



QATAR'S SECURITY ALIGNMENT WITH THE UNITED STATES: STRATEGIC CONSTRAINT OR FACILITATING CONDITION?

La armonización en seguridad de Catar con los Estados Unidos: ¿restricción estratégica o circunstancia favorecedora?

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Relations between Qatar and the United States constitute a mutually beneficial form of bilateral hierarchy that can usefully be considered to be a protectorate. The dynamics inherent in protectorates put the protector state in a disproportionately strong position early on, and place severe constraints on the activities of the protected partner. As time passes, this initial distribution of leverage shifts and the protected state becomes able to undertake foreign policy initiatives that contravene, and sometimes even cause damage to, the security interests of the protector. At the same time, the protected state's capacity to engage in autonomous, self-interested action in the regional and global arenas is shaped by the level of threat that it confronts from surrounding states. Taken together, these two factors offer a cogent explanation for recent trends in Qatari diplomacy.



Abstract

protectorate; Qatar; Gulf; military; foreign policy; United States
protectorado; Catar; Golfo; militar; política exterior; los Estados Unidos



Key words

Las relación entre Catar y los Estados Unidos constituye un tipo de jerarquía bilateral mutuamente beneficiosa, que sería útil considerar como si fuera un protectorado. La dinámica inherente a los protectorados sitúa en el inicio al estado protector en una posición de fuerza desproporcionada, e impone severas restricciones sobre las actividades del estado socio. Con el paso del tiempo, esta distribución inicial de beneficios cambia, y el estado socio es capaz de tomar iniciativas en política exterior que pueden contravenir, e incluso dañar, los intereses de seguridad del protector. Simultáneamente, la capacidad del estado protegido de iniciar acciones autónomas e interesadas en las escenas regional y global está determinada por el nivel de amenaza al que se enfrenta proveniente de los estados colindantes. Tomados en conjunto, estos dos factores ofrecen una explicación convincente a las últimas tendencias de la diplomacia catari.



Resumen

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Fechas

In the years after the Second Gulf War of 1990-91, Qatar has cultivated a close security alignment with the United States. The evolving strategic partnership between Doha and Washington transcends the characteristics of a conventional inter-state alliance and approximates the kind of bilateral arrangement that David Lake (1996) calls a protectorate. In this exceptional type of security alignment, each member-state maintains its own sovereign autonomy, yet the structure of the partnership constitutes a form of dyadic hierarchy, in that the protected state relinquishes the capacity to defend itself from all but the most minor external threats.

Qatar's position as a protectorate of the United States has enabled and encouraged the leadership in Doha to carry on a remarkably active foreign policy (Wright, 2011). More important, it has provided the Qatari government with the capacity and incentive to pursue external initiatives that at times run counter to American interests in both the Gulf and the broader Middle East. Relations between Doha and Washington therefore exhibit a degree of friction that seems incongruous, given the depth and vitality of the underlying relationship between the two states. Journalists thus occasionally assert that "Qatar's Support of Islamists Alienates Allies Near and Far", "Qatar's Ties to Militants Complicate Relations with U.S.' Neighbors", or "Qatar's Ties to Militants Strain Alliance" (*New York Times*, 7 September 2013; *Los Angeles Times*, 25 January 2015; *Wall Street Journal*, 23 February 2015). The paradox that exists between Qatar's firm security alignment with the United States and Doha's proclivity to undertake actions that challenge or undermine US strategic interests in the region can best be explicated in terms of the dynamics inherent in the structure of protectorates.

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1. Dynamics of dyadic protectorates

Security partnerships come in a wide variety of forms. Studies of world politics tend to lump these diverse arrangements together under the loose heading of "alliances", even though only a small subset of inter-state partnerships exhibits the defining features of an alliance.¹ Existing studies usually classify alliances according to how many member-states they entail and the primary purpose for which they have been constructed (Weitsman, 1997; Tow, 2001; Wilkins, 2012). Such concerns push the analysis of alliance politics toward explaining why some member-states contribute more than others to keep the partnership alive or why some alliances turn out to be more successful than others in achieving their stated objectives (Starr, 1972; Pressman, 2008; Weitsman, 2014).

