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# PERSPECTIVES

Political Analysis and Commentary from the Middle East & North Africa



## QATAR: ASPIRATIONS & REALITIES

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The cover photographs shows a public art installation by the Qatar Media Agency in Doha. The Arabic word in the picture means development.

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# Editorial

## Qatar: Aspirations and Realities

In the wake of the Arab Revolts, the political landscape of the region is changing, fast. Main actors of the old order have entered processes of political transition and are determining – or struggling to determine – the future course of their internal and regional politics.

In the Arab Gulf Region, one political actor, in particular, is becoming more visible, seemingly more engaged in navigating these uncertainties and in filling the gaps in this political scene: The state of Qatar.

In terms of its native population, Qatar is tiny. Only some 250,000 citizens possess Qatari passports – but they are fabulously wealthy. The people of Qatar produce the highest Gross Domestic Product per capita worldwide. While at the same time, some 1.5 million residents who entered the country as migrant workers lack many of the most basic rights.

For various reasons that the authors in this issue of *Perspectives MENA* explore, this little peninsular nation seems very much to be taking the leading role in Arab politics, a place customarily reserved for its much larger neighbors, like Saudi Arabia. Indeed, from the onset of the Arab Spring protests, Qatar took sides with what looked like to many a healthy lack of reserve. The network that the Emir of Qatar built, Al-Jazeera, was vital in its support of people's power in Tunisia and in Egypt. In Libya, Qatar went much further, currying favor within the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Arab League for a military intervention and becoming the only Arab state to openly participate in it. After an initial hesitance, Qatar also steadily backed the anti-government rebels in Syria by providing financial and military aid.

At the same time, Qatar is acting as a prominent global player by developing its capital as a hub for international “mega events,” not least the 2022 football World Cup whose finals

will be played in Doha, and the United Nation's climate change conference which will be held at the end of 2012.

In almost all of these endeavors, the newly acquired role of the Arab state with the smallest population is being increasingly met with criticism. Some of the persistently asked questions throughout the Middle East and increasingly North Africa are: What are the motivations behind its – at times – contradictory actions? Is Qatar meddling in the internal affairs of other Arab states, with all of the attendant negative implications? To which extent does it support Islamist trends of various ideological stripes that may be enhancing violence and intolerance?

And there are also other questions posed in this edition which relate to how Qatar – or the political elite in Qatar more properly – treats its own citizens and the migrant workers who are building its vision of the future. Are its practices and its own political system compatible with the ideas it publicly seems to support?

We leave it to the reader to determine whether our authors have adequately opened up what we believe is a vital space for understanding and engaging a critical driver of future possibilities and challenges.

*Perspectives: Political Analysis and Commentary from the Middle East & North Africa* is a quarterly journal dedicated to highlighting research and debate from authors who live and work in the region. It is now jointly edited and published by the three HBS offices located in Tunis, Beirut and Ramallah. We welcome comments and criticism, which can be directed to us via the contact information on the back page of this volume.

**Joachim Paul, Bente Scheller and Rene Wildangel**

# Doha as Host and Site for the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change Negotiations

From November 26 to December 7, 2012, Qatar hosts the 18th Conference of the Parties (COP) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and, simultaneously, the 8th Meeting of the Parties (MoP) to the Kyoto Protocol. The main issue on the Doha agenda: Adopting meaningful global emissions reduction commitments for a second implementation period (2012-2015) under the Kyoto Protocol (that is otherwise set to expire at the end of this year) and thus setting the stage for a new climate change regime starting in 2015. Developing countries are also pushing for the effective implementation of the 2007 Bali Action Plan – a set of agreements on long-term cooperative action on adaptation, mitigation, finance, technology transfer, and capacity building – in a manner that is coherent and integrated. As with many such global agreements, the South rightfully complains that the North has not fulfilled its numerous pledges in terms of financing and technology transfer.

Qatar spent two years fighting off the challenges of rival states from the Asia Group (the annual meetings rotate among five main regions), and in particular that of a determined South Korea which – unlike members of the energy exporting Gulf Cooperation Council – is considered to be relatively progressive in terms of its commitment to a low-carbon economy. One reason Qatar was selected – aside, of course, from its financial potential – was in keeping with the long-held demand by the Global South that the centers of international policy be located outside of traditional Northern bases such as New York and Geneva. Until recently, the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) alone

