



QATAR

Quick Facts

Population: 2,314,307

Area: 11,586 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Arab 40%, Indian 18%, Pakistani 18%, Iranian 10%, other 14%

Religions: Muslim 77.5%, Christian 8.5%, other 14%

Government Type: Emirate

GDP (official exchange rate): \$166.3 billion (2017 est.)

Map and Quick Facts derived in part from the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated September 2018)

INTRODUCTION

The tiny Gulf state of Qatar is a study in contradictions. Considerably more liberal than many of its neighbors, Qatar nevertheless is the only country other than Saudi Arabia to espouse Wahhabism as its official state religion. A traditionally conservative country whose authoritarian tribal rulers brook no opposition, Qatar is nevertheless host to the Al-Jazeera satellite television network, whose independent reporting has occasionally led to diplomatic crises with neighboring countries. Moreover, Qatar plays host to Al Udeid air base, the regional home of U.S. Central Command, yet the Qatari government has also provided money and diplomatic support to Islamists in Syria, Libya, and the Sahel, as well as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

Domestically, Qatar has no active Islamist opposition, for the simple reason that the state has co-opted and involved Islamism in its governance ever since its establishment. Wahhabi thought is especially influential among the Al Thani clan, which has ruled Qatar since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Its embrace of Wahhabism distinguishes Qatar religiously from its other neighbors, which has traditionally led to an uneasy alliance with Saudi Arabia. However, the June 2017 diplomatic crisis with Saudi Arabia and a dozen other states has led to a growing alliance between Qatar and Iran.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Islamism is very much an in-house phenomenon in Qatar. It has been pointed out that a necessary precondition for the rise of an Islamist opposition is a decline in government legitimacy and efficacy.¹ This, in a nutshell, explains the general lack of robust Islamic opposition to the governments of the Gulf States, and Qatar is no exception. A small, exceptionally wealthy country where the government subsidizes everything from petrol to education, Qatar so far has lacked serious challenges to the Islamic legitimacy

of its government.

Likewise, there have been very few reported incidents of anti-Western terrorism in Qatar in recent years. In November 2001, two U.S. contractors were shot at Al Udeid air base, and attackers attempted to ram the base's gate in 2002.² These incidents, however, are believed to have been the work of lone attackers.

In March 2005, Omar Ahmed Abdallah Ali, an expatriate Egyptian, blew himself up outside a theater in Doha. The attack, which killed a British school teacher, was the first suicide bombing in Qatar. Ali was believed to have had ties to al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, whose leader issued a communique two days before the attack calling on local citizens of a number of Gulf states, of which Qatar was at the top of his list,³ to act against Western interests. In the aftermath of this attack, allegations were made that Qatar's rulers had been paying protection money to al-Qaeda. A report in London's *Sunday Times* described an agreement between the government of Qatar and al-Qaeda prior to the 2003 Iraq War, under which millions of dollars were paid annually to the terror network to keep Qatar off of its target list, despite the country's role as a U.S. ally.⁴ This money was believed to be channeled via religious leaders sympathetic to al-Qaeda, and used to support the organization's activities in Iraq. After the attack in Doha, the agreement was renewed, according to the *Times*' source, "just to be on the safe side."⁵

The *Times* report highlights the fine line that Qatar treads in its relations with the U.S. and its powerful neighbors. Because it hosts the Al Udeid air base and Camp As Sayliyah, a pre-positioning facility for U.S. military equipment, Qatar is a more attractive target for terrorists than most neighboring countries, whose ties to the U.S. are less tangible. Qatar pays for the upkeep of the bases used by American military forces on its soil; the U.S. pays neither rent nor utilities on them.⁶ While officially these are Qatari bases, there are reportedly some 10,000 U.S. and coalition personnel stationed at Al Ubeid.⁷ The Qatari government has reported that the U.S. is aiming to expand the base, and host a permanent presence in Qatar—reports that have been downplayed by the Pentagon.⁸ As neither Qatar nor the U.S. makes any secret of these ties, it is surprising that Qatar has not been a more frequent target of Islamists. The purported payment of protection money to al-Qaeda is one explanation for Qatar's relative safety; another may be that the absence of social and political discontent within the country's borders deprives al-Qaeda of willing local recruits. Homegrown jihadis are not as common in Qatar as they are in many neighboring countries.

