



INSS Insight No. 441, July 2, 2013

All in the Family: The Changing of the Guard in Qatar

Yoel Guzansky

In an unusual step, Sheikh Hamad Bin Halifa al-Thani, the Emir of Qatar, transferred the throne to his 33-year old son, Prince Tamim, who thus becomes the youngest ruler in the Arab world. Hamad thereby put an end to rumors circulating in recent months of an impending change in leadership.

What lies behind the surprising step? In recent years, the outgoing Emir's serious kidney disease was a source of concern regarding regime stability, what may explain the timing of the transfer of power to his son. Perhaps the Emir sought to put his successor in place for the sake of future stability. Some say he was afraid of losing control of appointing his heir, lest the son gain too much strength and decide to depose his father, as occurred in Qatar in the past. Indeed, to date the danger of revolt has always come from within the royal household: since gaining independence in 1971, Qatar has experienced two bloodless royal coups. In 1972, Halifa Bin Hamad seized the throne when his uncle, the Emir, was on a hunting trip in Iran. His son, Hamad, took similar action in June 1995, when his father was out of the country. Halifa's attempt to restore his rule the following year, apparently with Saudi aid, failed. Some have suggested that the current danger of an overthrow came specifically from the royals close to the Saudi royal family, which is displeased with the independent foreign policy Qatar has adopted and the political prominence it has cultivated. Moreover, past years (most recently in 2009 and 2012) have seen reports of questionable reliability about attempted coups in the emirate. Many within the outgoing Emir's close circle of influence were unhappy with the emirate's "reckless" foreign policy and Qatar's regional activism, creating friction between Qatar and its allies, as well as with its enemies.

The decision making process in the emirate occurs within the family, with the Emir's authority supreme. The changes Hamad made to the Qatari constitution gave him much greater authority than that enjoyed by his father, and formally allowed him to appoint his successor without the agreement of the family, which in any case is neither strong nor united enough to oppose him. And while the timing of the move is a subject of speculation, the choice of Tamim is not: the crown prince has been groomed for the job

for years. The incoming Emir, Hamad's son from his second wife, Sheikha Mozah, became crown prince in 2003 (replacing his brother Jassim). Tamim, like his father, is a graduate of the British Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. He served as the head of Qatar's Olympic committee and deputy chief of staff of the Qatari army. While he enjoys good working relations with his Western counterparts, he is also viewed as a supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood. Overall, however, little is known about him, even though his public exposure has grown in recent years. In 2011, for example, he hosted the Libya Contact Group in Doha; this past month, he participated in a meeting of the Friends of Syria in Doha, and also participated in talks on border issues with Saudi Arabia.

The fact that the incoming Emir is the son of Sheikha Mozah helped his candidacy, and will undoubtedly continue to help him in the future. The outgoing Emir and prime minister, as well as the influential Sheikha, will likely continue to pull the strings from behind the scenes, even though when Tamim inherited the throne, the Prime Minister also resigned, apparently so as to avoid infringing on the new ruler.

Over the years the outgoing Qatari ruler and Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Hamad Bin Jassim positioned Qatar as a key player in several arenas in, but not limited to, the Middle East. With an average annual growth rate of 12.9 percent between 2000 and 2012, the emirate is currently the world's largest exporter of liquid natural gas and controls the world's largest LNG reserves after Russia and Iran. In addition to the powerful economy, the al-Thani family created a highly influential tool in the form of the al-Jazeera television network, which since its launch in 1996 has become an effective vehicle for conducting foreign policy.

Accordingly, the young Emir is inheriting not only the richest nation in the world (in terms of GNP) but also some challenges regarding Qatar's foreign policy. The tremendous wealth and willingness to use it for political ends, as well as the weakness of some power loci in the region and beyond, have given prominence to Qatar's unique foreign policy, including involvement in most of the regional uprisings, from Libya to Mali and Syria. American military support enables the emirate's political activism, as it knows its own security is not threatened. Motivating Qatar is the desire to entrench its position and avoid the possibility that upheavals will cross its own borders. However, its power is not unlimited, and its support for Islamic elements has aroused opposition from within neighboring monarchies. Regarding Syria, Qatar seems to be downshifting its scope of support for Assad's opposition and leaving Saudi Arabia to set the tone.

It is still unclear how – or even if – the change in leadership will affect Qatar's foreign policy. Policy, certainly in the realm of national security, was always set by the outgoing

Emir and his inner circle and bore his personal stamp. Therefore, the way the incoming Emir decides to steer the emirate is of particular significance. Even if the challenges facing Tamim differ from those facing the king of Bahrain, who is confronting violence on the part of the Shiite majority, they remain substantial and may well surface in light of the change in leadership. In recent years, Tamim has been involved in the emirate's decision making, and has seen eye to eye with his father on many issues. This, as well as the fact that the outgoing Emir and Prime Minister are not disappearing altogether, raises the probability that there will not be any immediate or essential change in Qatari policy. Still, the new Emir, as well as Abdullah Bin Nasser, the new Prime Minister, may want to focus on internal issues (e.g., the outgoing Emir's 2012 promise to hold elections for the Shura Council has yet to be fulfilled). They may try to shift the center of gravity to development projects in honor of hosting the 2022 Olympic Games and Vision 2030, instead of furthering the wasteful foreign policy pursued by Qatar, which sparked criticism from within. In local parlance, many Qataris would like to see the nation's great wealth go towards developing "roads in Doha rather than Lebanon."

Until the Arab Spring, little limited the reign of Arab rulers other than their health. The upheavals that began in 2011 have placed the royal households in a quandary: they might like to identify with the Arab masses that took to the streets in part in protest against the gap between them and their aging rulers, but they are still interested in preserving the traditional regime structure and their total control of internal political processes. For Qatar, the rapid identification of trends and the spearheading of processes are critical for maintaining its security. The outgoing Emir thus made an effort to attach the sense of enlightenment to the transition process and stressed the importance of transferring authority to the "dynamic and creative" younger generation in his own lifetime, a precedent that may have an effect on the other aging Gulf monarchies.

