



QATAR

Quick Facts

Population: 2,444,174 (July 2020 est.)

Area: 11,586 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Non-Qatari 88.4%, Qatari 11.6% (2015 est.)

Religions: Muslim 67.7%, Christian 13.8%, Hindu 13.8%, Buddhist 3.1%, folk religion <.1%, Jewish <.1%, other 0.7%, unaffiliated 0.9% (2010 est.)

Government Type: Absolute monarchy

GDP (official exchange rate):\$166.9 billion (2017 est.)

Map and Quick Facts derived in part from the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated July 2020)

INTRODUCTION

Qatar represents a study in contradictions. It is the only country other than Saudi Arabia to espouse Wahhabism as its official state religion, its authoritarian tribal rulers brook no internal opposition (Islamic or otherwise), and its leaders fund the popular and controversial satellite television network Al-Jazeera. Moreover, while Qatar hosts Al Udeid air base, the regional home of U.S. Central Command, it also provides money and diplomatic support to anti-Western Islamists.

Wahhabism is especially influential among the al-Thani clan, which has ruled Qatar since the beginning of the nineteenth century. However, in contrast to other regional nations, Sunni Qatar has close relations with Shi'ite Iran. In the wake of the June 2017 diplomatic crisis with Saudi Arabia and several other Gulf states, that alliance has steadily grown.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Qatar is an exceptionally wealthy country where the government subsidizes everything from petrol to education. Due to the government's commitment to public services, Qatar so far has lacked serious challenges to the legitimacy of its government. Likewise, there have been very few reported incidents of anti-Western terrorism in Qatar in the past two decades. Incidents like the 2001 shooting at Al Udeid air base, the forward headquarters for U.S. Central Command, and the attempted ramming of the base's gates in 2002 are thought to have been perpetrated by lone wolf attackers.¹ 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 of its kind in Qatar. Ali was believed to have had ties to al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, whose leader issued a communiqué two days before the attack.²

In the aftermath of this attack, a *Sunday Times* report alleged that Qatar's rulers were paying protection money to al-Qaeda. It described an agreement between the Qatari government and al-Qaeda prior to the 2003 Iraq War, as a result of which millions of dollars were paid annually to the terror network to keep Qatar off of its target list.³ After the attack in Doha, the agreement was renewed, according to the *Times*' source, "just to be on the safe side."⁴ This money was likely channeled via religious leaders sympathetic to al-Qaeda and supported its activities in Iraq.

The 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 represents an attractive target for terrorists. While officially these are Qatari bases, there are reportedly some 10,000 U.S. and coalition personnel stationed at Al Udeid.⁵ Nevertheless, the Qatari government appears invested in these ties; in 2018, the country's defense minister expressed his government's desire to expand the base, which the U.S. government authorized the following year.⁶

Yet, while Qatar enjoys a close relationship with Washington, this proximity is balanced by the government's ties to regional Islamist groups. A 2009 State Department cable deemed Qatar's counterterror efforts "the worst in the region."⁷ In the report, 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."⁸

The Qatari government has a reputation as a financial backer of Islamist causes abroad, including funding terrorist organizations. Qatar also shelters known Islamists, providing safe haven to members of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Palestinian Hamas movement, and Afghanistan's Taliban. The government's activities have not gone unnoticed, and the *emirate* has faced international consequences from its activities, most notable in the form of the diplomatic crisis that erupted between it and the other Gulf states beginning in 2017.

Backing Terrorist Entities Abroad

Qatar has backed and funded a host of Islamist groups abroad, including Hamas in the Palestinian Territories, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and al-Qaeda in Syria. At the start of the Arab Spring, the Qatari government supported Islamist protest movements throughout North Africa and the Middle East, and played a major role in almost all regional conflicts. Qatar was the first Arab country to recognize Libya's rebels and contributed six Mirage fighter jets to depose Muammar Qadhafi. Its financial support of the Libyan revolution may have reached as much as \$2 billion in 2012 alone, channelled through various Islamist, anti-Western opposition figures.⁹ Qatar continues to support Libya's ongoing internal conflict, with Qatari-Turkish joint venture BMC providing armored vehicles to the Libya's Government of National Accord (GNA) as of December 2019.¹⁰ The Qatari government is also known to have provided financial aid to Islamist militants fighting in the Sahel.

