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Transcript

Qatar's Foreign Policy

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HE Dr Khalid Bin Mohammed Al-Attiyah:

Thank you very much. My brothers and lords, excellencies, Dr Niblett, members of Chatham House, distinguished guests, members of the press, ladies and gentlemen: good afternoon to you all. It is a great pleasure for me to be here today and to address such a prominent audience, founded on the principle of studying international problems to prevent future wars. The Royal Institute for International Affairs is widely recognized as one of the most relevant venues for discussion of current issues. Personally, I consider this to be one of our most valuable assets in a world that has become ever more complex and ever more volatile.

In other words, the mission of Chatham House today remains as valid, if not more valid in fact, than at the time of its founding under the leadership of Lionel Curtis. Known for his love of travel and legendary ability to argue, Curtis wrote and lived in a world greatly different from ours. London in July 1920, when the British Institute of International Affairs was created, bears little resemblance to the London of today – except, of course, for the great weather. Obviously the same holds true for the region I come from, the Arabian Gulf. The world of December 2013 is indeed a different place. Yet our need to understand its dynamics, our need to understand its trajectory and our need to understand one another have never been greater.

It is therefore quite fitting that I be here with you today to discuss the foreign policy of an Arab peninsula known to many but truly understood by few – a place that has urbanized, modernized and globalized faster over the past two decades than arguably any other on earth: the State of Qatar. The great Irish master Eugene O'Neill once said there is no present or future, only the past happening over and over again now. The human presence on the Qatari Peninsula goes back tens of thousands of years. The written history of my country can be traced to the mention by 5th century Greek historian Herodotus. The articulation and diffusion of our past, however, has taken different, perhaps less conventional forms. In many respects, the history of Qatar embodies the experience of its people: crossing the land to thrive, loyal to their natural environment and devoted to the fundamental principle of community and constant adaptation. History in Qatar is therefore easier to witness in the living rather than in the dead: the importance of tradition and the pivotal role of the elders in the aspiration of the youth and in the clarity of our vision.

Similarly, an understanding of modern-day Qatar will require a firm grasp of the impact on such a singular civilization of the astonishing changes that have taken place over the past two decades. This part of our history began in

October 1938 with the drilling of the first oil well in the Jebel Dukhan, opening a chapter that would lead this country from the frugality of the pearl-diving age to the wealth and rapid development of the LNG (liquefied natural gas) era. This journey, dear friends, was neither leaner nor easy. Understanding our foreign policy as a state requires understanding our trajectory as a people.

Contrary to popular perception, Qatar was not always a land of plenty. In fact, it really never was until the last few decades of the 20th century. Before that, Qatar had only enjoyed a period of social progress and economic prosperity following the advent of our founder, Sheikh Jassim bin Mohammed Al-Thani. Sheikh Jassim achieved national unity on 18 December 1878, allowing Qatar to experience its first significant opening through trade, education and philanthropy. Pearl-diving was on the rise in Doha, soon becoming an important commercial hub. This flourishing era, however, came to a quick end. Some of you may not know that when the Second World War interrupted international trade, about one-third of our population actually died of hunger. The consequent disruption of food supplies extended a period of economic hardship in Qatar that had begun in the 1920s with the collapse of the pearl trade and which deepened with the global depression of the 1930s. Such deprivation led to the massive migration of families and people throughout the peninsula, in a context of widespread poverty, malnutrition and diseases. When my father's generation was born, one in four women still died during childbirth.

A constant from this difficult time to today, nonetheless, is the wonderful spirit and the strong character of Qatari people – a people of few words, whose actions speak on their behalf. A people whose men are known for their generosity, their courage and their honesty. Such traits are matched only by the remarkable nature of the Qatari women: role models, guardian of our education and simply the foundation of our society.

While limited in comparative terms, oil revenue eventually put Qatar on a more solid path to development, with major implications for both the economy and society. Our country's first school opened in 1947 and a full-scale hospital followed in 1959. This period also coincided with the development of government structures and public services. The first state budget was drawn in 1953. A year later there were 42 Qatari government employees. This early period of change had important political, financial and social implications. Qatar was even at the stage of oil worker strikes. But don't worry – all of them are still alive yet, after the strike. The country was going through its first period of rapid, largely uncorrected evolution. Yet by the end of 1980 there was still only one significant building: the Sheraton Hotel in Doha. In less than

ten years, more than 100 skyscrapers would join it. Qatar was on the verge of the second modern evolution, this time on a totally unprecedented scale.

