

US-Qatar Relations: Realizing the Full Potential of a Growing Strategic Partnership

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Six months into my tenure as the United States Ambassador to the State of Qatar, I have learned a great deal about the complex identity of this small, proud nation. Qatar's leaders believe the best way to promote stability and stop the spread of violent extremism in the region is for governments to be responsive to the needs of their people. Although he commands one of the smallest militaries in the region, the Emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, is overseeing one of the most ambitious and comprehensive military modernization programs in the world. Though culturally conservative, Doha has welcomed branch campuses of six American universities with an eye toward blending its traditional heritage with the cutting edge practices of Western liberal arts and sciences. In only a few decades, Qatar has transformed from a developing nation to a financial powerhouse with the highest per capita income in the world.

Perhaps the most important lesson after my first months of engagement with Qataris is that US-Qatar relations are poised to enter an unprecedented period of growth and development. Our interests, bilaterally and regionally, have never aligned more closely. Qatar's new Emir—who ascended to power in 2013 after his father's voluntary resignation—is the youngest head of state in the region. He has an ambitious, forward-leaning vision for his country and its role in the Middle East and beyond. For the United States, Qatar's political stability, economic prosperity, and military development make it a strong strategic partner in a region beset by challenges.

A Partner in Promoting Stability and Prosperity in the Region

Although it has the smallest population of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, with Qatari citizens comprising about 300,000 of a population of 2.3 million residents, Qatar has had an outsized influence on the course of regional events. The former Emir and his foreign policy team pursued an assertive, independent foreign policy, with key roles leading international efforts to oust Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi in 2011, backing democratic transition in Egypt, and supporting the Syrian opposition in seeking a negotiated political settlement to end the conflict and usher in a new era without Bashar al-Asad or his regime. Their foreign policy expanded Qatar's global influence and prestige, but at times put them at odds with friends in the region and western governments, some of which disapproved of Doha's perceived preference for working with Islamic opposition movements in places like Egypt, the Palestinian Territories, Libya, and Tunisia.

In February, I had the privilege of accompanying the Emir on his first visit to Washington as head of state. I heard him articulate to President Obama and other senior administration officials a moderate, flexible foreign policy vision that shares the President's goal of promoting peace, stability, and prosperity in the region and that seeks to achieve

those goals through cooperation and understanding between our countries. Qatar has been a committed supporter of the Syrian opposition, of efforts to find a way forward in the Middle East peace process, and of United Nations-led political dialogue for Libya. The Emir has stated that the only way to halt the growth of violent extremist groups, like Da'esh (also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or ISIL), that claim Islam as their inspiration is to embrace and include moderate Islamic voices in the governance of their respective countries. The Emir's perspective is unique among Middle Eastern leaders and makes Qatar an important conduit to key opposition groups in the region. Qatar's understanding of the region's history and dominant religion, and its firm belief that we must collectively address the socioeconomic factors driving people toward violent extremism, make Qatar a key partner in our efforts to confront groups like al-Qaeda and Da'esh.

A Strong and Growing Military Relationship

For decades, Qatar has proven itself to be a reliable and indispensable military ally in a volatile region. Since the early 2000s, Qatar has hosted tens of thousands of US military personnel, US Central Command Forward Headquarters, and Air Force Central Command at al-Udeid Airbase—the largest American air base outside of the continental United States. The Qatar Emiri Armed Forces (QEAF) has officers integrated into the Combined Air Operations Center that oversees all air operations in the region, and Qatar is playing a significant role supporting the efforts of the Counter-ISIL Coalition.

Recent cooperation with Qatar in Iraq and Syria, combined with the Emir's plans for expanding and modernizing the Qatari military to confront and defend against myriad regional challenges that impact both of our countries, has clearly demonstrated to me the critical importance of expanding our bilateral military partnership. The Qatari military seeks to place more of its officers in US command schools, to conduct more joint exercises with US forces, and most significantly, is moving to purchase huge amounts of US military equipment. In 2014, the QEAF purchased over \$11 billion in military equipment, including Apache helicopters and Patriot air defense systems, which will help protect our military personnel stationed throughout the Middle East. As the only state in the GCC without US fighter aircraft as part of its air force, Qatar also seeks to purchase American fighters to ensure the QEAF has the capability and interoperability necessary to train and coordinate with US forces and provide fulsome contributions to future US-led military efforts. These purchases demonstrate Qatar's commitment to our long-term military relationship and have benefited the American people by sustaining more than 50,000 jobs in the United States, with the potential for 60,000 more. This is just one area where enhanced strategic ties between the United States and Qatar stand to bolster the American economy.

