

Report

Qatari Foreign Policy: Carryover or Redirection?

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10 July 2014





[AlJazeera]

Abstract

In his eighteen years as ruler of the state of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani radically changed Qatar's internal and external policies, transforming the small Gulf Coast emirate into a key strategic player in the region. On 25 June 2013, the Sheikh handed power over to his son, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani. This report examines the ways in which Qatari foreign policy has changed since Sheikh Tamim assumed power. The report has three sections. The first section contains an outline of Qatari foreign policy's characteristics since 1995. The second section examines the impact of recent regional developments on the balance of power in the Arab world and describes how Qatar's new leader has responded to the various crises that recently hit the region. The third section focuses on the country's internal concerns and the ways in which the new emir has redirected his government's strategic activities to focus on internal reforms and preparations for the 2022 World Cup.

Introduction

On 25 June 2013, an important political transition took place in Qatar. Setting a historical precedent, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani voluntarily relinquished state power to his son, the young Crown Prince Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani. Sheikh Hamad had led the country since 26 June 1995 and chose to hand power over to his son exactly eighteen years after his own inauguration. At just thirty-three years of age, Sheikh Tamim became the youngest leader to ever take power in his country.

During his reign, Sheikh Hamad made radical changes to Qatari national and international policy, transforming his country from a small emirate into a key player in the Gulf region. Qatar's national wealth increased dramatically, making the country one of the world's richest relative to its population. Diplomatically, Qatar's status rose in various international forums. Since hosting the 2006 Asian Games, Doha has become an attractive centre for international sports competitions. Culturally, Qatar aims to play a leading role in the acquisition of cultural artefacts (1).

This report examines whether Qatari foreign policy has changed since Sheikh Tamim assumed power. The report has three sections. The first section outlines the characteristics of Qatar's diplomatic structure since 1995 and assesses whether Sheikh Tamim has redirected his father's foreign policy path. The second section tracks the impact of developments over the past twelve months on the balance of power in the Arab world and assesses how Qatar has dealt with various crises that have hit the region. The third section examines the country's internal concerns and the ways in which Sheikh Tamim has redirected his strategic activities, focusing generally on internal reforms and particularly on ensuring that his country hosts the 2022 World Cup.

Qatar's foreign policy: from mediation and neutrality to impact and influence

In terms of international relations, Qatar's political policy is based on the principle of consolidating peace and stability (2). Article 7 of the Qatari Constitution states that the country's foreign policy "is based on the principle of strengthening international peace and security". Since the country declared independence in 1971, successive governments have maintained this approach.

From the mid-1990s, and before the advent of what has become known as the Arab Spring, Sheikh Hamad's diplomatic policy focused on conflict resolution and Doha began to play a key role in international mediation in Sudan, Eritrea, Lebanon, Palestine and others, playing the mediator role in several ongoing regional conflicts. Successes achieved in this regard (as in the case of Lebanon in May 2008) added to Qatar's international recognition and credibility. Similarly, when Qatar became involved in disputes with its neighbours over territory, as with Saudi Arabia in the 1990s and with Bahrain in the early 2000s, Qatar insisted on finding solutions through international arbitration.

From December 2010, with the outbreak of the Arab Spring, it became clear that a historic shift was changing the region's political landscape. The Arab people, subjected to repression ever since their countries achieved independence from colonialism, took to

the streets, seeking to recover their freedom and their right to self-determination. The revolutionary wind that began in Tunisia toppled a number of dictatorships in the region.

From the start, Qatar supported the calls for freedom. This has radically changed the country's image in the international arena. Thus, in April 2011, during the NATO-led campaign against late Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's forces, Qatar was obliged to participate in the military deterrence under the umbrella of an international coalition and the country moved from playing a mediator role to that of supportive activist (3).

Two points are important here in relation to Qatari foreign policy. First, this foreign policy is fully consistent with, and conforms to, the text and spirit of Qatar's Constitution (Article 7, cited earlier, also states that Qatar will "support the right of peoples to self-determination"). Secondly, the vacuum in regional powers, and especially within the Arab League from 2010 to 2012, was likely a factor in pushing the Qatar into assuming a leadership position.

In 2010, traditional Arab powers were in decline. Saudi Arabia was busy arranging its internal affairs and a sense of dissension had begun to appear in some of its regions. Egypt was paralysed by the transitional period that followed the 25 January 2011 revolution. Iraq has continued to stumble and collapse since the US invasion in 2003 (4), while Syria was, and still is, plagued by the violence that ensued after the March 2011 popular uprising. All these factors paved the way for Qatar's advance into the Arab world and turned Doha into a sponsor and supporter of the revolutionaries, aiming to enable Arab peoples to control their own destiny. Qatari support for Libya, Syria and Egypt has taken the form of financial, humanitarian and media assistance.

Sheikh Tamim's first year in power: relative carryover in an unfavourable environment

On 3 July 2013, just days after Sheikh Tamim was handed power from his father, a military coup in Egypt overthrew Mohamed Morsi, the first elected president in the country's history. The coup was welcomed by some states in the region and condoned by Western powers. At the regional level, Turkey, Qatar, and Hamas expressed strong reservations about this sudden disruption of the democratic process. In some respect, the Egyptian crisis was a key challenge which forced Qatar's new leader to make his own position clear.

