



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات  
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

## ASSESSMENT REPORT

# Emir's Washington Visit Highlights the Independence of Qatari Foreign Policy

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | Mar 2015

At First White House Visit Qatar's Emir Insists on Independence as Plans Move Ahead for More Bilateralism

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## Introduction

On his first visit to the United States following his accession to the throne in June 2013, Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad al-Thani was received at the White House on February 25, 2015. Speaking at a joint press conference, President Barack Obama emphasized the robust relationship between the two nations,<sup>1</sup> as joint efforts are expected to continue on several fronts.

In an opinion piece published by Sheikh Tamim in the *New York Times*<sup>2</sup>, a day ahead of the White House meeting, the Emir embraced the strengthening of bilateral ties expected to be made between the nations, but at the same time committed himself to maintaining the interests of Qatar in both domestic and international relations. Despite the positive atmosphere of the meetings, US media focused on the concerns expressed by some in Washington over Doha's endeavor to pursue an independent foreign policy and its implication, particularly for Israel.

Qatar's support for the reconstruction of Gaza in the wake of successive Israeli attacks, and its backing of revolutionary movements in the Middle East during the Arab Spring, have been misconstrued by some American media outlets and members of Congress as signs of a Qatari foreign policy that directly opposes US interests. Much of this concern, however, is seen as the effect of lobby groups with an interest in maintaining the status quo in the Middle East.

During their meetings, Obama and Sheikh Tamim were able to agree on several points of common interest and an impressive program for cooperation, while maintaining the unique characteristics of the nations' two policy agendas.

## Points of Consensus

As expected, discussions between the two leaders were dominated by their mutual concerns over the rise of terrorism in the region, foremost of which is the fight against

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<sup>1</sup> "Remarks by President Obama and the Amir of Qatar After Bilateral Meeting", <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/24/remarks-president-obama-and-amir-qatar-after-bilateral-meeting>

<sup>2</sup> Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani, "Qatar's Message to Obama", *The New York Times*, February 24, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/24/opinion/qatars-message-to-obama.html>

the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), in addition to efforts to quell violence in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen. High on the agenda were also the Iranian nuclear negotiations and the future of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. At the joint press conference, the two heads of state laid out their common concerns in the region:

- Defeating ISIL. Obama recognized Qatar's current role within the international coalition in fighting the extremist group, and affirmed a mutual aim of crushing the movement.
- Supporting a moderate Syrian opposition as the only way forward in a Syria where current President Assad "has lost all legitimacy." Though Obama made clear that there was as yet no plan in place to secure a stable Syria, he noted an exchange of views with the Emir on the topic.
- A peaceful Iraq. Obama expressed both leaders' desire "for all people in [Iraq] – Sunni, Shia and Kurd—to live together in peace."
- Political solutions for Yemen and Libya. Commitment on the part of both leaders was affirmed, though neither elaborated.
- Reaching an agreement in Iranian nuclear negotiations. Obama noted he had updated Sheikh Tamim on the status of the present P5+1 negotiations with Iran, and reiterated that the ultimate aim of these talks was to prevent Iran obtaining nuclear weapons. Obama added that the US hoped to pressure Iran into adjusting policies it saw as 'destabilizing' in the region as a whole. Both leaders asserted their preference for a negotiated solution, with Qatar being recognized as the first state in the Gulf to call for talks.

These points of consensus were the focus of the press conference, which the US President closed by calling Qatar's role in the Middle East as "extraordinary," and "what the United States wants to see for all of the Middle East and all of North Africa [where] peace and security prevail, and [where] people –particularly young people— have the opportunity to learn, to get educated, and to succeed in this modern economy."

## Differing Priorities

While there was a clear consensus about the main issues of concern between the United States and Qatar, a clear difference in the order of priorities around each issue was seen. Moreover, the leaders did not always agree to the mechanism by which to

tackle their shared challenges. This was nowhere more clear than in the Emir's op-ed, which made explicit the country's belief that "military solutions are insufficient to defeat terrorism and confront the monumental strategic challenges facing the Middle East and the world." Rather, the Emir stated, the world would need to understand the broader political, social and economic contexts that gave rise to terrorism. "Addressing the root causes of terrorism will require a deeper, longer-term, and more strategic approach to the problem". In particular, the leader noted his insistence that "tyrants be held to account."