In addition, most scholarship on alliances focuses on the circumstances in which inter-state partnerships initially take shape. Yet almost all of the crucial questions surrounding the role of security alignments concern the impact that formal and informal commitments to engage in joint action have on member-states' interactions with one another and with non-members after the alliance has been established (Snyder, 1997). Puzzles associated with alliance management have yet to be accorded the level of sustained attention that they deserve (Schroeder, 1976; Weitsman, 1997).

Unusual variants of security alignments have attracted even less scholarly attention. One particularly rare species in the contemporary world is the dyadic protectorate, in which one state

¹ That is, a "formal agreement that pledges states to co-operate in using their military resources against a specific state or states and usually obligates one or more of the signatories to use force, or to consider (unilaterally or in consultation with allies) the use of force, in specified circumstances" (Osgood, 1986, p. 17).

takes sole – or at least predominant – responsibility for defending another against external threats (Lake, 2009).² In most cases, the state that assumes responsibility for defense is larger, richer and more powerful than the state it protects, although it is conceivable that a wealthy or particularly well-endowed state would contract with a smaller, poorer or weaker partner to take charge of its defense. In other words, protectorates usually work to the advantage of the protector, and so protectors are almost always labelled the dominant partner, despite the fact that in exceptional cases protectorates work instead to the advantage of the protected state. It is this fundamental ambiguity regarding who benefits more from this type of security partnership that opens the door to analyzing protectorates using the concept of “relational contracting” (Lake, 1996; 1999).

Through the lenses of relational contracting, both states can be seen to benefit from the existence of a protectorate. This type of security alignment is therefore inherently “positive sum” (Lake, 1999). Protector and protected states alike find themselves better off than they would be alone, due to the creation of “joint production economies” regarding security (Lake, 1999). Whenever the protector stands at a distance from the geographical region in which the protected state is located, for instance, the protector benefits from the partnership due to a substantial reduction in the “marginal costs of projecting force over distance” (Lake, 1999). By the same token, setting up a protectorate enables both partners to “reduce redundant efforts and share [the] costs” of defense (Lake, 1999). Consequently, protectorates tend to generate significant divisions of labor with regard to the implementation of security-producing programs.

On the other hand, states that form a protectorate end up exposing themselves to notable uncertainties and dangers. Arguably the most important of these dangers is that one partner will take advantage of the alignment to pursue its own interests in ways that inflict harm on the other. Glenn Snyder (1984) calls this dynamic “entrapment”, and claims that whenever one state commits itself firmly to an alliance, its partner gains the capacity to drag it into unwanted disputes and conflicts. In a similar fashion, Lake asserts that in a protectorate, the protector exposes itself to various “costs of opportunism” on the part of the protected state (Lake, 1999). The potential for opportunistic action by the protected state tempts the protector to exert greater control over the protected state’s foreign policy, thereby engendering discontent and resentment on the part of the protected partner and prompting it to pursue a more assertive foreign policy than it might otherwise do (Elgstroem, 1981).

Opportunistic action can also be undertaken by the protector, and the protected state constantly stands vulnerable to becoming trapped in disputes and conflicts that get foisted on it by the state that guarantees its external security. Consequently, in order for a protectorate to work, the protector can be expected to create institutions that limit its capacity to exploit the protected state. The protector in fact has a strong incentive “to convince the subordinate polity that, despite its now greater decision-making authority [as part of the protectorate], it will not take advantage of the latter’s vulnerable and exposed position” (Lake, 1999; 2009). The institutional and other limitations that the protector state puts in place constitute a major component of the “governance costs” associated with protectorates (Lake, 1996). Since the costs of maintaining a security alignment tend to be greater the more hierarchy it involves (Lake, 1996), governance costs will be higher in a protectorate than they are in an alliance. In addition, governance costs tend to be greater at moments of crisis than they are during times of relative stability (Lake, 1996).

Qatar’s position as a protectorate of the United States has enabled and encouraged the leadership in Doha to carry on a remarkably active foreign policy

2 Analyzing relations between Qatar and the United States in Lakean terms was first suggested in Kamrava (2013). Dumianski (2014) proposes that all small states in the contemporary world can best be considered protectorates.