Moreover, politics in the region are often played out in a very subtle way. While Qatar ostensibly enjoys a close relationship with Washington, these ties are balanced by ties with Islamist groups throughout the region. According to a State Department cable released by Wikileaks, Qatar was deemed "the worst in the region" in its counterterrorism efforts.⁹ Qatar's security service was described as "hesitant to act against known terrorists out of concern for appearing to be aligned with the U.S. and provoking reprisals."¹⁰

Nor is this merely a tactic to defuse Islamist hostility; rather it is consistent with Qatar's long-term strategy. The Qatari government has acquired a reputation as a financial backer of Islamist causes abroad, including funding terrorist organizations. Several charities based in Qatar have been accused of actively financing al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations. One of these, the Qatar Charitable Society (QCS), was set up and operated by an employee of the Qatari government.¹¹

At the start of the Arab Spring, Qatar threw its weight behind the protest movements in North Africa and the Middle East, playing a major role in almost all the conflicts in the Arab world. Qatar became the first Arab country to grant official recognition to the Libyan rebels, and contributed six Mirage fighter jets to the Western military campaign to depose Muammar Qadhafi. Its financial support of the revolution in Libya may have reached \$2 billion, channelled through various opposition figures.¹²

Doha also provided financial aid to Islamist militants fighting in the Sahel region, including al-Qaeda forces that managed to carve out a state in Mali. In 2015, Qatar deployed troops and materiel to Yemen, as part of the Arab coalition's fight against Houthi rebels.¹³

In the Palestinian arena, Qatar has long been the primary financial and ideological sponsor of Hamas,

and has hosted senior Hamas officials on its soil. In October 2012, the emir became the first head of state to visit the Gaza Strip since Hamas took full control of the territory in 2007. At that time, the emir pledged \$400 million for infrastructure projects. The timing of the visit, coming just after the upgrade of the Palestinian Authority's status at the United Nations, appears to have been aimed at boosting Hamas's standing against its Fatah rivals.¹⁴ More recently, Doha has coordinated with Israel and the Palestinian Authority to pay Hamas' employees' salaries, and to import construction materials into the Gaza Strip.¹⁵ In July of 2017, Qatari envoy Mohammed El-Amadi reaffirmed support for development projects in the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip.¹⁶ More recently, in October 2017, Qatar announced that it would fund a new headquarters for the Palestinian Authority in Gaza in support of reconciliation deal between Hamas and Fatah.¹⁷ Furthermore, in 2013, the Taliban opened an official office in Qatar.¹⁸ The office was briefly closed under pressure from the U.S. and the current Afghan government, but has since reopened to serve as a base for negotiations.¹⁹

But it is in Syria that Qatar's support for Islamists is most controversial. While Qatari jets have provided symbolic participation in the airpower mission against the Islamic State, Qatar has become a significant financial sponsor of the Islamist elements arrayed against President Bashar al-Assad. In particular, Qatar has provided funding and weapons to Ahrar al-Sham—or “Free Men of Syria.” Khalid al-Attiyah, then Qatari foreign minister, praised this movement as “purely” Syrian.²⁰

Qatar has been openly funding Jabhat al-Nusra since 2013. Much of this funding is provided in the form of “ransom” for Western hostages, kidnapped by the group for exactly this purpose.²¹ This is in addition to large sums of money channeled to the group via Qatari charity organizations and individuals, who are allowed to operate freely in the country.²²

In addition to material support, Doha has provided considerable propaganda support for the Syrian jihadis via *Al Jazeera*. Qatari officials have touted their support of “moderate” jihadi groups as an effective means of fighting the Islamic State.²³ In fact, this support was portrayed in a positive light by the U.S. State Department in its 2014 Country Reports on Terrorism, which cited Qatar's offer “to host a train-and-equip program for moderate Syrian opposition forces.”²⁴

In fact, with Qatar's help, Jabhat al-Nusra became powerful enough that that U.S. General Petraeus suggested that the U.S. also support the group as the only plausible threat to ISIS in Syria.²⁵ However, such suggestions ignore the fact that there is no real hierarchy of jihadi groups. Alliances and rivalries between the different “camps” are continually shifting, so that support for one group can reach rival groups via mergers and temporary alliances.