Sheikh Hamad had been committed to broad support for Morsi's government and his son, Sheikh Tamim, has followed his father's diplomatic policy. The position adopted by official authorities focuses on adamant respect for the choice of peoples and rejects the exclusion of any political force from national dialogue. Qatari policy keeps the door open

for discussion with the new Egyptian authorities while stressing the necessity of an inclusive political scene. Since this is contrary to the position taken by other countries in the region to confront the Muslim Brotherhood, the Qatari position revealed sharp rifts between the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). This was undoubtedly the second biggest challenge facing Sheikh Tamim during his first year as emir.

On 5 March 2014, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates all decided to withdraw their ambassadors from Doha. This decision, unprecedented in the history of the GCC, illustrated the depth of the differences between GCC members in their assessment of Egypt's status quo. Qatar's refusal to accept the military coup led by Field Marshal Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and its adoption of a regional policy inconsistent with those adopted by other GCC states strained its relations with those countries (5). The diplomatic crisis that developed between Doha and some of its GCC neighbours arose from Qatar's independent political decision, one defended by Sheikh Tamim. Thus, it can be argued that Sheikh Tamim is carrying over a state policy that aims to make Qatar an active sovereign and credible regional actor with strategies that can vary drastically from those adopted by its neighbours.

However, despite the relatively cool relations between Doha and some of the GCC states, the GCC has consolidated its position on Syria in recent months. Essentially, "co-operation and coordination" between Saudi Arabia and Qatar on Syria will survive for as long as Saudi sees its conflict with Iran as a greater strategic threat. In other words, in the face of its confrontation with Tehran, Riyadh needs the support of the other GCC countries. Thus, the present status quo, which can be characterised as a cold war in the Gulf, seems set to continue. This means that Qatar will maintain its real support for the Arab peoples but that its efforts are likely to be primarily diplomatic in nature. This does not mean that Doha is stepping down from its regional role; rather, it suggests a shift towards the use of "smart power", or a combination of soft and hard powers.

The idea of a transition to a new approach in Qatari foreign policy seems to be based on the principle of achieving a distinctive advantage in international affairs by using a blend of polarisation and power to realise specific goals. This may explain Qatari foreign policy's position on the international stage, remaining reserved on some issues while playing a major and active role in others.

Focus on internal affairs: long-term strategy

In his inauguration speech, Sheikh Tamim focused mainly on the state's internal affairs and did not highlight international issues. Apart from mentioning Palestine, which is consistently a regional priority, Sheikh Tamim's speech focused entirely on the need for reforms directed at achieving the 2030 Qatari national vision (6). These reforms focus on

the economy and on infrastructure and property developments required for hosting the 2022 World Cup in Qatar.

In this respect, it can be argued that Qatar has been in the international spotlight over the past year. On the one hand, the country has been exposed to a mass media campaign and reports by numerous human rights organisations aimed at tarnishing its image in western newspapers and magazines. On the other hand, internal reforms have accelerated, including a crucial reform of labour law that abolishes the kafala (sponsorship) system tying foreign workers to a single employer.

In this context, it seems likely that one of two possible scenarios will unfold in the near future. In scenario one, foreign criticism of Qatar will continue, focusing mainly on employment conditions and the charges of corruption, causing the number of anti-Qatar press reports to steadily increase. The impact of these negative reports could be considerable as they tarnish Qatar's international image and may even lead FIFA to consider other venues for hosting the 2022 World Cup. Since allegations published in the Sunday Times on 1 June 2014 that a Qatari official made five million dollars worth of bribes to influence FIFA's decision on hosting the World Cup, dozens of similar reports have flooded Western media. Such reports might push public opinion, especially in Britain and France, to demand a new vote. A number of officials, athletes, politicians and intellectuals are already lobbying for this.

In scenario two, the negative media coverage on Qatar may decline as reforms are implemented, particularly if Asian workers' conditions improve. It is important to note, however, that the Western media have either ignored or expressed scepticism about Qatari efforts to reform the kafala system.

Conclusion

There is no doubt Qatar has several strengths. Its influence as a mediator in regional and international conflicts, its enormous oil wealth and strong foreign investment and its participation in international sporting and cultural events makes this small state a key player in the region. Since the early 2000s, Qatar has stood out as a rising regional power, taking advantage of its large national income (7). It has capitalised on the fact that a power vacuum developed in the region as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iraq and Syria have increasingly had to focus on their own internal affairs and because the United States seems increasingly reluctant to engage in new conflicts and wars in the region given its Afghanistan and Iraq experiences.

Since the “Arab Spring” revolutions, the strategic direction of Doha’s foreign policy seems to have shifted. The country has taken advantage of the soft powers that it built and refined during the first decade of the new millennium, making a strategic change in its foreign policy that has helped it build solid ground for its transition from neutrality to influence.

The changes in the region since 2010, particularly in relation to the number of Arab countries that have seen change, such as Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Syria, combined with various internal difficulties and issues, have pushed Qatar to adopt a foreign policy based on the principles of smart power; that is, using a combination of persuasion and alliances to create change through strengthening relations with other powers, while maintaining power and influence in carefully selected instances.

What can be concluded as the first year of Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad’s reign draws to a close is that Qatar has faced several crises during this period, and has been able to maintain its presence in the international arena despite the fact that conditions have been less favourable than those that prevailed during the reign of his father. The challenges facing Sheikh Tamim are likely to increase in severity as tension mounts in the region and as the 2022 World Cup approaches.

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