The best way to predict your future is to create it, Abraham Lincoln said. Leadership, as many of you know, can be a lonely place indeed. Our father emir, His Highness Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, held firm in his long-term strategic vision for Qatar when he decided in mid-1990 to pursue liquefied natural gas and petrochemicals as the future backbone of our economy. Taken in the context of severe financial difficulties, with the state on the verge of bankruptcy, this vision received little support and much opposition at that time, even from close friends. I think it is fair to say that this decision is now largely vindicated. Presently, Qatar is the largest exporter of LNG in the world. It is well positioned to become a global leader in petrochemical production and its citizens are enjoying one of the highest GDP per capita in the world.

The proposition that Qatar does not have a culture of strong strategic vision simply does not stand the test of objective scrutiny. Under the leadership of our father emir, the country also experienced an outstanding development leap. According to the World Bank, maternal mortality in Qatar is now one of the lowest in the world. Our country enjoys high literacy, low unemployment rate and very low level of crime. Young men and women in Qatar have full exposure to advanced learning through the establishment of top-level education and culture in the city of Doha. The 2013 United Nations Human Development Report ranked Qatar at the top of the Arab world and 36th overall out of 186 countries. The human advancement, along with many other individual rights – including personal liberty, private ownership and access to education – are secured through our country's permanent constitution, which was adopted in 2003 by public referendum.

This is a story of a country blessed with natural resources but whose wise leadership managed in a very short amount of time to deliver real social and economic improvement. It is not a perfect story and we will always try to improve. But while the State of Qatar has not arrived, it has certainly made remarkable headway. Therefore, when assigning our trajectory, let us not lose sight of the complex and sequential nature of development as process – a process whose outcome remains over-determined, a journey that knows many stages and contingencies. Of course, that can encounter setbacks, especially when pursued so rapidly. Over the past decade Qatar has probably enjoyed the highest GDP and population growth, rated in the world at an average of, respectively, 15 per cent and 13 per cent annually.

While growing rapidly, our country also becomes an increasingly relevant hub. A story comes to mind that could not illustrate this point better. When I left Qatar for special training in the UK as an air force pilot, there was only one flight per week between our two countries. As I speak, there are now no less than six flights to London daily. Qatar is now a central part of our globalized world. Certainly this audience will appreciate the wide-ranging social and economic implications of this structural demand on national capacity, but our growth story also includes significant and sometimes ignored cultural and psychological dimension.

How to make sense of an interconnected and rapidly changing and still unequal world is a question that I believe all countries, whether in the East or the West, struggle with today. The State of Qatar is contributing its own answer, even if incomplete, to this fundamental question. Under the guidance of the emir, a new generation of Qataris has now taken the baton. This generation will continue to build the country in line with the founding principle of our nation, anchored in the Qatar National Vision 2030.

This principle will also guide our engagement abroad as a constructive member of the international community – a role that Qatar takes on with both humility and confidence. Ladies and gentlemen, allow me at this point to turn to the core tenets of our foreign policy.

The State of Qatar's relations with other countries are based on mutual respect and common interest. These relations are both balanced and growing. Article 7 of the Qatari constitution reads as follows: 'The foreign policy of the State of Qatar is based on the principle of preserving international peace and security by means of encouraging peaceful resolution of international disputes; shall support the right of people to self-determination; shall not interfere in the domestic affairs of states; and shall cooperate with peace-loving nations.' The document, approved by strong popular consent, clearly outlined the founding principle of Qatar's foreign policy. Chief among them stand the preservation of international peace and security. As such, the State of Qatar will always be a peaceful and productive party to any conflict resolution effort, especially in the Middle East.

Over the past decade, Qatar has played a significant role in the region with the aim of stopping violence and warfare, as in the case of Lebanon in 2008. This dedication to resolve conflict stems from the longstanding Qatar tradition of mediation. Our cultural norms also emphasize tolerance and openness, especially towards those in difficulty. In the words of our founder, Sheikh Jassim: [in Arabic], 'Qatar is the destination of the oppressed'. Qatar will

always welcome those who do not have homes and empower those who no longer have a voice. Our country will continue to protect human life during conflict, even at the individual level. Hence, Qatar's silent but effective work in the release of numerous hostages – an initiative whose success proves our credibility among various opposition parties in the region. This important and complicated role, I believe, should neither be attacked nor taken for granted.