In the Palestinian arena, The Qatari government has long been the primary financial and ideological sponsor of Hamas and has hosted senior Hamas officials. In October 2012, the Qatari *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. This visit took place just after the upgrading of the Palestinian Authority's (PA) status at the United Nations, and appears to have designed to boost Hamas's standing against its political rivals in the PA's secular Fatah faction.¹¹

More recently, Qatar coordinated with Israel and the PA to pay the salaries of Hamas' employees, and to import construction materials into the Gaza Strip.¹² In 2018, Qatar launched a new payments program for families needing assistance in the Strip, to a tune of \$330 million, for fuel, electricity, and civil servant salaries. In August 2019, Qatar's envoy to Gaza noted that over \$150 million had been spent as part of that effort.¹³ However, Axios reported in June 2020 that Qatar planned to suspend these payments beginning the following month, due to Israel's pending plans to annex parts of the West Bank. Notably, though, this story conflicts with Qatari state media, which stated that the country will continue payments.¹⁴

In July 2017, Qatari envoy Mohammed El-Amadi reaffirmed support for development projects in

the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip.¹⁵ In October 2017, Qatar announced that it would fund a new headquarters for the PA in Gaza as part of a reconciliation deal between Hamas and Fatah.¹⁶ As of early 2019, Israeli sources calculated that Qatar had donated more than \$1.1 billion to projects on the Gaza Strip between 2012-2018.¹⁷ Reportedly, 44% of Qatari funding went to infrastructure projects and 40% to medical and educational services, while the rest went to Hamas and other groups.¹⁸

Furthermore, in 2013, the Taliban were permitted to open an official office in Qatar.¹⁹ Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE were also considered potential locations. Turkey was rejected since it was a NATO member, while Saudi Arabia and the UAE were seen as too close to the U.S. The Taliban ultimately preferred Qatar, seeing it as a neutral option. Qatar likely saw the Taliban office as yet another avenue for building its geopolitical clout.²⁰ The office closed shortly after opening because Taliban representatives flew the Taliban flag at the office,²¹ an act that enraged then-Afghan President Hamid Karzai, but the facility reopened in 2015.²²

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 Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. For example, Qatar has provided funding and weapons to Ahrar al-Sham (Free Men of Syria). Khalid al-Attiyah, then-Qatari foreign minister, praised this movement as “purely” Syrian²³ and the U.S. State Department’s 2014 *Country Reports on Terrorism* highlighted Qatar’s offer to “host a train-and-equip program for moderate Syrian opposition forces.”²⁴ However, Ahrar al-Sham fought alongside another Qatar-backed group, the al-Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra. Qatar has funded *Jabhat al-Nusra* since 2013. Much of *al-Nusra*’s funding comes from “ransoming” hostages from Western countries.²⁵ This is in addition to the large sums of money channeled to the group via Qatari charity organizations and individuals, who operate freely in the country.²⁶

Al-Nusra ostensibly split from al-Qaeda in mid-2016, rebranding itself as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS) and later as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. However, the “split” was in name only; the organization’s leader did not renounce ties to its parent group.²⁷ Qatar, meanwhile, was essential to this rebranding; Qatari intelligence officials met several times with *al-Nusra* leader Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, spurring him to abandon al-Qaeda and even promising funding.²⁸

Hundreds of fighters have left *al-Nusra* to join the Islamic State within the last few years.²⁹ These defections have led to the transfer of Qatari-supplied weapons and funds to ISIS, a fact that even Qatar’s allies acknowledge. A leaked email published by Wikileaks in October 2016 singled out Qatar and Saudi Arabia for “providing clandestine financial and logistic support to ISIL [ISIS] and other radical Sunni groups in the region.”³⁰ Two months earlier, in August 2016, two rebels disclosed to the *Financial Times* that Qatar and Saudi Arabia were consistently sending cash and supplies to Aleppo via Turkey, in order to aid Nusra’s offensive against Assad forces in that city.³¹ The Nordic Research Monitoring Network, a Sweden-based non-profit dedicated to tracking extremist trends, corroborated this information in December 2019.³²

