

# Qatar's international relations under Emir Tamim

By David Roberts

## ■ Executive summary

Emir Tamim has become the new ruler of Qatar after the abdication of his father, Emir Hamad Bin Khalifa al-Thani. The latter followed an independent foreign policy throughout his reign and sought good relations with all states, although Qatar's taking sides in the Arab uprisings have somewhat modified this position. Evaluating Qatar's foreign policy under Emir Tamim is difficult. In his upbringing Tamim was imbued with the vision of Qatar as an internationally oriented state. It would be very surprising if he were to backtrack on this basic thrust and withdraw Qatar internationally. Emir Tamim's Qatar will therefore likely continue to seek to extend the small state's influence throughout the region wherever and whenever possible.

Throughout most of the reign of the now-former ruler of Qatar, Emir Hamad Bin Khalifa al-Thani (r. 1995-2013), it was possible for Qatar to profess the notion that it was a state that did not take sides. Certainly, on occasion this suggestion would be greeted with bafflement or amused scorn, but on balance and before Qatar's involvement in the Arab Spring such a notion was at the very least plausible.

Hamad took power from his father in 1995, but was the most powerful man in the country long before. The early years of his de facto rule saw Qatar diplomatically recognise the Soviet Union and China in 1988 without waiting for Saudi Arabia to do so first – an unusual move for Qatar that indicates Hamad's influence – and then at the start of the 1990s Hamad set about improving relations with both Iran and Israel. This too was deeply unusual and put Qatar starkly at odds with Saudi Arabia, which after independence from Britain in 1971 had been the de facto protector of Qatar.

Hamad sought these diverse relationships primarily for one tactical and one strategic reason. Tactically, Qatar needed the U.S. to guarantee its protection. Hamad was considering a whole range of taboo-breaking policies in the coming years and did not trust in Saudi Arabia's putative guarantees: not only was the Saudis' ability to defend themselves questioned by the so-called 'tanker war' in the late 1980s, but this sense of doubt was driven home by their plea for international help with Operation Desert Shield. Indeed, the

Iraqi invasion of Kuwait held many concerning analogies for Qatar (a small, intrinsically weak, but hydrocarbon-rich state invaded by one of its far larger neighbours, with whom it had sporadically troubled relations) and so Qatar needed a suzerain power. As the emir noted in an interview in the Lebanese paper *al-Safir* in 2009, he initially boosted relations with Iran (and Iraq, then still an international pariah) as a way to force the U.S. to aid Qatar if it did not want Qatar to further deepen its relations with Iran (also an international pariah state).

Strategically, however, new relations with Iran and Israel, and later Hizbullah and Hamas, were designed to bolster the notion that Qatar wanted relations with all states, no matter their orientation. Boosting relations with Iran in particular was necessary to offset the quickly deepening relations with the U.S., which included defensive agreements and subsequently increasing basing arrangements from 1992 onwards: Qatar's foreign policy was – and remains – all about balance.

Opening negotiations with Israel as the 1990s progressed, culminating in the opening of an Israeli trade office in Doha in 1996, was one of a panoply of issues between Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Fundamentally, Saudi Arabia could not adjust to the new elite in Qatar and their resolutely independent policies, which were a complete change from those of the traditionally far more pliant and obedient Qatar. The cold

war between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, fought with the use of Al-Jazeera and diplomatic initiatives, was only ended in 2008 with the return of the Saudi ambassador to Doha after a six-year hiatus and agreements that, for example, Al-Jazeera's coverage of the Kingdom would be more judicious and less salacious.

Then-Crown Prince Tamim was placed in charge of the bilateral committee in the late 2000s designed to get Saudi relations back on track for Qatar and he is thus in a good position to maintain a cordial working relationship between the two countries in the future. Crucially, Qatar needs this relationship to remain friendly. It plans to undertake huge infrastructure projects in the next decade and the road into Qatar from Saudi Arabia will be a centrally important conduit of materials, with Doha's port being too small and its new port being repeatedly delayed. Given that Saudi Arabia has a track record of using its borders to apply pressure on its smaller neighbours in political disputes (as with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 2010 regarding a dispute over the maps on UAE identification cards), Qatar, while not capitulating, will assiduously try to keep relations cordial and professional.

Despite the UAE initially supporting Khalifah Bin Hamad (r. 1972-1995) when he was ousted in 1995 by his son and crown prince, Hamad, relations were soon normalised when it became apparent that Hamad was there to stay. Throughout Hamad's tenure relations remained amicable and unspectacular. A fundamental rivalry remains between the two states that colours relations. Both are small states striving to exert their influence internationally and to carve niches for themselves. In some areas in particular such as aviation (Qatar Airways versus Etihad and Emirates Airlines), high-end tourism (Doha and Abu Dhabi) and finance (Doha versus Dubai's and Abu Dhabi's financial centres) the states are in direct and vigorous competition.

