American Foreign Policy Council

Qatar

QUICK FACTS

Population: 840,926

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): $93.63 billion

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated June 2010)

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 freewheeling reportage has occasionally led to diplomatic crises with neighboring countries. Moreover, Qatar is host the Al Udeid air base, regional home of the U.S. Central Command. The Qatari government has reportedly paid large sums of money to al-Qaeda to avoid being targeted by the organization in retaliation for its support for American operations in Iraq.

Domestically, Qatar has no active Islamist opposition, for the simple reason that the state has co-opted and involved Islamism

in its governance from the very beginning. 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, while promoting a close relationship—and occasional rivalry—with Saudi Arabia.

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.

There likewise 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 the al-Udeid airbase, and an attempt was made to ram the base's gate in 2002.[2] These incidents, however, are believed to be 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 ties to Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, whose leader had issued a communiqué two days before the attack calling on local citizens of a number of Gulf states to act against Western interests. Qatar was at the top of his list.[3] 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 made between the government of Qatar and al-Qaeda prior to the 2003 Iraq War, under which millions of dollars are 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 is believed to be channeled via spiritual 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 quoted an unnamed Qatari official as saying that Qatar is a "soft target" which prefers to pay to secure its national and economical interests, and that Qatar is not the only state doing so.[6]

The *Times* report highlights the fine line that Qatar treads in its relations with the U.S. and its neighbors. Because it hosts the Al Udeid airbase 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 American military bases on its soil; the U.S. pays neither rent nor utilities on them.[7] Neither Qatar nor the U.S. makes any secret of these ties. It is thus surprising that Qatar has not been a more frequent target of al-Qaeda's attacks. The purported payment of "protection money" to al Qaeda is one explanation for Qatar's relative safety; another reason may be that the absence of social and political discontents 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 on a very subtle level. While Qatar ostensibly enjoys a close relationship with Washington, these ties are balanced by a certain amount of independence when it comes to taking action in support of American interests. According to a State Department cable released by Wikileaks, Qatar was deemed "the "worst in the region" in counterterrorism efforts.[8] 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."[9]

Nor is it only in taking affirmative steps against known terrorists that Qatar is reluctant; the country has acquired a reputation as a financial backer of Islamist causes abroad, including 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.[10] In April 2006, Qatar's government pledged $50 million to the new Hamas-led Palestinian government, after the U.S. and the EU withdrew their funding.[11] In April 2008, Ethiopia severed ties with Doha over alleged Qatari "support for armed opposition groups and their coordinators in neighboring countries."[12]

At times, this support has gone beyond financing. 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.[13] 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.[14]

Apparently, 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 havens for al-Qaida leaders.[15]

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 which adopted the Wahhabi interpretation in the late 19th century was the Al Thani—as contrasted with 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.[16] This set the stage for tensions between Qatar and its other neighbors.

Qatar's population is conservative, but overt religious discrimination has been rare. While non-citizens constitute a majority of Qatar's residents, most are from Southeast Asia or from other Muslim countries—a trend which has minimized the influence of Western culture.[17] 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.[18] 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.

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.[19] 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.[20]

The need to keep pace with global social and economic development has pushed Qatar gradually to shift its political structure from a traditional society based on consent and consensus to one based on more formal and democratic institutions. While Qatar's constitution institutionalized the hereditary rule of the Al Thani family, it also established an elected legislative body and made government ministers accountable to the legislature.[21] 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.[22]

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.[23] 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 constitutions for political parties, and hence there is no official political opposition.[24] 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 engaging in political activities.[25]

The Qatari government has preferred to co-opt rather than oppose Islamism. 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.[26]

Qatar has a longstanding tradition of granting asylum to exiled Islamists and radical preachers from other Muslim countries.[27] 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 Hanbali-Wahhabi scholar Sheikh Abdallah bin Zayd al-Mahmud, who subsequently was appointed Qatar's most senior cleric.[28]

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, sympathy for Islamist causes ran high in Qatari society and among many members of the ruling clan. In fact, Sheikh Fahd bin Hamad al-Thani, the second-eldest son of the Emir, effectively eliminated himself from contention for the throne by surrounding himself with *jihadists* from the Afghan War.[29] 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.[30] 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.[31]