Means of Funding

Simultaneously maintaining good relations with both Islamist factions and with the West has facilitated Qatar’s role as a regional mediator. This strategy has allowed the Qatari government to openly bankroll *jihadi* groups through the payment of ransoms for Western hostages.³³ The Qatari government negotiated the release of captive U.S. servicemen in Afghanistan in exchange for prisoners held by the U.S. in 2014 and, in April 2017, may also have paid the largest ransom in history – over \$1 billion – to secure the release of a Qatari hunting party taken hostage in Iraq. The sum was delivered to an array of Sunni and Shia militias, including Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, Kataib Hezbollah in Iraq, and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards’ Quds Force.³⁴

Qatari charities represent another means of providing financial support to terror groups; several have been accused of actively financing al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations. In the wake of the 2017

Gulf blockade of Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other Gulf states designated several Qatari charities as terror financiers. These included the Eid Charity, Qatar Charity, and the RAF Foundation. While Qatar Charity was set up and operated by an employee of the Qatari government,³⁵ the RAF Foundation is implicated in funneling money to Jabhat al-Nusra.³⁶ Eid Charity, cofounded by known terror financier Abdulrahman al-Nuaimi, is accused of funding projects and supporting individuals associated with al-Qaeda.³⁷

Islamists and Islamist Extremists in Qatar

Qatar has, in the past, granted asylum to exiled Islamists, Islamic extremists, and radical preachers from other countries.³⁸ Following the 1979 attack on the Grand Mosque in Mecca by an Islamist extremist group, Qatar housed 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.³⁹

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). The following decade, a number of al-Qaeda leaders – including Osama bin Laden and Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, the future leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq – reportedly travelled through Qatar under the protection of members of the country's ruling clan.⁴⁰ Chechen leader Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, who was killed in Doha in 2004, also found refuge for several years in Qatar.

Among the political exiles who have sought refuge in Qatar are prominent Muslim Brotherhood figures, 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 until the early 1980s.⁴¹ The dean of the College of Islamic Studies at Qatar's flagship Hamad bin Khalifa University is Emad al-Din Shahin, a member of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.⁴²

One of the most influential – and controversial – voices in Islamist circles is Egyptian Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who has lived in Qatar since 1961. Al-Qaradawi enjoyed worldwide exposure through his weekly television program on *Al Jazeera*, “Sharia and Life” (*al-Shari'a wa-al-Hayat*). Until 2010, he also oversaw the Islamist Web portal IslamOnline, which he founded in 1999 in Qatar with backing from the royal family.⁴³ Many consider Sheikh al-Qaradawi to be the most influential Islamic scholar alive today, and he is viewed as the spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood.⁴⁴ Among some audiences, however, his comparatively moderate views on the acceptability of Muslim participation in Western democracies have brought him both praise and condemnation.⁴⁵ Al-Qaradawi is one of the founders of the *wasatiyya* (“Middle Way”) movement, which attempts to bridge the various interpretations of Islam.⁴⁶ Al-Qaradawi's influence also played a role in the Arab Spring; his protégés emerged as new leaders, financial backers, religious authorities and politicians.⁴⁷

Al-Qaradawi has sparked considerable controversy in the West for supporting suicide bombings in Israel and the killing of American citizens in Iraq. He is also a founder of *Itilaf al-Khayr* (Union of the Good), a coalition of European Islamic charities designated by the United States Treasury in 2008 as a channel for transferring funds to Hamas.⁴⁸ Three Qatari charities were part of the Union's network.⁴⁹

In May 2013, he urged Sunni Muslims to join the *jihad* in Syria against the Assad regime and against Hezbollah.⁵⁰ Qaradawi's many pronouncements have made him a frequent point of strife between Qatar and its Gulf neighbors. In 2014, the UAE summoned Qatar's ambassador to Abu Dhabi to formally protest al-Qaradawi inveighing against the UAE.⁵¹ In June 2017, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain designated al-Qaradawi a terrorist.⁵²

