

# Qatar's foreign policy

By Bernard Haykel

## ■ Executive summary

Qatar's foreign policy is largely designed and driven by the emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani. The two countries that figure most prominently in his calculations are the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. He seeks to keep the U.S. as a protector and ally against foreign aggression and prevent the Saudis from resuming their policies of undermining his regime. Qatar has adopted an aggressive policy of mediating disputes throughout the region in order to make itself appear as an important player in Arab politics. It has also effectively developed the Al Jazeera television station in order to project its soft power among Arab publics. On both counts Qatar has been remarkably successful.

Qatar, like all of the states of the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC), is ruled in a highly personalised, autocratic and idiosyncratic fashion. The emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, came to power after ousting his father in a coup in 1995 and has since centralised power in his own hands. Most descriptions of Qatar's ruling clique present four individuals as playing a central role in the country's decision-making and policy-setting process. They are the emir; his favourite wife, Sheikha Mowza; the crown prince, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad (who is also Mowza's son); and, finally, the prime minister and foreign minister, Sheikh Hamad bin Jasim Al-Thani (commonly referred to in Western policy circles as HbJ). There is no doubt that HbJ is a dynamic individual with a large network of contacts and that he plays an important role in Qatar's foreign policy, but most insiders argue that the person who micromanages every decision and move Qatar makes is the emir himself. He is the one who decides on everything, small and large, but often gives credit to his wife or HbJ for a given policy. The advantage of doing this is deniability should a policy fail and to make his central role in the power structure appear less prominent. In private conversation with HbJ a number of individuals have remarked that he is preparing to retire from political life in order to give the designated heir, Sheikh Tamim, a larger role and wider platform to play on. What is remarkable in Qatar (but also in the United Arab Emirates) is the relative youth

of the leadership, especially as compared to the gerontocracy that rules Saudi Arabia.

Qatar's foreign policy is dictated by the need to secure the regime's survival. Since the time of the Ottomans and the British, the Qatari leadership has been adept at playing all sides in order to guarantee its survival. One implication of this is that the regime is not ideologically committed to anything and is thus willing to make alliances, either temporary or of long duration, if this is deemed to be in the country's interest. Moreover, Qatar is a small and very rich country living in a hostile neighbourhood. Saudi Arabia, not Iran, is Qatar's principal threat. The Saudis have never fully accepted that Qatar, a fellow Wahhabi state, should be fully independent and not – for example, like Bahrain – a client kingdom in need of Saudi protection and largess to remain viable. The Saudis have been implicated in a number of plots to overthrow Sheikh Hamad and claim that his foreign policy is driven by foreign powers, for which he acts as a local agent. High-ranking members of the Saudi royal family have voiced the opinion that the Qataris punch so far above their weight that they must be working either for the Americans or perhaps the Israelis. Neither is, of course, the case. Qatar is simply taking advantage of foreign opportunities in order to create an image of itself as an indispensable player on the scene and therefore a regime worth preserving and protecting. It also helps that foreign

policy success often benefits the Qatari leadership on the domestic front.

The Qatari leadership realises that the U.S. is the hegemon that can protect it from Saudi, Iranian and any other foreign military threats (just as Britain had done in the past) and is therefore making itself an important ally of Washington in the region. When the U.S. decided after the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, DC of September 11th 2001 to remove its military forces from Saudi Arabia, it turned to Qatar, which was more than happy to host the U.S. Central Command's forward headquarters in the al-Udeid air base. Qatar even contributed significant sums to the building of the base.

But Qatar's foreign policy has been much more than this military alliance. It has developed a policy of trying to mediate various regional disputes ranging from Morocco and Western Sahara, to Lebanon's sectarian feuds, to those in Yemen between the Houthi rebels and the central government in Sana'a, to the war in Darfur against the government in Khartoum. It has not been successful in many of these diplomatic efforts: it failed in Yemen and partially succeeded in Lebanon, but its most lasting success has been in adopting Hamas, which controls the Gaza Strip, as a client. Qatar has the ability to talk to everyone and this is in part due to its financial largesse, which it is willing to expend in trying to mediate disputes. And while the U.S. may not be happy that Hamas has been rehabilitated from its alliance with Syria and Iran, it knows it can communicate with and perhaps even influence the Islamist organisation through Qatar.

The other tactic that Qatar has developed in furthering its regional influence has been through what might be termed "soft power". And here the Al Jazeera satellite television channel, primarily the Arabic service, has been remarkably effective as a tool for promoting Qatar's image and policies. It was serendipitous that the emir acceded to power in Doha in 1995 just as the BBC Arabic television service was shutting down due to a dispute with Saudi Arabia. Qatar was then able to start Al Jazeera by hiring the recently laid-off BBC journalists, and through this to offer Arab audiences virtually uncensored coverage of and debates on highly relevant issues that had hitherto remained taboo. In so doing, Al Jazeera also shattered the information monopoly that the region's state-run television stations had enjoyed and created a truly pan-Arab audience that responded to the same stories and images. The contagious character of the Arab Spring revolts owes much to Al

Jazeera's sensationalist and advocacy coverage. With the exception of Bahrain's uprising – on which Al Jazeera Arabic has been virtually silent and therefore complicit with the minority Sunni regime in Manama – Qatar has pursued a dynamic policy of encouraging revolt and people power from Tunisia to Syria. One irony here is that in Qatar itself citizens do not enjoy the power that Al Jazeera promotes for Tunisians, Libyans, Egyptians and Syrians. This contradiction, like many others, is glossed over entirely.

One of the effects of Qatar's strong support for the opposition in Syria is to have alienated Iran, perhaps definitively. By doing so, Qatar has adhered to a position that the GCC has adopted under Saudi leadership after the coming to power in Iraq of Shia political forces beholden to Tehran. Qatar, like the other GCC countries, is worried that a revived Iraq under Prime Minister al-Maliki's leadership will pose a threat and that any policy that weakens what amounts to a Shia arc of power that extends from Iran to Lebanon, via Iraq and Syria, is an imperative. Iran must be made to understand that core Arab politics is off limits, and this includes among other things the Palestinian dispute with Israel. Qatar has been successful at wooing Hamas away from Iran and Syria, and has built an alliance with Turkey and Egypt that it hopes will keep Iranian power contained to Iraq. And while this policy places Qatar and Saudi Arabia firmly in the same camp, it is not clear that it follows from a clearly delineated strategy. Rather, it appears opportunistic in that Syria presents a possibility of weakening Iran, so why not pursue an effort to topple the Assad regime?

## Recommendations for Norway

Qatar will no doubt welcome a stronger relationship with Norway and offer its mediation services and connections to pursue common goals. What must be kept in mind, however, is that Qatar's policies are not rooted in principles (e.g. human rights, the rule of law, etc.) or well-conceived strategies. The policies that Qatar pursues are based on ad hoc decisions made by the emir for the purpose of preserving his rule and that of his heir. In other words, Qatar cannot be relied on entirely to remain consistent or to do the right thing. It might use Norway's considerable standing and reputation in the world in some opportunistic fashion, and this could potentially lead to Norway's embarrassment. It bears remembering that Qatar does not treat its own dissidents kindly and the various promises the emir has made in the past about greater democratisation and the electoral participation of the population have remained largely unfulfilled. ■

## ■ THE AUTHOR

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