

# COMMENTARY

No.214

Friday, 22 August 2014

## **Qatar invests in Israeli soccer despite Gaza and war of words with Jerusalem**

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**Q**atar is emerging for the second time in a decade as the only Arab state without a peace treaty and diplomatic relations to have invested in Israel. Qatar's latest investment in Israeli Palestinian soccer comes against a backdrop of a war of words between the two countries over the Gulf state's support for Hamas, the Islamist militia that controls the war-racked Gaza Strip. Yet, Qatar's relationship with Hamas makes it alongside Turkey the only country that can talk directly to the group as part of international efforts to achieve a ceasefire in Gaza.

A Qatari agreement to donate US\$ 4.6 million to two Israeli Palestinian soccer clubs, Bnei Sakhnin, a team based in Galilee that historically stands for Israeli-Palestinian co-existence, and Maccabi Ahi Nazareth FC, a squad that historically was part of the centrist wing of the Zionist movement, was negotiated prior to the eruption three weeks ago of hostilities between Israel and Hamas.

In a move that is likely to provoke Israeli right-wing and nationalist ire, Qatar paid Bnei Sakhnin, which was the foremost Palestinian team to include Jewish players in its squad, its first instalment of the donation. Mazen Gnyem, the mayor of Sakhnin, a Palestinian town in the Lower Galilee, and former Bnei Sakhnin chairman, told Israeli business newspaper Globes that Qatar had transferred US\$ 500,000. Right wing and nationalist ire is likely to feed on the fact that Bnei Sakhnin recently lost Eliran Danin, its last Jewish player. Maccabi Nazareth however continues to have both Palestinian and Jewish players.

Shimon Peres, who stepped down as Israel's president and is widely seen as a dove when it comes to Israeli-Palestinian peace, accused Qatar this week of being "the world's largest funder of terror." Peres charged that "Qatar does not have the right to send money for rockets and

tunnels which are fired at innocent civilians. Their funding of terror must stop. If they want to build then they should, but they must not be allowed to destroy,” he told Ban-Ki Moon during the United Nations Secretary General’s visit to Jerusalem in a failed bid to achieve a Gaza ceasefire.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s former security advisor Major General (res) Yaakov Amidror said the United States had earlier stopped the Amman-based, Palestinian-owned Arab Bank from transferring Qatari funds for the payment of 43,000 public sector workers in Gaza who haven’t received salaries for month. Gen Amidror told The Times of Israel that Qatari funding of Hamas’ military operations continued nevertheless unabated.

Israeli economy minister N. Bennett meanwhile called on world soccer body FIFA to deprive Qatar, which is home to Hamas leader Khalid Masha'al, of its right to host the 2022 World Cup because of its funding of what he described as radical Islamic terror. Communications Minister Gilad Erdan demanded that the Qatar’s state-owned Al Jazeera network be taken off the air due to its “extremely severe incitement against the State of Israel as well as enthusiastic support for Hamas and its terrorist actions.” Earlier, Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman denounced the network despite the fact that Israeli spokesman, including his ministry’s spokesman, Yigal Palmor, appear regularly on Al Jazeera.

Al Jazeera was this week forced to evacuate its Gaza office after it came under fire. The network’s Jerusalem bureau chief, Walid Al-Omari, accused members of the Israeli Cabinet in an interview on Israel’s Army Radio of incitement and putting its crews at risk.

Qatari Foreign Minister Khalid Al Attiyah, who has played a key role in the ceasefire negotiations, hit back at Israel, saying that “Qatar does not support Hamas, Qatar supports the Palestinians.” In an interview with CNN, Al Attiyah accused Israel of systematically sabotaging peace efforts over the past year. He lashed out at Messrs Lieberman and Bennett, saying they “practice terrorism... Israel never leveraged on the pragmatic approach of Hamas. Al Attiyah noted that Hamas had agreed to participate in Palestinian elections in 2006 encouraged by the fact that then US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had asked Qatar to support the group’s move. “They decided to practice democracy,” the minister said.

The Israeli war of words on Qatar is designed to further isolate Hamas, which has found little sympathy among Arab government in its latest round of fighting with Israel, leaving the Gulf state as its main Arab backer. By discrediting Qatar hopes to support Egyptian mediation efforts in the knowledge that Cairo’s relations with Hamas are troubled because it views the group as an extension of the banned Muslim Brotherhood.

Former Qatari emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani became in 2012 the first Arab head of state to visit Hamas-controlled Gaza. Al Attiyah said residential housing and hospitals that were being built in Gaza prior to the Israeli assault with US\$ 500 million pledged by Sheikh Hamad had been constructed by contractors associated with Hamas’ rival, Al Fatah, the group that forms the backbone of the West Bank’s Palestine Authority headed by President Mahmoud Abbas. He said the funds for Gaza were being channelled through Arab Bank and the Palestine Authority rather than Hamas.

Qatar played an important role earlier this year in bridging the seven-year old rift between Fatah and Hamas which led to an agreement to form a national unity government that would be backed by both groups but would not include Hamas representatives. The formation of that government prompted Netanyahu to break off US-sponsored Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. Israel's assault on Gaza is believed to be in part intended to undermine the government and put Abbas back in the driver's seat, an effort that has so far backfired.

Qatar first invested in Israeli soccer when it funded in 2006 the construction of the Doha Stadium in Sakhnin to the tune of US\$ 6 million, the first ever official investment in Israel itself by an Arab state that has yet to recognize Israel. The funding came after Bnei Sakhnin, Israel's most successful Israeli Palestinian club, won the 2004 State Cup. The team's captain, Abbas Suan, became a national hero in 2006 when he scored a key goal in Israel's World Cup qualifier against Ireland.

A week later Abbas was greeted in the stadium of Jerusalem by supporters of Beitar Jerusalem, Israel's most anti-Palestinian, anti-Muslim club, with chants of "Suan, You Don't Represent Us" and "We hate all Arabs."

**Note:** This article was originally published in the blog, **The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer** and has been reproduced with the author's permission. Web link: <http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.in/2014/07/qatar-invests-in-israeli-soccer-despite.html>

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