

Qatar: Big Ambitions, Limited Capabilities

Qatar has been in the limelight since it increasingly gained importance following the foundation of Al-Jazeera in the mid 1990s until the eruption of the “Arab Spring,” for which Doha was one of the main sponsors. Experts have failed, however, to explain and analyze Qatar’s position because it has continuously shifted from one political stance to another, from one extreme to the other. What are the motives that are driving this tiny Emirate, which is small in both territory and population, to play a regional role in a rather difficult and tense region which abounds with powers that are bigger in number and greater in surface area and which have proven themselves in history?

[...] It seems that Qatar is currently allying itself with the movement of political Islam, namely the Muslim Brotherhood organization, across the length and breadth of the Arab world. Therefore, it is also apt to wonder about the relationship that ties the Qatari governing family to the whole smorgasbord of Islamic political movements, parties and organizations. What are Qatar’s strengths and weaknesses and what is the future of its regional role?

Qatar’s Concerns and Its Eternal Dilemma

Qatar is located in a geographically tense region. It appears on the map as a fingertip or a protrusion extending from the Arabian Peninsula into the Gulf. On the opposite shore is Iran, as if geography itself has put Qatar in the face of an eternal dilemma between two major regional powers that are far greater in size and population. It is easy to sum up this dilemma by looking at the country’s statistics: Qatar comprises 11,437 square kilometers or the size of the small American state of Connecticut

or slightly larger than the size of Lebanon. On the other hand, next door, Saudi Arabia has an area of 2,217,949 square kilometers which is 185 times the size of Qatar. As for Iran, its 1,648,000 square kilometers are 144 times the size of Qatar.

Qatar’s geographical problems are compounded by concerns over demographics. Its population is estimated at 250,000 people, which is 100 times less than the population of Saudi Arabia and 300 times less than the population of Iran. This combination of small size in both geography and population shows that Qatar is on an extremely uneven footing with its two powerful neighbors, Iran and Saudi Arabia, whether in the short, medium or even the long term. Indeed, even if Qatar tried to arm itself and develop a larger military power capable of deterring its neighbors from attacking it, it simply could not succeed, regardless of its financial resources due to its limited geographical space and small population.

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When it comes to its resources, Qatar’s natural gas reserves are estimated at around 900 trillion cubic feet, the third largest in the world after Russia and Iran. Due to this potential wealth, and in addition to its small population,

Dr. Mustafa el-Labbad

Dr. Mustafa el-Labbad is the director of the Cairo-based, independent research center Ash-Sharq Center for Regional and Strategic Studies, specializing on alternative Egyptian foreign policy, the relations between Arab countries and Turkey, Iran and the regional order.

Qatar has the highest income per capita in the World, estimated at \$77,000. Consequently, it is bound to ally itself with an international power to safeguard its national security in the face of its more imposing neighbors around it.

As a consequence, since 1916 the ruling family in Qatar has allied itself with Great Britain, in a bid to protect itself from Saudi ambitions to annex the emirate to Saudi Arabia. Under this arrangement, the British Crown administered Qatar's affairs and security from its headquarters in India. In the same context, when Qatar offered the Al-Udeid air base for free to the United States Air Force in 2003 (during the attack on Iraq), it considered the move as a necessary insurance policy to face Saudi Arabia and Iran. It is essential to note in this context that Qatar had already started expanding and constructing Al-Udeid as early as 1996, one year after the current Emir seized power.

Qatar's stance in the regional axis means that the soft power it has amassed over a decade, and in which it invested huge amounts of money, is about to face a big challenge: Those opposing Islamists.

The origins of the Al-Thani ruling dynasty itself can be traced back to the Tamim tribe that moved from its original homeland, south of Najed in Saudi Arabia, to Qatar by the 18th century, before settling in Doha in the 19th century. Therefore, although Qatar is the second Wahhabi state in the world after Saudi Arabia, it fears potential annexation attempts by Saudi Arabia (similar to Iraq's attempt to annex Kuwait in 1990). These concerns are exacerbated by ongoing border problems between Qatar and Saudi Arabia and by talk about an alleged Saudi plot which aimed to topple the current Qatari ruler in 1996 and bring his father back to power.

