

First target for Iran: Qatar?
OLIVIER GUITTA



France's President Nicolas Sarkozy (R) and the emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani. (photo by SIPA via Newscom)

What would be the most logical target Iran would strike in case of a U.S. or Israeli attack on its nuclear sites?

Qatar.

In fact, Iranian Revolutionary guards have already threatened to attack Qatari oil and gas facilities (hence crippling the world economy by creating an oil and gas shock) by sea and air by using suicide boats and air missiles.

For Iran, it's a no-brainer: Qatar hosts the largest U.S. base in the Middle East (8,000 U.S. soldiers are stationed there) and is also viewed by some as being friendly with Israel.

What is Qatar doing about it?

First and foremost, Qatar has been heavily using the diplomatic weapon. Its strategy is to befriend everyone: from Israel to Hamas, from Syria to France.

Even though Qatar's deputy foreign minister Mohamed al-Ruhaimi firmly believes that "speaking to everyone allows us to have a dynamic and independent policy," it is a recipe for disaster. For instance, Qatar has not been terror-free: in fact, in March 2005, a suicide bomber (most likely linked or inspired by al-Qaida) killed one Briton and wounded 12 people in Doha in an attack at a theater frequented by Westerners.

Also, while Qatar is the only country with Iran, heavily investing in Syria, and thereby propping up the Assad regime, it does not seem to pay off. Quite the contrary. In June 2006 the Kuwaiti daily Al Seyassah reported that Qatar had foiled a destabilization plot against the regime and that Qatari authorities had arrested about 100 Syrian workers and five Syrian intelligence officers. This plot was reportedly conceived by Syrian President Bashar Assad's brother-in-law and chief of Syria's security services, Assef Shawkat, with the help of Hezbollah's mastermind, Imad Mugniyeh. They were to activate sleeping cells in the Gulf and target vital and strategic centers in Qatar. Syria wanted to take revenge on Qatar because of its vote at the United Nations for resolution 1680, which calls for a final drawing of the borders between Syria and Lebanon and the reestablishment of normal diplomatic relations between the two states.

On the diplomatic front, Qatar has been handling Iran carefully.

For proof, Qatar was the only country to reject a U.N. Security Council resolution against Tehran. Another reason for this policy is that according to a figure cited by the French daily, Le Figaro, 30 to 40 percent of Qatari citizens are of Iranian descent.

But appeasing Iran might not be enough to stave off a conflict with its powerful Shiite neighbor. Just a spark might ignite a fire: for example a major diplomatic incident broke out last year between the two countries when Qatar's emir called the Gulf "Arabian" and not "Persian."

Finally another potential source of conflict is the sharing of the enormous offshore gas reserve of the North Field (the largest natural gas reserve in the world with 25 trillion cubic meters) between the two nations, which is bound to ignite major tension, in particular as the Iranian economy worsens.

But Qatar has also a few fail-safe measures: one of them is obviously the U.S. military presence in the country. Another one is a military treaty with France obligating the latter to intervene militarily to defend the tiny Gulf state. France would be treaty bound to send troops to the region to retaliate against Iran. Recently, Qatari diplomats have been reminding France of its commitments.

Last but not least, since March 2006 Qatari refineries and vital oil installations have been protected by batteries of Patriot missiles.

An Iranian attack on Qatar might literally plunge the world into a new global war. Gulf and Western countries are taking this scenario seriously. That is why military activity in the Gulf has been increasing tremendously in the past few months. According to British sources, the stock of weapons, missiles, and combat planes in the six neighboring countries to Iran is now three times what it was at the onset of the Iraq war in 2003. The skies are getting darker once more in the Middle East.

--

Olivier Guitta is a foreign affairs and counter terrorism consultant in Washington D.C. and the founder of the newsletter The Croissant (www.thecroissant.com)