Like all inter-state partnerships, protectorates constitute “obsolescing bargains” (Lake, 1999; Moran, 1974). At the outset, the protector brings to the alignment vital resources that the protected state cannot supply for itself, such as state-of-the-art weaponry and experienced military personnel. Because the protected state has little to offer in return, the initial bargain tends to be skewed to the advantage of the protector. Most protectorates therefore resemble “patron-client relationships”, in which:

the client state is expected to remain under the wing of its patron because of the ‘shield’ [the patron] provides. It is only sensible to suggest that the client state will have to behave according to the demands of the patron and adjust its policies, respectively. (Kasimeris, 2009)

As time goes by, however, the protector invests resources, time and effort into consolidating the partnership, and thereby ends up with substantial sunk costs (Keohane, 1971). These give the protected state the capacity to exercise increased leverage vis-à-vis the protector, and enable it to undertake foreign policy initiatives that advance its own strategic interests. Furthermore, as the protector becomes more deeply committed to the partnership, the protected state finds itself able to carry out policies that circumvent the restrictions on its freedom of action that had been incorporated into the original bargain. The protected state may even gain the capacity to renegotiate the underlying terms of the contract. Such changes tend to be cumulative: “each concession that the [protected] state successfully negotiates chips away at the monopoly of information and control” that the protector enjoyed at the outset (Hosman, 2009).

Just how much leverage the protected state can exercise in its dealings with the protector state is linked to changes in the “security geography” in which the alignment operates (Bjøl, 1968). If the region in which a protectorate operates is extremely dangerous, then the protected state can be expected to restrain itself and defer to the interests of the protector. Whenever the level of threat diminishes, however, the protected state will tend to act in a more self-interested way, even if this means carrying out initiatives that challenge its partner’s strategic interests. Alterations in the security geography that surround a protectorate reflect transformations in military technology (Bjøl, 1968), as well as changes in the intentions of states in the region.

Qatar concluded an unprecedented mutual defense agreement with the United States in June 1992

2. Emergence of the Qatar-US protectorate, 1992-2005

Qatar concluded an unprecedented mutual defense agreement with the United States in June 1992. The pact provided for half a dozen joint military maneuvers by Qatari, US, British and French forces over the following two years. In March 1995, Doha took the further step of granting Washington permission to pre-position on Qatari territory enough materiel to supply combat operations by one US Army mechanized infantry brigade. Three squadrons of US F-15 and F-16 warplanes were deployed to Qatar two months later to support the creation of a “no-fly zone” over southern Iraq. And during April 1998 Qatari and US units carried out a particularly extensive set of combined land, sea and air exercises (Lawson, 2004).

In November 1998, the US ambassador in Doha announced that the US Army Corps of Engineers intended to build a giant warehouse complex in the emirate, which he boasted would end up being the US armed forces’ “largest storage base for military equipment abroad”. Then, in April 2000 the US Central Command negotiated rights to use the massive Qatari air base at Al’Udeid; the agreement authorized the Corps of Engineers to construct a new air com-

mand center at the base, as a complement to the existing regional facility at Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia (Lawson, 2004). In the months after September 2001, US commanders rushed additional military units to Qatar: by the summer of 2002 some 3300 American troops had taken up positions at Al-'Udeid, where hardened hangars were being built to house the fighter-bombers of the US Air Force's newly formed 379th Air Expeditionary Wing. More important, hundreds of Central Command headquarters personnel were transported from McDill Air Force Base in Florida to Qatar to supervise preparations for the upcoming US-led military offensive in Iraq (*Christian Science Monitor*, 19 September 2002).

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld traveled to Doha in December 2002 to sign a revised bilateral agreement that granted the US permission to make use of facilities in Qatar for an undisclosed period of time (*Los Angeles Times*, 12 December 2002). The visit accompanied a large-scale electronic exercise carried out under the auspices of the Central Command based at Qatar's Camp al-Sailiyah, which was billed as "the first such exercise ever staged outside the United States" (*Daily Press*, 8 December 2002). American commanders meanwhile began to transfer all command-and-control operations from Prince Sultan Air Base to Al-'Udeid, relegating the former installation to the status of "a standby facility that likely would be repopulated only in the event of a major military confrontation in the region" (*Washington Post*, 20 April 2003; *New York Times*, 28 April 2003; *Aviation Week*, 5 May 2003).

