Qatar's Gaza Motives

by Simon Henderson **(/experts/simon-henderson)**

Jul 29, 2014

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

Doha's involvement in ceasefire diplomacy reflects its ambition for a wider regional role that Washington should challenge.

On July 26, Secretary of State John Kerry stood next to Qatari foreign minister Khalid bin Mohammad al-Attiyah in Paris during remarks on diplomatic efforts to organize a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas. This followed a July 14 Pentagon meeting between Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel and Qatari minister of state for defense affairs Hamad bin Ali al-Attiyah, where the two signed an $11 billion arms package that included Patriot missiles, Apache helicopters, and antitank missiles.

These high-profile initiatives and the nature of the bilateral relationship in general are a consequence of Doha's huge natural gas revenues, as well as its generosity in giving the U.S. Air Force the run of the giant al-Udeid Air Base, which has been crucial to operations over Iraq and Afghanistan. But these ties come at a cost. Qatar clutches its sovereignty over al-Udeid closely, insisting on being asked for permission in advance for arrivals of personnel and aircraft. It also supports Hamas, providing a home for leader Khaled Mashal and lending the group respectability through various diplomatic moves.

QATAR'S CALCULUS

The key to understanding the relationship from Qatar's perspective is that it regards the United States as its most important ally and works assiduously to maintain ties. This mindset is a consequence of Doha's near paranoia about its diminutive size and geographical isolation. Smaller than the state of Connecticut, the hydrocarbon-rich peninsula juts out from Arabia into the Persian Gulf, only 120 miles or so from Iran. Its citizen population is a mere 250,000, about the same as Washington DC's commuter suburb of Arlington (though its total population is boosted six to eight times by temporary expatriate workers).

Moreover, Qatar has long had troubled relations with its neighbors. To the south, it shares a land border with Saudi Arabia, which once backed a coup to overthrow Sheikh Hamad and still regards Qatar as a troublesome sponsor of

the Aljazeera satellite television network and other media that are sometimes critical of the kingdom. To the west is the island-state of Bahrain, whose royal family hails from the Qatari peninsula and only gave up its territorial claim there in return for a generous settlement of a dispute over some reefs and islets. To the east is the United Arab Emirates, where officials have accused Doha of backing opposition political activists. Last but not least there is Iran to the north, with which Qatar shares the world's largest offshore gas field; called "South Pars" in Tehran and "the North Field" in Doha, it is a source of tension at times because Qatar has been extracting more gas than Iran.

Amid this friction, Qatar has sought to position itself as something of a trendsetter in the region. After Sheikh Hamad deposed his father as ruler in 1995, he began deliberately reaching out to Washington -- a process made smoother by Doha's establishment of friendly contacts with Israel. He also lifted formal media censorship, allowing Aljazeera to begin operating in 1996. And in 1999, municipal elections were held -- the start of what the royal family sees as a "democratization" program, though without political parties. More recently, Sheikh Hamad abdicated in 2013, and his thirty-three-year-old son Tamim took over. Although Hamad was believed to have health problems, his gesture was officially depicted as a progressive move, in marked contrast to other Arab Gulf rulers, who usually retain their positions until death.

The "Arab Spring" uprisings that began in late 2010 also affected Doha's posture, with the government seemingly judging that further revolutions were inevitable, and that it should strive to be on the right side of this historical trend. Despite being a traditional conservative Arab state with a ruling family, Qatar sees itself as a postmodern role model of sorts. From its perspective, the House of Saud, the al-Khalifas in Bahrain, the al-Nahyans in the UAE, and even Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas are all *anciens regimes*. Most Qataris are Wahhabi, the ultraconservative branch of Islam also practiced in Saudi Arabia, though with some obvious differences (e.g., Qatari women are permitted to drive). But whereas King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia appears to have decided that political Islam is a major danger rivaling that of Shia Islam, the al-Thanis have taken the opposite view, perceiving the Sunni hardliners of Hamas and even Afghanistan's Taliban as the way of the future.

The ructions of the past three plus years have tested this philosophy, but Doha still believes its view is right. The al-Thanis were delighted when Hosni Mubarak was overthrown in Egypt, then replaced with a Muslim Brotherhood government legitimized via the country's first free elections (though this sentiment was also driven by personal animosity toward Mubarak, a major but often ignored feature of intra-Arab relations). Yet Doha was let down by the Brotherhood's massive administrative incompetence, and some might say the group's overthrow showed that history is not necessarily flowing smoothly the way the Qatari royal family sees it. Today, Doha has reluctantly accepted the accession of President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, though Cairo still seems bent on punishing Qatar for its previous stance, as in its recent prosecution of three Aljazeera journalists.

Qatar also starred during Muammar Qadhafi's overthrow in Libya, at least through al-Thani lenses. Its air contingent was the first to arrive at the Souda Bay base in Greece, from which operations were directed, and its special forces were active on the ground. These efforts were commanded by then Crown Prince Tamim, who was deemed to have done well -- a factor in his father having the confidence to allow last year's leadership transition. Although the post-Qadhafi era in Libya has not gone well, that does not appear to have shaken Doha's confidence in its approach.

Syria has been even more of a challenge. After becoming involved with the anti-Assad opposition via Turkey, Doha ended up backing some of the worst jihadists because they were the most effective fighters. Even so, the Assad regime still rules in Damascus three years later.

GAZA GAMBLE

The latest crisis in Gaza is the first real foreign policy test for Tamim as emir. His father met with Hamas officials in Gaza in 2012, pointedly avoiding a parallel visit with the PA leadership in the West Bank. Yet Hamad is letting

his son run the show today. And while the current foreign minister is clever, competent, and close to Secretary Kerry, he lacks the flair of his predecessor, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim al-Thani (a.k.a. HBJ), a casualty of the 2013 transition.

On July 22, Tamim became openly involved in the crisis by visiting King Abdullah in Jeddah for talks on Gaza -- the first time the two men had met since November 2013, when the Saudi monarch told Tamim to stop interfering in the domestic affairs of other Gulf states. Doha's failure to honor that apparent agreement spurred a diplomatic boycott of Qatar by Riyadh, Bahrain, and the UAE. Last week's meeting does not seem to have produced any significant rapprochement -- Abdullah apparently hosted Tamim merely out of politeness, and the only other top Saudi at the meeting was the interior minister. Moreover, when Saudi Deputy Crown Prince Muqrin visited Kuwait, Bahrain, the UAE, and Oman a few days later, he pointedly omitted Qatar, the other member of the Gulf Cooperation Council.

CHALLENGES FOR WASHINGTON

The Obama administration has sought to take advantage of Doha's Gaza diplomacy, but this stance comes with multiple costs. Secretary Kerry's outreach to Qatar has annoyed a wide spectrum of U.S. allies, including Egypt, Israel, the PA, Saudi Arabia, and probably other Gulf states. Washington's efforts also suggest tolerance of rather than irritation with the restrictions that Doha puts on access to al-Udeid. Qatar has arguably bought itself into the diplomatic equation by providing aid for many months, such as fuel oil for the Gaza power station delivered via the Israeli port of Ashkelon. But this aid has also included construction materials that may have been used to build the tunnels through which terrorists have infiltrated Israel.

Moving to ceasefire and then reconstruction in Gaza will be difficult enough without taking steps that legitimize Hamas, a terrorist group that rejects decades of U.S. Middle East peace diplomacy. Qatar's view of Hamas's future role is very different from the traditional U.S. view and should be challenged. Washington would certainly get Doha's attention if it obtained assurances from other GCC members that their bases are available for redeployed U.S. air assets, thereby making clear that al-Udeid is not essential for preparedness toward Iran.

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