

American Foreign Policy Council

QATAR

QUICK FACTS

Population: 2,042,444

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): \$183.4 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 to the Al Udeid air base, regional home of the U.S. Central Command. Yet the Qatari government also has 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 from the very beginning. Wahhabi thought is especially influen-

tial 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.

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 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 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 highlights the fine line that Qatar treads in its relations with the U.S. and its powerful neighbors.⁶ 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 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 counter-terrorism 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 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 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

Since the start of the Arab Spring, Qatar has thrown its weight behind the protest movements in North Africa and the Middle

East, and has played 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.¹¹ At the same time, Doha has also provided financial aid to Islamist militants fighting in the Sahel region, including al-Qaeda forces that have succeeded in carving out a state in Mali.

Though a bit slow to get involved in Syria, Qatar eventually became a significant sponsor of the Islamist elements of the opposition now battling President Bashar al-Assad. It has contributed not only cash and weapons, but, perhaps even more important for the long term, considerable propaganda support via Al-Jazeera.

Qatar has also been active in the Palestinian arena. In October 2012, the emir of Qatar 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.¹²

In Egypt, Qatar's close ties to the Muslim Brotherhood have translated into much-needed financial support, in an attempt to prop up the failing Egyptian economy. Whether this will change with the ouster of Mohammed Morsi is hard to say. Doha may be inclined to follow through with existing pledges in order to deflect criticism by other Gulf states of its support of the Brotherhood. Qatar's initial support of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt was more than just the pragmatic support of the winning side; the Brotherhood's espousal of sharia law made its platform attractive to Qatar's rulers from an ideological standpoint.¹³ Other Islamist forces have taken notice; on January 3, 2012, the Taliban announced its intention to establish a peace mission in Qatar.¹⁴

At times, Qatar's support for Islamists has been a matter of personal

honor. Qatar's ties to Libyan rebels were reportedly mostly on the level of personal connections.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

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-Qaeda leaders.¹⁸

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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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.²¹ 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.²² 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.²³

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, 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.²⁴ 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.²⁵ More recently, the Emir has initiated a series of political reforms widely seen as an attempt to boost the credibility of Qatar's policy on the Arab Spring. However, these reforms are mostly cosmetic; at present, the only real threat to Emir Hamad's authority would appear to stem from his own relatives.²⁶

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.²⁷ 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.²⁸ 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.²⁹

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.³⁰

Qatar has a longstanding tradition of granting asylum to exiled Islamists and radical preachers from other Muslim countries.³¹ 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.³²

Sympathy for Islamist causes has traditionally run 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.³³ 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.³⁴ 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 govern-

ment 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.³⁵

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.³⁶ 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.³⁷

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.³⁸ More recently, Hamas political head Khaled Mishaal quit his former headquarters under the wing of Syria's Al Assad regime and relocated to Doha.³⁹

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.⁴⁰

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 1997.⁴¹ 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.”⁴² 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.⁴³ 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.⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵

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.⁴⁶ 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 neighbors, 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.⁴⁷ These investments are a tool

of foreign policy, but also serves an important function in domestic policy. The greater the stake of foreign countries 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 recently caused a stir when it emerged that Qatar had pledge 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.⁴⁸ 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 means other than military. 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.⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰ 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.⁵¹

In recent years, Al Jazeera has undergone a process of increasing "Islamization," with many of its more secular staff replaced by Islamists.⁵² 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.⁵³ 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. Qatar supported Saudi Arabia's intervention in neighboring Bahrain to help quell Shi'ite protests, and sent a small contingent of security personnel to protect government sites.⁵⁴

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.⁵⁵ 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.⁵⁶

Al Jazeera rarely criticizes Qatar's ruling Al Thani family, although other Arab governments come in for severe censure.⁵⁷ 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.⁵⁸ 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 cover-

age.) Jordan and Lebanon have accused Al Jazeera of actively working to undermine their governments, while uncritically supporting their opposition Islamist movements.⁵⁹

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.⁶⁰ It would appear that Al Jazeera was in fact a key player in the events which led to the eventual ouster of Mubarak and his replacement by an Islamist regime. It is still too early to say what affect the Brotherhood's change of fortunes will have on Al Jazeera's reportage. In the aftermath of Morsi's June 2013 ouster, Al Jazeera reportedly experienced a wave of desertions by veteran reporters over "biased coverage" and the station's blatant support of the Brotherhood.⁶¹

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.⁶²

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 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."⁶³

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 competi-

tion 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.

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.

Still, in the Arab world, soft power remains the name of the game. 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.

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