was based in the South, specifically in Nairobi, Kenya. But perhaps a more immediate reason Qatar was awarded the honor of hosting UNFCCC COP 18 was to try and drive a wedge between what are increasingly being labeled, somewhat patronizingly, “climate progressives” among the Gulf monarchies, UAE and now Qatar, and the so-called “rejectionists” represented by Saudi Arabia that have until now been hegemonic within official Arab negotiation circles. The idea, then, was to reward Qatari ambitions to take on Saudi Arabia and thus break the unity of the powerful energy more constructive player in the production, consumption, and underwriting of an emerging global “green” economy. They point to the 2009 UN General Assembly meeting, when the Qatari Emir first signaled a change in discourse away from climate change denial to acknowledging the threat of climate change as a “pressing challenge” to world civilization. Qatar points to its huge gas reserves, and to the potential of at least shifting dependence on the worst kind of fossil fuels – heavy oil and coal – towards the more emissions-friendly natural gas, which contains roughly 50 percent less emissions than fuel oil. Qatar also dangles the carrot of its potentially significant contribution towards some green funding agency and energy research as well as technology institutes that Arabs, and other members from the Global South could draw on in their quest to adapt to the realities of global warming.

Critics, meanwhile, dismiss the idea that the world’s richest country (in per capita terms), and one with the world’s largest environmental footprint and per capita carbon emissions rate (along with fellow Gulf countries the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait), is serious about

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addressing root causes of climate change. Rather they suggest that Qatar is up to its old image-management and marketing schemes: It desires to be buy the “climate change” brand, much as Abu Dhabi bought the “renewable energy” brand by defeating a bitter Germany in 2009 for hosting the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), the first such global agency in the Arab world. Indeed, the brand boasting in Doha continued immediately after signing the Host Country agreement with the UN, with the designated conference venue in Doha, the Qatar National Convention Center, swiftly labeled as the “greenest” building ever to host a COP. However, skeptics maintain that while Qatar will do its utmost to ensure an effective branding summit (that is, it needs a major political outcome or the launch of a major initiative that will associate “Doha” with “green” and “climate change progressive”), once the summit is over, any progress achieved will slow down, much as Abu Dhabi’s much heralded Masdar City (the first zero-carbon city, or ecotopia ever implemented) has done since its launch.

### **Progress? Qatari and Arab Climate Change Attitudes and Positions**

Despite such skepticism about Qatar’s role and intentions behind hosting this global conference at such an important crossroads for the UN climate change regime and the fate of people and nature around the world, a basic Qatari and Arab claim generally holds true: There has been some progress in climate change attitudes and discourse in the region, at least measured in terms of the number and frequency of meetings, papers and change in official discourse. After two decades of generally ignoring the increasingly frenzied global debate on climate change, the Arab region has belatedly caught the climate change bug and movement is now afoot in both official circles and the globalized segments of Arab civil society.

There are two main drivers for this apparent change in attitudes. On the one hand, there has been the realization – increasingly backed up by clear scientific evidence and rigorous forecasting – that while the Arab region contributes only modestly (less than 5 percent) of global greenhouse gas (GhG) emissions, it is

arguably the most highly vulnerable region to the impact of climate change. As the 2012 World Bank flagship report on climate change in the Arab Region reaffirmed, the vast majority of the roughly 350 million citizens of the Arab world, and in particular the 100 million classified by the UN as “poor” and thus most vulnerable, will feel this impact directly. Credible models suggest that the region faces surface temperature increases of 2 to 5.5 degrees centigrade by the end of the 21st century, with already 2010 tying 2005 as the hottest average temperatures since records began to be kept in the late 19th century. Moreover, forecasted sea level rise will have a devastating impact in the region. In the Gulf, for instance, recent man-made islands will simply disappear and the small island state of Bahrain will lose up to 15 km of its coastline. In Egypt, forecasts of a one-meter sea level rise will affect around 6 million, mostly poor, people living in the Nile delta basin. Forecasts published in a major regional study produced by the Arab Development and Environment Forum contribute further to the alarming statistics. It suggests that increasingly scarce water resources will be further reduced by between 15-50 percent in countries such as Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Palestine; that the Nile River’s flow will decrease by 40-60 percent; and that increased frequency and intensity of drought particularly in North African and Mashriq (Levant) countries will become a major socio-economic and political problem for the region.

Thus, given the Arab region’s historically low contribution to global GHG emissions and its high vulnerability, Arab governments and businesses have understood that there is much to gain in terms of attracting donor financing for mitigation and adaptation measures (3rd p), participating in carbon market schemes, as well as benefiting from the potential transfer of climate-friendly technologies and energy efficiency schemes that fit nicely into on-going technical reform packages throughout the region. As a result, the official focus of most non-oil producing Arab states such as Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon in the global negotiations

has thus been on lending support to the G77 position aiming to ensure that the principles of equity, common-but-differentiated responsibility, poverty alleviation, and sustainable development are enshrined in any post-Kyoto regime. To be sure, their primary interest in advocating such important and necessary international principles is not so much a commitment to human survival, or a pledge to restructure their respective socio-economic and political systems, but rather to benefit from additional donor funds and market opportunities likely to flow from any global deal reached while at the same time cater to the sharp rise in domestic demand for electricity, water and energy. Another interest of such countries is to avoid ruffling the feathers of Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, which is a major donor and political influence in the region’s non-oil economies.