Sheikh Tamim stressed that for Qatar priority must be put on tackling the root causes of terrorism, at the same time as it must be combatted politically and militarily. In his op-ed, he wrote, "I know that many in the West look at the terrorist threat and say that the problem is Islam. But as a Muslim, I can tell you that the problem isn't Islam — it's hopelessness. It's the kind of hopelessness that abounds in the Syrian and Palestinian refugee camps, and in war-weary towns and villages in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya and Gaza. It's the hopelessness we see in the poorer neighborhoods of Europe's great cities, and, yes, even in the United States. And it is this hopelessness, which knows no state or religion, which we need to address if we are to stem the tide of terrorism." However, while similar sentiments were expressed by President Obama during the Summit on Countering Violent Extremism, which the White House hosted between February 18 and 20, 2015,<sup>3</sup> they have yet to be translated into policy.

Sheikh Tamim expressed the complex nature of addressing both terrorism and its root causes, explaining some of the reasons behind differences in approach between the United States and Qatar. The rise of extremism, hopelessness, and the fight against terror, explained the Emir, have problematic overlaps. As he made clear during his visit, "Unfortunately, our war against terrorism is, in some cases, helping to preserve the bloodstained dictatorships that contributed to its rise. We believe that the battle against violent extremism will succeed only if the people of the region are convinced that we are committed to ending the tyrannical rule of the likes of Bashar al-Assad of Syria, who is carrying out genocide against his own people." Sheikh Tamim also expressed his belief that "Arab countries must work together to create a political solution for Syria,"

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<sup>3</sup> "Remarks by the President at the Summit on Countering Violent Extremism," <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/19/remarks-president-summit-countering-violent-extremism-february-19-2015>

dismissing the idea that the United States should work alone in combatting terrorism and addressing its root causes.

The ramifications of these differences in policy positions was nowhere more clear than in the way in which both leaders would set about creating an overall policy. Where for Obama quashing ISIL should take precedence and priority over the fate of Syria's Assad regime, Sheikh Tamim said that solutions for Syria, Iraq, and Palestine must be first on the list. If policy in these areas could ensure that the youth of the region would live in freedom, dignity, economic security, and justice, he said, then a death blow would be dealt to extremism.

## Working Toward a New Understanding

While the United States and Qatar committed to continuing their conversations about how best to carry out their common aims in the region, some sticking points in relations between the two countries remain. Qatar sees these issues as largely the result of smear campaigns by various lobby groups, and in fact misunderstandings of the domestic and regional factors taken into consideration when policy is carried out. However, the US has maintained reservations about the Gulf State based on the following concerns, which the Emir worked to put in a wider and more considered context during his visit:

First are the allegations of Qatar's support for extremist Islamist groups (from the Nusra Front, a Syrian offshoot of Al Qaeda, to various Islamist fighting groups in Syria and Libya, and the Afghan Taliban).<sup>4</sup> Qatar has never denied that it maintains contacts with a variety of Islamist groups, since it has been these contacts that allowed the country to act as mediator, saving the lives of hostages in the past (for example the release of US Army Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl who had been held captive by the Taliban, in exchange for five Taliban leaders who were being held in Guantanamo) and playing an active role in regional diplomacy. However, when it comes to allegations of financial support, Doha categorically refutes the suggestion.

Second are the allegations of laxity in application of US Treasury anti-terror funding laws. Allegations in September 2014 were made by a US official, who claimed that a specific Qatari businessman had provided USD 2 million to ISIL. That allegation was

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<sup>4</sup> See: Jay Solomon and Nour Malas, "Qatar's Ties to Militants Strain Alliance," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 23, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/qatars-ties-to-militants-strain-alliance-1424748601>



followed by another, which said the state had failed to act against funders of terrorism. Qatar has strenuously and thoroughly denied claims around failure to adequately police the funding of terrorism, and pointed out that any such allegations must be corroborated with evidence, which has not been forthcoming.<sup>5</sup> Officials in Qatar have continuously stressed their efforts to prevent funds (and indeed people) from reaching terrorist groups, but they add that no nation has succeeded in controlling flows of people or funds entirely. Officials also stressed attempts to bring to trial those individuals suspected of contributing to terrorist groups, but in the interests of maintaining legal procedure, are awaiting the collection of evidence through which to hold them accountable.