In addition, membership in the different jihadi groups is fluid; senior leaders of Al Nusra were once members of the Islamic State in Iraq.²⁶ Hundreds of fighters have left al-Nusra to join the Islamic State over the past few years.²⁷ These defections lead to the transfer of Qatari-supplied weapons and funds to ISIS, a fact that even Qatar's allies have had to acknowledge. A leaked email published by Wikileaks in October 2016 singled out Qatar and Saudi Arabia as “providing clandestine financial and logistic support to ISIL [ISIS] and other radical Sunni groups in the region.”²⁸

None of the groups fighting in Syria can be seen as “moderate” in any meaningful sense. Ahrar al-Sham fought alongside Jabhat al-Nusra during the battle for Aleppo and has been accused of at least one sectarian massacre.²⁹ At the time the organization was being openly supported by Qatar, it was also sharing local authority with the ISIS in Raqqa.³⁰ Meanwhile Jabhat al-Nusra ostensibly split from al-Qaida in mid 2016, rebranding itself as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham. However, the “split” was in name only; the organization's leader did not in fact renounce ties to its parent group.³¹

Qatar's strategy of simultaneously remaining on good terms with Islamists and with the West has facilitated its role as a mediator in the region, including negotiating for the release of captive U.S. servicemen in Afghanistan in exchange for prisoners held by the U.S. This role, as seen in connection with the al-Nusra hostages, has allowed Qatar to openly bankroll jihadi groups through the payment of

ransoms for Western hostages.³² Qatar's role in playing off regional actors against one another, as well as its support of radical groups, has brought it into conflict with its neighbors. The major bone of contention is Qatar's long-standing support of the Muslim Brotherhood, an organization seen by other Sunni states as a danger to their own regimes.

In March 2014, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain withdrew their ambassadors due to the Qatar's sponsorship of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups.³³ After Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi was overthrown in 2013, several members of the Muslim Brotherhood were asked to leave Qatar, as part of a rapprochement agreement signed between Gulf countries.³⁴ It is not known whether those expelled eventually reentered the country. In December 2016, Egypt accused Qatar of being indirectly responsible for the bombing of a Coptic church which killed 24 people. A statement by the Egyptian government said that the attacker had been instructed by the Muslim Brotherhood in Qatar to plan and carry out the attack in order to promote sectarian strife.³⁵

These tensions have been exacerbated by what the Gulf countries see as Qatar's breach of the Sunni alliance against Iran. Qatar's relationship with Iran is complicated by the fact that the two states share the largest gas field in the world. Qatar has also cooperated with Iran on infrastructure projects.³⁶ The tensions with the Gulf countries broke out into an open feud at the end of May 2017, when Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani was quoted by Qatari state media as claiming "there is no wisdom in harboring hostility towards Iran." Qatar later denied the emir had made the statements, claiming the state media website and Twitter accounts had been hacked, but the damage was done. The statements—whether real or fabricated—provided Qatar's neighbors the excuse they needed to openly strike out against Qatari policies. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates quickly blocked access to Al Jazeera's website.³⁷

On June 5, 2017, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) broke off relations with Qatar and cut off all air, sea, and land routes. Yemen, Mauritania, and the Maldives followed. Qatari citizens were given 14 days to leave Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE, and those countries also banned their own citizens from entering Qatar. Saudi Arabia, which leads the coalition fighting Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen, expelled Qatar from the coalition.³⁸

