

Qatar's Emir Visits Gaza

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Brief Analysis

The Qatari ruler's trip further demonstrates his country's growing diplomatic profile.

When Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani arrives in the Gaza Strip tomorrow, he will be the first head of state to visit the territory since Hamas seized power in 2007. Ostensibly, he will be there to inaugurate some Qatari-funded aid projects, but his visit has much wider significance.

The Gulf state of Qatar has one of the world's smallest populations (around 200,000 citizens) but one of the highest per capita incomes (over \$110,000, the result of rapid development of enormous natural gas reserves). This wealth affords a huge foreign labor force to help build the country, as well as a surplus that enables it to have a diplomatic profile out of proportion to its size.

Ably assisted by his prime minister, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim, the emir has made Qatar a regional player and an increasingly important actor on the world stage. Its Aljazeera satellite television network influences opinion in the region and further afield. Qatar is also the world's largest exporter of liquefied natural gas, and its airline flies to more than a hundred destinations.

The country's policies are more challenging to describe, however. The emir constantly seems to be balancing different objectives. On the one hand, Qatar hosts one of the largest concentrations of U.S. airpower in the region at al-Udeid Air Base, outside the capital. The United States has also reportedly installed an X-band radar in the emirate, which would be ideal for detecting incoming Iranian missiles. On the other hand, Qatar is careful to retain close relations with Iran, with which it shares a gigantic offshore gas field. For example, the emir recently irritated Washington by attending the Non-Aligned Movement summit that Tehran hosted in August.

Qatar's policies tend to challenge Saudi Arabia's regional dominance as well. When the emir first took over from his father in 1995, Riyadh opposed his accession, and the bad memories linger. Today, both countries are supporting opposition fighters in Syria, but probably competitively rather than collaboratively.

Sheikh Hamad reportedly wanted President Mahmoud Abbas to accompany him to Gaza, but the Palestinian Authority leader, who maintains a vacation home in Qatar, apparently refused. In any case, the emir will arrive via Egypt's al-Arish airport and then take a helicopter to Rafah before driving into Gaza. Cairo's approval was likely easy to secure given that Doha has promised Egypt \$2 billion in aid. Qatar likely obtained Israeli acquiescence to the trip as well, or at the very least a promise not to conduct airstrikes. In the past, the emirate almost established a diplomatic mission in Israel, and it has allowed Israeli diplomats to operate in Doha.

Whether and how Qatar will be able to leverage the Gaza visit to further its diplomatic advantage is unclear. Washington will likely be annoyed that its policy of isolating Hamas has been undermined, and the Palestinian Authority is already upset. But the trip will demonstrate Qatar's growing prominence and ability to surprise.

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

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