In this context, it is important to note that Saudi Arabia has always lurked in the background during the five forced transfers of power witnessed in Qatar in the 20th century (1913, 1949, 1960, 1972 and 1995). Moreover, Saudi Arabia has traditionally supported certain wings inside the Qatari ruling family, with it reportedly favoring Crown Prince Jassim Bin Hamad before he stepped down from his position in favor of his younger stepbrother Tamim. Due to all the abovementioned reasons, Saudi Arabia is considered the number one threat facing Qatar.

In order to counter the historical threat coming from Saudi Arabia, Doha is has allied with a power outside the region, the United States, to protect its security. Meanwhile, Qatar also enjoys close relations with a regional power, Iran.

Qatari-Iranian ties are ambiguous and complex by all accounts. On the one hand, Iran is an important ally for Qatar to counter-balance Saudi Arabia's power and ambitions, but on the other hand, Iran's regional and nuclear ambitions frighten Qatar. While it does not want to see a nuclear Iran, neither does it favor a military attack against Iranian nuclear facilities because it fears potential revenge attacks against Qatar's oil and gas facilities, located well within range of Iranian missiles. Thus, in its relations with Iran, Qatar's conduct naturally differs from that of the other Gulf Cooperation Council countries: to be more specific, Qatar shares the world's largest natural gas field – the country's main source of income – with Iran. Qatar calls it "The Northern Field" while Iran calls it "South Pars." Thanks to the advanced technology purchased by Qatar to extract and liquefy natural gas (Qatar is the world's main producer of liquefied natural gas), some Iranians are afraid that Qatar might extract more gas than it has been legally allocated, especially since it is already extracting more gas than Iran does in the field. Iranian fears are increasing because Tehran has been subject to sanctions in the energy industry since the Iranian Revolution and does not have access to the same advanced technology as Qatar. Iran, however, is well aware that Qatar and its oil and gas wealth

are an international “red line.” Therefore, no matter how tense their relations might get over the natural gas field, Iran would not do what Iraq did to Kuwait in 1990 when the core of the conflict involved the Al-Rumaila oil field.

As such, these realities have force both sides to maintain a minimum level of good ties, a key reason why Qatar is continuously ignoring Iran’s provocations [...]

Qatar and Soft Power

According to political science theory, small states do not have many options to protect their security. They can either ally with a superpower or try to balance their ties with a variety of different states and adopt flexible policies regarding these states in order to create their own room for maneuver. A third option has emerged as a result of the structural changes that occurred in the international system following the end of the Cold War. This third option consists of allying with a set of countries in international organizations. Qatar has therefore adopted a new policy, combining the three available options without having to limit itself to any of them.

Doha has built clear military ties with Washington in order to safeguard its security, facing any potential threat by allying with a

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major state, but it has also opted for the second option by balancing its ties with a wide variety of countries: It enjoys good business ties with Tel Aviv, on the one hand, while also maintaining close relations with Iran. In other words, Qatar has manipulated the contradictions in the Middle East regional system and used them to its advantage in order to protect itself from falling under the sway of one regional power (Saudi Arabia or Iran). Moreover, Qatar has also utilized

the third option that is theoretically available for small states, i.e. allying with a set of countries in international organizations. In fact, Doha’s ties are similar to an intercontinental compass directed towards France, South Africa, Brazil and other countries even farther afield. By adopting the third option to protect its security, the current Emir has taken clear measures to accumulate soft power in his hands ever since he took control.

Of course, he started by founding Al-Jazeera only a year after he took power; the very same year that witnessed the opening of commercial representation offices with Israel (an unprecedented move in the Gulf region) – with the directors of the two offices in Doha and Tel Aviv playing the roles of ambassadors.

Developing and investing in all of these forms of soft power is considered one of Qatar’s main weapons to resist any potential Saudi attempt to write off or to marginalize its smaller neighbor. But it is also an excellent means for Qatar to boast in the face of other neighbors in the Gulf with whom it shares painful memories – namely Bahrain and Abu Dhabi. In this context, it is important to note that Qatar engaged in a military confrontation against an alliance of these two countries in the 19th century and has since been involved in a kind of subdued conflict.

On a different plain, Qatar has not only focused on hosting political and sporting figures, but it has also aimed at promoting arts by hosting the world’s most famous Western and Oriental symphonic orchestras. It has built a museum for contemporary art in Doha and bought some of the world’s most renowned paintings for inclusion in the museum’s collection, while also sponsoring an Islamic Art Museum [...]