**Arab governments and businesses have understood that there is much to gain in terms of attracting donor financing for mitigation and adaptation measures.**

A second major driver for the change in discourse in regard to climate change in the Arab region comes from the fact that the oil-exporting countries of the GCC and particularly Saudi Arabia perceive the recent wave of climate change negotiations (following the ratification of Kyoto in 2005) and discussions regarding a low-carbon global economy as a direct threat to their national interests and security. As such Saudi Arabia, which greatly influences the position of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and the Arab League, has until recently dominated the Arab position and even been a genuine global player in influencing (albeit negatively) the climate change regime since at least the Bali round of negotiations. Saudi Arabia’s active participation

in global negotiations has basically served to limit the aspirations of a post-Kyoto climate change deal vis-à-vis developing countries and tried to incorporate a mechanism to compensate oil-producing countries for any losses to the oil trade resulting from climate change.

**Qatari strategic policy has become more complex over the past several years, and its attempts to assert itself politically (and since the Arab Uprisings, militarily as well) in the region complement its attempt to become a global brand by hosting the UNFCCC and the World Cup.**

Qatar has, until recently, followed Saudi Arabia's lead in this. Qatari official submissions to the UNFCCC starting in the immediate post-Bali period supported Saudi Arabia's, and G77's, formal position regarding long term action: That developing countries ("Non-Annex I countries"), including the GCC members, should take up "nationally appropriate mitigation actions" only in line with "their special national circumstances and sustainable development imperatives," and "contingent on the effective implementation" by developed countries of their obligations to provide technical and financial support. In other words, national climate change policy should be voluntary rather than internationally mandated as with developed countries ("Annex I countries") under the Kyoto Protocol. Qatar supported the Saudi line that warned that any nefarious attempts by the North to introduce socio-economic or per capita criteria to differentiate among non-Annex I countries with a view to "imposing" mitigation and other commitments on richer countries within the global South based on "relative degree of development and capabilities" are "unacceptable." When it became clear that some European countries and civil society

groups wanted to impose an international carbon tax, particularly on the aviation and shipping sectors that have so far not been included in the negotiations, Qatar again responded vocally in tandem with Saudi Arabia that its oil export and revenues would be seriously undermined, and that would in turn curtail development plans contrary to the provisions of the Kyoto Protocol that calls on Annex I countries to implement policies that minimize adverse social, trade, economic and environmental impacts on other states. Thus while actively working to inhibit positive action on carbon tax (and similar policies designed to punish carbon exporters for the sins of carbon consumers, largely in the North), Qatar and other GCC states have instead heavily promoted "market and economic potentials for mitigation" through energy conservation and efficiency, carbon capture and storage, and in Qatar's case, fossil fuel switching to lower carbon fuels (such as natural gas).

It thus becomes clearer why Qatar was selected to host the UNFCCC. On the one hand, of course, there is the hope that by leveraging the increased pressure felt by Qatar and other GCC states to persuade them to unleash their financial potential to fund both poorer nations in the global South and northern-based companies, firms and researchers, there will be a "win-win" situation in terms of the global economy and sustainable development. On the other hand, there is the importance attached to somehow breaking the OPEC and GCC blocs resistance, and through that split the G77 and China group of developing countries, as one of the political priorities of both the more progressive states of the North and the northern-led environmental movements. As Connie Hedegaard, currently the European commissioner leading the climate change portfolio, recently made clear in an interview to one Gulf newspaper, the Doha meeting could make Qatar an "interesting leader in this field in the whole region" if it switches away from fossil fuel dependence. The "leadership" role she is dangling in front of the Qataris, of course, is intended as a contrast to Saudi Arabia and other OPEC member states. The EU, to this



end, has funded some Arab NGOs that have been critical of Saudi Arabia's position in order to point to indigenous criticisms and avoid (legitimate) charges of Northern interference. Time will tell if Qatar will move further away from Saudi Arabia's position and fulfill yet another "leadership" role in the region, a role that has become increasingly controversial since the start of the Arab uprisings. Qatari strategic policy has become more complex over the past several years, and its attempts to assert itself politically (and since the Arab Uprisings, militarily as well) in the region complement its attempt to become a global brand by hosting the UNFCCC and the World Cup. Qatar is, in short, trying to make itself indispensable not just to in security terms to key western states (like the United States of America) but in financial terms to northern-based multinational companies and institutions. Their hope is that such deep institutional, economic, and security linkages with the West (and, in parallel, China) will protect them from regional hegemonies such as Saudi Arabia and Iran.

