

Qatar-Turkey ties getting stronger at all levels

Relations between Qatar and Turkey are constantly growing particularly when compared to the ties with other countries. Qatar's Ambassador to Turkey, Salem bin Mubarak Al Shafi, and Turkey's Envoy to Qatar Ahmet Demirok speaking to Mohammed Osman of *The Peninsula* about a wide range of bilateral topics & future prospects.

How do you assess the Qatar-Turkish relations comparing to the past?

We look at the bilateral relations of the two countries in a very positive way and they are on the right track. We always seek to maintain momentum of the existing relations to achieve common strategic goals which we are aspiring to achieve. If we compare the current relations to the situation five to ten years ago, we will note the big differences. Qatar-Turkish relation today is stronger than ever, thanks to the wise vision of the Emir H H Shekh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani and the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Relations between the two countries are constantly growing particularly when compared to relations with other countries in the world. The Emir's visits to Turkey is one of the indicators. "The Emir visited Turkey since 2013 until yesterday. These visits are the highest comparing to his visit to other countries, not to mention visits of Ministers and senior officials."

President Erdogan also visited Qatar eight times, six of them as a president and two as prime minister and the last visit was in November. Our relation is based on solid ground of principals, values and common interests. Cooperation and coordination at local, regional and global levels and in different fields has boosted confidence. The Supreme Strategic Joint Committee was established in 2014 and since then it has made great contribution to boost ties and institutionalise cooperation and speed up the process of achievement of goals.

Regarding the Supreme Strategic Committee, when it is going to hold its second meeting and what will be discussed?

As you know the committee held its first meeting in Doha last year at the level of leadership. The meeting was very positive and fruitful and around 16 bilateral agreements were signed. The agreements covered multiple sectors including security, banks, financial, education, health, information, achieve, transport and energy. The second meeting will be held in Ankara and will witness signing of several agreements. There are 15 agreements, memorandum of understanding, and protocols being prepared since the first meeting.

These agreements will cover variety of areas such as culture, youth and sports, health, medical, aviation, justice, environment, energy, management of free zone, investments, customs, recruitment of manpower, humanitarian cooperation and military. We are working hard to finalise these agreements and forward them to the meeting of the higher strategic committee at leadership in Ankara and most probably before the end of this year (November of December). The meeting will be preceded by technical meetings of concerned senior officials and



Salem bin Mubarak Al Shafi, Qatar's Ambassador to Turkey.

ministers in order to prepare for the summit.

How do you see the investment and economic relation of the two countries?

Our economic and trade witnessed significant development during the last decade but still we aspire for more under the excellent political relations of our countries. The two countries have economic potentials and wealth which requires them to have the highest level of complementary economic partnership. Commercially, we are seeking to raise the trade volume to \$ 5bn, along with efforts to boost investment focusing on priority areas such construction and contracting, energy, banks, industry and transportation. The expected investment will be in tens of billions of dollars. Some of these investments faced delay as huge investments need to be well studied before signing agreements.

What is the nature of Qatari investments in Turkey, is it only government or there is also private sector investments?

Qatari investments in Turkey are varied and focused on vital sectors, feasible and in areas representing added value to the economy of the two states. These investments are not only governmental, but there are many Qatari businessmen who are running their own investments in infrastructure projects, services and tourism sector.

What is position of energy in the relation of the two countries?

As Qatar is one of the major players in the area of energy in the region and the world especially in production and exports of LNG. Turkey is economically emerging state and energy is a key element in economic advance and prosperity. Both sides gives much importance to develop their cooperation in the area of energy, whether by exporting LNG to Turkey or encouraging Qatari investment in Turkey in the field of energy. We have the potential to effectively contribute to the development of energy sector in Turkey. Increasing LNG export to Turkey and

the possibility of storing gas Turkish facilities were discussed after the higher strategic committee finished its meeting in the past year.

In light of the agreements signed with Turkey, is there Qatari plan to establish educational and cultural institutions in Turkey?

Yes in 2015 Qatar and Turkey signed cultural cooperation protocol then we have made great effort to make the Qatari - Turkish cultural year features cultural activities in both countries. Thanks to Allah that we made significant success. "It was unprecedented advance but still there are more efforts needed in this regard and that is what we are preparing for the cultural agreements to be signed soon". There are also joint cultural and educational projects working on, but there are some educational institutions that have been established in Turkey with Qatari Initiative and will be open soon. Turkey has opened Yunis Amra Institute in Doha to teach Turkish language and both sides are encouraging such cultural projects and we expect more in the future.

What is the volume of Qatari-Turkish cooperation in humanitarian aspect, in particular supporting Syrian refugees in Turkey?

In the humanitarian aspects there is great cooperation between the two countries in particular support devoted to Syrian refugees in Turkey or displaced in side Syrian. It is our duty and commitment to support the Syrian as much as we can under the current crisis. In 2014 Qatar donated \$20m to the joint humanitarian fund of the Humanitarian Affairs Office at UN as major supporters of the fund. Qatar also donated \$100m at the 4th Conference of Syria donors held in London February 2016. The Qatari support to the Syrian refugees since the crisis commencement of the crisis has reached \$1.5bn. Turkey is currently hosting 2.5 million Syrian around 300,000 to 500,000 of them are living in 25 refugee camps distributed in ten Turkish towns. This fact has made Turkey a point of attraction to humanitarian efforts and Qatari charities like Qatar Red Crescent, Qatar Charity, RAF, Eid Charity and others.