On June 22, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt issued a 13-point list of demands to restore relations and gave Doha 10 days to comply.³⁹ The demands include Qatar severing ties with jihadist groups, shutting down news outlets (including Al Jazeera), limiting ties with Iran, and expelling Turkish troops stationed in the country. Among the Islamist groups mentioned in the list were the Muslim Brotherhood, Hezbollah, al-Qaeda, and ISIS. As of late 2017, no obvious progress has been made at resolving the dispute.⁴⁰

Qatar's continued support of Islamist elements, despite its negative diplomatic impact, reflects the fact that this support goes beyond mere pragmatism, and has a clear ideological basis.⁴¹ At times, this support has been a matter of personal honor. Qatar's ties to the Libyan rebels, for instance, were reportedly mostly on the level of personal connections.⁴² Such ties are nothing new; according to American intelligence officials, Abdallah bin Khalid al-Thani, a member of the Qatari royal family, helped wanted al-Qaeda chief Khaled Sheikh Mohammed elude capture in 1996. Abdallah bin Khalid, who was Qatar's Minister of Religious Affairs at the time, reportedly sheltered the wanted man on one of his own farms.⁴³ Mohammed is believed to have been employed for some years in Qatar's Department of Public Water Works, before slipping out of the country on a Qatari passport just ahead of an American attempt to capture him.⁴⁴

Abdallah bin Khalid was not alone in his sympathies to al-Qaeda. News reports have cited U.S. officials as saying there were others in the Qatari royal family who provided safe haven for al-Qaeda leaders.⁴⁵ In late 2013, the U.S. Treasury Department imposed sanctions on several prominent Qataris for providing funds to al-Qaeda and to jihadis in Syria.⁴⁶ One year later, one of those designated was found to be still employed by the Qatari Interior Ministry, while others were still living at large in the emirate.⁴⁷ A U.S.-based think tank has identified over twenty individuals under U.S. or UN sanctions who have benefitted from some form of Qatari negligence or support.⁴⁸

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Wahhabism—the very strict interpretation of Islam espoused by 18th century preacher Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab—has shaped Qatar’s history for more than a century. Among the tribes that adopted the Wahhabi interpretation in the late 19th century was the Al Thani—in contrast to the ruling Al Khalifas of Bahrain, who rejected Wahhabism. When the Al Khalifas attempted to invade the peninsula of Qatar in 1867, the Al Thani and their followers, with the help of the British, repelled the invasion. This victory established the Al Thani family as Qatar’s ruling clan. Thereafter, Qatar became the only country other than Saudi Arabia to espouse Hanbali Wahhabism as the official state religion.⁴⁹ This set the stage for tensions between Qatar and its other neighbors.

Qatar’s population is conservative, but overt religious discrimination has been rare. Non-citizens constitute a majority of Qatar’s residents, as most are from Southeast Asia or from other Muslim countries, which has minimized the influence of Western culture.⁵⁰ Inter-Muslim friction is also minimized by the homogeneity of Qatar’s citizenry. Sunni Muslims constitute the overwhelming majority of the population, while Shi’a Muslims account for less than five percent.⁵¹ As a result, the main drivers for Islamist opposition are lacking in Qatar; the government espouses a distinctly Islamist ideology, while social inequities and cultural frictions have been kept to a minimum. While many Qatari citizens express support for jihadists fighting in Syria and Iraq, relatively few have actually joined the fighting. A 2014 study of social media found that of all social media posts originating in Qatar, 47% were supportive of ISIS, a higher percentage than any other Arab state.⁵²

However, in contrast to Saudi Arabia, Wahhabi tenets are not officially enforced or strictly adhered to in most public settings in Qatar. Qatari society is generally moderate, and, among Arab countries, its civil liberties are ranked second only to Lebanon.⁵³ While instances of overt religious discrimination have been rare, anti-Semitic motifs are common in the mainstream media: Israel and world Jewry are frequently demonized in editorials and cartoons.⁵⁴

The need to keep pace with global social and economic development has pushed Qatar to gradually shift its political structure from a traditional society based on consent and consensus to one based on more formal, though not necessarily democratic, institutions. Qatar’s constitution institutionalized the hereditary rule of the Al Thani family, but it also established an elected legislative body and made government ministers accountable to the legislature.⁵⁵ While formally accountable to no one, the emir is still bound by the checks and balances of traditional Muslim Arab societies; all decisions must be in accordance with sharia and must not arouse the opposition of the country’s leading families.⁵⁶