Investing for Islamism

Qatar's policies are consistent with two strategic objectives: to buy foreign influence through a variety of means while playing off its stronger neighbors — particularly Saudi Arabia and Iran. Uppermost on Qatar's agenda is the need to protect its sovereignty and natural gas wealth. This has motivated Qatar's

historical spending spree in Europe, where Qatar invested billions of dollars in real estate, tourist venues, sports, and media sectors.⁵³ These are tools of both foreign and domestic policy; by investing heavily abroad, the al-Thani are, effectively, buying insurance against a domestic uprising. This practice caused a stir when a 2012 *New York Times* article revealed that the Qatari government 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 pushing an Islamist agenda. Such allegations have also dogged the spending of Qatari charities in European countries.⁵⁴

Similar concerns have been voiced about donations received in the U.S.; Qatar Foundation International (QFI) has delivered large donations and grants to both K-12 and higher education institutions.⁵⁵ The Qatar Foundation (QF), QFI’s parent organization, has donated billions to U.S. universities; some of those schools—such as Georgetown, Northwestern, Texas A&M, and Carnegie Mellon, among others—have built campuses in Doha.⁵⁶ Both QFI and the Qatar Foundation are effectively controlled by the al-Thani.⁵⁷

QFI also develops curricula and education materials for Arabic-language programs in the U.S. with Qatari pro-Islamic influence. Their “Arabic Advocacy Kit” lays out several reasons for learning Arabic, particularly noting that learning the language will encourage Americans to hold warmer feelings towards Arabs and Muslims. *Al-Masdar*, QFI’s online curriculum development resource, offers lesson plans and other teaching resources to aid Arabic language learning, including a lesson plan on “Express Your Loyalty to Qatar” and another on “Whose ‘Terrorism’?” about the moral relativity around some definitions of terrorism.⁵⁸

International Consequences

Qatar’s role in playing off regional actors against one another, as well as its support of radical groups, has periodically brought it into conflict with its neighbors. In March 2014, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain withdrew their ambassadors due to the Qatar’s sponsorship of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups.⁵⁹ After then-Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi was overthrown in 2013, several Brotherhood members were asked to leave Qatar as part of a rapprochement agreement signed between Gulf countries.⁶⁰ In December 2016, however, Egypt accused Qatar of being indirectly responsible for the bombing of a Coptic church which killed 24 people, due to its facilitation of the Muslim Brotherhood branch that had instructed the attacker to act.⁶¹

Tensions between Qatar and the Gulf states erupted anew 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. 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 UAE quickly blocked access to *Al Jazeera*’s website.⁶²

On June 5, 2017, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt and the UAE broke off relations and cut off all air, sea, and land routes with Qatar. 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.⁶³

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.⁶⁴ 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 July 2020, the dispute appears stalemated, despite repeated U.S. efforts to broker a resolution.⁶⁵ By all perceptions, Qatar is has claimed the upper hand, having proven resilient to financial and supply chain pressures caused by the early days of the blockade. Qatar has deepened links with other Middle Eastern countries, most notably Turkey and Iran, in a bid to cultivate new allies. The

Trump administration, meanwhile, has backed off on finding a comprehensive solution to the blockade, and has of late narrowly focused on airspace.⁶⁶

Qatar's continued support of Islamist elements, despite the negative diplomatic impact of this policy, reflects a clear ideological outlook.⁶⁷ At times, this support has been a matter of personal relations. According to U.S. 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, then Qatar's Minister of Religious Affairs, reportedly sheltered the wanted man on one of his farms.⁶⁸ Mohammed was supposedly employed in Qatar's Department of Public Water Works for some time before fleeing the country on a Qatari passport.⁶⁹

Abdallah bin Khalid was hardly alone in his sympathies to al-Qaeda. U.S. officials have said that other Qatari royal family members similarly provided safe haven for al-Qaeda leaders.⁷⁰ In late 2013, the U.S. Treasury Department imposed sanctions on several prominent Qataris for providing funds to al-Qaeda and Islamic extremists in Syria.⁷¹ One year later, one of those sanctioned people was still employed by the Qatari Interior Ministry.⁷² In this way, more than twenty people under U.S. or UN sanctions have benefitted from Qatari negligence or support.⁷³