As the US military presence in Qatar blossomed, the emirate's own military establishment remained miniscule. Doha's air force in the mid-1990s consisted of a dozen Mirage 2000-5s, which continued to be the primary component of the local armed forces over the next ten years. The air force was complemented by an equally miniscule navy consisting of seven fast attack boats and six coastal patrol vessels, along with an 8500-person army organized into four regiments and six battalions, including an armored battalion equipped with 34 French-built AMX-30 tanks. This force structure stayed constant even as military procurement and spending escalated sharply in neighboring states. The surge in arms deliveries that took place in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Oman during the summer of 2006, for example, conspicuously by-passed Qatar (*Middle East Economic Digest*, 4-10 August 2006).

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2.1. Qatar restrains itself

During the initial phase of the Qatar-US protectorate, officials in Doha adopted a foreign policy agenda that balanced a measure of independence with broad conformity to American strategic interests. Qatar resumed routine diplomatic relations with Iraq in the aftermath of the 1990-91 Gulf war, even as other Arab Gulf states kept Baghdad resolutely at arm's length out of respect for Kuwaiti sensibilities. Qatar at the same time engaged in normal interactions with the Islamic Republic of Iran, which focused on the harmonious exploitation of the newly-discovered natural gas field that straddles the maritime border between the two countries (Wright, 2011).

More compatible with US regional interests were Doha's overtures to Israel. The Qatari government broke ranks with the rest of the Arab League in September 1994 and effectively terminated its participation in the boycott against the Jewish state (Blanchard, 2008). Local officials then convened a series of working groups of Arab and Israeli academics and specialists to explore a wide range of regional problems, and in April 1996 welcomed Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres to the Qatari capital. Peres's visit set the stage for the opening of an Israeli com-

mercial office in the emirate, one of only two such agencies in the Gulf (Cooper & Momani, 2011). The trade mission continued to operate even after the outbreak of the 2000 Palestinian uprising, albeit “at a very low level” (Blanchard, 2008). Not until the weeks immediately prior to the 2003 invasion of Iraq did the office shut its doors.

Barely a week after Qatar’s ruler Amir Hamad bin Khalifah Al Thani conferred with US President George W. Bush in Washington in May 2003, the Qatari foreign minister flew to Paris to meet his Israeli counterpart. The two representatives discussed prospects for resuming the stalled negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA), “prompting speculation that President Bush [had] encouraged Qatari officials to take a more active role in the peace process” (Blanchard, 2008). Doha’s efforts to effect a rapprochement between Israel and the PA culminated in a burst of diplomatic activism during October 2006, when “the Qatari government launched an ultimately unsuccessful round of shuttle diplomacy aimed at resolving differences between [rival] Palestinian factions and securing the release of kidnaped [sic] Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit by his [radical Palestinian] captors” (Blanchard, 2008; *Daily Star*, 11 October 2006).

Qatar’s adoption of foreign policies that were broadly congruent with US interests was buttressed by the comparatively high level of threat that existed in the Gulf during the early years of the protectorate. The potential for Iraqi belligerence against surrounding states remained substantial even after the 1990-91 Gulf war. Baghdad’s repeated attempts to expel United Nations weapons inspectors precipitated major confrontations with US forces on four separate occasions between October 1997 and December 1998; US air strikes against Iraqi targets became a regular feature of regional affairs during 1999-2000, and grew more frequent and extensive during the first half of 2001. Iran, meanwhile, took steps to revive its dormant nuclear research program. In August 2002 an opposition group released details of two previously undeclared facilities, which led the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in March 2003 to censure the Islamic Republic for its failure to make a full disclosure of the various components of the research program (IISS Strategic Comments, 2003).

US officials accused Iran of being involved in a pair of bombings that occurred at expatriate housing complexes in Saudi Arabia in May 2003, and by the summer of 2004 it was reported that US Special Forces were undertaking clandestine reconnaissance missions inside Iranian territory. Persistent friction with Washington contributed to the electoral victory of Mahmud Ahmadinejad in the June 2005 presidential elections, and the new president wasted no time in ratcheting up the level of hostile rhetoric directed against the United States and its regional partners. Consequently, US President George W. Bush on a number of occasions in the summer of 2005 pointedly refused to rule out the use of force to bring an end to the Iranian nuclear program. Yet by late 2005 the Islamic Republic had shifted its attention away from the Arab Gulf states and started to concentrate on consolidating political and economic ties to post-Ba’thi Iraq (Legrenzi & Lawson, 2014).