In June 2013, Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani abdicated in favor of his son, British-educated Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani. At 36 years old, Emir Tamim is the youngest head of state in the region and has promised to modernize the country’s governmental system and reduce his family’s presence in the government. Faced with falling oil prices, the new emir reduced the number of government ministries, slashed state institutions’ budgets and put various social welfare schemes on hold. This was accompanied by hikes in utility rates, gas prices, government fines and service costs.⁵⁷ While these reforms are aimed to provide a smooth transition into a post-oil economy, they could negatively impact the popularity of the regime among its citizens. In addition to economic reforms, Emir al-Thani has loosened strictures on expressions of foreign culture, including allowing state-owned sales of alcohol and pork to the country’s foreign residents, and supported religious freedom for non-Muslims, albeit within strictly proscribed limits.

These measures have not been universally popular among citizens. Some have accused the emir of forsaking his own citizens in favor of the migrant workers who make up some 90% of the population. After conservatives threatened a boycott, a plan to offer co-ed lectures at Qatar’s public university were cancelled.⁵⁸

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Qatar's government and ruling family have traditionally been strongly linked to Wahhabi Hanbali Islam. Not only is Wahhabi Islam the official state religion, but Islamic jurisprudence is the basis of Qatar's legal system. Civil courts have jurisdiction only over commercial law.⁵⁹ Qatar's governmental structure, despite a written constitution, conforms closely to traditional Islamic constraints, with tribal and family allegiance remaining an influential factor in the country's politics. There is no provision in Qatar's constitution for political parties, and hence there is no official political opposition.⁶⁰ Professional associations and societies, which in other Muslim countries play the role of unofficial political parties, are under severe constraints in Qatar, and are forbidden to engage in political activities.⁶¹ While the official policy has been to support the movements behind the Arab Spring abroad, any such aspirations within the state are dealt with harshly, as in the case of poet Mohammed al-Ajami, who was handed a 15-year prison sentence for a poetry reading in which he called all Arab governments "indiscriminate thieves."⁶²

This firm hand when it comes to internal dissent should be contrasted with the considerable leniency shown by authorities toward Qataris accused of funding Islamist activities abroad. What the U.S. government has described as a "permissive" environment for terror finance⁶³ should be seen as part of a deliberate policy: simply put, the Qatari government has preferred to co-opt rather than oppose Islamism.⁶⁴ Religious institutions are carefully monitored by the Ministry of Islamic affairs, which oversees mosque construction and Islamic education. The Ministry appoints religious leaders and previews mosque sermons for inflammatory language that might incite listeners to violence.⁶⁵

Qatar has a longstanding tradition of granting asylum to exiled Islamists and radical preachers from other Muslim countries.⁶⁶ Following the 1979 attack on the Grand Mosque in Mecca by an extremist group, Qatar took in a number of radical exiles from Saudi Arabia, including Wahhabi scholar Sheikh Abdallah bin Zayd al-Mahmud, who subsequently was appointed Qatar's most senior cleric.⁶⁷

Sympathy for Islamist causes has traditionally been high in Qatari society and among many members of the ruling clan. Sheikh Fahd bin Hamad al-Thani, the second-oldest son of the emir, established a reputation for surrounding himself with jihadist veterans of the Afghan War.⁶⁸ A number of al-Qaeda leaders are believed to have travelled through Qatar during the 1990s under the protection of members of the ruling clan, including Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi and Osama bin Laden.⁶⁹ The Chechen leader Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, who was killed in Doha in 2004, also found refuge for several years in Qatar.