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.[32] 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 *per se*. Most Islamists, both domestic and immigrant, have become well integrated into the top echelons of Qatari society.[33]

Among the political exiles who sought refuge in Qatar are prominent figures of the Muslim Brotherhood, many of whom fled persecution at the hands of Nasser's Egyptian government 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.[34]

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.[35]

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.[36] 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."[37] Qaradawi has sparked considerable controversy in the West for 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.[38] 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.[39] 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.[40]

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.[41] And while 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.[42] 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 is a breath of fresh air. Formed in 1996 from the remnants of BBC Arabic TV, which

had just been closed down, the station offers the kind of free and unfettered discussion of issues not usually broadcast in the Muslim world. *Al Jazeera* has established itself as a major international media player, and is increasingly being viewed as a political actor in its own right. Yet, although it does not seem very much like a traditional government-controlled propaganda outlet, *Al Jazeera* is in fact funded by the Qatari government, with its expenses reimbursed by the Ministry of Finance.[43] Sheikh Hamid bin Thamer, a member of the royal family, heads the station's board of directors.[44]

Since the September 11th attacks on New York and Washington, *Al Jazeera* has undergone a process of increasing "Islamization," with many of its more secular staff replaced by Islamists.[45] This process has been accompanied by subtle—and some 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.[46] 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 Shi'ite-led government of Iraq. On the other, Qatar's Sunni majority sees Shi'ite Iran as the main threat in the region.

Al Jazeera rarely criticizes Qatar's ruling Al Thani family, although other Arab governments come in for severe censure.[47] 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 destabilizing its neighbors. Libya withdrew its ambassador from Qatar between 2000 and 2002 to protest *Al Jazeera's* less-than-complimentary coverage of the Qadhafi regime.[48] 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.) The Egyptian government also has repeatedly complained about the open forum given by *Al Jazeera* to representatives of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.[49] Jordan and Lebanon have accused *Al*

Jazeera of actively working to undermine their governments, while uncritically supporting their opposition Islamist movements.[50]

It is unclear how much of *Al Jazeera's* increasing Islamist slant is a matter of design and how much is evolution. Has the station been changing its approach in order to promote the interests of the Qatari ruling family, or is the shift a simple reflection of the growing popularity of Islamist causes in Arab society? Whichever is the true cause (and they are not mutually exclusive), *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.[51]

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. 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 the *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".[52]

Al Jazeera's influence reflects the new 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 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.

ENDNOTES

[1] Sheri Berman, "Islamism, Revolution, and Civil Society," *Perspectives on Politics* 1, no. 2, June 2003, 257-272.
[2] Oxford Analytica, "The Advent of Terrorism in Qatar," *Forbes*, March 25, 2005, http://www.forbes.com/2005/03/25/cz_0325oxan_qatarattack.html.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Uzi Mahnaimi, "Qatar buys off Al-Qaeda attacks with oil millions," *Sunday Times* (London), May 1, 2005, http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/article387163.ece.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibidem.
[7] Elizabeth Weingarten, "Qatar: 'Worst' on Counterterrorism in the Middle East?" *The Atlantic*, November 29, 2010, http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2010/11/qatar-worst-on-counterterrorism-in-the-middle-east/67166/.
[8] Scott Shane and Andrew W. Lehren, "Leaked Cables Offer Raw Look at U.S. Diplomacy," *New York Times*, November 28, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/29/world/29cables.html?_r=1.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Steven Emerson, Testimony before the House of Representatives Committee on Financial Services, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, February 12, 2002, 8-9.
[11] "Qatar Pledges $50M to Palestinian Government," Associated Press, April 17, 2006, http://toronto.ctv.ca/servlet/an/local/CTVNews/20060417/qatar_palestine_060417?hub=CalgaryHome.
[12] Panapress, "Ethiopia Accuses Qatar of Terrorist Funding and Severs Ties," *Afrik News*, April 21, 2008, http://www.afrik-news.com/article13306.html.
[13] Terry McDermott, Josh Meyer and Patrick J. McDonnell, "The Plots and Designs of Al Qaeda's Engineer," *Los Angeles Times*, December 22, 2002, http://articles.latimes.com/2002/dec/22/world/fg-ksm22.
[14] Brian Ross and David Scott, "Qatari Royal Family Linked to Al Qaeda," *ABC News*, February 7, 2003, January 12, 2010.
[15] Ibid.
[16] "Qatar: Wahhabi Islam and the Gulf," country-data.com, n.d., http://www.country-data.com/cgi-bin/query/r-11031.html.
[17] U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, "Background Note: Qatar," September 22, 2010.
[18] U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, *International Religious Freedom Report 2010* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, November 17, 2010), http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/index.htm.