I have stressed the importance of providing good office and reaching out, yet peace and security sometimes warrants more than mediation. This way our country will also stand firmly and fulfil its shared responsibility to regional peace and stability where needed, as in the current case of Syria. There, our stance has always been to call for a peaceful political solution despite the systematic crimes of the Assad regime. Three years into the conflict, the country is destroyed. More than 3 million refugees. An average of 3,000 deaths per month. Thousands of innocent children killed, thousands of harmless women and girls subjected to sexual abuse and violence. In the face of such atrocity, it is our conviction that Bashar Al-Assad has lost any interest in political solutions, holding the international community hostage to his desire to stay in power at any human cost. The State of Qatar simply cannot subscribe to this immoral waiting game.

Our foreign policy in Syria remains to protect human life in any way possible, to ensure a safe corridor for humanitarian aid, to promote a political solution to end the violence, to support the coalition in their aspiration for transitional government, and to collaborate through the Friends of Syria group and other multilateral channels. This policy has been complemented by a humanitarian campaign aimed at providing food, shelter, medical care and education to the Syrian people and to Syrian refugees in Qatar. With the winter upon us, we urge the international community to work together in assuring the passage of crucial aid inside Syria and the stabilization of humanitarian corridors.

As stated in our constitution, another key principle of Qatar's foreign policy is to support a people's right to self-determination and collective aspiration. Such a statement takes an even greater meaning when these aspirations are geared toward justice and freedom. In this context, the State of Qatar's support for the emerging democracy in Egypt should be understood and analysed. Indeed, Qatar and Egypt share a long fraternal history – a history coloured by the power of culture, the influence of the Arab language and the significance of trade and industry. Supporting the Egyptian people as they liberated themselves through peaceful means from the grip of dictatorial rule post-25 January 2011, was not only our political responsibility – it was our moral duty. So Qatar assisted the economy of Egypt, fulfilling the commitment

on an LNG shipment and providing much-needed financial aid as the country's finances neared a complete collapse. This support, ladies and gentlemen, covered the entire period from Mohamed Hussin Tantawi all the way to Adly Mansour and to Abdul Fattah Al-Sisi. The State of Qatar worked with government – not with political parties or factions. Qatar's policy toward Egypt remains the same, and is anchored in full respect of the country's national sovereignty and territorial integrity. This policy is based on the following principle: to work with the country's legitimate government, not with a party or a group; to provide assistance as needed and upon request by the government; to encourage dialogue between all parties; to promote inclusion into the national political framework; and to never resort to force against peaceful protesters. It is ultimately beyond question that the stability of Egypt is in the interest of everyone.

I believe that a stable Arab world is a stable world, period. Preserving global peace and security, however, remains a collective responsibility – a responsibility to be borne by all members of the international community. In that respect, I am proud to highlight that the State of Qatar has always been and will continue to be an engaged participant in the formal multilateral and regional fora, whether it's the United Nations, the Arab League or the Gulf Cooperation Council. Qatar recognizes the need for and the value of these cooperative and rules-based institutions. Our country will always aim to be a constructive party in these organizations and to support the crucial initiatives they promote.

This is especially true in the case of the Palestine issue and conflict, which we believe is best addressed and best decided upon in the legitimate avenue of international institutions. As stated earlier, the State of Qatar considers that peace is fundamental to global stability. It's also realised that several regional and international variables have to be taken into consideration when it comes to the subject of Israel and Palestine. I am deeply concerned, however, about the current state of affairs, especially the increase in illegal settlements and the number of deaths committed by the Israeli army. As a result, the peace process is weakened and the prospect for stability only pushed further away. Qatar strongly supports the efforts of the Arab Peace Initiative and the role played by our friend, the United States, to find a just solution to this conflict. We emphasize that the Palestinian cause is our cause and the first cause of the Arab people. We reject all forms of Israeli settlement and praise the European Union's firm and coherent position in this regard. It is unclear that Israel has any intention to bring this conflict to an end, despite the willingness to engage of Qatar and other peace-seeking parties. It is unclear also that

Israel has shown any commitment during this negotiation, despite our dedication to pick this complex yet realistic process.

Our position remains that peace cannot and will not be achieved until Israel fully withdraws from the occupied territories. Our position remains that a just solution consists of the establishment of a Palestinian state based on the pre-1967 borders with full sovereignty and East Jerusalem as its capital. Anything short of that will only delay peace and justice further.

Having highlighted Qatar's dedication to the multilateral process and international cooperation, allow me to make a broader point about the concept of inclusion as a key component of our foreign policy strategy and philosophy. Our country considers that political solutions require the representation and participation of all parties to the conflict, no matter how difficult and controversial at the time. It is our belief that only such preconditions can allow for viable, legitimate and ultimately long-term resolution to conflicts. The necessity of inclusion is the reason why our country offered to host reconciliation discussions between the leadership of Fatah and Hamas in February 2012. The necessity of inclusion is the reason why the State of Qatar worked tirelessly to bring together under one umbrella the various opposition groups of Syria later that year. The necessity of inclusion is the reason why Qatar offered to facilitate the establishment of the political office of the Taliban, to resume contacts with all parties.