During the 1980s, many Wahhabi exiles were appointed to senior and mid-level positions in Qatar's Interior Ministry, which controls both the civilian security force and the Mubahathat (secret police office). After 2003, Emir Hamad bin Khalifa began gradually weeding out the more extreme Islamist elements from government ministries, including the Interior Ministry; the Minister of the Interior, Sheikh Abdallah, a member of the Wahhabi clique, was removed from office in 2004. The Interior Ministry was then put under the de facto control of Sheikh Abdallah bin Nasser bin-Khalifa al-Thani, an emir loyalist. However, a large number of Islamist appointees are believed to remain among mid-level Qatari security officials.⁷⁰

In June 2003, the emir created an independent State Security Agency, answerable directly to him. Additionally, all the most important police, military, and internal security services are headed by powerful members of the ruling family, who in turn answer to the emir.⁷¹ The creation of these parallel security agencies effectively bypassed the Interior Ministry's control of police and public security. These shakeups, however, have had more to do with political alliances than with government opposition to Islamists. Most Islamists, both domestic and immigrant, have become well integrated into the top echelons of Qatari society.⁷²

Among the political exiles who have sought refuge in Qatar are prominent figures of the Muslim Brotherhood, many of whom fled persecution at the hands of Gamal Abdel Nasser's government in Egypt during the 1950s. Some of these exiles reportedly laid the foundations for the Qatari Education Ministry, and taught at various levels there until the early 1980s.⁷³ More recently, Hamas political head Khaled

Mishaal quit his former headquarters under the wing of Syria's Al Assad regime and relocated to Doha.⁷⁴

Given the great success of these elements, the country has no obvious need for an Islamist opposition. In 2007, Kuwaiti Islamist writer Abd Allah al-Nafisi called for the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood to follow the lead of the Qatari branch and disband altogether. Al-Nafisi noted that from 1960 to 1980, Qatar went through a period of great Islamist intellectual activity and organization. In contrast to the experience of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the Qatari Muslim Brothers had no real conflict with the state.⁷⁵

One of the most influential—not to mention controversial—voices in Islamist circles today is Egyptian Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who has lived in Qatar since 1961. Qaradawi enjoys worldwide exposure via *Al Jazeera* television, through his weekly program “Sharia and Life” (al-Shari’a wa-al-Hayat). Until recently, he also oversaw the Islamist Web portal IslamOnline, established in 1997.⁷⁶ Many consider Sheikh al-Qaradawi to be the most influential Islamic scholar alive today; he is viewed as the spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, and “sets the tone for Arabic language Sunni sermons across the world.”⁷⁷ Qaradawi has sparked considerable controversy in the West by his support for suicide bombings in Israel and the killing of American citizens in Iraq. Among Muslim audiences, however, his comparatively moderate views on the acceptability of Muslim participation in Western democracies have brought him both praise and condemnation.⁷⁸ This mixture of conservatism and reform informs Qaradawi's politics. He is one of the founders of the wasatiyya (“Middle Way”) movement, which attempts to bridge the gap between the various interpretations of Islam.⁷⁹ Yet Qaradawi's political proclivities and involvement have led to some questionable connections: Qaradawi is listed as a founder of the Union of Good (Itilaf al-Khayr), a coalition of European Islamic charities now designated by the United States Treasury as a channel for transferring funds to Hamas.⁸⁰

Qaradawi's influence also played a role in the events of the Arab Spring, as his protégés emerged as new leaders, financial backers, religious authorities and politicians.⁸¹ In May 2013, he urged Sunni Muslims to join the jihad in Syria against the Assad regime and against Hezbollah.⁸² In a region where educational and media influence can determine the lives of dictators, Sheikh Qaradawi is a significant foreign policy asset.

Qatar's policies, though seemingly contradictory, are consistent with two strategic objectives: to buy influence with a number of different forces, while playing off its stronger neighbours, particularly Saudi Arabia and Iran. Uppermost on Qatar's agenda is the need to protect its sovereignty and natural gas wealth, by means of which the country has emerged as a regional player. This strategy may be one of the motivations for Qatar's recent spending spree in Europe. Qatar invests billions of dollars a year in Europe, in real estate, tourist venues, sports and media sectors.⁸³ These investments are a tool of foreign policy, but also serve an important function in domestic policy. The greater the stake foreign countries have in the stability of the Al Thani government, the better. By investing heavily abroad, the Al Thanis are buying insurance against an Arab Spring of their own.