### **Conclusion: Contradictions of Doha**

Perhaps most interestingly, it is worth pointing out an obvious contradiction that will be at play as Qatar hosts the UNFCCC this year. On the one hand, there is Doha as a site for the UNFCCC negotiations that effectively aim to correct two hundred years of adverse impact on environmental and social relations unleashed by the European industrialization and colonial processes and ensuing consumerist ideology that accompanied this capitalist expansion via neoliberal globalization. It is this historical process that underlies the basic, legitimate claim by the global South that the North has a basic and historic responsibility to clean up (and pay for) the mess it has caused without compromising the South's ability to develop. There are also increasingly frenetic debates about the need for a new form of environmentalism based on an altered economic and social model that needs to be constructed if planet Earth is to survive the next century given the continued rise in global population rates and consumption patterns.

On the other hand, there is Doha as site of, and model for, rampant consumerism and consumption, one whose political, economic and social forms of governance – to say nothing of its energy-intensive construction boom and mall culture – is the antithesis of imagined new forms of environmentalism. In per capita terms Qatar and its GCC neighbors have the world's largest emissions consumption rates, and the largest environmental footprint. According to one report, Saudi Arabia is responsible for roughly 28 percent of the region's emissions though its population is only 7 percent of the region's total; and it produces more carbon emissions than countries like France, which has more than double Saudi's population, and Brazil which has nearly eight times the population. It further reinforces these patterns on the more oil-dependent countries in the region via exporting rentierism, with the result that the carbon emissions of the average Arab person will soon exceed the global average (with Qatar at roughly 12 times the average). The consumption of energy within Arab states has more than doubled since the end of the Cold War, and this trend is set to continue as the forecasted primary energy demand grows by nearly 3 percent in the period 2005-2030, more than any other region other than China and India. This contradiction between Doha as a site for climate change salvation and new environmentalism, and that of Doha as the poster child for consumption and consumerism becomes even starker with the observation that Qatari citizens represent under 13 percent of Qatar's total population, with much of the rest extremely poor and disenfranchised workers from south Asia.

Ultimately, as various scholars such as Pacific University's Ahmad Kanna have pointed out, Qatar, the GCC and the Arab region more generally, must be viewed today within the context of an historical struggle between hegemonic social and political formations (reinforced by colonial and neo-colonial structures) and various reform movements within the region that aim for better forms of governance and more equitable societies. The Arab uprisings unleashed the latest



wave of reform movement across the region, one based (at least in part) on the revolutionary potential of genuine democratic change and social equity. This potential has largely been crushed, for now, as powerful reactionary forces across the region move to limit meaningful social change. With time, as social movements in the region regroup to consider longer-term strategies, a new form of environmentalism can take root, one that can genuinely challenge the existing socio-economic and political order in line with other such movements across the region and world. Until then, the Qatar brand can be greatly enhanced if it somehow coaxes COP-18 member states to commit to concrete short and longer-term targets to substantially cut global carbon emissions, and paves the way for a meaningful post-Kyoto climate change regime.

# The People Want Reform... In Qatar, Too



Over the last two years of revolt in the Middle East and North Africa, the Arab Gulf has often been portrayed in the regional and international media as an exception, standing in relative stability outside an “arc of history” struggling towards freedom and democracy. Within this discourse, whatever its merits, Qatar has come to occupy a place even further along the axis of exceptionalism, all the more so as nearly all of its neighbors – Kuwait, Eastern Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Oman – are now experiencing repeated, public signs of deep discontentment, social unrest and various forms of state and popular-led violence.

Although these aspects are still absent in Qatar as of this writing, the desire for reform is not.

One effort by Qataris in this regard is illustrated below in an excerpt from the Introduction to the recently published book, *The People Want Reform In Qatar...Too* [The full Introduction, in Arabic, can be accessed via <http://arabsfordemocracy.org/democracy/pages/view/pageId/2069>; the full Table of Contents for the book is also accessible via <http://arabsfordemocracy.org/democracy/pages/view/pageId/2068>]. Written by the editor of the Arabic-language volume, Dr. Ali Khalifa al-Kuwari, the piece represents a kind of opening salvo for much of the criticism, methodology and aspirations that Dr. Kuwari and the Qatari writers he assembled in weekly meetings over the past year have long directed towards the current system of state-society relations. This time, however, apparently robust private discussions have been turned into an organized series of public analyses and statements. As he describes it:

“Some sixty Qatari citizens with a special interest in the country’s public affairs participated... united by their belief in the need to generate a call for reform in Qatar, which the narrow margin for free expression and debate permitted by the authorities did nothing to facilitate. Perhaps this faint call might reach the ears of the country’s public officials and find a positive response from its decision makers.”

