



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
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The US-Qatar Summit Puts Qatar at the Epicentre of the US Regional Strategy

Unit for Political Studies

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Unit for Political Studies

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On 31 January 2022, US President Joe Biden welcomed Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, the Emir of Qatar, to the White House, in the first summit that Biden has held with a Gulf leader since he took office about a year ago. The summit attracted attention in Washington and abroad due to the importance of the issues it addressed. The summit culminated in President Biden's announcement of his decision to classify Qatar as a "major non-NATO ally."¹

Points of Discussion

According to the press statements, the summit touched on a number of regional and international issues, foremost of which is security in the Gulf and the Greater Middle East, ensuring the stability of global energy supplies in light of fears that they will be affected by the Ukraine crisis, continuing coordination on the situation in Afghanistan, and the Iranian nuclear issue. Sheikh Tamim also stressed that he wanted to discuss Palestine and "the equal rights of the Palestinian people" with President Biden.² The summit also considered ways to enhance trade and investment cooperation between Qatar and the United States, and bilateral defence and security relations, which are expected to undergo expansive development after Biden's announcement of Qatar as a major ally.

The Ukraine Crisis

The Ukraine crisis dominated the discussion at the summit, especially in light of the Biden administration's efforts to develop contingency plans in the event that Russian President Vladimir Putin cut gas supplies to Europe in response to any Western economic sanctions against a potential invasion of Ukraine. Russia supplies Europe with about 40% of its natural gas needs, but it reduced its exports to it in the final quarter of 2021 by 25% compared to the same period in 2020, in an attempt to pressure European Leaders not to support the US "tough" position on Ukraine.³ The Biden administration is trying to maintain the unity of the Western position towards Moscow's actions in Ukraine, specifically Germany, by offering guarantees that there are alternatives to Russian gas, eliminating the threat of winter outages.⁴ President Biden and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen had earlier issued a joint statement saying that they were working to ensure sufficient supplies of natural gas to the European Union, from multiple sources, to avoid supply disruptions.⁵ In addition to the possibility of a supply shortage, the United States and its European allies fear a significant rise in energy prices at a time when their economies, and the global economy in general, are recovering from the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

¹ "Remarks by President Biden and His Highness Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani, Amir of the State of Qatar Before Bilateral Meeting," The White House, 31/1/2022, accessed on 3/2/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3AVA5kb>

² Ibid.

³ Aamer Madhani, "Biden to Meet Qatar Leader as Europe Energy Crisis Looms," *The Associated Press*, 31/1/2022, accessed on 3/2/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/35yYEaT>.

⁴ Michael D. Shear, "Biden Designates Qatar as a Major Non-NATO Ally," *The New York Times*, 31/1/2022, accessed on 3/2/2022, at: <https://nyti.ms/3umSOE7>.

⁵ Madhani.



Given that Qatar is the largest producer and exporter of liquefied natural gas in the world, controlling 22% of the market, and owning 12% of its transportation (74 tankers),⁶ the country is a cornerstone of US plans to secure alternative sources to compensate for any Russian loss to Europe. Qatar has stressed that it does not want to be a party to any political polarization, and Sheikh Tamim has also put other Qatari interests on the agenda, including regional issues and Palestine. The Emir was not accompanied by the Minister of Energy, indicating that the issue of gas is not the main topic of the visit. But it also confirmed that it is ready to cooperate with gas producers and consumers. Qatar is aware of the importance of this issue for Europe and the opportunity it provides to thus enhance its own position. On the other hand, Qatar is currently producing at almost maximum capacity, and it is linked to long-term contracts with many countries, specifically in Asia,⁷ with exports to Europe only 5% of its gas production, which means that compensation for Russian gas in the event of its interruption from Europe will need a multilateral understanding, under which Washington's Asian allies, led by India, Japan and South Korea,⁸ agree to transfer some of their liquefied natural gas contracts with Qatar to Europe.⁹ It also requires urging other producers, namely Australia, Italy, the Netherlands and Norway, to contribute alongside the United States in providing larger gas shipments to Europe.

The Afghan Issue

Afghanistan was next on the agenda of the US-Qatar talks. Here, too, the Biden administration is hoping for an effective Qatari role in dealing with the Afghan situation, especially after Qatar has taken care of US interests in Afghanistan since the withdrawal of its forces from it last summer. Qatar's assistance to the United States on the Afghan issue has extended over three American administrations, starting with the administration of President Obama. For many years, Qatar hosted rounds of talks between the Taliban and Washington, which culminated in the Doha agreement in February 2020, paving the way for ending the longest war in US history. Since the US withdrawal from Afghanistan last August, Qatar Airways, in coordination with the United States, has transported more than 124,000 people, and hosted some of them in special camps in Doha, pending their asylum requests and destinations.¹⁰ Despite the emergence of some disputes between Doha and the Taliban last December, which resulted in the suspension of air evacuation flights, the two parties recently reached an agreement allowing the resumption of evacuations. The Biden administration is still requesting Qatar's help in attending to its responsibilities and still needs Doha as a diplomatic channel to communicate with the Taliban government, which Washington does not recognize, as well as managing Kabul International Airport. Qatar and the Taliban recently reached an agreement to re-open the airport with Qatari-Turkish participation.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Jennifer Jacobs & Annmarie Hordern, "Biden Officials Talking to Qatar About Supplying Gas to Europe," *Bloomberg*, 21/1/2022, accessed on 3/2/2022, at: <https://bloom.bg/3og6mgL>.

