

Paul Stott: It's time that British elites had a reality check about our relationship with Qatar

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For the next month, or at least until England and Wales are knocked out, much of the country will be keeping an eye on events in Qatar, where the tiny Gulf state hosts one of the world's premier sporting events: the World Cup.

The 2010 decision to hold football's biggest tournament in a country with a negligible sporting history, poor human rights record, and body-sapping heat – not to mention complex political and religious sensitivities remain that would not have affected a World Cup held in football's heartlands of Latin America or Europe – was controversial at the time and remains so today.

Consider, as just one example, Qatar's last-minute decision to revoke the sale of alcohol to ordinary ticketholders inside stadium bars.

Noting the considerable concerns about Qatar's treatment of migrant workers and its lack of political and personal freedoms, a new report for Policy Exchange attempts to look at some of the questions rarely asked in our public discourse: what is our relationship with Qatar, what are the advantages and disadvantages of it, and what changes might we need to make?

Largely written by Sir John Jenkins, formerly the Foreign Office's leading Arabist, the text documents the often-problematic conduct of Qatar on the international stage.

Whether Britain's intervention in Libya in 2011 was wise is a moot point, but Qatar's support for Islamist actors in Tripoli added to the already difficult chances of a stable post-Gadaffi regime emerging; in the Gulf, the Qataris have traditionally been closer to the Islamic Republic of Iran than their Arab neighbours, or indeed the UK, have been comfortable with.

Just as Russia being awarded the 2018 World Cup did little to mend Vladimir Putin's ways, so being handed the World Cup in 2010 did little to alter Doha's instincts. During and after the 2011 Arab Spring, it bet heavily on the pan-national Islamists of the Muslim Brotherhood – a decision which its neighbours took firstly as undermining their own regime stability, but secondly as gross hypocrisy. Qatar itself does not allow the formation of political parties, even of the Islamist variety.

The resulting 2017 blockade of Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt has been parked, but not resolved.

Despite this backdrop, the Qataris and Britain are far from strangers. Engagement and interaction tends to be at the elite level. The Emir of Qatar is a Sandhurst graduate, and in the sport of kings the annual Goodwood horse racing festival is that more glorious for Qatari support.

This year Ben Wallace and Priti Patel, then Home Secretary, met His Excellency Fahad bin Mohammed Al-Attiyah the Qatari Ambassador. In May Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani was one of the last overseas leaders to meet Queen Elizabeth II at Windsor Castle.

On practical measures, the South Hook Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) Terminal at Milford Haven in western Wales, owned by Qatar, brings gas from the Emirate to the United Kingdom. The site can meet up to 20 per cent of Britain's daily gas needs.

Those familiar with the UK's energy relationship with Qatar stress that its gas fields, as distant as they are from the UK, form an essential part of our critical infrastructure. In May a joint communique was announced between the countries, [affirming](#) close co-operation and, in the standard diplomatic language of the age, 'to forge ever closer cooperation to tackle shared global challenges jointly.'

Tucked away in that communique is the following statement:

"The leaders shared their ambition to build on the strong links between the UK and Qatar in education partnerships and joint academic research, including the intention to agree a Memorandum of Understanding that aims to promote mutual understanding and exchange knowledge and experience."

Examining FOIA requests, our research revealed over £25 million has been invested by Qatar in British universities. Further tie-ups have occurred in our schools. The ethical questions raised by people uncomfortable with a World Cup in Qatar have not stopped these relations; indeed, the Government appears more committed than ever.

But it is now time for a reality check. Qatar remains a nation with very different values to our own. To take just one example, claims of past support for Islamist organisations in Europe has been made in books like the [Qatar Papers](#) in France, and in the media by [Andrew Norfolk](#) of the *Times*, though these have been denied.

At this stage it seems wise to slow down a little and ask pertinent questions. How comfortably does Qatari funding, and perhaps participation in our education system, sit with the much-vaunted concept of British values? Has a broader assessment been conducted in order to fully understand Doha's actions and motives?

Global Britain requires some challenging relationships. But our social cohesion must come first.



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