Lastly is the allegation that Qatar is playing host to Hamas leadership, as well as accusations of support for Islamist groups—particularly the Muslim Brotherhood—in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia, during the Arab Spring, especially after the ousting of Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi in the summer of 2013. For Qatar, hosting of the Egyptian Brotherhood leaders is not seen as part of a policy of supporting Islamist movements in general. Rather, it is part of a policy of political plurality whereby Doha opens its doors to receive those of all political persuasions oppressed and victimized within the borders of their own country. And while political asylum as a policy is highly regarded, exiles welcomed into the state are aware that their presence in the country is contingent on respecting the sovereignty of Qatar, so that the country cannot be used as a base for political activity.

How to overcome the above perceptions of Qatar's policies remains on the political agenda, and will in large part dictate the nature of bilateral relations between the two states. This has certainly been the case in the past, for example when members of Obama's National Security Council demanded that the president reduce the American military presence in Qatar, which hosts the al-Udeid Air Base. According to a report in the *Wall Street Journal*, the demand was set as a protest for what was described by the councilmen as Qatari support for armed groups in the Middle East. The demands were overruled by the Pentagon, and the American lease on the airbase was renewed without the requested amendments in 2013.

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<sup>5</sup> Taimur Khan, "Qatar' Emir meets Obama in first visit to White House," *The National*, February 24, 2015, <http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/qatars-emir-meets-obama-in-first-visit-to-white-house>

However, Qatar's leading role in Middle East diplomacy, and its reception in the United States, may be going some way to change American opinion. The Department of State has, for example, publically recognized Qatar's crucial role in securing a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas following the Israeli assault on the Gaza Strip during the summer of 2014,<sup>6</sup> and in securing the release of US Sgt. Bergdahl in June 2014.<sup>7</sup> The unique position of Qatar, with its strong ties with a wide array of actors in the region, is beginning to be recognized as something that allows it to play a role that a few countries are able to. This has led to a growing number of proponents in America pursuing a strong relationship with Qatar, in both the Pentagon and the US Department of State. This has been particularly the case as officials look to create a strategy in the fight against ISIL.<sup>8</sup>

As White House Press Secretary Joshua Earnest put it: "like all partnerships, especially in this region of the world, the United States does not necessarily agree with the Qatari government on every issue, but we have the kind of relationship that allows us to be frank and open about where we disagree and why. But the bottom line is that our interests with Qatar converge somewhat more often than they actually diverge."<sup>9</sup> Earnest went on to spell out a number of regional theaters and issues of interest where Qatar and the United States cooperate closely, including Iran, Afghanistan, the training of the Syrian opposition and the war against ISIL.

## Conclusion

Following the visit of Sheikh Tamim to the United States, it has become clearer than ever that, despite the issues on which they disagree, the relationship between the United States and Qatar shares a breadth of solid interests. Further evidence of this was recently reported by Qatar's Minister of Finance, who predicted Qatari investments in the US technology and infrastructure industries would reach USD 35 billion over the

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<sup>6</sup> Solomon and Malas, "Qatar's Ties to Militants Strain Alliance"

<sup>7</sup> Taimur Khan, "Qatar' Emir meets Obama in first visit to White House"

<sup>8</sup> Solomon and Malas, "Qatar's Ties to Militants Strain Alliance"

<sup>9</sup> Press Briefing by Joshua Earnest, February 24, 2015, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/24/press-briefing-press-secretary-josh-earnest-22415>

coming five years.<sup>10</sup> This builds on existing bilateral trade with a volume of USD 7 billion. As a partner of growing importance in US diplomacy, Qatar is fulfilling the American need for a reliable military and diplomatic ally in a troubled region. Through investment and strategic diplomacy, Qatar has been able to maintain the independence of its policies and foreign affairs, while also maintaining its vital military alliance with Washington.

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<sup>10</sup> "Qatar's investment in the US jumps to USD 35 billion," *Customs Today Report*, February 21, 2015, <http://customstoday.com.pk/qatars-investment-in-us-jumps-to-35-billion-3/>