

Foreign policy implications of the new emir's succession in Qatar

By Kristian Coates Ulrichsen

■ Executive summary

The carefully managed handover of power in Qatar on June 25th 2013 will change the style, but not the substance of Qatari foreign policy. The abdication of Emir Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani and the replacement of Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Shaykh Hamad bin Jassim al-Thani (HBJ) removes from office the two men behind Qatar's rise to global prominence since the 1990s. The new emir, 33-year old Shaykh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, will likely curb the excesses of Qatar's aggressive internationalisation strategy and recalibrate the country's regional policy to address its policy overreach in Syria. While the underlying substance of policy is likely to remain broadly similar, the biggest changes are expected in the hitherto-personalised style of decision-making associated with HBJ and the former emir. Greater emphasis on multi-lateral co-ordination will also replace the confrontational unilateralism associated with Qatar's post-2011 Arab Spring policies.

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Controlled transition

In June 2013 Doha had for months been rife with speculation about a leadership transition. Shaykh Hamad had been in power since toppling his own father in a bloodless palace coup in 1995. In recent years the emir had transferred most day-to-day authority to his favoured second wife, Shaykha

Moza bint Nasir al-Misnad, and his heir apparent, Shaykh Tamim. In 2008 Tamim was entrusted with overseeing the Qatar National Vision 2030 and he assumed the leadership of the Qatar 2022 Supreme Committee in charge of preparing for the FIFA World Cup. Tamim was thus in charge of medium- and long-term policy planning for several years prior to becoming emir.

Tamim's rising prominence extended to the regional domain, long the preserve of HBJ, who had been foreign minister since 1992. On a formal level he represented his father at the annual Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) Summit in Bahrain in December 2012 and in welcoming delegates to the Arab League Summit in Doha in March 2013, as well as hosting visiting dignitaries such as U.S. secretary of state John Kerry, British foreign secretary William Hague, and Britain's Prince Charles. Notably, given the heavy emphasis placed in Qatari regional and foreign policy on diplomatic mediation, it was Tamim rather than HBJ who arranged meetings between the leaders of the Palestinian resistance organisation Hamas and King 'Abdullah of Jordan in January 2012.

As Tamim played an increasingly active role both in domestic politics and foreign affairs, HBJ's power and influence began to wane. A "turf war" developed in Doha between HBJ, on the one hand, and Tamim and Shaykha Mozah, on the other, as they established supreme councils in health, education, family affairs and the environment that became very influential in policymaking. Moreover, Tamim took credit for populist initiatives designed to address any local sensitivities arising from the Arab Spring upheaval across the region. These included the announcement of generous salary, social allowances, and pension increases for Qatari civil service and military personnel, as well as a directive lowering the price of basic foodstuffs sold by companies working with Qatar's National Food Security Programme.

Change of leadership

Given these dynamics, it was no surprise when Tamim opted to replace HBJ on taking power. In addition to naming the former minister of state for internal affairs, Shaykh 'Abdullah bin Nasir al-Thani, as prime minister, Tamim promoted HBJ's former deputy, Khalid al-Attiyah, to foreign minister. Al-Attiyah had been minister of state for foreign affairs since 2011 and reportedly had been controlling the Foreign Ministry in the months preceding the June 25th handover of power, so his promotion sent a clear signal that there would be continuity at the helm of Qatari foreign policy. Al-Attiyah emerged as the point man within the Foreign Ministry for Qatar's support of opposition fighters in Syria, while Tamim himself co-ordinated extensively with Saudi Arabia as the Syrian crisis escalated in 2013.

HBJ's replacement removes the dominant figure in Qatari foreign policy. Together with the outgoing (now "Father") emir, he was the architect of the aggressive internationalisation strategy that so firmly marked Qatar on the global map. His intensely personalised style of policymaking and vast range of contacts will be difficult to replicate. These attributes earned him the reputation of a "non-stop mediator", but also contributed to ad hoc decision-making on the uprisings in North Africa and Syria that undermined Qatar's regional standing. Deteriorating relations with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) left Qatar increasingly isolated within the GCC and at odds with international partners over such issues as the arming of Syrian rebels and support for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and other states in transition.