[19] "Qatar: Political Forces," *The Economist*, March 11, 2009, http://www.economist.com/node/13216406.
[20] U.S. Department of State, *International Religious Freedom Report 2010*.
[21] U.S. Department of State, "Background Note: Qatar."
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibidem.
[24] "Qatar: Political Forces."
[25] U.S. Department of State, *International Religious Freedom Report 2010*.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Oxford Analytica, "The Advent of Terrorism in Qatar."
[28] Michael Knights and Anna Solomon-Schwartz, "The Broader Threat from Sunni Islamists in the Gulf," Washington Institute for Near East Policy *PolicyWatch* no. 883, July 25, 2004, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=1761.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Barry Rubin, ed., *Guide to Islamist Movements* (London: M.E. Sharpe, 2009), 308-310.
[31] Oxford Analytica, "The Advent of Terrorism in Qatar."
[32] Ibid.
[33] "Qatar: Political Forces."
[34] . Ehud Rosen, *Mapping the Organizational Sources of the Global Delegitimization Campaign Against Israel In the UK* (Jerusalem, Israel Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, December 24, 2010), http://www.jcpa.org/text/Mapping_Delegitimization.pdf.
[35] Marc Lynch, "Muslim Brotherhood Debates," *Abu Aardvark* blog, February 28, 2007, http://abuaardvark.typepad.com/abuaardvark/2007/02/muslim_brotherh.html.
[36] Reuven Paz, "Qaradhawi and the World Association of Muslim Clerics: The New Platform of the Muslim Brotherhood," *PRISM Series on Global Jihad* no. 4/2, November 2004, 1-2, http://www.e-prism.org/images/PRISM_no_4_vol_2_-_Qaradhawi.pdf.
[37] Samuel Helfont, "Islam and Islamism Today: the Case of Yusuf al-Qaradawi," Foreign Policy Research Institute. January 2010. http://www.fpri.org/enotes/201001.helfonts.islammodernityqaradawi.html Retrieved 23 January 2011.
[38] Samuel Helfont, "Islam and Islamism Today: the Case of Yusuf al-Qaradawi". Foreign Policy Research Institute *E-Notes*, January 2010, http://www.fpri.org/enotes/201001.helfonts.islammodernityqaradawi.html.
[39] Ibid.
[40] U.S. Department of the Treasury, "PRESS RELEASE HP-1267: Treasury designates the Union of Good," November 12, 2008, http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/hp1267.aspx.

[41] "Qatar: Political Forces."
[42] Jennifer Lambert, "Qatari Law Will Test Media Freedom," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace *Arab Reform Bulletin*, December 1, 2010, http://www.carnegieendowment.org/arb/?fa=downloadArticlePDF&article=42049.
[43] Kristen Gillespie, "The New Face of Al Jazeera," *The Nation*, November 9, 2007.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibidem.
[46] Ibidem.
[47] U.S. Department of State, "Background Note: Qatar."
[48] "Qatar: Political Forces."
[49] Zvi Bar'el, "Is Al Jazeera Trying to Bring Down the Palestinian Authority?" *Ha'aretz* (Tel Aviv), February 2, 2011, http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/features/is-al-jazeera-trying-to-bring-down-the-palestinian-authority-1.340716.
[50] Gillespie, "The New Face of Al Jazeera."
[51] Zvi Bar'el, "Is Al Jazeera Trying to Bring Down the Palestinian Authority?"
[52] "Qatar Uses Al-Jazeera as Bargaining Chip: WikiLeaks," Agence France-Presse, December 5, 2010, http://www.google.com/hosted-news/afp/article/ALeqM5gqrdtYIc4k1ZzxfdOvlgFkyYXCwQ?docId=CNG.46b645b43dfaa2dc5d313fea1f79b408.121.