Consistent with this view, we welcome the recently announced Geneva interim agreement on the Iranian nuclear programme. Our recommendation would be to hold this consultation not as a 5+1 but actually as a 5+2, with the inclusion of the GCC – an essential party to the stability of the region. Qatar also takes this opportunity to restate its position that the Middle East should be a fully nuclear-free zone.

While Qatar and Iran clearly disagree over the Syrian conflict, it is important to remember that our two countries also share much in common, starting with a longstanding history of trade and cultural exchange across the Gulf. I am therefore surprised and a bit saddened by the current tendency going around to create a virtual enemy. I am afraid though that these unfortunate tactics will simply go to waste. We do indeed strongly differ with our Iranian neighbour over the issue of Syria, but the State of Qatar does not consider Iran its enemy.

I now turn to the issue of foreign aid as a central component of Qatar's foreign policy strategy. The State of Qatar believes that economic development and social inclusion are the safest, most reliable path to peace and stability. This

is why our foreign aid contribution is now nearing the \$1 billion mark annually, spread across 100-plus countries. On a relative basis, it is worth mentioning that Qatar actually spends more on international assistance than the United States or even Germany.

The State of Qatar is a generous development partner but it has also proved to be a dependent ally to developed nations in time of crisis. The case of Japan – a country whose trust and friendship we really value – comes to mind, post-tsunami. Year in, year out, Qatar provides critical support and development in post-conflict countries, helping them build the institutions most needed for a peaceful and prosperous future. Doing so falls both under the strategic interest and our moral obligation to build a better, safer world for all our children.

Finally, Qatar's foreign policy distinguishes itself throughout an ongoing effort to support the rise of women in the diplomatic corps. We believe and are committed to the effective contribution of all members of Qatar's society to government, irrespective of age and indeed of gender. Truly, I could not be prouder of the many bright, young Qatari women who play an essential role in our country's diplomatic efforts.

Ladies and gentlemen, having set out the key principles and stated objectives of Qatar's foreign policy, allow me to make one quick, final point about its effectiveness. Indeed, it has been argued at times that Qatar's actions tended only to reap short-term results and that its strategy remained largely opportunistic. It has been suggested also that our foreign policy was more concerned with public diplomacy than strategic achievement. Obviously, I could not disagree more. On a number of critical issues, the State of Qatar has made significant and at times decisive contributions to international peace and security. Through its good offices, Qatar has avoided the extension of several conflicts and has brought to the negotiation table many parties that otherwise would not have come. In the mediation capacity, our country has saved the lives of numerous hostages and humanitarian workers, and it continues to do so.

Perhaps Qatar is the subject of so much scepticism because it is fully and eagerly embracing its international responsibility. In fact, criticism is often the price to pay for standing up and following one's beliefs. In the words of the Emir, His Highness Sheikh Tamim: we do not live on the sideline of life, and we do not drift without a destination; we are a people with a vision. The State of Qatar has always lived up to its role in productive participation in the international community, sparing no effort to engage and honour its

commitments. With COP19 having closed just a few weeks ago in Warsaw, we are reminded of the important and concrete achievements secured at COP18 in Doha (the 2012 United Nations Conference on Climate Change). As a strong advocate of GCC integration, Qatar is often leading the way on issues such as food security and sustainable development policy. Through its promotion of education worldwide, our country has opened the doors of classrooms to hundreds of thousands of children, especially in war-torn countries. And, as all of you know, Qatar will be hosts of the 2022 FIFA World Cup, a true catalyst for our continued development and a wonderful opportunity to welcome the world to Doha. I have tickets by the way, if you need them.

These are achievements that any country should be proud of, especially one that has experienced so many transformations over the past two decades. I am here today to assure you of Qatar's determination to pursue its constructive and inclusive role in international affairs. Under the wise leadership of His Highness, Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani, the State of Qatar will remain an engaged and contributing actor in our common enterprise for a peaceful and prosperous world.

Ladies and gentlemen, surely our world today has become so polarized, and at times so violent, because we know not the right words to discuss our differences. Our failure as a global polity is increasingly not a space we receive for informed conversation. What we need today is another generation of Lionel Curtis. What we need today is more institutions like Chatham House that bring us closer together. What we need today is the will to celebrate knowledge, the strength to consider its wisdom and the courage to act with honour. Thank you very much.