This strategy caused a stir when it emerged in 2012 that Qatar had pledged 150 million Euro [\$199 million] to investments in French suburbs inhabited by a Muslim majority. While Qatari officials insisted that the move was “just business,” critics claimed that the Qataris were using their economic clout to push an Islamist agenda.⁸⁴ The issue highlighted the fact that Qatar has become an international superpower when it comes to soft power. The Al Thani regime has established itself as second to none in wielding influence through non-military means. Perhaps the greatest weapon in its arsenal is the *Al Jazeera* satellite television station.

Although the Qatari press is free from official censorship, self-censorship is the norm. Defense and national security matters, as well as stories related to the royal family, are considered strictly out of bounds. The country's major radio and television stations, Qatar Radio and Qatar Television, are both state-owned.⁸⁵ Although newspapers in Qatar are all privately owned in principle, many board members and owners are either government officials or have close ties to the government. For example, the chairman of the influential daily *Al-Watan*, Hamad bin Sahim al Thani, is a member of the royal family.⁸⁶ Meanwhile,

Qatar's Foreign Minister, Hamed bin Jasem bin Jaber al Thani, owns half of the newspaper.

Compared to the traditionally conservative and highly censored Arab press, Qatar's *Al Jazeera* satellite network would appear to be a breath of fresh air. Formed in 1996 from the remnants of BBC Arabic TV, which had just been closed down, the station initially offered the kind of free and unfettered discussion of issues not usually broadcast in the Muslim world. *Al Jazeera* quickly established itself as a major international media player, and is increasingly being viewed as a political actor in its own right. *Al Jazeera* is in fact funded by the Qatari government, with its expenses reimbursed by the Ministry of Finance, and Sheikh Hamid bin Thamer, a member of the royal family, heads the station's board of directors.⁸⁷

In recent years, *Al Jazeera* has undergone a process of increasing "Islamization," with many of its more secular staff replaced by Islamists.⁸⁸ This process has been accompanied by subtle—and not-so-subtle—changes in the station's reportage of happenings in the field. *Al Jazeera* is alleged to have moved away from its rather ideologically diverse origins to a more populist—and more Islamist—approach.⁸⁹ In addition, *Al Jazeera* is increasingly becoming a participant in the sectarian feud between Shi'as and Sunnis. Qatar itself is right in the middle of this battle; on the one hand, it hosts an American military base on its soil, where tanks and vehicles damaged in the fighting are serviced and sent back into battle to protect the Shiite-led government of Iraq. On the other, Qatar's Sunni majority sees Shiite Iran as the main threat in the region. Qatar supported Saudi Arabia's intervention in neighboring Bahrain to help quell Shiite protests, and sent a small contingent of security personnel to protect government sites.⁹⁰

Al Jazeera's Arabic channel has also been heavily involved in promoting the Muslim Brotherhood as a viable player in Egypt, and may well have been the determining factor in the election of Muhammed Morsi to the Egyptian presidency.⁹¹ Many leading figures at *Al Jazeera* news are Egyptians affiliated with the Brotherhood, and Brotherhood guests and loyalists dominate most of the channel's programs on Egyptian political affairs.⁹²

Al Jazeera rarely criticizes Qatar's ruling Al Thani family, although other Arab governments come in for severe censure.⁹³ This has not only infuriated those Arab governments on the receiving end of the station's critical coverage, but also raised the question of Qatari complicity in the destabilization of its neighbors. Libya, for instance, withdrew its ambassador from Qatar between 2000 and 2002 to protest *Al Jazeera's* less-than-complimentary coverage of the Qadhafi regime.⁹⁴ In 2002, Saudi Arabia likewise withdrew its ambassador to Doha, partly in response to *Al Jazeera* reportage. (Relations were restored six years later, and *Al Jazeera* has since toned down its Saudi coverage.) Jordan and Lebanon have accused *Al Jazeera* of actively working to undermine their governments, while uncritically supporting their opposition Islamist movements.⁹⁵