Qatari Mediation and Regional Conflicts

The Doha Agreement that was signed in 2008 by local Lebanese parties is the best example of Qatari mediation. Qatar appeared as the broker in the conflict and the Sheraton-Doha Hotel was chosen as a venue to hold the meetings that finally led to an agreement. It is true that the agreement focused on the balance of power at that time

and that regional and international parties were present behind the scenes and through their local representatives, but Qatar was able to steal the show and appear to be in a great position, moving beyond being a small state to becoming an “acceptable mediator” between local and regional parties in disagreement. Nonetheless, Qatar’s mediations would not have been possible without its relatively strong ability to create ties with various regional and international parties.

At this time, one could therefore have said that its policies tilted toward the West but that it preserved good relations with Iran, the Syrian regime, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza. The role Qatar played was vital for America and the West because it opened the door to countries and political parties that have uneasy ties with the West, to say the least. Qatar’s initiatives therefore represented an open window for the West so that the latter could indirectly take a peek at these political powers. However, this raises the question: How could Qatar, with its small army and its limited geographical size, pull off these diplomatic achievements without brandishing threats of military intervention that it is, in any case, not capable of carrying out? Perhaps the answer lies in its relations with the US, which needs strong local allies in the region and Qatar, naturally, needs – as we saw earlier – military protection from outside the region. This makes Qatar a necessary and integral part of America’s grand, overarching plan for the region. Accordingly, Qatar used its membership in the Security Council during the Israeli war on Lebanon in 2006 to condemn Israel and to offer generous monetary donations for the post-war reconstruction of Lebanon. The Lebanese March 8th political alliance welcomed Qatar’s role and villages in southern Lebanon put up banners reading “Thank you Qatar,” which gave Qatar a special place in conflict zones in the region [...]

Qatar itself – cognizant of the limits of its own abilities – did not want to align itself with a certain party against another, contrary to what some imagined [...] In doing so it benefited from two key factors. First, the decision-making class in Qatar is much smaller than it is when it comes

to other key regional players, such as Saudi Arabia. Second, it offers financial and investment incentives to help the parties commit to their agreements. However, the failure of several of its mediation initiatives has also revealed two faults. First, Doha cannot practically keep planning to solve crises without guaranteeing that the concerned parties will follow through and abide by their agreements. Second, Doha must always collaborate with outside powers to succeed in its mediations.

The Beginnings of Qatar’s Transformation

Qatar introduced a change to its regional policies starting in 2009 by reducing its opposition to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which consequently ceased to be an obsession controlling the minds of decision-makers in Doha. The reason for this change is due to a number of factors. Firstly, Qatar succeeded in protecting itself against Saudi ambitions by becoming a dependable partner of the United States in the Gulf. Secondly, the steady growth of the Iran-led axis in the region will eventually lead to the establishment of a new regional reality that is disadvantageous for Qatar and its perpetual fears over Iran. Thirdly, and most importantly, Qatar’s calculations assume that a peaceful solution to the Iranian nuclear crisis will necessarily entail an American-Iranian understanding that codifies the various aspects of the conflict and demarcates new lines of conflict between the axes, and thereby weakens the need for an American-Qatari understanding. Consequently, stopping the American-Iranian understanding requires a rapprochement between Qatar and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, due to the latter’s undeniable power over the American decision-making process and over American lobby groups (oil, weapons, banks, etc.). In addition, while Riyadh’s relations with Doha have improved due to their shared opposition to Iran, Doha began to create ties with Turkey, the historic rival power of Iran in the region. It was clear that Qatar has started shifting towards other regional policy arrangements that exclusively depend on the America’s allies in the region, as the innovation in its policies consisted

in supporting the reintegration of Turkey into the region as well as facilitating the diplomatic and media aspects of this return. But despite the fact that Turkish-Saudi disagreements are real and present, they have decreased with time – in the midst of the diplomatic and media conflict with Iran – to become secondary to the main disagreement with Iran [...]