Qatar made some progress toward accountability in the initial months of the Gulf crisis, including the expulsion of Hamas operative Saleh al-Arouri in June 2017.⁷⁴ In July 2017, Qatar signed a memorandum of understanding on terror finance with the U.S., and followed that with an agreement to impose further curbs on terror financing that October.⁷⁵ Al-Arouri, Hamas' military commander in the West Bank and the founder of its Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, was behind the 2014 murder and kidnapping of three Israeli teenagers. Since then, however, Qatar seems to have returned to its old ways: in April 2018, Abdullah bin Nasser bin Khalifa al-Thani, Qatar's then-prime minister, attended the wedding of the son of a noted terror financier, Abdulrahman al-Nuaimi. Al-Nuaimi has been designated by both the U.S. and the UN for funding al-Qaeda in Iraq, and was even placed on Qatar's terror watch list.⁷⁶ In January 2020, an American citizen filed a lawsuit against a main Qatari bank, alleging that the bank facilitated funding operations for the Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham.⁷⁷ In June 2020, another lawsuit was filed in the U.S. against Qatar, alleging that Qatari charities funneled money to Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which have both carried out attacks against Americans.⁷⁸

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Among the tribes that adopted the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam in the late 19th century was the al-Thani – in contrast to the ruling al-Khalifas of Bahrain, who rejected it. 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 Wahhabism as its official state ideology.⁷⁹ Further, the al-Thani claim to be descended from the Banu Tamim tribe, the same clan as Mohammed ibn Abd al-Wahhab, Wahhabism's progenitor.⁸⁰ Sympathy for Islamist causes has therefore traditionally been high among many members of the country's ruling clan.

However, Wahhabi tenets are not officially enforced or strictly adhered to in most public settings; Qatari society is generally moderate, and, among Arab countries, its ranks second only to Lebanon in terms of civil liberties.⁸¹ While instances of overt religious discrimination have been rare, anti-Semitic motifs are common in the mainstream media.⁸² Extensive examples can be found in publicly available sermons and state-sponsored educational materials – the latter of which has also glorified *jihad*.⁸³

Non-citizens constitute a majority of Qatar's residents; most are from Southeast Asia or from other Muslim majority countries.⁸⁴ Sunni Muslims constitute the overwhelming majority of the population, while Shi'a Muslims account for less than five percent.⁸⁵ As a result, the main drivers for Islamist opposition are less salient in Qatar; the government espouses a distinctly Islamist ideology, while social inequities and

cultural frictions have been kept to a minimum.

Qatar's government sees to its citizens' health, educational, and other social service needs. This has decreased the opportunity for Islamic opposition groups to use traditional pathways to increase influence in Qatari society.⁸⁶ While many Qatari citizens express support for *jihadists* fighting in Syria and Iraq, relatively few have joined the fighting. This is somewhat surprising because a 2014 study found that, of all social media posts originating in Qatar, 47% were supportive of ISIS.⁸⁷

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Islamic jurisprudence is the basis of Qatar's legal system and civil courts have jurisdiction only over commercial law.⁸⁸ 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.⁸⁹ 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 from political activity.⁹⁰ 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 the content of mosque sermons on an *ad hoc* basis, but does not require clerics to receive approval for their sermons.⁹¹ Comparatively, authorities are considerably lenient toward Qataris accused of funding Islamist activities abroad. The U.S. government has described this behavior as a "permissive" environment for terror finance.⁹²

Marginal Reforms

In June 2013, Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani abdicated in favor of his son, British-educated Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani. Now 40 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. The need to keep pace with global social and economic development has pushed Qatar to gradually shift its political structure to one based on more formal institutions. Qatar's constitution institutionalized the hereditary rule of the al-Thani family, but it also mandated that two-thirds of the Advisory Council, its national legislative body, be directly elected. The Council would have the power to remove ministers from office, to approve the national budget, and to draft and vote on proposed legislation.⁹³ Still, elections have been repeatedly delayed. The *emir* announced in 2017 that the government was preparing for the polls, noting "there are legal shortcomings and legal issues" that need addressed.⁹⁴ 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.⁹⁵

In 2016, when Qatar posted its first budget deficit in 15 years, *Emir* Tamim 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.⁹⁶ The *emir* has since reversed course in the wake of the Gulf crisis, repatriating some assets to cushion the economy and implementing a stimulus package to aid private sector businesses.⁹⁷ *Emir* Tamim has also loosened strictures on expressions of foreign culture, including state-owned sales of alcohol and pork to the country's foreign residents and supporting limited religious freedom for non-Muslims. These measures have not been universally popular. Some have accused the *emir* of forsaking his own citizens in favor of the migrant workers who make up some 90% of the population.