Qatari-Turkish relations have witnessed significant advances over the past few years. And many bilateral agreements were signed in different areas. What are the most important agreements in terms of promoting the strategic relations between the two countries?

Relations between Turkey and Qatar are flawless and getting stronger at all levels. Our ties are rooted deeply in our shared culture and history. We enjoy an outstanding, dynamic relationship. It is based on a solid foundation of mutual respect and a spirit of cooperation. Official visits have been supporting this trend. You know that President Erdogan was in Qatar last December. In the course of this visit, we held the First Meeting of Turkey-Qatar Supreme Strategic Committee, where our ministers had the chance to talk about bilateral relations and how to improve them. We have signed 17 agreements in this event on economic, cultural, education, energy, technology, science, visa exemption and military cooperation areas. All of these agreements are important in their capacity. All of them are covering areas that have a great potential for our relations.

What is the role being played by Turkey in implementation of infrastructure projects in Qatar and FIFA World Cup 2022.

Turkish construction companies constitute the driving force of Turkish investments to Qatar. There are 64 Turkish companies operating in Qatar and 36 of them are in construction business. I am proud to see Turkish construction companies going from strength to strength in Qatar. They assumed 119 projects so far, which corresponds to \$15.1bn. Among these projects, Museum of Islamic Arts, New Doha International Airport, Qatar National Convention Center, Salwa Road, North Road, RasLaffan to Mesaieed Gas Pipeline project and Qatargas Onshore Facilities are the most prominent ones. Particularly for World Cup 2022, two Turkish contractor companies have signed a \$4.4bn contract to deliver the Gold Line of Doha's new metro. They are building more than 30km of tunnels and 13 stations on the line. Besides, Hassan Al Thawad, Secretary General of the Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy has paid a visit to Turkey last March. During his visit, he had a chance to observe capabilities of Turkish engineering and construction companies in the field. We, as Turkish public and private sector, are ready to assist Qatar in every field to make Qatar World Cup 2022 as the best World cup organization ever.

What is the nature of Turkish investment in Qatar and is there similar Qatari investment in Turkey?

As I said, construction sector in Qatar is the number one sector Turkish capital and expertise are sought for. Of course, the brotherly relations between Turkey and Qatar motivate the two nations to deepen



Ahmet Demirok, Turkey's Ambassador to Qatar. PIC: Salim M / The Peninsula

their business and trade relations. Investment opportunities in our countries are also important. I am glad to say that our economic ties are getting stronger each day. Bilateral trade volume of two countries was nearly \$1.3bn in 2015. The exports of Turkey to Qatar was \$423m and imports of Turkey from Qatar was \$835m. Yet, this does not reflect the true potentials of our countries. There is still room to advance our trade relations. We perceive that, Turkey and Qatar, as key players in the global markets, share common interests and opportunities. In this context, in the bilateral economic relations perspective, construction, energy, health, agriculture sectors and plastic and aluminum industries have particular potential for cooperation. Qatar has invested in several projects in Turkey, primarily in the real estate, banking and media sectors. Qatar has bought two of the biggest banks in Turkey, Turkey, with its updated, modernised and simple legal framework for foreign investors offers ample opportunities for Qatari businessmen. We expect to see more Qatari investment in Turkey. In terms of direct foreign investment in Turkey, Qatar is among top 20.

Recently the two countries signed a military agreement. What is the nature and aim of this agreement and does it seek the Turkish military presence in Qatar?

Turkey and Qatar face common problems and we are both very concerned about developments and uncertainty in the region. We confront common enemies and at this critical time for the Middle East, cooperation between Turkey and Qatar is vital. Corollary to this, military relations between our countries are continuously getting stronger. We have signed an agreement in 2014 and as part of this agreement Turkey will establish a military base in Qatar. Some of Turkish troops are currently in Qatar and more ground troops will be stationed at the base, as well as air and naval units, military trainers and special operations forces. The base will primarily serve as a venue for training and joint exercises. Stability of the Gulf is an important priority for Turkey. I believe this base will support

this policy. It will also be an important foothold for Turkey and Qatar in their regional cooperation.

Many western countries have established health and education institutions in Qatar. Still we have not seen any Turkish hospital or university in Qatar. Is there any future plan in this regard?

Yes, there is. Turkish hospital and school are not future plans any more, we are about to realize them. We are planning to open up the first Turkish school in Doha in September 2016. We have started registration for the 2016-2017 school year. I am confident that with its high quality, Turkish School will contribute to the quality of education system in Qatar. Moreover, Yunus Emre Turkish Cultural Center in Doha, which was opened last December, signed an agreement with Qatar University to launch a Turcology programme at the university. We hope the programme will start this year. Besides, the first Turkish hospital is also going to be opened at the end of this summer. It will be a full-fledged private hospital with a hundred bed capacity.

How Turkey views the Syrian refugee crisis, if the Syrian crisis prolongs further?

Since the start of the armed conflict in Syria, Turkey pursued an "open door" policy for Syrians without any form of discrimination. Turkey strictly complies with the principle of non-refoulement. According to the UNHCR, Turkey is the biggest refugee-hosting country in the world with almost 2.5 million refugees or asylum-seekers. 260,000 Syrians are accommodated in 25 temporary protection centres and daily provided with food, non-food items, health and education services as well as psychological assistance, vocational training and social activities. 1.8 million Syrians who live outside these centres are also under our protection regime and they benefit from free medical services. Turkey has so far spent \$10bn for all these efforts, whereas the total contributions we received bilaterally and multilaterally from the international community so far have been limited to \$417m. This is not sustainable.