In addition to his highly personalised approach to policy, HBJ also combined his roles as prime minister and foreign minister with his leadership of the Qatar Investment Authority. This made possible a comprehensive approach to diplomatic mediation and foreign policymaking predicated on heavy Qatari investment in targeted countries. The most notable example of this "state capitalism" at work was the extension of more than \$7.5 billion in loans and grants to the Muslim Brotherhood-led government in Egypt following its election in June 2012. HBJ also used a visit to Cairo in September 2012 to state that there would be "no limits" to

Qatar's support for Egypt as he announced plans to invest \$18 billion over five years. Few additional details were forthcoming at the time and little has materialised since.

On July 2nd 2013 Tamim issued a decree replacing HBJ as vice-chairman and chief executive of the Qatar Investment Authority. Ahmad Muhammad al-Sayid (previously the managing director of Qatar Holding) was named chief executive, while Tamim's half-brother, Shaykh 'Abdullah bin Hamad al-Thani, became vice-chairman of the board of directors. The "separation of powers" among HBJ's successors widens the tiny apex of decision-making in Doha that hitherto had facilitated the mobilisation of different parts of the state apparatus in pursuit of a common objective. It also goes some way toward addressing the negative perception that had arisen across the Middle East that Qatar was engaged in "buying influence" in transition states through its overt combination of diplomacy and investment.

Foreign policy implications

Emir Tamim's inaugural speech to the nation on June 26th 2013 indicated that Qatar would continue to pursue its regional policy objectives, albeit in a lower-key and less confrontational manner than under HBJ. While the speech focused primarily on domestic affairs, the new emir did not make any mention of Syria, but did emphasise Qatar's role in the GCC. This portended the mending of damaged GCC relationships with Saudi Arabia in particular and built on the Saudi-Qatari decision in the spring of 2013 to shift regional leadership on Syria from Doha to Riyadh. Tamim has worked closely with Saudi leaders to better align Gulf policy on Syria and brings a less strident tone to policy-making than HBJ, whose bellicose public pronouncements were increasingly at odds with the traditional quiet "back-seat" diplomacy favoured by Riyadh.

Tamim also sought to reassure sceptical regional allies and international partners that Qatar was "not affiliated with one trend against the other", while adding that "we reject dividing Arab societies on a sectarian or doctrinal basis". This was a signal that while Doha intends to maintain its autonomy in foreign policymaking, it will do so by following a more co-operative and multilateral approach that is also less overtly ideological than before. It was noteworthy that Tamim sent a message of congratulations, albeit belatedly, to Egypt's interim military government following the toppling of the Muslim Brotherhood government that Qatar had so heavily backed. Tamim's statement made no reference to ousted president Mursi in an apparent attempt to salvage Qatari prestige in the wake of a radical shift in regional power relations. Instead, he praised the military for "defending Egypt and its national interests".

The trilateral U.S.-led attempt in early August 2013 to mediate a solution to Egypt's worsening political crisis provided evidence of the new Qatari approach to regional policy. The foreign ministers of Qatar and the UAE joined with U.S. senators John McCain and Lindsay Graham to

seek a negotiated settlement to the escalating confrontation between the military and the Muslim Brotherhood. Although the initiative was unsuccessful, the attempt to leverage Qatari influence in a co-ordinated and multilateral approach with regional and international partners was very different from the unilateralism associated with HBJ and the former emir.

The road ahead

Domestic policies are likely to take priority over foreign policy for Emir Tamim as he settles into office. High spending and changing energy markets present short- and medium-term challenges for the new government, as do the continuing high levels of inward migration and the soaring cost of living in Doha. Opinion polls taken in 2012

by Qatar University's Social and Economic Survey Research Institute indicated mounting levels of domestic dissatisfaction, with more than 70% of those polled referring to Qatari interventions abroad when asked to identify "the most important problem Qatar faces today". With the momentum of the Arab Spring having shifted back in favour of the status quo ante, Emir Tamim faces a delicate combination of consolidating power domestically while engaging in damage limitation regionally. It is likely that the exuberance of some of Qatar's more outlandish foreign policy initiatives will be tempered by greater caution – and sustainable thinking – in decision-making as the new leadership moves to rebuild bridges across the Middle East. ■

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