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On February 21, 2022, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi arrived in Doha on a state visit to Qatar.

Raisi's visit to Doha is significant in several respects. Qatar and Iran have long enjoyed cordial relations. Despite the friendly nature of these relations, however, they have been largely superficial and devoid of substance. As part of its foreign policy strategy of hedging, intended to maximize the number of the country's friends and to minimize the number of its adversaries, Qatar has long sought to keep the potential for tensions with Iran to a minimum. The fact that the two countries share the world's largest gas field, the South Pars/North Dome, has further encouraged Qatar to maintain open and friendly lines of communication with Iran.

Careful not to violate secondary US sanctions on the Islamic Republic, Doha has at the same time avoided expanding trade or other substantive commercial ties with Tehran.

Tehran appears to have maintained a similar view of its relations with Doha, seeing Qatar as a valuable friend diplomatically but being reluctant to take Doha up on its offer to mediate in its disputes with the United States and Saudi Arabia. In 2015, when Iran and the United States started secret negotiations in the lead-up to what eventually became the Nuclear Accord, they chose to be hosted first by Oman rather than by Qatar. More recently, despite Qatar's offer of mediation between its neighbors to the north and to the south, Iran and Saudi Arabia have both preferred to meet and discuss their differences in Baghdad.

Despite the reluctance of both sides to substantively deepen their relations, Raisi's visit to Qatar represents an important development on several fronts. To start with, the visit marks only Raisi's second state visit after his election, the first such visit having been to Russia, and the first visit by an Iranian president to Doha in eleven years. There are a number of other, more important reasons for the trip's significance. The trip comes in what appears to be the final phase of the renewed negotiations in Vienna between Iran and the world powers to renew the Nuclear Accord, from which the United States withdrew in 2018. During their meeting, Raisi reportedly briefed Qatar's Emir, Sheikh Tamim, on the status of the Vienna negotiations. This appears to be part of a deliberate, wider strategy by Raisi and his foreign minister, Hossein Amirabdollahian, to get buy-in from as many GCC states as possible for a new nuclear accord by keeping them in the loop on the status of the Vienna negotiations.

For Qatar, President Raisi's visit can help enhance its early-starter advantage for access to Iran's lucrative markets when and if the ongoing negotiations result in the lifting of US and secondary sanctions on Iran. The two leaders reportedly discussed a number of bilateral trade issues and joint infrastructural projects.

More immediately, Sheikh Tamim's offer to Raisi to help finalize the Vienna talks can only add to Qatar's diplomatic prestige and also to its strategic value to Washington and other world capitals. Even if Doha does not become formally involved in the negotiations, it can claim to have been a moderating influence on Iran and helping get the negotiations over the line.



Given the speed and fluidity of regional developments, it is nearly impossible to predict the future course of Iran's relations with Qatar and with its other Arab neighbours. Nevertheless, if Raisi's past few months in office are an indication, current trends point to a steady reduction of tensions between Iran and the GCC states, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Within this context, Iran's pre-existing, cordial relations with Qatar are likely to assume even greater importance, not just diplomatically but also politically and commercially. In this sense, Raisi's visit to Doha could well represent the start of a new chapter in Iran-GCC relations that feature far less tension and perhaps even a few areas of cooperation.