## Dr. Ali Khalifa al-Kuwari

Born in Qatar in 1941, Dr. Ali Khalifah al-Kuwari received a Doctorate in Philosophy from the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Durham in the United Kingdom. Subsequently, he held several academic positions in Qatar and published more than four dozen books and articles in both Arabic, including: *The role of public projects in development, the imbalance of population in the Arab Gulf countries, concerns over oil as a development strategy, the role of dialogue in democracy, the economics of natural gas in Qatar and the Islamic movements relationship to democracy.* Dr. Kuwari has also held a number of positions in the private sector in Qatar, including serving as Vice-Chairman of the Qatar Liquefied Gas company and Vice-Chairman of the National Company for Petroleum Products. The book which he edited and which appears as a short excerpt in this issue of Perspectives, *The People Want Reform...In Qatar Too*, was published in 2012 by the Beirut-based Al-Maaref Forum.

*Covering a wide array of issues – 11 different authors address issues from the weaknesses in the current Qatari Constitution and the overall lack of transparency to population concerns, the Arabic language’s declining role and the dangers of a hydrocarbon heavy economy – the book sometimes struggles with the limitations of its particular environment. Beyond the overall atmosphere of extremely limited free speech, which certainly does little to help an academic or activist effort, references are sometimes made to events and facts which may be “well known” to Qataris but which are difficult to tie to objective, public evidence. Likewise, discussions of population concerns can sometimes seem extremely narrow, even chauvinistic, to the outside observer; perhaps not surprising given both the staggering dynamics of population imbalance as well as the scant input which regular Qataris have evidently had in managing this trend.*

*On the other hand, the book represents an important departure for the country’s politics in its clear demand of the government to involve Qatari citizens in designing policies that deeply affect their lives; in the call for having access to public information, transparency and the right to hold government accountable for the decisions it makes – decisions which, the authors variously acknowledge, affect Qataris as well as external actors in a multitude of sometimes negative ways.*

*Qatar, in short, may not be facing the same kind of extreme trends and daunting choices that so many other Arab countries are struggling with here and now, but some of its citizens, at least, firmly believe that their country’s contradictions are growing fast, threatening the very existence of Qatari society. For Dr. Kuwari, as the excerpt below suggests, this challenge must not only be met by the government and the Emir, but also by engaged Qatari citizens – for which the book represents a first step. Indeed, without both legs, Qatar may well find itself divided and effectively hobbled sooner rather than later, no matter its extraordinary rise to prominence.*

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[...]There is no chance of reform if the current state of general freedoms continues as it is, if transparency remains absent and if public and private finance affairs remain intertwined. The obstacles include the following:

### **Concealing and Preventing the Publication of Information Related to Public Affairs**

The principal observation agreed on by all those present at the Monday meetings (though known about and commented on prior to this initiative) is the concealment of information connected to public affairs in Qatar and the inability to publish anything related to the decision-making process that lies behind official pronouncements. Indeed, the majority of our speakers and commentators lacked precise information and are unaware of the reasons behind public policy choices and the incentives and justifications for the ruler’s commands.

**Qataris are unable to express themselves and are forbidden from influencing current events, participating in building their own future, safeguarding the fate of their society, their identity and their wealth and securing it for future generations.**

This ensures the Qatari people exist in a constant state of surprise at the options taken and the decisions made, as though the public policies and life-changing decisions enacted by the government were a private affair that regular citizens had no right to know about, let alone participate in.

To start with, we find that the government of Qatar does not explain the overall purpose of its population policy, nor does it publish statistics about the number of citizens, their social make-

up, or projections of how their proportion of the overall population will change.

The same approach is found in finance. The estimated national budget is never published in full. Even the current Advisory Council only has the right to examine estimated capital expenditure. The budget's final account is top secret. No one may look at it. The same applies to the report of the state's Audit Bureau (itself answerable to the executive), whose powers do not include examining certain incomes and expenditures of public monies because such data does not come under the authority of the Council of Ministers: It is excepted from their authority and any other form of public oversight.

**Correcting this imbalance requires a transition to a democratic political system governed by a constitution drafted by committee. Only then will Qatar have a contractual constitution. Only then will the people assume their proper place as the ultimate source of authority.**

The same is true of the state's public reserves, investments made with this money and the results of these operations. Citizens hear about Qatar's massive international deals but have no idea if these benefit public finances or private interests. The size of the national debt is neither known nor published, nor the scale and composition of debts guaranteed by the state, which are estimated in the tens of billions of dollars. Reports from the International Monetary Fund's International Institute of Finance indicate that a large part of the income from oil and gas does not appear in the relevant section of the national budget.

Alongside the mystery surrounding the income, expenditure and investment of public wealth, there is the matter of publicly

owned assets, particularly land that has been developed or property confiscated under the Public Interest Law. Many of these lands and properties have passed into private hands either for token, non-competitive prices, or as gifts and bequests. Privately owned hotels, commercial and residential projects and towns are built. The upshot is projects like Souk Waqif, Al-Jasra, Mushairib, Kahraba Street, the fifteen million square meter Education City, the Katara cultural village and the various institutes and projects of the Aspire Zone. The market value of these public properties is in the hundreds of billions.

