

A Tale of Two Qatars

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Brief Analysis

The Central Command of the U.S. military reports that the biennial "Internal Look" exercise is slated to begin Monday at the as-Sayliyah base in Qatar. The operation is designed to test U.S. military reactions to various threats in the Middle East.

Qatar's strategic importance extends well beyond this exercise. The United States sees the al-Udeid air base, located some twenty miles outside Doha, as the likely nerve center for an attack on Iraq. The base boasts a 15,000-foot runway and is said to be capable of housing thousands of troops and dozens of aircraft. With 3,300 troops and untold amounts of military hardware already in place, Qatar is now lauded as America's new and notable ally in the Gulf.

With a Gulf war looming, the importance of this cooperation cannot be minimized. But the U.S.-Qatar alliance is murkier than it appears. Qatar's policies are not so much "pro-American" as they are pragmatic steps to offset instability, compensate for weak defenses, and undercut Qatar's foes.

Reality Check

Qatar, a country smaller than Connecticut, has recently received much praise in the American media. The New York Times dubbed Qatar "one of the most liberal, democratic countries in the traditionally tribal-ruled neighborhood." The Wall Street Journal reported that Qatar "has gone through a social revolution," providing "freedoms unheard of in most of the Arabian peninsula."

These broad brushstrokes are deceiving. Qatar's press, consisting of three mainstream Arab language newspapers (ash-Sharq, al-Watan, and ar-Raya), is heavily censored by the government. Even al-Jazeera, touted as the most independent television station in the Arab world, will not address sensitive domestic Qatari politics as long as it broadcasts from Doha. Dissent on the streets of Qatar is virtually nonexistent. There are no political parties in Qatar, and elections are never held at the executive level.

Still, free and fair municipal elections were held in 1999. Qatar should be lauded for undertaking a slow and painful process of liberalization, which sets it apart from many of its Arab neighbors. In other words, Qatar is a reforming but somewhat repressive democratic monarchy that is ruled by a self-serving elite.

Evading Military Overhaul

Allowing the United States to bulk up at al-Udeid has been construed as a measure of unwavering Qatari support for America. Following the September 11 attacks, Qatari emir Shaykh Hamad bin Khalifa ath-Thani offered his

unconditional support. He even paid for television ads pledging Qatari support for the "war on terror."

In all likelihood, however, this does not stem from sincere affinity for U.S. policies. More realistically, Qatar has made a pragmatic play for U.S. military and diplomatic protection.

From a population of about 750,000, only an estimated 130,000 are citizens. Thus, Qataris are outnumbered almost five to one by foreign nationals with work permits. Added precariousness stems from challenges posed by plotting rival members of the ath-Thani clan. A U.S. presence there may help bolster the regime's stability.

Further, Qatar's meager and poorly equipped military is unprepared to counter threats from any of its well-armed Gulf neighbors. Qatar built al-Udeid and offered it to the United States as an alternative to a costly military overhaul.

The American military presence in Qatar, ath-Thani hopes, will also safeguard Qatar's vast oil and gas reserves. According to Hassan al-Ansari, a Qatari strategist, "Qatar's interests lie in developing its extensive fossil fuel reserves . . . the largest known gas reserve in the world." Thus, the American presence is a "valuable form of insurance in a turbulent region."

A Blow to the Saudis

The American buildup at al-Udeid is also a poignant message to Qatar's biggest Gulf foe: Saudi Arabia. Rivaling Saudi Arabia as America's most vital military host in the Gulf is clearly a battle won for Qatar.

Tensions with Saudi Arabia have existed for years. Saudi and Qatari forces skirmished several times in the early 1990s over a border dispute dating back to 1935; this resulted in several deaths. After Shaykh Hamad overthrew his father Shaykh Khalifah bin Hamad in 1995, Qatar accused the Saudis of orchestrating a failed coup in 1996 designed to bring Shaykh Khalifah back to power.

Recently, Saudi officials lambasted Qatar for anti-Saudi criticisms aired on al-Jazeera, broadcast from Qatari soil. After a series of diplomatic scuffles, the Saudis "decided to stop the welcoming of, or the dealing with, the Qatari emir and his foreign minister." The kingdom recalled its envoy to Qatar in late September.

America previously relied upon Saudi hospitality at the Combined Air Operations Center at Prince Sultan Air Base. Of late, however, Saudi Arabia announced its likely refusal to allow an attack on Iraq from its soil. Qatar, meanwhile, had offered al-Udeid to the Pentagon in 2000. Today, as the United States touts al-Udeid as the likely operation center for an attack on Iraq, Qatar has scored a considerable blow against its rival Saudi neighbors.

Pro-American?

Pragmatism aside, many of Qatar's policies reflect disdain for America. Consider the case of al-Jazeera. The Arab television network's lack of criticism toward Qatar is an indication that it may take orders from the emirate. In fact, the channel has largely relied on funding from Qatar's government since it launched in 1996. With that funding, al-Jazeera frequently hosts guests who espouse vitriolic anti-American rhetoric. Whether intended or not, as the Arab world's most watched television network, al-Jazeera has played a role in propagating hatred against America both before and after September 11.

In addition, Qatar has (in its tenacious efforts to spite the Saudis) come out in support of Saddam Husayn. In November 2000, for example, a member of Qatar's royal family gave Saddam a Boeing 747 jumbo jet. Shaykh Hamad bin Ali bin Jabr ath-Thani said the personal gift was an expression of solidarity with Saddam. While this was a thorn in the side of the House of Saud, it was also an affront to America, which sought to isolate Iraq for its violations of UN resolutions and efforts to build weapons of mass destruction.

While little is known of Qatari popular opinion (due to the ruling family's squelching of popular dissent), there is scant evidence of support for the United States, and some signs of opposition. According to one official, "There could

be a popular backlash if Qatari soil is used by the U.S. for the destruction of Iraq." The New York Times has noted Qatari "popular distrust of American intentions."

Implications

Qatar may be liberalizing faster than its neighbors, but the fact remains that the U.S. government has become bedfellows with a closed regime that is most concerned with protecting a small ruling elite. Washington must not confuse this recent cooperation with an alliance based on shared values. After all, America has a similar relationship with the Saudi royal elite. That relationship has recently come under intense strain due to conflicting interests.

For the moment, and as long as it is consistent with the aims of the emir, Qatar will use cooperation with America to advance its security in the region. A change in leadership or political landscape could quickly precipitate a change in policy and put Washington back out on the market for yet another Gulf ally.

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