

Crisis in the Persian Gulf: The Emir of Qatar : The Mideast 's Quiet Peacemaker

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There are few Arab governments that would accord Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad a warm welcome. One has been Syria, the other Iraq. A kindly reception was conferred only by certain parties in Baghdad though, and the same scenario is likely to hold true when he visits Lebanon later this month. That made the Iranian leader's Sunday trip to Qatar—a rare Sunni Arab ally—all the more telling. It was Ahmadinejad's sixth visit to the Persian Gulf state in five years, but it spoke less of him than the quiet, effective diplomacy for which his host, the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, is renowned.

In a climate of heightened rhetoric in the Persian Gulf over Iran's nuclear ambitions and attendant fears of perceived expanding spheres of influence, the cool, even-handed approach adopted by Sheikh Hamad has not only been the exception, but emblematic of the way the emir has settled seemingly intractable regional disputes, often ones with sectarian overtones.

Qatar's friendly relations with Tehran are in stark contrast to those of the usual Mideast heavyweights like Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. On Ahmadinejad's latest visit to Qatar, a defense cooperation agreement was inked between the two nations. The emir also officially backed last May's nuclear fuel-swap deal arranged by Turkey and Brazil and supports Iran's development of a peaceful nuclear energy program.

Successful mediation of conflicts by the emir, however, usually takes place far from the Gulf.

His efforts famously helped rescue Lebanon from the brink of civil war in 2008. At the time, Lebanon was in the midst of a tense 18-month political standoff, including the last six without a seated president.

Events came to a head in May of that year when Prime Minister Fouad Siniora's cabinet declared Hezbollah's telecommunications network illegal and attempted to have it dismantled (the same network that remained impenetrable to Israeli intelligence during the July 2006 war and was instrumental to Lebanon's defense).

After the cabinet decision, street battles erupted in Beirut and other parts of the country between supporters of the opposition March 8 Coalition (Hezbollah and Amal) and the ruling March 14 Coalition. At one point, Hezbollah briefly took control of West Beirut before returning authority to the Lebanese Army. More than 100 lives were lost in the clashes.

Under the aegis of the Arab League, Sheikh Hamad acted as intermediary between the rival coalitions, first in Beirut and thereafter at a National Dialogue Conference in Doha. The

outcome was the signing of the Doha Accord on May 21. It led to the restoration of the prime minister's cabinet, formation of a national unity government, and the election of Gen. Michel Suleiman as president. Civil war had been averted.

With upcoming indictments by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon expected to finger Hezbollah elements in the February 2005 assassination of the late Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, concerns that violence could again erupt along sectarian lines prompted Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to pay a high-profile, joint visit to Beirut in late July.

Quietly slipping behind the scenes to again help defuse tensions was the Qatari emir. He even took time off from diplomacy in Beirut to go where the other two leaders dared not venture: southern Lebanon. Sheikh Hamad, a Sunni monarch of an oil-rich Persian Gulf nation, toured villages and towns in the war-ravaged Shia heartland. It was the first time a visiting Arab head-of-state had visited the area.

The towns' residents, who witnessed most Arab leaders give tacit approval to the Israeli assault in hopes that Hezbollah would be destroyed, waved Qatar's flag and carried signs reading "Thank you Qatar" along with pictures of the emir.

Millions in aid have been spent by Qatar to help finance the reconstruction of four towns in southern Lebanon devastated by Israeli shelling in the July 2006 war. One was Bint Jbeil, a Hezbollah stronghold and among the hardest towns hit. While there, Sheikh Hamad inaugurated a hospital, school, mosque and church.

Another conflict benefitting from his intervention has been the devastating six-year war between Zaidi Shia rebels, known as "Houthis," in northern Yemen's Saada province and the government of President Ali Abdullah Saleh. The Zaidis assert they are fighting to end the socioeconomic marginalization and religious discrimination of their community while Saleh maintains their real intent is to restore the former Zaidi caliphate that existed in Yemen prior to the 1962 revolution.

The war has taken an exceptionally heavy toll on Saada's poverty-stricken civilian population; hundreds of thousands displaced, overstretched refugee camps and growing child malnutrition all pointed to a full-blown humanitarian disaster. (This was not helped, of course, by Saudi Arabia's reckless bombing campaign in November 2009 under the broad and specious pretext of stemming Iranian influence in Yemen.)

A ceasefire deal negotiated by Doha in early 2008 fell apart by August 2009 after the government accused the Houthis of failing to abide by its terms. A sixth round of fighting ensued until yet another deal was struck in February 2010. The precarious truce nonetheless suffered from mutual recriminations of its violation, prompting Sheikh Hamad to fly to Sanaa in mid-July. As a result, talks resumed between the government and rebels based on the original peace treaty brokered by Qatar.

The Emir of Qatar has proven his ability to successfully tackle difficult situations and reconcile conflicts that fellow Arab rulers have not only failed to do, but have exacerbated. Sheikh Hamad's amicable relations with Iran, his good standing among fellow Sunnis and the trust he has earned amongst Shia make him the Middle East's ideal arbiter in mediating regional disputes, particularly those that require bridging the political divide between Sunni and Shia.

There are two Arab countries now in desperate need of his diplomatic skills. Bahrain and Iraq eagerly await Sheikh Hamad's arrival.

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