What of the transparency regarding major public policy decisions, the documents and plans that that will determine the country's present, the fate of society and the future that awaits generations to come?

### **No Public Debate on and Participation in Important Socio-Political Decisions**

We find the public and higher education systems altered on the advice of a study by the Rand Corporation (which also supervises them), in which English is the chief language of instruction and in which society and national studies have been removed from the curriculum. All this has been implemented without any public debate and without the participation of education specialists or the faculty of the University of Qatar. Now we hear of two more projects being put in place: A voucher scheme to replace the provision of free education in government schools and a health insurance scheme for citizens, replacing the government's provision of health services. Education and health have been left to the private sector: a discriminatory private sector into whose maw the government shovels its citizens' social services, absolving itself of responsibility for providing public services through agencies and channels that once served citizens with exemplary levels of care.

The same is true of the rationale behind infrastructure and construction projects and the property sequestration, which has grown into a phenomenon that poses a threat to citizens' sense of stability, their jobs. We have

the Human Resources Law and the decision to convert cooperative associations into commercial companies without any clarification as to why this has been done much less any thought given to its legality [...]

We look on as the railway and metro project is implemented at a cost of forty billion dollars with no public debate, despite the project's vast scale and the statistical errors it is based on. It estimates, for instance, that in ten years Qatar's population will number five million, a growth of 200 percent in a decade. That Qatar's population strategy rests on such improbabilities is positively sinister.

**The Qatari people exist in a constant state of surprise at the options taken and the decisions made, as though the public policies and life-changing decisions enacted by the government were a private affair that regular citizens had no right to know about, let alone participate in.**

Politically, Qatar's constitution was drawn up by government committee without any public debate or discussion: Merely a yes-or-no referendum overseen by the Ministry of the Interior, promoted by the media and meddled with by the executive branch. Qatar's National Vision for 2030, and the National Development Strategy 2011-2016 were both created without any discussion outside government circles. Even the Advisory Council was denied an opportunity to pass judgment on the two documents.

The list goes on: Many more such decisions and public policy choices, including security treaties, military bases and laws that grant residential property purchasers and beneficiaries the right to permanent residence. It is worth pointing out that this last policy, which has no counterpart outside the smaller Gulf states, has

led in Qatar to the construction of residences for around 210,000 permanent residents, not counting those who have travelled to Qatar for work or possess temporary work visas. This at a time when the number of Qatari citizens is estimated at no more than 250,000.

### **Freedom of Opinion and Expression**

The lack of transparency and the concealment of information are linked to a tightening along the margin for free expression and an absence of independent civil society organizations concerned with public affairs, citizens' rights, professional syndicates and workers' unions. These are things the law does not allow. The Associations and Foundations Law will only grant licenses to government officials or those who have received prior approval from the authorities. Indeed, there is a failure to consider requests for setting up associations and foundations that have not received prior approval and in these cases – either because of a failure to consider the request or an outright refusal – there is no recourse to the courts: Only the fruitless option of making a complaint to the Council of Ministers.

It is worth highlighting here that Qatari law does not permit the establishment of political bodies, forums for debate, professional syndicates or trade unions. There are no civil society organizations for human or citizens' rights, nor any association or institution with a focus on public affairs. It is therefore inaccurate to talk about civil society in Qatar: It is those who hold power who set up private bodies to work in the public interest, lavishing public money on them without any oversight. There are many such examples and anyone who has attempted establishing a non-governmental organization will know them.

Freedom of expression is curtailed by a Press Law with excessively severe penalties for journalists, not to mention direct intervention by the executive in installing newspaper editors and appointing individuals in the public and private media sectors without the slightest qualification for their positions.<sup>1</sup>

The lack of freedom of opinion and expression, in addition to the freedom to organize, may be the chief factor in entrenching the lack of transparency, allowing the terrifying official media machine to frame the situation in Qatar until reality is essentially effaced, then to transmit this propaganda abroad, leaving the naïve dazzled, while those in the know chuckle at the passivity of the Qatari people who are deprived of their right to voice an opinion through a strategy of carrots and sticks.

All this at a time when Qataris are unable to express themselves and are forbidden from influencing current events, participating in building their own future, safeguarding the fate of their society, their identity and their wealth and securing it for future generations [...]