3. Consolidation of the Qatar-US protectorate, 2006-10

After 2005 policy-makers in Washington allocated increasing resources to consolidate the Qatar-US protectorate. The Department of Defense earmarked almost USD 82 million during fiscal year 2008 alone to construct and equip additional facilities on Qatari territory for use by the US Air Force and an assortment of special operations teams; this figure equalled almost

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two-thirds of the total amount spent in Qatar by the US armed forces over the preceding four years (Blanchard, 2012). For fiscal year 2010 the figure jumped yet again, to USD 117 million. Meanwhile, Al-Udeid Air Base became the command center for all air combat and surveillance operations undertaken by components of the Central Command not only in the Gulf and Iraq, but in Afghanistan as well (Blanchard, 2012).

Qatar's military establishment remained inordinately small from 2005 to 2011. More important, its armaments steadily slipped into obsolescence compared to those found in the arsenals of the other Arab Gulf states. Only in terms of aggregate troop strength did the Qatari armed forces exhibit any noticeable change: By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century the total size of the emirate's army, navy and air force had increased to approximately 12,000 personnel. The new force structure included two additional regiments of Royal Guards, a second artillery regiment and two new mechanized infantry battalions. Nevertheless, outside observers found themselves in agreement that the country "continues to rely on the US as the ultimate guarantor of its security" (Middle East Economic Digest, 18-24 April 2014).

3.1. Qatar turns toward activism

Consolidation of the Qatar-US protectorate coincided with Israel's assault on the Lebanese Islamist movement the Party of God (Hizbullah) in the summer of 2006. Despite Doha's ongoing campaign to revive negotiations between the Jewish state and the PA, the war in Lebanon elicited severe criticism from Qatari officials. First Deputy Prime Minister Hamad bin Jasim Al Thani took advantage of Qatar's rotating seat on the United Nations Security Council to demand Israel's full and immediate withdrawal from Lebanese territory (*Middle East Economic Digest*, 29 September-5 October 2006). As soon as the fighting came to an end, Amir Hamad told a press conference in Beirut that "the Lebanese people and their resistance have achieved the first Arab victory, something we had longed for" (Agence France Presse, 21 August 2006). He then announced that Qatar would provide the financial assistance necessary to rebuild villages along the Israeli-Lebanese border that had been destroyed during the war. These actions contravened US policy with regard to the conflict, which placed blame for the war squarely on the shoulders of Hezbollah; they also contradicted the positions adopted by Saudi Arabia and Egypt, which more or less reflected that of Washington (*Middle East Economic Digest*, 29 September-5 October 2006).

Qatar pushed the envelope a bit more during the spring of 2007, when it pledged USD 50 million to finance the day-to-day operations of the PA after Palestinian voters placed the local administration in the hands of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Harakah al-Muqawamah al-Islamiyyah, HAMAS). Amir Hamad subsequently invited the head of HAMAS's political bureau, Khalid Mish'al, to Doha for consultations (*Middle East Economic Digest*, 14-20 September 2007). At the same time, Qatar expanded diplomatic and economic links to Libya, despite Benghazi's long-standing pariah status in the eyes of policy-makers in Washington.

January 2009 saw the convening of a regional summit meeting in Doha to discuss escalating tensions in Gaza. The conference was attended by Mish'al and Syrian President Bashar al-Asad, but ended up being boycotted by the head of the PA, Egypt and Saudi Arabia to protest Qatar's continuing material and moral support for HAMAS. Qatari officials then invited Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad to take part in the proceedings, a move that transformed the

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gathering into “a soapbox to bash America and its Mideast allies” (Associated Press, 2 February 2009). At the conclusion of the meeting, the local authorities notified Israel’s commercial mission that it would no longer be permitted to do business in the Qatari capital (Ulrichsen, 2014).

