

Qatar:

A Template for Future U.S.–Persian Gulf Relations?

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Brief Analysis

This week's visit to New York and Washington by the ruler of the Persian Gulf state of Qatar is a public display of the type of relationship the United States would prefer to have with its allies in the region post-September 11: friendly, concerned, and openly cooperative. It will be contrasted by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's visit to Qatar's much larger neighbor and frequent rival, Saudi Arabia, where the ruling family is reluctant to make military facilities available for operations against Osama bin Laden and the Taliban.

The trip by Qatar's emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, had been scheduled before the terror attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon. But the coincidence of timing should enable Qatar to build on its relations with Washington. Indeed, the opportunity arises for the Bush administration to remodel its ties in the region to cope with changed security threats.

Defense and Security

The driving force could well be security cooperation: Qatar now hosts the largest U.S. pre-positioning facility in the Gulf, containing enough material to equip two armored brigades. Enticing for Washington, Qatar is completing the giant al-Udaid air base in the south of the country, of which the main 15,000-foot runway -- the longest in the Gulf -- is already in service. The facility, only 200 miles from the Saudi Prince Sultan air base where the Saudis have put restrictions on U.S. combat operations, is perhaps fortuitously even closer to Afghanistan.

Qatar's approximately 200,000 citizens make it the smallest of the conservative Arab states of the Persian Gulf. Most Qataris follow the Wahabi version of Sunni Islam but are notably less intolerant than other Wahabis in Saudi Arabia and among the Taliban. Situated on a peninsula about the size of Connecticut, Qatar sticks out into the center of Gulf. This position, as well as oil reserves (it is a member of OPEC) and enormous gas reserves (the third largest in the world after Russia and Iran), give the emirate an importance way beyond its size. Since taking power in a 1995 bloodless coup against his increasingly disconnected father, Sheikh Hamad has shown himself to be far more visionary than most other rulers. At that time, he was a generation younger than the rulers of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates -- although the emir of Bahrain has since died and his successor, also called

Hamad, is, at 51, a contemporary of the Qatari leader.

History of Difficult Relations

It is now difficult to imagine that before Saddam Husayn invaded Iraq in 1990, Qatar's relations with Washington were strained. Military links had been banned in the late 1980s after Qatar showed off, in a military parade, Stinger missiles purloined illegally from the Afghan mujahadin and then refused to hand them over to the United States.

Even since Sheikh Hamad took over, there have been tensions. Qatar's spirited foreign minister, Sheikh Khalid bin Jassem bin Jabr al-Thani, once infuriated U.S. officials by making a surprise direct flight to Cuba after a round of talks in Washington. The emirate's determination to maintain and develop links with Baghdad was an early factor in undermining U.S. policy on Iraq. And to Saudi Arabia's fury, Qatar reportedly allowed frequent visits by bin Laden in the late 1990s, tolerating public collections in mosques for Al-Qaeda.

Qatar may be best known in the Arab world for its Al-Jazeera satellite television broadcasts, which display editorial freedom unheard of in the Arab world. The only restrictions appear to be on sensitive domestic issues like the relations between the emir and his father, and the emir's own health. However, Al-Jazeera has been uniformly inflammatory on Israeli-Palestinian issues, Iraq, and bin Laden rather than offering responsible, professional journalism. In its coverage of the intifada, the station makes no attempt at journalistic "balance" and instead seems premised on the prevailing Arab public view that Israeli occupation justifies terror attacks on Israeli civilians, including women and children. On bin Laden, the station resembles his publicity department, receiving -- at least in the past -- exclusive access to him and to his communications, which it airs without any response by moderate Muslim or Arab leaders, much less by U.S. officials.

On the domestic side, during the late 1990s, to the delight of the Clinton administration, Sheikh Hamad made a series of moves toward greater political participation, including the introduction of municipal elections and granting women the right to vote.

Relations with Israel

Politically, under Sheikh Hamad's leadership, Qatar has been notably adventurous. By establishing relations with Israel in 1996 -- officially only at a commercial level -- Sheikh Hamad broke with the traditional way that the conservative Gulf Arab states have handled their populations, dubbed by some diplomats as "bread and circuses." (The bread is the huge quantity of free services and large subsidies afforded by oil revenues; the circus is the Israel-Palestine crisis that, at least until the latest intifada, was always viewed as a sideshow by rulers of the Gulf states.) Links with Israel were cut in November 2000 under Saudi pressure but Qatar has said it is determined to invite Israel to participate in the World Trade Organization conference to be held in November at Doha.

Qatari Vulnerabilities

Economically, Qatar's existing oil production makes its nationals among the wealthiest in the world, but Sheikh Hamad is well aware that his country's future lies in the exploitation of its vast gas reserves. He has signed a range of deals to deliver gas to Asia, liquefied and under pressure in huge tankers. But this requires an expensive and extensive loading infrastructure, and the country has taken on large loans to finance the development. Careful budgeting and recent high oil prices have enabled Qatar to manage this debt, but if the price of oil falls much below its current figure of around \$21 per barrel, the country could face problems. Additional contracts are to be signed this month for the laying of gas pipelines to neighboring Bahrain and Abu Dhabi, but the uncertain future of the world economy could force a delay.

Politically, Sheikh Hamad has had awkward relations with Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi, both of which disapproved of the precedent in overthrowing his father. Saudi Arabia even backed a coup attempt and declines to reach a full

border agreement, apparently as a way of maintaining an irritant factor.

U.S. Opportunities

The most tantalizing prospect for the American military is the use of Qatar's new air base for operations over Afghanistan and perhaps even as an alternative to the existing Saudi facility for U.S. air operations over Iraq. But Washington needs to be careful not to swap one set of restrictions for another. A transfer would also risk offending the Saudis, possibly complicating an already difficult relationship.

There are also those who caution developing further links, warning of the mercurial nature of Qatari diplomacy which advances toward democracy, but where power is still held tightly by Sheikh Hamad and a few members of the Al-Thani clan.

The emir's health is also uncertain: after two operations he has been left with just one kidney. His proclaimed heir Jassem, the eldest son of his favorite wife, is still in his 20s and lacks experience.

Washington needs to warn Doha that Al-Jazeera, airing inflammatory rhetoric, resembles a propaganda service rather than a credible and free press. At the same time, Washington should offer to make available top U.S. officials for interviews on Al-Jazeera.

Even so, the events of the September 11, which arguably threaten the Gulf monarchies even more than the United States and the Western world, should provide an opportunity for Washington to refocus its relationships with Gulf states to build on those showing capability of change.

Simon Henderson is an adjunct scholar of The Washington Institute. His Institute Policy Paper *The New Pillar: Conservative Arab Gulf States and U.S. Strategy* will be published in early 2002.

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