Using Al Jazeera to Proselytize Islamism

Though the Qatari press may be 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.⁹⁸ 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.⁹⁹ Meanwhile, Qatar's former Foreign Minister, Hamed bin Jasem bin Jaber al-Thani, owns half of the newspaper.¹⁰⁰

When then-*Emir* Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani launched the *Al Jazeera* satellite network in 1996, the station initially offered the kind of free and unfettered discussion of issues not usually broadcast in the Muslim world. *Al Jazeera* is directly funded by the Qatari government, and Sheikh Hamid bin Thamer, a member of the royal family, has been the network's chairman since its inception.¹⁰¹ In recent years, many of *Al Jazeera*'s more secular staff have been replaced by Islamists.¹⁰² This process has been accompanied by a shift away from its ideologically diverse origins to a more populist—and more Islamist—approach.¹⁰³

Al Jazeera's Arabic channel has actively promoted the Muslim Brotherhood as a viable player in Egypt and its Arabic channels reflect Doha's official policies.¹⁰⁴ 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.¹⁰⁵ *Al Jazeera*'s Islamist shift was a matter of design as much as evolution, reflecting the interests of the Qatari ruling family, and seeking to influence events rather than just reporting on them.¹⁰⁶ Government control over the channel's reporting was so direct that the channel's output is 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."¹⁰⁷

Al Jazeera rarely criticizes Qatar's ruling family.¹⁰⁸ 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 and Saudi Arabia have both withdrawn their ambassadors to Doha in the past in response to *Al Jazeera* reportage, while Jordan and Lebanon have both accused the station of actively working to undermine their governments, while uncritically supporting their opposition Islamist movements.¹⁰⁹

Al Jazeera's influence reflects the reality of an increasingly media-driven Middle East. The station's rivalry with the newer Saudi-backed, Dubai-based *Al Arabiya* satellite channel is indicative of a deeper competition for regional influence. While the Saudi-led coalition demanded, amongst other things, that *Al Jazeera* be shuttered to end the blockade, the attempt at silencing Qatar's regional *dawa* (missionary activity) seems to have only upped the ante; both Qatar and its opponents have funneled billions of dollars into PR efforts.¹¹⁰

In recent years, *Al Jazeera* is facing a pressure campaign to register under the Foreign Agent Registration Act (FARA).¹¹¹ In 2018, a bipartisan group of lawmakers led by Representatives Josh Gottheimer and Lee Zeldin published a letter urging the Department of Justice to enforce FARA against the network.¹¹² In June 2019, a group of lawmakers led by Senators Chuck Grassley and Tom Cotton sent another letter to the Department of Justice, asking why it has not mandated *Al Jazeera* to register.¹¹³

In addition to *Al Jazeera*, Qatar is purported to fund several other outlets, including *Middle East Eye*, *Al-Araby al-Jadeed*, and the now-defunct *HuffPost Arabi*.¹¹⁴ Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, funds *Asharq al-Awsat* and *Arab News*, as well as the afore-mentioned *Al Arabiya*, while the UAE funds *Sky News Arabia*, a joint-venture between Britain's Sky and the Abu Dhabi Media Investment Corporation.¹¹⁵ Twitter is another arena where this electronic warfare plays out, with both sides deploying an army of bots and smear accounts.¹¹⁶ In effect, these governments vie to monopolize digital reporting.

While the initial onset of the Gulf crisis held hopes that the Saudi-Emirati pressure would push Doha to course correct, Qatar's success in withstanding the embargo has likely emboldened it. Instead of curbing its involvement with bad actors, Doha continues to fund and shelter Islamist groups while reaching out to the Iranian and Turkish governments.

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