By the spring of 2009, US officials had grown exasperated with the vagaries of Qatari diplomacy. Senator John Kerry remarked at the close of a trip to the Middle East in March that “Qatar can’t continue to be an American ally on Monday that sends money to HAMAS on Tuesday” (*The Atlantic*, 25 September 2010). At the end of the year, the Obama administration expressed concern that Qatar had abandoned its commitment to work with Washington in the ongoing struggle against Islamist radicalism. An assessment of Doha’s efforts to combat terrorism in the Middle East called them the “worst” of all American allies in the region and went on to complain that the Qatari government had become “hesitant to act against known terrorists out of concern for appearing to be aligned with the US and provoking reprisals” (*The Atlantic*, 29 November 2010; Kamrava, 2013). Relations with Washington were further challenged by Doha’s unstinting advocacy of the objectives espoused by the Global Redesign Initiative (Cooper & Momani, 2011, p. 126; Ulrichsen, 2012b).

Moreover, Doha had by early 2010 become outspoken in defense of Iran’s right to pursue a nuclear research program. Relations between Qatar and Iran had strengthened decisively in July 2009, when Amir Hamad told visiting Iranian Foreign Minister ‘Ali Larijani that “Iran is always our friend and we won’t allow any ill-will person to create problems between us” (Fars News Agency, 6 July 2009). A day after the ruler’s statement, the chief of Qatar’s general staff met with Iran’s defense minister in Tehran to discuss mechanisms that might improve security co-operation between the two countries (Fars News Agency, 7 July 2009). Subsequent visits culminated in the arrival of Qatar’s Crown Prince Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani in Tehran in February 2010; the heir apparent discussed the future of bilateral security collaboration with senior Iranian officials, including First Vice President Muhammad Reza Rahimi (Fars News Agency, 2 February 2010). In the wake of Tamim’s visit, the two governments concluded a pact that aimed “to combat terrorism and promote security cooperation” (Cafero, 2012). Prime Minister Hamad bin Jasim journeyed to the Iranian capital at the close of the year to confer with Ahmadinejad and Supreme Leader ‘Ali Khamenei, who took the opportunity to declare in the prime minister’s presence that “the Americans and Zionists [are] fueling... ignorance of the importance of security in the [Gulf] region” by attempting to derail Iran’s nuclear program (Agence France Presse, 21 December 2010).

Qatar’s turn toward a more active foreign policy was nevertheless constrained by the high level of threat that continued to pervade Gulf affairs from 2006 to 2010. President Ahmadinejad in April 2006 publicly celebrated the resumption of nuclear enrichment operations, and the United Nations responded three months later by adopting Security Council Resolution 1696 that demanded an end to all such activities. Tehran ignored the resolution and the Security Council imposed punitive sanctions at the end of the year. After President Bush called Iran “the world’s leading state sponsor of terrorism” in January 2008, naval units of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) started playing “chicken” with US warships at the southern end of the Gulf. That October the commander of the Iranian navy announced plans to open a new naval base at Jask, which would constitute “an impenetrable barrier” to shipping in the Strait of Hormuz (*Guardian*, 28 October 2008). These moves raised the possibility that Tehran might close off access to the Gulf by interdicting ships traversing the strait (Talmadge, 2008). Iranian

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officials also threatened to retaliate against US warships stationed in the Gulf if any attempt were made to destroy nuclear facilities in the Islamic Republic (al-Arabiyya, 19 January 2010).

On the other hand, Tehran moderated its overall belligerence in the wake of the 2006 war in Lebanon, and in particular responded positively to overtures from Ankara (Legrenzi & Lawson, 2014). Relations between Iran and Turkey improved further in late 2008, after Israel launched a large-scale military offensive against Gaza without notifying the Turkish government in advance. The following year saw the two countries agree to collaborate on a variety of economic projects, and in 2010 Turkish officials revised the annual National Security Policy Paper so as to remove the Islamic Republic from the list of outstanding external dangers facing Turkey.

4. Maintaining the Qatar-US protectorate, 2011-15

American expenditures for new military facilities in Qatar dropped off sharply after 2010. Just over USD 64 million were authorized to upgrade logistical and command structures at al-Udeid during fiscal year 2011, and no more than USD 37 million got allocated for projects on Qatari territory the following year (Blanchard, 2012). Funding for military construction in the emirate was phased out completely after fiscal year 2012 (Blanchard, 2014). Nevertheless, Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel traveled to Doha in December 2013 to conclude a ten-year security agreement with Qatar's new ruler Amir Tamim bin Hamad. Seven months later US officials approved the sale of a package of armaments worth USD 11 billion to the Qatari military, a transaction that was reported to have constituted "the biggest weapons deal for the United States in 2014" (Agence France Presse, 14 July 2014; *The National* [Abu Dhabi], 17 July 2014).

