

Regime Change in Qatar

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Articles & Testimony

Knee-deep in Syria's civil war and surrounded by family quarrels, Qatar's emir is looking to hand over the country to his thirty-three-year-old son.

Which country is most actively throwing its weight around in Syria and Egypt? It's not the United States (population: 316 million) or Iran, Saudi Arabia, or even Russia. Rather, it's the small Persian Gulf state of Qatar (population: 2 million). In Syria, Qatar is showering money and arms on anti-Assad militia groups and is competing with Saudi Arabia as the opposition's primary patron. It is also the largest funder by far of Egyptian President Mohamed Morsy's government, providing \$5 billion-plus in loans -- without the conditions for reforms that the International Monetary Fund would have demanded.

Why is Qatar so involved in Egypt and Syria? Good question. Part of the answer is certainly because, in the absence of the United States, Qatar perceives a vacuum -- and therefore a new opportunity to raise its international profile.

Qatari foreign policy has been based on the whims -- or more politely, the vision -- of Emir Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani and Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani, who is currently serving as prime minister and foreign minister. The two leaders' personalized control has produced a decisiveness lacking in their larger allies. On a visit to Doha, the Qatari capital, in March 2011, at the time of the international intervention in Libya, a Qatari friend laughed as he showed me a cartoon in London's *Independent*, depicting a fighter jet with British Prime Minister David Cameron and then French President Nicolas Sarkozy fighting over the controls, while U.S. President Barack Obama dozed in the back seat ("leading from behind"). Riding the aircraft's nose was the Qatari emir, holding up his finger to see which way the wind was blowing. The caption of the cartoon, which you would never get away with in the United States, was "FU-2 Infighter Jet."

But now, the team that has overseen Qatar's growth into a regional powerhouse is changing. Arab and Western diplomats reported this week that Emir Hamad, 61, is soon going to replace the prime minister with his son, the 33-year-old Crown Prince Tamim, and would then abdicate power himself in favor of Tamim. The news prompted an

almost audible "OMG" across major world capitals, and among Qatar's neighbors -- a novice leader at a time of tension and great flux, after all, seems enormously risky.

Why now? One thought is that Emir Hamad's health has taken a turn for the worse. He is said to have only one functioning kidney -- though it is not known whether it is his own or a transplant he received in 1997. If one compares a 2009 photograph of him with Obama in New York City with one taken in the Oval Office this April, it is clear he has lost a prodigious amount of weight. A Qatari friend denies there is a health issue, claiming instead that this is a well-planned transition for which Tamim has been groomed for several years.

Transitions in Qatar rarely go smoothly. Emir Hamad himself seized power from his father in 1995 while the latter was at a sanatorium in Switzerland. Indeed, it is hard to identify a trouble-free change in power in the last 100 years. Over those years, there have been roughly eight transitions -- the exact number depends on your definition of "transition" -- but all are based on the theme of forced abdication. The result is a history of family antagonisms within the Al Thani clan, which numbers at least several thousand.

Qatar is not a democracy -- the Thanis are the country's only real political constituency. But clan unity has been strained since Emir Hamad's deposition of his father, whose own elevation in 1972 upset parts of the family because he was seen as outmaneuvering a rival. Family members are said to bear grudges and have long memories. Tamim will be forced to navigate this snake pit while many veteran political hands closely watch how the young emir performs.

Tamim is Emir Hamad's fourth son and is the second to have the title of crown prince. Of the emir's two eldest sons, a former ambassador in Doha told me, "One partied too much; the other prayed too much." When I asked the same ambassador what happened to Tamim's elder brother Jassim, the third eldest son who lost the title of heir apparent in 2003, he responded, "Oh, he listened to his Palestinian advisors too much."

Tamim, it seems, has managed to avoid all those pitfalls for a Qatari heir apparent. He was trained at Britain's Royal Military Academy Sandhurst and has a reputation for diligence. But his crucial advantage may well be that he appears to be a favorite of Sheikha Moza, Emir Hamad's second and highest-profile wife.

It is still unclear how this political changing of the guard will work in practice. Will his father stay on in Doha, effectively undermining Tamim's authority? Emir Hamad's own father lived in exile for many years, until his resentment at being overthrown had burned out. The elderly father has now returned to Qatar, and apparently to political irrelevance.

And what about the prime minister and foreign minister, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani, known to diplomats as "HBJ"? At a ceremony held by the Brookings Institution this April, he was presented with a huge plaque and eulogized by the great and good representatives of the U.S. foreign-policy establishment as essentially irreplaceable. Perhaps he is -- there are no names yet in the frame for who will take over from him as foreign minister. HBJ will remain in charge of the Qatar Investment Authority's estimated \$200 billion portfolio, but may well decide to reside in London, where the Shard, the British capital's tallest and newest building, is Qatari-owned.

Once the handover is complete, Tamim will be in charge of guiding Qatar's intervention in Syria against President Bashar al-Assad's regime, as well as maintaining Qatar's influence across the Arab world. With the revenues received as the world's largest exporter of liquefied natural gas, he is not going to be short of cash. He can also buy advice and assistance, which has been a Qatari specialty in the past: After all, roughly 1.7 million residents of the peninsula, the vast majority of the population, are not citizens but hired help.

But will he continue to be the biggest financial backer of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt? Will he still back what are probably the most extreme, albeit effective, jihadi fighters in Syria? And will Iran, which lies 100 miles north and with which Qatar shares the world's largest natural gas field, seek revenge for losses in Syria by challenging the

neophyte? What about Qatar's Sunni Arab rival, Saudi Arabia, where the now-deceased Crown Prince Sultan used to refer to Emir Hamad contemptuously as a "Persian" for what was perceived to be the less-than-pure Al Thani bloodline?

For the soon-to-emerge Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, the quarrelsomeness of his own family may present a challenge as equally daunting as the turbulence in the Middle East. For years, Qatar has been punching above its weight. Now, some may just try punching back.

Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program at The Washington Institute. ❖

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