### Issues in Need of Reform

These are the principle and most serious imbalances in the current system and the resulting flaws that manifest themselves in all areas of cultural, social, economic and political life. The imbalances that require a process of root-and-branch reform before they can be properly addressed can be summarized as follows:

#### Population Imbalance

The first issue in need of reform is the terminal and mounting population crisis in Qatar, which has led to a drop in the proportion of Qatari citizens from 40 percent in 1970 to just 12 percent by 2010. At the same time, the workforce rose from 323,000 in 2001 to 1.265 million in 2009, while over the same period the proportion of Qatari citizens in the workforce dropped from 14 percent to six percent. This makes it the most serious and pressing challenge in need of radical reform and the most deserving.

If Qataris are unable to apply pressure to halt this growing imbalance and begin gradual reform, their natural position at the head of society will fall away and they will be rendered incapable of reforming the other and newer problems. Indeed, they will be transformed into a deprived and marginalized minority in their own land.

The perpetuation of this growing imbalance threatens to uproot Qatari society, to erase its identity and culture, to take its mother tongue, Arabic, out of circulation, and erode the role of its citizens in owning and running their own country. Local citizens constitute the leaders and administrators in every other country in the world, particularly in public administration.

It is worth noting here that the issue of population imbalance has long been recognized by both civil society and the authorities. Its reform has been a constant refrain for the last fifty years, culminating in the National Development Strategy 2011-2016, which signaled a radical change in the official attitude towards the problem. The population imbalance was now an issue not to be spoken of, if not positively abjured. Everything is now discussed in terms of “population” and citizens and the proportion of that overall population that they represent is not mentioned.

This change in tack transforms Qataris from citizens, with corresponding rights, to a dwindling class of the population, forced to compete with immigrants for job opportunities, education and social services, all in a language not their own, even as they remain deprived for one reason or another of their political rights.

The new Nationality Law from 2005, of dubious constitutionality, paves the way for this transformation of citizens into inhabitants who enjoy none of their rights of citizenship. It does this by permanently depriving citizens who have acquired Qatari citizenship (about one third of all citizens) and their descendants of all political rights. At the same time, the current constitution fails to guarantee effective political rights to the remaining two-thirds of Qataris who are citizens by birth: Such scant political rights as there were are currently in abeyance courtesy of Article 150.

We call for urgent reform of this deplorable situation. The above-mentioned demographic change makes it necessary to rethink policies and adapt strategies.

The principle factor behind this worsening imbalance is an official policy brought into operation in 2004 which aimed to expand

the property market and institute vast new developments (along with the infrastructure required to support them) by means of marketing property investments by granting buyers permanent residence in Qatar, regardless whether their skills were required by the workforce or the country's ability to absorb them. The perpetuation of this imbalance is thus not only caused by the traditional demand for immigrant workers but also an indefensible official policy. New towns and residential zones were constructed, not for citizens or immigrant workers, but for an entirely new population encouraged to invest in property in return for residence for themselves and their families, without the need to possess work visas like other incomers.

Nor is this imbalance acceptable from a patriotic perspective. Nothing comparable can be found in other another country in the world, great or small, with the exception of our neighbors, the United Arab Emirates, and may God forgive their rulers and ours.

There is no people or society on earth capable of absorbing more immigrants than they have citizens, so what to make of Qatar where the figure is eight times higher? Even so, activities on the international property market continue, as does expenditure on infrastructure and educational services that Qataris not only do not need, but which are not intended for them in the first place, all of which leads to a greater influx of immigrants that further erodes the status of citizens, erasing their identity and extirpating their language.

### **Economic Imbalance**

The economic imbalance results from an almost absolute – and growing – reliance on income derived from exporting Qatar's abundant natural resources of raw petroleum (oil and natural gas). The country's main source of income is the profit resulting from an oil price ten times higher than the cost of production. It is most evident in any breakdown of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP): The source of all income is the profit

made on exporting a natural resource and not the productivity of individuals and institutions, as is the case in a production economy.

To appreciate the extent of this imbalance we must imagine the state of Qatar's income and standard of living if oil yields were removed. We would not find the revenue sources to supply even a small part of our daily needs. Indeed, all our oil and gas funded activities would grind to a halt and our cities would become ghost cities.

Because of the lack of desire (or perhaps, inability) of individual oil-producing nations such as Qatar to adopt national policies in which oil exports are subordinate to development goals, they have responded to world demand for oil in a random and unpredictable fashion. The state rushes to increase production without any serious economic or social research or the slightest regard for their capacity or the available oil reserves.

Qatar has raised its production of liquid natural gas (LNG) to 77 million tons per year, making it one of the top two suppliers in the world, without looking at alternative economic approaches or alternative uses for LNG, nor taking into consideration consequences and responsibilities. This has only increased reliance on oil and gas revenue, which has become the sole source of GDP, the only source of revenue in the national budget and thus of public expenditure and development and other national projects. Furthermore it has encouraged risk and wastefulness in addition to promoting foreign and local investments whose impact on the national interest and economy has not been properly researched.