9 Madhani.

10 "Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III Remarks Welcoming Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani, Amir of Qatar," U.S. Department of Defense, 31/1/2022, accessed on 3/2/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3uCrYrN>.

The Iranian Nuclear Issue

Since its inauguration last year, the Biden administration has been engaged in complex negotiations to revive the 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran, thrown out by Trump in 2018. Despite eight rounds of indirect negotiations held in the Austrian capital, Vienna, between the United States and Iran, there has been no breakthrough so far. Washington demands that Iran comply directly with the terms of the 2015 agreement, while Tehran believes that the United States should take the first step and lift all economic sanctions on it, on the grounds that it is the one who breached the agreement. According to the Qatari Foreign Minister, Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, the summit broached the Iranian nuclear agreement. He said that Qatar's role is not based on transmitting messages, but rather it uses the open channels with Washington and Tehran to "bring their views closer," and it is interested in reaching a conclusion to the agreement on the Iranian nuclear program.¹¹

Doha is in a position to play a mediating role between the two parties due to its good relationship with both. The Qatari foreign minister had visited Tehran a few days before the Qatar-US summit, following a visit to Doha by Iranian Foreign Minister Hussein Amir Abdollahian. The Qatari Foreign Minister has previously been to Washington to discuss information indicating that Iran may agree to a direct meeting with US negotiators, as well as the release of some US nationals of Iranian origin detained in its prisons, two aims that Doha is making an effort to achieve.¹²

Trade Relations

The summit also represented an opportunity to discuss and enhance commercial relations between the two countries, as a huge deal was announced between Boeing and Qatar Airways, which was signed at the White House. According to this deal, Qatar will buy up to 102 airplanes, at a total value of approximately \$34 billion. In the details of the deal, Qatar Airways will purchase up to 50 Boeing 777 - 8 freighters, including 34 confirmed purchase orders, and 16 additional planes as an option. Qatar Airways will also convert 20 of its 60 777X orders to a 777 - 8 freighter, in addition to an order for two existing Boeing 777 freighters. In addition, the two companies signed a Memorandum of Understanding to purchase up to 50 Boeing 737 - 10 aircrafts, including 25 confirmed orders, and 25 optional additional aircrafts, for a total value of approximately \$7 billion.¹³ This deal will benefit US suppliers in 38 states, creating 35,000 jobs, as well as pumping \$2.6 billion annually into the US economy.¹⁴ On the other hand, Qatar will get, between 2023-2027, the most up to date global air fleet, which will increase the efficiency of its airlines, and reduce travel costs and time periods.

¹¹ "Qatar working to bring Washington, Tehran's views closer - Qatar foreign minister," *Reuters*, 1/2/2022 accessed on 3/2/2022 at: <https://reut.rs/3L6eFW8>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Lucas Manfredi, "Boeing, Qatar Airways Strike Deal for 777 - 8 Freighter, 737 Max 10 Orders," *Fox Business*, 31/1/2022, accessed on 3/2/2022, at: <https://fxn.ws/3HpPcEW>.

¹⁴ David Shepardson, Eric M. Johnson & Tim Hepher, "Qatar Seals Boeing Freighter Deal with Surprise 737 Order," *Reuters*, 31/1/2022, accessed on 3/2/2022, at: <https://reut.rs/34wrojX>



Declaring Qatar a Major Non-NATO Ally

In his letter formally notifying Congress of Qatar’s designation as a “major non-NATO Ally,” President Biden noted that he is doing so “to reflect the importance of our relationship,” and that “it’s long overdue.”¹⁵ In deepening bilateral defence and security cooperation with the State of Qatar. Thus, Qatar will be the third Gulf country to have this status, after Kuwait and Bahrain, and the nineteenth country globally. Although this classification does not mean that the United States is obligated to defend the ally, it falls — according to the definition of the US State Department — under US law, to grant the concerned party specific privileges in the areas of defence, security and trade cooperation, which is a strong indicator of close relations. Accordingly, the decision will give Qatar a higher diplomatic status, and will allow it to obtain military and security technology, systems and equipment, as well as training, and other privileges related to storing US weapons on its soil and maintenance contracts.¹⁶ This new designation could remove obstacles to Qatar’s request, pending since 2020, for \$500 million worth of drones. This request was pending on the part of the US State Department, despite the approval of the Pentagon, on the pretext that it might upset the military balances in the Arab Gulf region, and might anger some US allies, specifically the UAE and Israel.¹⁷

Conclusion

The summit between President Biden and Sheikh Tamim is an important indicator of Qatar’s success in maintaining its role as a major player in the region. And that is after five years of a blockade seeking to limit its role. The summit also expresses the importance of Qatar in the Biden administration’s regional approach. Qatar has proved to be a major player in Afghanistan, the Gaza Strip, combatting terrorism and the maintenance of regional stability, in addition to emerging as an important actor in the Ukraine crisis, the Iranian nuclear issue, and other pressing matters.

¹⁵ Shear.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Courtney Kube, Dan De Luce & Josh Lederman, “Pentagon Favors U.S. Sale of more than \$500 Million Worth of Armed Drones to Qatar, but State Department is Wary,” *NBC News*, 27/10/2021, accessed on 3/2/2022, at: <https://nbcnews.to/3ukJQqG>.