

Qatar and Central Asia

WHAT'S AT STAKE IN TAJIKISTAN, TURKMENISTAN, AND KAZAKHSTAN?

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Relations between Central Asian states and the Gulf Arab monarchies have expanded rapidly over the past decade. With one of the most outward-looking foreign policy agendas of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states, Qatar's leadership has increasingly entertained bilateral cooperation with Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan. The country opened its embassy in Astana in 2008, shortly after Kazakhstan opened its own in Doha in 2007. While Turkmenistan hosts a Qatari embassy but has none in Doha, Tajikistan-Qatari embassies were opened in 2012. And establishing diplomatic ties is only a small part of the story.

These growing political and economic ties between Qatar and Central Asia raise a number of questions. Why is Qatar—a country of only 260,000 citizens and 2.6 million total residents—interested in developing bilateral relations in the region? What is at stake for Qatari leaders and their counterparts in Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan? This memo reveals how Qatar's relations with these countries are highly dynamic but mostly bilateral and based on quid-pro-quo transactions. It also argues that, while leaders of Central Asia have looked on with admiration as Qatar has pursued an ambitious international engagement agenda, the regional blockade of Qatar that began in June 2017 raises new questions for the effectiveness of their own “soft power” foreign policies.

Qatar and Central Asia: An Overview

Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan are all nominally Muslim countries and initial engagement with Qatar after the fall of the Soviet Union largely unfolded through a narrative of religious unity. Since then, however, Qatar's relations with each of the three countries have followed substantially different trajectories. In their various interactions, a militarized understanding of security frequently shows up as a talking point, but it has not figured centrally in any of Qatar's bilateral relations in Central Asia. Rather, Qatari

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engagement has revolved almost exclusively around a range of low-impact, feel-good agenda items. The state allocates substantial funds for humanitarian aid, development, and Islamic cultural projects, which are largely spent domestically or in its near abroad. Central Asia has been the beneficiary of some of this ostensibly selfless giving, but the Qataris also have a number of interests that they pursue through engaging in the region. Because of their internationalist outlook that leaves the door open to a whole range of potentially beneficial forms of cooperation, Qatar's leaders are willing to let their counterparts in Central Asia set the agenda and step up when they see an opportunity to advance a current or future issue of interest. The result is that, as one commentator recently [put it](#), the Central Asian leaders can be reduced to the image of "a door-to-door salesman desperately seeking to tout his wares." Nonetheless, Qatar's leadership, first under the Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani and later his son Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, has been careful to pursue a policy of respectful, if minimal, engagement in Central Asia.

Tajikistan

Besides a fair bit of rhetoric around common causes and religious values, there are only a handful of substantive projects linking Tajikistan and Qatar. One is the parastatal Qatari Diar real estate company's luxury residence complex the "Diar Dushanbe," while the largest is the nearly-completed monumental mosque in Dushanbe. Costing upwards of \$100 million, but with a \$70 million Qatari funding pledge, the mosque aims to be the largest in Central Asia and accommodate 115,000 worshippers. Like [other monumental mosques](#), the iconic project is simultaneously designed to advertise the Tajik leadership's Islamic credentials and to enforce state control of religious practice. By developing a large-scale religious icon, leaders can more easily deflect criticism of any assaults on free worship by touting their allegedly outsize commitment to religion. Of course, the speciousness of this claim has not been lost on local practitioners, who set it in contrast to the government's shuttering of smaller mosques, according to one Dushanbe imam, "just like Soviet times." It is not clear how the funding negotiations unfolded, but the new Dushanbe mosque is clearly a pet project of President Emomali Rahmon—he even celebrated his 59th birthday driving an excavator to initiate its construction phase in 2011. For their part, the Qataris benefit because the project simultaneously bolsters their Islamic charity credentials, while making Rahmon an ally at a relatively low cost.

