



QATARGATE: EXPLAINING ISRAEL'S WARTIME FOREIGN INFLUENCE SCANDAL

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Last month, Israeli police concluded their investigation into Qatargate, a scandal involving allegations that Qatar bribed Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's top aides to promote Qatari interests during the Gaza war. The State Attorney's Office is now considering whether to indict members of Netanyahu's inner circle. While the prime minister himself is not a suspect, Israeli public opinion is deeply divided over whether Netanyahu was aware of or complicit in Qatar's alleged influence inside his office, with a slim majority believing that he was.

The prime minister has sought to distance himself from the scandal. At a recent press conference, Netanyahu [said](#) in reference to one of his closest advisors and a leading suspect: "He never said a word to me about Qatar ... it's all fiction." Qatargate is not merely another Netanyahu corruption scandal, but a wartime foreign influence campaign that exposed structural vulnerabilities in Israel's government and major threats to national security. This issue brief explains the affair and its implications for the country's politics and public opinion.

What Is Qatargate?

Qatargate concerns allegations that lobbyists acting on behalf of Qatar paid senior Netanyahu advisors to spread pro-Qatari messaging in an effort to elevate the Gulf state's image as a mediator in the hostage negotiations. Importantly, inside Israel, Qatar is widely regarded as hostile and known for hosting and sponsoring Hamas. In contrast, both the Trump Administration and previous US Administrations have viewed Qatar as a partner who can play a mediating role with Hamas. Qatar has in the past also played a role in mediating with other actors, such as the Taliban, and also hosts a key US airbase.

The case centers on **three figures** closely linked to Netanyahu who are suspected of having received funds from a pro-Qatar lobbying firm:

- **Jonatan Urich**, a senior adviser and campaign strategist who has worked closely with Netanyahu since 2015.
- **Israel ("Srulik") Einhorn**, a political consultant who, along with Urich, led five Likud election campaigns from 2019 until 2022.
- **Eli Feldstein**, Netanyahu's former military spokesperson. Feldstein was hired shortly after the October 7 attack as a liaison between the Prime Minister's Office and Israeli military correspondents – a line of communication designed to bypass the IDF Spokesperson's Unit and, according to investigators, promote messaging more closely aligned with Netanyahu's political interests.

The Qatari influence campaign aimed to bolster Qatar's standing – while minimizing Egypt's role – as the leading mediator between Israel and Hamas during the Gaza war. Urich and Feldstein were arrested in connection with Qatargate in April 2025. Since then, courts have [barred](#) Urich from communicating with the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and Netanyahu himself. The police

investigation concluded in January 2026, and the case now awaits prosecutorial determination of whether Israel's national security was harmed.

How was Qatari money funneled to Netanyahu's advisers?

According to investigative [reporting](#), Qatari funds were routed through a network of foreign entities before reaching Israeli political and communications firms linked to Netanyahu's advisers. Einhorn constructed a two-pronged campaign aimed at the Israeli public:

- One channel operated through Feldstein and Israeli journalists, some of whom later testified that they received messaging favorable to Qatar and critical of Egypt in the context of hostage negotiations.
- The second channel, led by US-based lobbyist Jay Footlik, relied on online amplification portraying Qatar as the most effective mediator. Feldstein's salary was allegedly [paid](#) by Footlik via Israeli businessman Gil Birger.

In multiple instances, Israeli journalists appear to have passed on Feldstein's information and framing with minimal verification, effectively amplifying foreign-sponsored narratives during wartime. This blow to the credibility of Israeli journalism erodes a central democratic firewall meant to protect against government abuses.

The *Bild* Case and its Connection to Qatargate

Qatargate is connected to another case that Feldstein has been indicted for, concerning the alleged leak of classified intelligence material to the German newspaper, *Bild*. The leaked document suggested the Israeli public's pressure on the Israeli government to bring back the hostages was part of Hamas's negotiating strategy. The timing of the leak – following the August 2024 Hamas killing of six Israeli hostages in a Rafah tunnel – suggests it was an effort to shape Israeli public opinion by deflecting blame for the hostages' death away from Netanyahu and toward Hamas and the Israeli Hostages and Missing Families Forum. Crucially, the *Bild* leak actually led Israeli legal authorities to uncover the Qatar-linked influence campaign within the PMO, as it involved several of the same actors.

In November 2024, the Central District State Attorney's Office filed an indictment against Feldstein, charging him with serious security offenses, including unlawful disclosure of classified information, unauthorized possession of classified material, and obstruction of justice. An arrest warrant was also issued against Einhorn in early 2025; Einhorn lives in Belgrade and serves as a political consultant to the Serbian government. He has remained outside Israel and has been described by Israeli police as a fugitive. Meanwhile, Urich's involvement in the *Bild* leak is still under review.

The Implications of Qatargate

1. **Wartime Decisionmaking:** After the October 7 attack, Israel faced a strategic decision over which actor, Qatar or Egypt, should play the leading role in negotiations with

Hamas. Within the security establishment, assessments diverged, and the prime minister ultimately opted for Qatar. At the same time, Israeli public discourse became saturated with unfounded claims portraying Egypt as an emerging security threat. Senior Israeli security officials repeatedly sought to clarify that no deterioration had occurred in Israel-Egypt relations. The persistence of this narrative alongside the mediation debate raises the concern that the Israeli government made a major wartime decision under Qatari pressure, thereby threatening Israel's peace treaty with Egypt, a cornerstone of Israeli national security.

2. **Security:** Feldstein traveled with Netanyahu, attended sensitive meetings, and interacted with military correspondents, despite having failed to obtain Shin Bet security clearance.
3. **Intelligence:** Sensitive materials were transmitted from Israeli intelligence to a political aide lacking full clearance – a significant failure.
4. **Electoral Politics:** Ahead of the 2026 Israeli election, opposition figures – most notably former Prime Minister Naftali Bennett – have begun raising concerns about Qatargate. The scandal will likely be a feature of the upcoming election and a political liability for Netanyahu's re-election campaign, but is unlikely to dramatically affect the outcome.
5. **Public Opinion:** Polling underscores the partisan divide regarding Qatargate, with many voters treating the affair as further confirmation of what they already believe about Netanyahu and the investigations into him. [54 percent](#) of Israelis believe Netanyahu was aware of his advisers' ties to Qatar, while 26.5 percent believe he was not. The former camp is composed mostly of centrist and left-wing voters, while the latter camp is composed mostly of right-wing voters loyal to Netanyahu.

Conclusion

Qatargate is especially sensitive given Qatar's indispensable role in the past and future of Gaza. Before October 7, Netanyahu long maintained a policy of allowing Qatari funds into Gaza. This policy was based on flawed thinking that keeping the West Bank and Gaza divided and propping up Hamas would effectively "manage" the conflict, weaken the Palestinian Authority, and prevent Palestinian statehood. While that policy was openly debated and coordinated with international actors, Qatargate suggests that Israeli government engagement with Qatar may have extended beyond official channels.

Ultimately, Qatargate points to a longer-term, gradual weakening of institutional and legal guardrails over the past decade, a process that has reshaped how power is exercised at the core of the Israeli government. Whether or not indictments are ultimately filed, Qatargate has already become a defining episode in Israel's ongoing struggle and deep polarization over accountability, governance, and national security.