Prior to the fall of the Mubarak regime, the Egyptian government repeatedly complained about the open forum given by *Al Jazeera* to representatives of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.⁹⁶ It would appear that *Al Jazeera* was in fact a key player in the events that led to the eventual ouster of Mubarak and his replacement by an Islamist regime. In the aftermath of Morsi's ouster, *Al Jazeera* reportedly experienced a wave of desertions by veteran reporters over "biased coverage" and the station's blatant support of the Brotherhood.⁹⁷ In their 13-point ultimatum to Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt and the UAE mentioned shutting down *Al Jazeera* as one of the key demands for resolving the current boycott of Qatar.⁹⁸ *Al Jazeera*, meanwhile, mustered a bevy of protest against the demand as an attack on freedom of the press.⁹⁹

It has become increasingly clear that *Al Jazeera's* Islamist shift was a matter of design as much as evolution, reflecting the interests of the Qatari ruling family, as well as the growing popularity of Islamist causes in Arab society. *Al Jazeera* is more than a mirror of public opinion; it is increasingly taking the initiative in influencing events rather than just reporting on them.¹⁰⁰

For some, there is no doubt that the network is subject to the political dictates of the Qatari government, which has become a significant player in many of the Middle East's disputes despite the country's small size. *Al Jazeera*, or at least, its Arabic channels have come to reflect Doha's official policies.¹⁰¹

Government control over the channel's reporting appeared to U.S. diplomats to be so direct that the channel's output is said to have become a subject of bilateral discussions between Washington and Doha. An American diplomatic dispatch from July 2009 noted that *Al Jazeera* could be used as a bargaining tool to repair Qatar's relationships with other countries, and called the station "one of Qatar's most valuable political and diplomatic tools."¹⁰²

Al Jazeera's influence reflects the reality of an increasingly media-driven Middle East. The station's rivalry with the newer Saudi *Al Arabiya* satellite channel is indicative of a deeper competition for regional influence. *Al Jazeera* may be seen as an arm of Qatari foreign policy, a sort of electronic da'wah (missionary activity). In effect, these governments use their control of the media to create a monopoly on reporting, making the reportage itself a tool in regional rivalries.

Although *Al-Jazeera* wielded tremendous influence during the events of the "Arab Spring," the fall of the Morsi government in 2013 showed the risks of Qatar's over-reaching itself in "making the news" rather than just reporting it. *Al Jazeera's* reputation in the Arab world suffered from its blatant support of the Brotherhood-affiliated regime. The station's English language staff members in Egypt were arrested and charged with disseminating "false news." Qatar was eventually forced to close its pro-Brotherhood Arabic service to repair relations with Egypt.¹⁰³

However, *Al-Jazeera* is only one of the means by which Qatar achieves influence. Qatari soft power has increasingly been augmented by investments in arms for Islamist militants in Arab conflicts. Libya was a case in point; by channeling weapons and money to Islamist rebels through personal channels, and largely bypassing the National Transitional Council, Qatar effectively limited the governing body's monopoly on the use of force. This has given Qatar a veto on violence in the country, allowing Qatar to back up its soft power with hard power. In Syria too, Qatar's backing of the insurgency against Assad has gained the country a key role in negotiations—a crucial bargaining chip in the volatile region.

In the Arab world, soft power remains vital. More than in any other region, persuasion and education are tools of dominance. Hence the political logic of *Al-Jazeera*, and hence the huge investment of Saudi Arabia in da'wah. What Western countries accomplish via economic dominance, Saudi Arabia has accomplished through financing mosques, and Qatar has accomplished through a studied combination of media influence, economic investment, and military backing.

While the Saudi-led coalition included the shuttering of al-Jazeera as a core demand for ending the blockade, the attempt at silencing Qatar's regional da'wah seems to have only upped the ante; both Qatar and its opponents have funneled billions of dollars into PR efforts.¹⁰⁴ By moving the conflict into the realm of electronic da'wah, the coalition has simply played to Doha's strengths. Not only does al-Jazeera continue to spread Qatari influence throughout the region, but Doha's reputation as a feisty underdog has only been enhanced.

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