Otherwise, they have largely been dismissive of Tajikistan's overtures for deeper engagement. During his visit to Doha in February 2017, Tajikistan's official outlets [reported](#) that Rahmon and his team presented their Qatari counterparts with a laundry list of potential investment and spheres of cooperation: from hydropower and water to transportation, agriculture, light industry, mining, and scientific exchanges. The president also highlighted the country's four free trade zones as open for Qatari business, and pushed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the Qatar Stock Exchange and Tajikistan's Central Asia Stock Exchange project, established in April 2015. Besides

this MOU and half a dozen others, little of substance came from Rahmon's 2017 visit. Given Tajikistan's risky investment environment, this is likely to remain the case for the time being, as Qatar's political and economic elites do not see any immediate value in investing in Tajikistan when its sovereign wealth fund, the Qatar Investment Authority, already has an impressive portfolio. Yet, by treating Rahmon to a state visit and supporting his Dushanbe mosque project, they leave the door open to future cooperation should it prove useful in the future.

Turkmenistan

President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov also [traveled](#) to Qatar in early 2017 and, like Rahmon, came home with little more than a number of small-fry MOUs on finance, sports, transport, tourism, education, culture, and civil aviation. Also like Rahmon, the Turkmen president was eager to list his country's opportunities for Qatari investment, but he is more specific in lobbying for a handful of projects in need of financial support. For example, during his visit to Doha, Berdymukhamedov tried to entice Qatari investment in his new, multi-billion dollar Turkmenbashi International Seaport. The port project was supposed to be completed in 2016, with Turkish financial backing, but observers suspect that something has gone awry if Berdymukhamedov is now asking for Qatar's support. As seasoned investors, leaders in Qatar are probably too wise to get involved in such a project, but they have listened calmly and willingly. Otherwise, the president clearly recognizes the value of portraying Qatar and Turkmenistan as being united around the natural gas industry, which dominates both economies, and Berdymukhamedov has [advocated](#) more cooperation in this sector. However, his tireless efforts to advance Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline project has not been received positively by Qatari leaders, who see it as potentially [threatening](#) their monopoly of gas markets in South and Southeast Asia. Observers suspect that Berdymukhamedov does not fully comprehend this issue—or perhaps it is a sign of mere desperation from being locked into a monopoly relationship with China for its gas exports, exacerbated in early 2016, when Russia ceased gas imports from Turkmenistan. In any case, the fact that Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim [visited](#) Turkmenistan announced a new phase of construction demonstrates that the Qatari leadership recognizes the importance of engaging Turkmenistan and, ideally, put the TAPI project to an end.

Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan has the longest and most substantial [record](#) of working with Qatar. One of the first regional projects supported by Qatari funding was Astana's Islamic Cultural Center, Nur Astana, which was initiated in 1999 and completed in 2005. Since then, the two countries have signed countless MOUs and touted cooperation in the oil, gas, and mining sectors, agriculture, banking and finance, as well as sports, education, and culture. In addition to the Nur Astana project, President Nazarbayev has also managed to secure Qatari support for a secondary school in Astana (named after Sheikh Tamim), a

planned Rehabilitation Center for Victims of Nuclear Testing in Semey, as well as cooperation with wildlife conservation efforts at the Andasai Natural Reserve (in the Zhambyl province). The last item is particularly significant because Kazakhstan is a popular destination for Gulf royalty to travel for falcon hunting expeditions. Traditionally, Gulf elites have traveled to Pakistan and other countries in North Africa for their expeditions to hunt the [houbara bustard](#), the favored prey that is globally endangered and extinct from the Arabian Peninsula. Due to tightened international restrictions and local outrage in these countries, permitting has become much harder and many Gulf elites now [travel](#) to Central Asia. Much of this activity is illicit and goes undocumented, but Kazakhstan does allow foreign falconers to hunt in the wild on the condition that they can demonstrate wildlife preservation efforts connected to the sport.

