UK will sell Qatar 24 Typhoon warplanes alongside the nine Hawk aircraft, both manufactured by British firm BAE Systems. The UK also [provides](#) a "bespoke support and training package".

The other squadron is a joint training unit for the Hawk fighter, based at RAF Leeming in Yorkshire.

“Qatar and the UK share mutual interests in ensuring stability in the Middle East”, the RAF has [stated](#), having recently agreed to extend the joint squadron at Coningsby for a further two years.

Qatari Funding

The Gaza Strip has been subjected to a brutal Israeli blockade, which has been termed illegal by the UN, since 2007. Hamas has controlled Gaza since it won elections in 2006.

Some [estimates](#) are that Qatar funds Hamas to the tune of over \$360m a year, which the group uses to buy fuel, support impoverished Gazan families and pay the salaries of the Hamas bureaucracy.

“Qatari spending in Gaza might look humanitarian, but in reality, Doha is funding Hamas’ coffers through oil sales”, writes Hussain Abdul-Hussain, an analyst at the right-wing Foundation for Defense of Democracies in the US.

“Without Qatari money, Hamas’s governorship of Gaza would have become untenable and its popularity among Palestinians would have collapsed”, he adds.

Another view is that “Qatar’s relationship with Hamas has been subjected to misinformation and mis-categorisation”, [says](#) Sultan Al-Khulafai, in a recent blog for the London School of Economics.

He writes that, far from funding terrorism, Qatar’s support for Hamas is based on backing the Palestinian cause, acting as a mediator to promote regional stability and addressing the humanitarian catastrophe faced by the people of Gaza.

Since January 2020, Qatar has hosted Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh and before that it offered a base to Khaled Meshaal, who served as the group’s leader from 2004 until 2017.

UK Qatari ‘Interoperability’

The joint squadron at RAF Leeming, which was agreed in 2021, will train British and Qatari pilots on Hawk fighter aircraft and enhance “interoperability and coordination between both air forces”.

The Yorkshire base will permanently host nine Hawk aircraft the UK is selling to the Qataris. These jets are currently being built by BAE at its factory in Warton, Lancashire.

The squadron at RAF Coningsby started flying in June 2020, with joint activities [including](#) “heavy weapons training” and exercises with Britain’s Royal Navy. The squadron also provided security for the football World Cup in Qatar last year.

The UK also has a [security pact](#) with Qatar to share classified intelligence, involving GCHQ, the UK’s largest spy agency.

A tiny resource-rich peninsula adjacent to Saudi Arabia, with a population of just over two million, Qatar is one of the leading suppliers of natural gas to the UK.

British ministers have allowed Qatar to [invest](#) over £40bn in Britain, in assets including Harrods and the London Stock Exchange, mainly through the state-run Qatar Investment Authority.

The Gulf state has been ruled by the al-Thani family since the mid-nineteenth century. Its current emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, took over from his father in 2013.

Terrorism

Qatar's government is more widely accused of funding terrorism. It "has paid ransom demands, shipped supplies, and funnelled billions of dollars of funding" to militant groups across the Middle East, [according to](#) the Counter-Extremism Project (CEP), a think tank close to the US establishment.

In 2019, eight Syrian refugees [filed](#) a lawsuit in the UK alleging that accounts at the Doha Bank in Qatar had been used to channel funds to the Nusra Front in Syria. The Nusra Front was the al-Qaeda affiliate fighting to overthrow the regime of Bashar al-Assad, before it merged into a broader Islamist militant force known as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.

The Doha Bank, whose largest shareholder is the Qatar Investment Authority and whose directors include members of the ruling al-Thani family, has denied the allegations.

In 2021, a separate legal claim was issued at the High Court in London against the Qatari state, accusing it of playing a central role in secret money-laundering operations to send hundreds of millions of dollars to the Nusra Front.

As [reported](#) by *The Times*, the claim alleges that the conspiracy was driven "by high-ranking members of the Qatari ruling elite", all of whom deny the allegations. The case is being brought by nine Syrians who say they were persecuted by the Nusra Front.

A UK Ministry of Defence spokesperson previously told *Declassified*: "The long-standing friendship between the UK and Qatar is more important than ever. With shared defence and security interests, it is vital we work together for both regional and global stability."

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Featured image: Qatari military personnel at their base at RAF Leeming in Yorkshire, England. (Photo: UK Ministry of Defence)

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