Qatar and the “Arab Spring”

Qatar has supported the Arab uprisings since they began by trading in its “mediating roles” for “new roles.” Since the start of the Tunisian revolution in late 2010, Al-Jazeera followed developments down to the minute and was very successful in highlighting the events up until the return of Rashid Ghannouchi, leader of the Ennahda Movement, and his control of Tunis. It should be mentioned here that Qatar has ties with Ghannouchi that date back many years. When the “Arab Spring” moved to Egypt in the beginning of 2011, the Qatari-owned television station became a main actor in the unfolding of events and in guiding these events towards serving the interests of the “Muslim Brotherhood.” The visit by the previously banned preacher, Sheikh Youssef al-Qaradawi, who had been living in Qatar for many years, to Tahrir Square on the day of the “Friday of Victory” rally was a media attempt to mirror the return of Imam al-Khomeini to Teheran after the victory there of the revolution.

Furthermore, the Qatari political presence reached its peak in March 2011 when Qatar, as the head of the Arab League, applied pressure to adopt a decision to permit military intervention in Libya [...] But it showed a certain awareness of its own capacity and consequently allied itself with other countries in order to serve its interests in Libya because it couldn't – with its 12,000 soldiers – play much of a military role inside or outside [...] Qatar ended up providing military training for the Libyan rebels and providing them with about 2,000 tons of military equipment. It also sent its Special Forces to Libyan territories.

In the end, it was easy for Qatar to conceal its interests in Libya with the cover of tradition

thanks to the tribal link and nexus between the tribes of eastern Libya and the Tamim tribe to which the ruling family in Qatar belongs (it is important to note here that the Mediterranean country of Libya is one of the most important exporters of natural gas and oil to Europe. Therefore, a change in the Libyan regime represents a great entryway for Qatar to take over Libya's share of oil export to Europe during and after the civil war. It also represents a chance for Qatar, along with France and Italy, to actively participate in owning shares in Libyan oil and gas companies) [...]

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When it comes to Syria, too, Qatar's special interest is focused on the country's energy sector. Despite the large Qatari investments in this sector during recent years, Doha might have the intention to expand even further by investing in the sector after the change of the current Syrian regime. It would do that by setting up pipelines that transport Qatar's natural gas through the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to Syria, Turkey and then finally to Europe. This means that the project to transport Iranian gas through Turkey to Europe, one of the most important cards Iran could play to prevent a military strike against it and to exert influence on the European stance – according to its interests – may receive a harsh blow if Qatari gas could reach Turkey through Syrian territory. Qatar's stance regarding Syria and regarding its interests in Syria is therefore another source of disagreement between Qatar and Iran. This is a truly dangerous policy because as the Arab proverb says, “Not every attempt is a safe attempt.”

New Constraints

The United States withdrew from the “Arab Spring” in appearance but left the way open for Qatar and Turkey to demarcate the routes of popular uprisings in the Arab world in a way that does not conflict with Washington’s interests in the region and in a way that does not involve direct American intervention. At the same time, the “Arab Spring” opened the door for Qatar to expand its role by allying itself with Islamist political movements in the countries where the populist uprisings took place. However, it also revealed Qatar’s limited abilities. Islamists supported by Qatar reached positions of power in Tunisia and in Egypt, a positive change for Qatar and for its ability to play the role of broker between political Islam and the West. In this, however, Qatar went from a preservation strategy to an expansion strategy under the cloak of the “Arab Spring,” ignoring a reality it had long taken into consideration: Direct involvement in regional conflicts is not compatible with its limited geographic size and its small population. The “Arab Spring” – to Qatar’s surprise – stripped Qatar of its eligibility as a neutral mediator in regional conflicts now that it has taken sides. Qatar’s stance in the regional axis means that the soft power it has amassed over a decade, and in which it invested huge amounts of money, is about to face a big challenge: Those opposing Islamists in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Syria now

oppose Qatar and the new role it plays. Moreover, although Qatar supported the opposition in Egypt, Libya, Syria and Tunisia, it played a clear media role in suppressing change in Bahrain.

Doha’s new position will also clearly show the contradiction that exists between its support for democracies abroad and its lack of any kind of elected council of its own. Although the Qatari Advisory Council consists of 45 members who are all appointed, the Emir is trying to make 30 of these positions elected positions by the start of next year. However, the powers of such a council largely remain a formality.

Qatar is quite simply an autocracy despite the repeated talks of “political reforms.” This neutralizes the local factor of Qatari decision-making and makes the country a hostage of the regional equation, the equation it spent so much effort and money trying to escape from during the past decade and a half.

It seems that Doha, amidst its “Arab Spring” successes, has reached for big dreams. It has, however, forgotten its geographical limitations and that the capacities of other countries sometimes cannot be bought or avoided.

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