



Editor: Bruce Maddy-Weitzman

October 7, 2008

Qatar's Relations with Israel An Exemplar of an Independent Foreign Policy

Uzi Rabi

In recent months, the Emirate of Qatar has distinguished itself as the "rising star" of Middle Eastern diplomacy, having initiated a flurry of diplomatic activity stretching from Lebanon via Palestine to Sudan. Indeed, the Qatari government has charted a distinctly independent route in foreign policy. One of its more conspicuous dimensions has been Qatar's relations with Israel.

Many argue that Doha maintains its links with Israel in order to better cultivate relations with the United States, and thus contribute to the consolidation of Qatar's political standing and security in a stormy region. Others argue that the economic incentive is the prime impetus, as Qatar strives to sell some of its plentiful natural gas to Israel. However, neither explanation is sufficient for what is obviously a controversial policy in the Arab and Muslim worlds.

One should bear in mind that Qatari-Israeli relations are just one component of the emirate's intricate and bold foreign policy. Qatar provides an example of how a small wealthy state can skillfully generate a sophisticated, independent foreign policy agenda that differentiates it from larger and more powerful neighbors, while simultaneously upgrading its international profile and gaining prominence in the Middle East.

Before 1995, Qatar did not have a clearly defined foreign policy agenda, and generally stood on the sidelines of world affairs. To a large extent, Qatari policies were considered to be an echo of Saudi Arabian foreign, domestic, and oil policies, owing to the many social and ideological similarities between the two countries. The dramatic shifts in Qatar's foreign policy are attributable to the

present ruler of Qatar, Shaykh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, who replaced his father in a bloodless palace coup on June 27, 1995. Since his accession to power, Shaykh Hamad has assiduously sought to transform Qatar into a regional influential.

Almost immediately, the new Ruler adopted policies which were fraught with resentment towards Saudi Arabia. Shaykh Hamad felt that Qatar had acquiesced to Saudi policy directives for far too long, and was extremely irritated when Saudi Arabia sided with Bahrain against Qatar in the renewal of their long-standing territorial dispute. Furthermore, Hamad was a more ardent nationalist than his father; accordingly, he was more interested in pursuing Qatar's territorial claims and initiating an independent foreign policy. These conditions led to heightened friction between Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

In 1996, Hamad funded the launching of the Middle East's first independent television news station, *al-Jazeera*. This station has consistently shattered long-held Middle Eastern taboos, ruffling the feathers of neighboring regimes, including Saudi Arabia. Qatar further distanced itself from Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf Arab states in 1997 when it refused to reverse its controversial decision to host the Middle East and North Africa economic summit (MENA), which was attended by an Israeli representative.

It was no surprise, then, that Qatar's ambassador to the UN requested in 2005 that Israel support its candidacy for a seat on the UN Security Council. Because Qatar was one of the few Arab countries that maintained its diplomatic ties with Israel throughout the second Palestinian *intifada*, Israel responded positively. But to Israel's dismay, Qatar's voting record on the Council was less than supportive on a multitude of issues. For example, in June 2006 Qatar was the sole Council member to vote against a resolution setting a deadline for Iran to halt its uranium enrichment. However, Qatar's behavior owed more to its interests in the Gulf than to its policy toward Israel. From a Qatari perspective, maintaining a constructive dialogue with Iran has an added value of aggravating Saudi Arabia, which would like to control the foreign policy of the smaller Gulf states, specifically in regards to Iran.

During the 2006 Lebanon War, Qatar also utilized its seat at the UNSC to express its "shock" and "astonishment" at the "disproportionate" nature of Israel's intervention in Lebanon, repeatedly calling for swift Security Council action, an immediate ceasefire and a complete withdrawal of Israeli forces to the international boundary. Doha assumed a prominent role in tendering Arab demands for a tougher version of the UN resolution that ultimately laid the basis

for the ceasefire. Qatar might have felt the need to be especially virulent in its criticism of Israeli actions precisely because it makes no secret of its continuing above-board commercial and diplomatic ties with Israel.

Qatar's desire to emerge as a regional peace-broker a role that until recently had been assumed by Qatar's rival, Saudi Arabia received renewed impetus as a result of the war. This was implicit in Qatar's attempts to facilitate dialogue between Israel and the Palestinians, and to help bring a halt to Palestinian internecine fighting. Indeed, already in 2006, Doha had attempted, albeit unsuccessfully, to engineer a Palestinian national unity government, and it remained relentless in its efforts to mediate between Fatah and Hamas in a bid to end violent clashes between the rival Palestinian parties in Gaza.

Shaykh Hamad's diplomatic breakthrough in the Lebanese arena in May 2008 - convincing Hizballah-led opposition forces and pro-Western factions to strike a power-sharing agreement that turned Lebanon back from the brink of a civil war - provided the most recent example of Qatar's success in carving out a position of regional influence independent of Saudi Arabia.

Whereas some Gulf countries are content to rely on an American security guarantee, Qatar seeks to develop an added dimension to its security policies by implementing a sophisticated, inclusive foreign policy that engages many political players. In so doing, Qatar is awarded regional significance and is thrust into the international limelight as well. In order to achieve these policy objectives, Qatar frequently hosts well-publicized multilateral meetings and summit conferences, distributes financial and humanitarian aid, and extensively employs both the media, such as *al-Jazeera*, and public forums, e.g. the Doha Debates a high profile event promoting dialogue and freedom of speech, hosted by the internationally renowned broadcaster Tim Sebastian, formerly of the BBC's *HARDTALK* program. The Doha Debates treat burning contemporary Arab and Islamic issues that are largely considered taboo in Middle Eastern media forums. They thus contribute to the fledgling image that Qatar strives to portray one of a modernizing, reform-oriented enclave in the Arab world, which is also an attractive place to do business.

The development of Qatari-Israeli relations is informed by the aforementioned foreign policy considerations. Evidently, Qatar has deemed partial normalization with Israel to be a calculated risk that promotes its broader foreign policy objectives. While it may appear as though Qatar's relations with Israel constitute an undesirable source of contention between Qatar and its neighbors, Qatari foreign policy is formulated in a manner that not only anticipates an indignant

Arab reaction, but also to a certain degree invites it. Maintaining relations with Israel has enabled Qatar to assert its independence in the Arab arena, and compete as an emerging regional actor with not inconsiderable clout. Thus, the rationale behind Qatari-Israeli relations is lucid, as long as it is not evaluated through the traditional prism of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Rather, this unique relationship should be assessed through the lens of the broader Qatari foreign policy agenda. In view of this argument, Qatar's semi-normal links with Israel are merely one element of the Qatari foreign (and domestic) policy edifice.