The two states' roles in the Arab Spring have added a complicating dimension. Despite both states initially vigorously supporting the revolutions, notably in Libya, subsequently the UAE has balked at supporting what it sees as increasing Muslim Brotherhood domination, whereas Qatar has supported (often significantly) the new Muslim Brotherhood-ruled powers. Domestically the UAE elite feel this caution even more strongly, as demonstrated by the arrest of nearly 100 people on charges relating to promoting the Brotherhood domestically. Qatar's ongoing support of the Brotherhood is, therefore, seen as exacerbating a deeply personal and delicate issue within the UAE. Initially, it is difficult to see Emir Tamim changing Qatar's policies. However, with the July 2013 coup ousting Mohammed Morsi (the elected Muslim Brotherhood president in Egypt), Qatar may be able to demonstrate that it does not seek to support the Muslim Brotherhood per se but whomever is in charge – a policy that thus far the State of Qatar has fundamentally been unable to articulate. Such an eventuality ought to calm the slowly increasing tensions between Qatar and the UAE.

Qatar's actions in the Arab Spring, however, are having the opposite effect on its bilateral relations with Iran. Qatar can easily demonstrate that it has supported a range of Iranian interests in recent decades. Qatar frequently diplomatically protected Iran's and Hizbullah's interests against United Nations (UN) resolutions, and when Qatar was on the UN Security Council it invited President Ahmadinejad to the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) Annual Summit in 2007 (the first time this had ever happened) and generally avoided the GCC-U.S.-led containment of the Islamic Republic. However, by so vigorously supporting the uprising against a key Iranian ally, i.e. President Assad of Syria, Qatar is effectively undermining a key plinth of Iranian foreign policy. This is the challenge that Emir Tamim will have to tackle. The recent June 2013 election as president of Iran of Hassan Rouhani, who is widely seen as offering a more conciliatory stance than his predecessor, Ahmadinejad, presents an good opportunity for Tamim to continue Qatar's line that its actions in Syria are necessary and not directed at Iran. Whether Tamim is inclined to ameliorate relations with Iran, however, remains to be seen.

Just as it took time for Saudi Arabia to come to terms with the fact that Qatar was not an obedient small state, so too the U.S. took its time to come to this realisation. Qatar's close relations with Iran were the central thorn in the side of U.S.-Qatari relations, with U.S. leaders becoming increasingly exasperated that Qatar would not toe their line towards the Islamic Republic. Difficulties with immigration for U.S. forces (bureaucratic impediments, delays, frequent deportations, etc.) using the al-'Udeid air base in Doha were a physical manifestation of their antagonistic relations. While the core relationship – the U.S. needing the bases in Qatar and Qatar needing these bases to stay – was never threatened, day-to-day activities and the overall relationship eventually improved as the U.S. realised – just as Saudi Arabia had – that Qatar was not going to do as it was told.

While the winding down of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars makes U.S. bases in Qatar less important, it is difficult to see the U.S. standing down its bases in Doha for at least a decade yet. Not only is investment in the bases ongoing, but Qatar will be loathe to give up such relations and the U.S. too – despite the overhyped pivot to Asia – still understands that Gulf stability is central to world economic (and therefore U.S.) prosperity.

Ever wanting to diversify its dependence, Qatar has typically sought military guarantees from the U.S., military training from the UK and military hardware from France. While there are various exceptions to this cliché (the acquisition of U.S. heavy-lift aircraft, Qataris studying at French military academies, etc.), Qatar's leaders will perennially strive to maintain such a split, for it reflects their innate disposition. There is no reason whatsoever to expect Emir Tamim to change this Qatari approach. Although he holds his French meetings in fluent French,

given the estimated £20-30 billion that Qatar has invested in London, the UK government need not be concerned over a pivot to France, while U.S. leaders know perfectly well that U.S. security guarantees are irreplaceable.

Evaluating Qatar's foreign policy under Emir Tamim is difficult. There is little evidence to base conclusions on at present as Qatar's international issues were previously dominated by his father and Emir Hamad's foreign minister, Hamad Bin Jasseem al-Thani, who was in the post for 21 years. Yet Tamim was brought up by his father (the emir)

and mother (Shaykha Muza) and imbued with their vision of Qatar as an internationally oriented state. It would be very surprising if he were to backtrack on this basic thrust and withdraw Qatar internationally. Without a foreign minister like Hamad Bin Jasseem, an extrovert of a man who perennially sought to hog the limelight whenever possible, Qatar's foreign policy will inevitably become somewhat quieter. Yet Emir Tamim's Qatar will still – if perhaps more subtly – seek to extend the small state's influence throughout the region wherever and whenever possible.

## ■ THE AUTHOR

**David Roberts** is the director of the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies in Qatar and has recently submitted his PhD on Qatari foreign policy and security to Durham University, which will be published in late 2013 by Hurst in Britain and Oxford University Press in the U.S. As well as writing extensively for a range of journals, magazines, and newspapers on Qatar and the wider Gulf region, he provides commentary to the print, radio and television media, and consults for a range of international banks, energy companies and other FTSE-500 institutions.

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