Mutual Benefits of Expanding Economic Ties

Qatar is in the midst of a historic economic boom that underscores the importance of expanding US-Qatar commercial ties, which have grown steadily over the past four decades. Qatar derives its wealth primarily from hydrocarbons and particularly from natural gas reserves off the northern coast of the country, which Qatar first began exploiting in the mid-1990s. Though Qatar's reliance on natural gas exports means it is

well-placed to weather the current downturn in oil prices, the Emir recognizes that gas is a finite resource and that Qatar's long-term prosperity depends on developing vibrant industries outside of the energy sector.

The Qatari government has articulated a plan to diversify its economy by increasing overseas investment and developing Qatar into a “knowledge-based economy”—a hub of education, research, and technical innovation that can guarantee Qatar's economic security and sustainability long after the gas reserves run dry. That the entire country currently resembles a giant construction site is a testament to Qatar's seriousness about developing the massive and complex infrastructure necessary to realize the Emir's ambitious goals. Citing his deep appreciation for US oil and gas firms that invested in Qatar in the early 1990s in the midst of major uncertainties in the oil industry, the Emir and his economic team have asserted that they see the United States as a central partner in Qatar's financial future.

As the country prepares to host the world's premier sporting event, the 2022 FIFA World Cup, Qatar is planning to spend more than \$200 billion on infrastructure projects. American companies have won tenders for many major infrastructure projects—including the \$16-plus billion Hamad International Airport that opened in April 2014, Doha's future metro system, and stadiums for the 2022 World Cup and beyond—that represent enormous profit for US firms and should result in greater use of US standards and specifications, including labor standards, that will favor other US companies in the future. American firms are playing leading roles in many of Qatar's large infrastructure projects, as Qatar looks to the United States as a priority for its sovereign wealth fund. The United States is positioned to become one of Qatar's top investment destinations, to the tune of at least \$35 billion over the next five years. Additionally, Qatar's sovereign wealth fund—estimated to be worth anywhere between \$180 and \$350 billion—is also looking to shift its investment focus to the Americas and Asia. The Qatar Investment Authority is set to open an exploratory office in New York City in the coming year to act as a forward base from which to identify new investments in the United States, and its real estate investment arm, Qatari Diar, opened a satellite office in Washington, DC in 2014 for the same purpose. Qatar is one of our most important trading partners in the region, importing more than \$5 billion of US goods in 2014.

No discussion of Qatar's “knowledge-based economy” would be complete without mentioning the cornerstone of this effort: Qatar Foundation's Education City. The city is a multi-billion dollar conglomerate of local and Western institutions of research and higher learning that includes branches from six of America's top universities: Georgetown University, Virginia Commonwealth University, Cornell-Weill Medical College, Texas A&M University, Carnegie Mellon University, and Northwestern University. I meet daily with Qatari Ministers, members of the royal family, and business leaders who attended American colleges and universities across the country (nearly 1,200 Qatari students are studying in the United States right now—an increase of nearly 20 percent from last year and a huge number for a country with a population of just 300,000). Based on their positive experiences studying in the United States, the Qatari leadership believes that the American universities at Education City have a critical role to play in forging strong educational and cultural ties between the Qatari and American people, facilitating the

robust exchange of ideas and perspectives in this country that seeks to become a gateway between East and West, and in building Qatar's own human capital to manage the country's rapid growth and modernization.

Ambitions to Become a Global Capital of Sports and Culture

Qatar has also established itself as a center of international culture, arts, and sports—areas that bring people together and provide platforms to engage youth in positive ways. Winning the hosting rights to the 2022 World Cup is Qatar's most visible success. It is also important to recognize Qatar's world-class Museum of Islamic Art designed by American architect I.M. Pei, the country's world famous art collection, its successful hosting of the 2015 Handball World Cup and the 2006 Asian Games, and the hundreds of international conferences, symposia, and expositions Doha hosts every year on art, healthcare advancements, education innovations, cutting edge military and security technologies, and more. Over the past few years, Doha has demonstrated its potential as a cultural hub and a venue for convening people to exchange ideas and work towards solutions to some of the world's most pressing challenges.

Leveraging Converging Interests

In many ways, Qatar's priorities are American priorities. Qatar's vision for its future, with a diversified economy and its youth integrated into the global economy, aligns with elements in the US strategy for helping to achieve stability in the Middle East. Less than one year into my tenure and on the heels of the Emir's trip to Washington, I see boundless opportunity for us to capitalize on the many areas in which our interests converge. Together with our partners in the Qatari government, private sector, and through our daily people-to-people exchanges, we are strengthening the bilateral relationship in ways that benefit the people of Qatar and the people of the United States.