Qatar's Quest to Become the Leading Arab State

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

Mar 31, 2011

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Simon Henderson (/experts/simon-henderson)

Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy at The Washington Institute, specializing in energy matters and the conservative Arab states of the Persian Gulf.

Brief Analysis

The small Persian Gulf state of Qatar is emerging as a significant international player in the Libyan crisis and a crucial supporter of U.S. policy. But its relationship with the United States has often been difficult, and its standing in the rest of the Arab world is questionable. For Washington, the challenge is to achieve balance between U.S. expectations, Qatar's own regional ambitions, and the need to minimize any adverse impact on U.S. ties with other Arab allies.

Background

The Qatari peninsula is about the size of Connecticut, but most of its population -- around 200,000 citizens and 600,000 expatriate workers -- lives in and around the capital, Doha. A member of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), the emirate produces relatively little oil. Instead, its growing wealth is the result of having the third-largest natural gas reserves in the world (after Russia and Iran). Qatar is now the world's top exporter of liquefied natural gas, with Asia particularly reliant on its supplies. Revenue from these sales has given Qataris the highest per capita gross domestic product ($88,000) in the world, almost twice the figure for Americans.

In recent days, Qatar became the first Arab state to contribute to no-fly-zone patrols over Libya and recognize the Benghazi-based rebels as legitimate successors to the Qadhafi regime. It has also offered its status and experience in OPEC to help the rebels market the Libyan oil and gas production that they control. In addition, the emirate was a major participant in the March 29 London conference regarding the crisis, and the first meeting of the follow-on Libya Contact Group will soon be held under Qatari chairmanship in Doha.

Qatar's leading representative at the London meeting and the driving force of its foreign policy is Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim al-Thani, who serves as both prime minister and foreign minister. HBJ, as he is widely known, is only a distant relative of ruler Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, but the two leaders have an extraordinarily close working relationship, and HBJ is credited with making many of the emir's visions a reality.

Meanwhile, Qatar's Aljazeera satellite television channel is among the most watched in the region; the emir's (second) wife, Sheikha Mouza, is the driving force in encouraging American universities to set up branches in Doha and develop a world-class "medical city"; and Qatar has been chosen as the venue for the 2022 World Cup. The

emirate is also becoming an increasingly large business conglomerate, with a national airline fleet that will soon exceed 100 aircraft, and a sovereign wealth fund t hat purchased Harrods, the iconic London store, in 2010, and owns the largest share of stock in a British supermarket chain.

Activist Foreign Policy

If Qatar's foreign policy appears eclectic in substance, its style often seems inconsistent -- and challenging even to its friends. Over the past several years, Qatar has tried to distinguish itself from the other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman) by being friendlier toward Iran and less publicly fearful of the Islamic Republic's nuclear ambitions. To the consternation of other GCC leaders, Qatar invited President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad to Doha for the council's 2007 summit. Privately though, Qatar is cynical about Iran's aspirations. As HBJ once told an American official, "[The Iranians] lie to us, and we lie to them."

More generally, Qatar tends to use Aljazeera as a tool of diplomacy. The network's coverage of domestic Qatari affairs is limited -- instead, Aljazeera news programming often seems aimed at annoying other Arab states. The United States was also a regular target of the network after the invasion of Iraq. For example, one false story broadcast in 2005 alleged that U.S. soldiers in Iraq were removing women's veils. The report caused widespread outrage in the Arab world and, according to then deputy defense secretary Paul Wolfowitz, was responsible for the killing of more than 100 American personnel. Qatari officials protested their innocence, claiming that Aljazeera was independent of government control and was permitted freedom of expression. Yet the output of the Arabic news channel and associated website suggests that they omit stories that might damage important diplomatic relationships (although the English channel and website are less constrained and more objective).

Qatar has also sheltered or otherwise affiliated itself with prominent regional radicals. In addition to hosting Hamas leader Khaled Mashal, the emirate has permitted firebrand Egyptian cleric Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi to broadcast a regular show on Aljazeera for years now, despite episodes justifying suicide attacks on Israeli children on the basis that they will grow up to become soldiers. And in the mid-1990s, Qatar allowed al-Qaeda terrorist Khaled Sheikh Muhammad, wanted by the United States for plotting aircraft bombings, to live in Doha, where he was given a government job and protected by a state minister.

Outreach to Israel and the U.S. Military

After Sheikh Hamad overthrew his indolent father in 1995, Doha worked to develop better ties with Washington, which at the time tended to view its relations with Arab Gulf states through the prism of neighboring Saudi Arabia. Among Qatar's tactics was deliberate outreach to Israel as a means of countering potential U.S. congressional opposition. At one point, this led to an Israeli diplomatic office operating under commercial cover in Doha. Yet when presented with a reciprocal offer to open a Qatari office in Israel, the emirate ignored it, while the Israeli presence in Doha met with criticism from other Arab states and was eventually closed.

On a grander scale, Qatar speculatively built the giant al-Udeid Air Base a few miles outside Doha. Following the September 11 attacks, U.S.-Saudi relations grew tense, and Riyadh asked Washington to stop using the Prince Sultan Air Base and its associated Combined Air Operations Center. Qatar was thus able to step in and offer the United States instant access to al-Udeid. Today, the U.S. military runs most of its regional operations out of the base, including patrols to counter any hostile moves by Iran a hundred miles to the north and flights over Afghanistan six hundred miles to the east. Yet U.S. forces do not have carte blanche over al-Udeid: the Qatari military jealously guards its sovereign control over access to the facility even though its own small air force does not use it, instead operating from one side of the capital's main international airport.

Largely Symbolic Role in Libya

Qatar is taking great pride in its role in stemming the Libyan crisis. As the Qatari air force chief of staff put it: "Certain countries like Saudi Arabia and Egypt haven't taken leadership for the last three years. So we wanted to step up and express ourselves, and see if others will follow."

In actuality, however, the Qatari military is greatly limited in both size and capability. The four Mirage 2000 jets that Doha deployed to Greece for Libyan operations represent the bulk of its operational air force. And two of those aircraft nearly failed to arrive, having to divert to Cyprus after running short of fuel en route. Reliant on servicing by French and other foreign technicians, the aircraft are not expected to see any real military action.

U.S. Policy and the Emir's Upcoming Visit

Qatari society does not recognize the universal freedoms that guide the Obama administration's foreign policy, but there is little domestic opposition to the emir's rule, which is marked by generous subsidies and traditional Gulf accessibility. Nevertheless, the administration should make the most of Sheikh Hamad's upcoming visit to Washington, originally scheduled for February but now seemingly slated for April. Doha will want to use the visit to confirm its new diplomatic status. Yet Washington must balance its gratitude for ongoing access to al-Udeid and the emirate's diplomatic support on Libya with the recognition that Qatar still has to prove itself as a reliable and consistent ally. Ultimately, Doha seeks guarantees of U.S. protection against Iran, which should be a win-win situation for Washington. But Doha is worried about the commitment of the Obama administration to deal with Qadhafi as well as Iran. Other U.S. Middle East allies will be watching closely to see how Washington handles its new best friend.

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

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations

Feb 15, 2022

Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)

ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria

Feb 15, 2022

Anna Borshchevskaya
(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Simon Henderson
(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Gulf States (/policy-analysis/gulf-states)