After cadres of the Islamic State pushed into northern Iraq in the summer of 2014, Qatar provided crucial staging points for strikes by US warplanes against targets in both Iraq and Syria (*Washington Post*, 26 August 2014). Aerial combat missions undertaken out of the emirate involved not only F-15s and F-16s but heavier B-1 bombers temporarily stationed at al-Udeid as well. In addition, US Air Force C-17 and C-130 transports based in Qatar delivered food and water to Yazidi refugees camped at Sinjar in northern Iraq (*Military Times*, 15 September 2014).

Qatar's own armed forces expanded dramatically during the second decade of the twenty-first century. The navy ordered 19 fast attack boats from foreign shipyards in the summer of 2012 and started building another six locally under license from the Dutch manufacturer Damen. The army at the same time purchased 62 upgraded Leopard II tanks from Germany to replace its outdated AMX-30s, while the air force ordered a dozen UH-60M Blackhawk, two dozen AH-64D Apache and 28 MH-60S Seahawk helicopters from the United States. Doha also requested authorization to buy US-made Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-missile systems and state-of-the-art rocket artillery batteries (Blanchard, 2014).

These procurements heralded a further jump in military spending during 2014-15 (*Military Technology*, March 2014; *Middle East Economic Digest*, 18-24 April 2014). Construction got underway on four corvettes to strengthen the navy, even as six advanced fast attack boats were ordered from Turkey. At the same time, Doha announced plans to retire its ageing Mirage 2000-5 fighter-bombers and replace them with up to six dozen modern warplanes; an initial order of 24 French-made Rafales was placed in May 2015 (*Jane's Defence Weekly*, 6 May 2015). As a result of these contracts, annual defense spending skyrocketed from USD 500 million in 2011 to USD 1 billion in 2013, and was expected to exceed USD 3.5 billion by 2015.

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5. Qatar flexes its muscles

As the original structure of the Qatar-US protectorate slid into obsolescence, Doha stepped up its foreign policy activism. The eruption of widespread popular unrest in Libya in February 2011 marked a notable turning-point:

Qatar went further than most Arab countries in backing international intervention in Libya and aligning itself with the revolutionaries. Qatar contributed fighter jets and special forces, as well as financing, weapons and training. It was the first country to recognize the National Transitional Council as the legitimate representative of the Libyan people, and organised the first meeting of the International Contact Group on Libya. (Echague, 2014; Eakin, 2011; Ulrichsen, 2012b; Khatib, 2013; Ulrichsen, 2014; Nuruzzaman, 2015)

These actions contributed greatly to the fall of the old regime led by Muammar al-Qaddafi, but left in its place an undisciplined cluster of militant Islamist formations that quickly fell into conflict with one another. Qatar's primary clients in the post-Qaddafi era included "the commander of the feared Tripoli Brigade, Abdul Hakim Belhadj, as well as the prominent Ali and Ismail al-Salabi brothers" (Ulrichsen, 2012); all three of these figures had close ties to the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, which had been designated a terrorist organization by the US government (Khatib, 2013). Officials in the interim government soon complained that Doha was supplying radical militias with armaments and funds, making it impossible for them to restore a modicum of stability to the country (Reuters, 18 November 2011; Ulrichsen, 2012a; Steinberg, 2012; Ulrichsen, 2014).

Qatar's policy toward events in Egypt displayed even less consideration for expressed US interests. Amir Hamad traveled to Cairo in August 2012 to meet with President Muhammad Mursi, after Doha had supplied some USD 5 billion in financial backing for the new regime. When Mursi was ousted in early July 2013 and 55 of his supporters killed in clashes with the armed forces, the Qatari foreign ministry immediately expressed sympathy for those who had been killed; shortly thereafter it called for Mursi to be released from custody. These moves angered Egypt's new military leaders, who ordered the closure of the Cairo bureau of Qatar's flagship television network "al-Jazeera" and arrested its local staff.

