



Political and
Geostrategic
OBSERVATORY
of the United States

PATRONS, CLIENTS AND THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE DEAL

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The agreement to end the war between Israel and Gaza is still in its earliest days and could collapse any time. Nonetheless, it has already accomplished important things. All the living, and some of the bodies of the dead, hostages have been returned to Israel. About 1,900 Palestinian prisoners have been released from Israeli prisons and we have already had a few days with no Israeli attacks on Gaza. There is still much work to be done, beginning with getting the much-needed food and medical supplies into Gaza, but the deal has already accomplished a fair amount.

This raises the question of how the Trump administration was able to get this deal done, but that framing is too narrow as there were other important actors who made it happen. There are many lenses through which to understand this, but a very helpful one is through patron-client relations, because while the war itself was fought between Israel and Hamas, both forces had powerful outside backers. Israel's most powerful ally has long been the US. However, in recent decades that relationship has changed into more of a patron-client relationship. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's recent rantings about Israel becoming a "super-Sparta" notwithstanding, Israel has become increasingly dependent on the US. The US has provided financial and military support that has been essential for Israel's survival. Moreover, the US has been a key diplomatic ally using its still ample global influence to curtail criticism of Israel from American allies, veto UN resolutions and the like.

At the beginning of the war, Hamas had several patrons, including their Gulf State funders, notably Qatar, as well as Turkey and Iran. Iran has been extremely supportive of Hamas, meaning that the war that began after the Hamas attack on October 7th, although rarely described that way, was, to a substantial extent, a proxy war between the US and Iran. However, since the war began, Iran has been substantially weakened and is no longer able to meaningfully support Hamas. This meant that Hamas's other funders became more influential.

Hamas's support rests on three unequal pillars: their funders, global left-wing public opinion and the people in Gaza. We have now seen that Hamas needs to have at least two of those things to be relevant. Before October 7th, Hamas had enough of the third, a lot of the first and not much of the second. Over the course of the following two years that changed. Hamas's standing among the global left rose dramatically as many allegedly progressive Europeans and Americans began to see Hamas as national liberation force to be celebrated. However, their standing within Gaza and

with their donors did not fare as well.

As the Israeli military continued to batter Gaza, it became more difficult for Hamas to avoid blame for playing a big role in bringing that suffering to the people there. Therefore, as time went by their support in Gaza began to weaken. To some extent this can be understood as part of Hamas' long game, where building a global opposition to the existence of the state of Israel is more important than the lives of people living in Gaza.

That macabre political tradeoff might have worked if Hamas had been able to retain the support of its funders, but the group's patrons in the Gulf, notably states such as Qatar had a different worldview, and different priorities, than Iran had. Qatar was not interested in having the US as an enemy and was open to doing working with, and doing business with the US in a way that Iran has not been for almost half a century. This became more true with the return of Donald Trump, an aspiring authoritarian oligarch to whom Qatari leadership could easily relate, to the American presidency.

By fall of this year, it became apparent that if Qatar and the US wanted an end to the Gaza war, or at the very least significant discussions about peace, it would occur. In other words, if the patrons agreed, the clients would have to follow. Once the patrons wanted peace talks, the path to the deal was accelerated. The key components of that deal, being hostages returned to Israel, an enduring ceasefire, prisoners held by Israel freed and a plan for rebuilding Gaza were always going to be central to any peace agreement.

This process ended up working well for Israel and the Netanyahu government as the living hostages were returned, and Israel can plausibly claim victory. It also was a good deal for the corrupt MAGA grifters around President Trump, some of whom have been given lucrative cutouts in the form of business opportunities in post-war Gaza as well as for Qatar who will now have a closer relationship with the US and therefore a very powerful potential patron. However, for Hamas, suddenly relatively powerless despite their heightened profile globally, this is precisely the deal they did not want.

Once Qatar decided the US was more important to them than Hamas was, events moved quickly for Hamas. Their patron more or less sold them out, their grip on Gaza was loosened and they were forced to return the hostages thus losing whatever

remaining leverage they had on Israel. We cannot know either what Hamas will do next or how long this peace will hold, but it is also important to recognize that Hamas has a record, which was evident as recently as the first days following the peace deal, of using violence to shift the agenda or hold on to power.

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