With the February 2007 signing of a cooperation agreement on the protection of Kazakhstan's houbara bustard population, the door has been open to elite Qatari hunters. Though it is not clear if Sheikh Hamad visited for this purpose, the country more recently became one of Sheikh Tamim's favorite destinations, at least until a mishap in September 2016 when two of the [Sheikh's prized falcons died](#) from overexposure in the Almaty airport customs control. The Emir was understandably furious—the birds are not only beloved pets but worth hundreds of thousands of dollars—and he cut short his planned two-week visit after just three days. Far from a sideshow to the main affairs of foreign policy, falconry is a major interest for Qatari elites. Indeed, until the recent incident, Kazakhstan's appeal for the Qataris has largely rested with its role as a venue for hunting, not just because of its accessible permitting process, but also for its comparative political security. This was a message that especially hit home after 27 Qatari hunters and royal family members were [abducted in Iraq](#) in December 2015. The government's effort to secure their release is said to have entailed a \$1 billion [ransom payment](#) to Iranian-backed militias and other Islamist terror groups, which some commentators suspect was the "straw that broke the camel's back" leading to the regional blockade of Qatar.

The Limits of Soft Power? Multi-Vectorism and Qatar Under Blockade

Qatar suddenly became the center of sensational news coverage worldwide in June 2017. The country's leaders have actively sought international media attention over the past decade through their famous "soft power" foreign policies and branding campaigns, but the headline-grabbing news of a regional blockade from its partners in the GCC was anything but welcome coverage. Relations in the Gulf neighborhood [have long been unsteady](#), but the coalition led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and joined by Bahrain, Egypt, Libya, and the Maldives, severed diplomatic ties and cut off Qatar's vital air, sea, and land connections. Put in place shortly after President Donald Trump's fawning visit to Saudi Arabia, during which regional fissures quickly bubbled to the surface, the coalition was apparently emboldened to look tough on terrorism and win further support from the new U.S. president. Indeed, Trump's immediate response via Twitter, which contradicted longstanding U.S. support of Qatar, [validated](#) the coalition's

blockade: “During my recent trip to the Middle East I stated that there can no longer be funding of Radical Ideology. Leaders pointed to Qatar—look!” And as *The Washington Post* later [reported](#), the whole episode had roots in other digital media, with the UAE apparently taking a page from Trump’s “fake news” playbook by orchestrating a hack of Qatari government sites to plant inflammatory material (including quotes denied by the Qataris, in which the Emir allegedly expressed support for Iran and Hamas).

The blockade, which is [far from over](#), has been a tremendous economic blow for Qatar. More than that, it has presented a serious challenge to Qatar’s far-reaching imaging project, something that the leaders of Central Asia’s authoritarian governments would key into immediately. The leadership in many of the smaller Soviet successor states have undertaken some variation of “multi-vector foreign policy,” largely to avoid being monopolized by Russian political and economic agendas. The Qatari royal family has been plagued by similar concerns about potential challenges to its sovereignty from their much larger regional neighbors and has pursued the same strategy of extreme international engagement seen in Central Asia. This has involved high-profile efforts to portray the country as a regional exemplar with a progressive and engaged foreign policy agenda, a mediator of regional and international conflicts, an economic powerhouse in the Gulf, an elite education hub, and a proponent of sports and culture, all aimed at redefining what it means to be “modern” in the Middle East.

Like their counterparts in Eurasia, the Qataris are undertaking these diverse international branding exercises in part for the economic rewards, combined with a fair bit of egoism, but they are clearly designed to have a common cumulative effect: establishing the state as a legitimate actor in global affairs and a country with allies that would be quick to rally to defend Qatari sovereignty in the face of territorial threats. Yet contrary to the implicit assumption that such threats would foremost involve invasion, the regional blockade leaders have also shown the power of assaulting Qatar’s international image, depicting the country as a retrogressive force in the region, a source of instability through its Al Jazeera news outlets, and a villainous sponsor of terrorism. The [unfolding of Qatar in the online trenches](#), crafted by public relations and lobbying firms, illustrates the limits of a soft power approach in translating the hyper-mediated world of words into action on the ground that can put an end to its blockade. Central Asian elites may continue to be disappointed in their hopes for Qatari investment in their local economies, but this lesson of not lending too much blind faith to their own multi-vector policy proscriptions may well be one of the most valuable things the small Gulf state can offer Central Asian leaders in the near term.