Meanwhile, in October 2012 Amir Hamad paid an official visit to Gaza, the first head of state to tour the territory since it came under HAMAS's control. The ruler promised to provide up to USD 400 million to repair the damage to housing, public buildings and general infrastructure that had been inflicted during successive Israeli military incursions. Qatari officials also encouraged HAMAS's Mish'al to take up residence in Doha after he abandoned Damascus in the spring of 2012. When the Israeli armed forces once again launched large-scale military operations against Gaza in the summer of 2014, Qatar voiced strong condemnation of the offensive, and described Israel as the "aggressor" in the conflict (Blanchard, 2014). In an address to the United Nations General Assembly that September, Amir Tamim went so far as to brand the battlefield operations that had been carried out by the Israel Defense Force "a crime against humanity."

Qatar's hyperactive foreign policy reflected the diminished level of threat that confronted the Arab Gulf states after 2010. US commanders deployed Patriot anti-missile batteries to Kuwait, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar in January 2010 in a bid to limit the potential consequences of Iranian belligerence. That July, the secretary general of the Gulf Co-operation Council observed that the organization did "not wish for a confrontation [with Tehran] and we

As the original structure of the Qatar-US protectorate slid into obsolescence, Doha stepped up its foreign policy activism.

reject any military option. We ask that Iran respond to and co-operate with legitimate international resolutions and the IAEA in order to resolve the current problems” (*al-Hayah*, 16 July 2010). These sentiments were echoed by the foreign minister of the UAE, despite his country’s long-running territorial dispute with the Islamic Republic over three strategically situated islands in the Gulf (*The National* [Abu Dhabi], 8 December 2010).

Regional tensions flared again at the end of 2011, when officials in Tehran warned that they would stop traffic moving through the Strait of Hormuz if the country were subjected to stricter economic sanctions (Katzman, Nerurkar, O’Rourke, Mason, & Ratner, 2012). US commanders then reported that the IRGC had built up a squadron of suicide bomb boats, complemented by a pair of new submarines. In response, the US Navy deployed a network of mine detection and surveillance equipment around the strait. Iran’s armed forces nevertheless found themselves pre-occupied with conflicts farther north, along the border with the Kurdistan Regional Government, and devoted little sustained effort to military initiatives in the Gulf (Legrenzi & Lawson, 2014).

Furthermore, Iranian representatives in April 2012 met in Istanbul with representatives of the US, Russia, China, Britain, France and Germany to discuss ways that the ongoing crisis over nuclear enrichment could be defused. Both sides called the talks “constructive”, and when the meeting ended officials in Washington announced that Iran might be permitted to continue producing enriched uranium so long as it made a firm commitment not to develop a nuclear weapon and agreed to allow full IAEA inspections. Renewed activism on the part of Azeri nationalists deflected Tehran’s energies away from the Gulf and toward the Caucasus, a trend that accelerated as Turkey stepped up its own involvement in Azerbaijan, Pakistan and Afghanistan in the fall of 2013 (Legrenzi & Lawson, 2014). Faced with pressing strategic problems to the north, Tehran hinted that it would be interested in undertaking a rapprochement with the Arab Gulf states, and with Saudi Arabia in particular (Gause, 2014).

A crucial difference between the pre-1971 era and today is that Qatar is now a sovereign state, which enjoys the right and capacity to pursue an external policy in its own interest

6. Conclusion

Qatar’s relations with the United States have exhibited a peculiar form since the early 1990s. Doha has relied on Washington to provide it with defense against virtually all external threats, and has in exchange allowed US commanders to build up a massive military presence in the emirate. As a result, the security alignment between the two countries can best be described as a protectorate – one not much different in basic structure from the kind of arrangement that existed between Qatar and the United Kingdom in the decades prior to 1971.

A crucial difference between the pre-1971 era and today is that Qatar is now a sovereign state, which enjoys the right and capacity to pursue an external policy in its own interest. Doha found itself tightly constrained during the early years of the current protectorate, both by the dynamics inherent in such alignments and by the high level of threat that permeated the Gulf. As US commitment to and investment in the protectorate increased, however, and as the level of regional threat subsided, Qatar started to pursue a more assertive set of policies, which at times conflicted with American strategic objectives. Qatar’s ability and incentive to undertake foreign policy initiatives that challenge US interests increased sharply after 2010, at precisely the moment that the Middle East experienced an unprecedented degree of upheaval. Whether or not US officials will take steps to curtail Qatar’s post-2011 freedom of action – as the theory of relational contracting might predict – remains to be seen.

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