This on-going imbalance has been accompanied by an interpenetration of public and private wealth and lack of transparency, which treats oil and gas yields, the budget and public reserves as a state secret not to be divulged to Qatari citizens. This has led to a great deal of waste and misappropriation of oil revenue for purposes of short-term expenditure instead of long-term investment. Policies for the investment of oil revenue remain backward due to the failure



to link the expenditure of public funds with an understanding of the economic and national benefits they might bring [...]

### Political Imbalance

Qatar's political imbalance in the relationship between the government and its people is best expressed in the phrase, "a more than absolute authority and a less than powerless people." The authorities in Qatar monopolize the decision-making process with no effective political participation on the part of citizens [...]. It was hoped that the National Vision and National Strategy would make priorities of both political development and the necessity of transitioning to a constitutionally supported democracy. Perhaps they would offer a vision and plan for this long-awaited political reform.

Reading the National Vision for Qatar 2030 we find that it does not mention political reform and political and cultural development in its discussion of the vision's cornerstones. Neither do we find any discussion of these issues in the National Development Strategy 2011-2016.

Correcting this imbalance requires a transition to a democratic political system governed by a constitution drafted by committee. Only then will Qatar have a contractual constitution. Only then will the people assume their proper place as the ultimate source of authority, guided by the generous principles of Islamic Law, the human rights treaties to which Qatar is a signatory and the values of the political system shared by all democratic countries [...]

\* Translated from Arabic by Robin Moger.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Editor's Note: In late October 2012, Human Rights Watch (HRW) urged the Emir of Qatar not to approve a draft media law "unless loosely worded provisions penalizing criticism of Qatar or neighboring governments are removed... The draft law builds in a double standard on free expression that is inconsistent with Qatar's claims to be a center for media freedom in the region." HRW, as well as a number of press freedom organizations, also pointed to the imprisonment of Qatari poet Muhammad Ibn al-Dheeb al-Ajami since November 2011 as evidence of "Qatar's double standard on freedom of expression." On October 22, a judge postponed al-Dheeb's trial for the fifth time. He faces charges of "inciting the overthrow of the ruling regime," which carries the death penalty under Article 130 of the penal code in Qatar.

# 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.

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.

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,

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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 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

**Saudi Arabia has always lurked in the background during the five forced transfers of power witnessed in Qatar in the 20th century .**

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) [...]

**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.**

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.

\* Translated from Arabic by IndustryArabic.com. A longer version of this article - first published in two parts on July 30 and August 6, 2012 - is accessible via <http://www.assaafir.com/Article.aspx?ArticleId=2961&EditionId=2216&ChannelId=53140> and also <http://www.assaafir.com/Article.aspx?ArticleId=466&EditionId=2222&ChannelId=53290>.

# Migrant Worker Rights Ahead of the 2022 World Cup



Construction workers pause at a Doha job site

## Nadim Houry

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Qatar's growing ambition is hard to miss. From the ubiquitous yellow Qatar Foundation billboards in airports across the world, to Al-Jazeera's expanding reach, to its emergence as a major sponsor of the arts, to its recent rise on foreign policy issues, the country is making headlines. No wonder the Economist magazine called it in November 2011 a "Pygmy with the punch of a giant."

One of the country's crowning achievements was winning the bid to host the 2022 Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) World Cup, one of the world's largest sporting events. According to some estimates, Qatar will spend US\$100 billion over the next few years on infrastructure projects to support the World Cup. Its winning bid included commitments to build nine state-of-the-art stadiums equipped with cooling technology to beat soaring summer temperatures, a new airport, \$20 billion worth of new roads, \$4 billion for a causeway connecting

Qatar to Bahrain, \$24 billion for a high-speed rail network, and 55,000 new hotel rooms to accommodate visiting fans.

To succeed in its ambitions, Qatar is relying on a small army of migrant workers—1.2 million workers—who comprise a staggering 94 percent of Qatar's workforce (the highest percentage of migrants to citizens in the world).<sup>1</sup> And Qatar's World Cup selection means that worker recruitment will reach new heights as the government brings in hundreds of thousands of additional workers to carry out new construction.

And yet, while Qatar adds new workers at staggering speeds, its recruitment and employment system do not offer these migrants basic rights. In 2011, Human Rights Watch (HRW) visited six labor camps in the Doha Industrial Area and in Al-Khor, a town approximately 50 kilometers north of Doha, and interviewed 73 migrant construction workers. Twenty minutes away from Doha's gleaming



new skyline, we found workers who slept in unclean, overcrowded barracks, sometimes with no mattresses or air-conditioning, in a country where summer temperatures routinely exceed 40 degrees Celsius. The vast majority of workers reported that employers confiscated their passports, making it difficult for some to leave the country or return home freely. Many said that their working conditions or salaries differed significantly from what they had agreed to before leaving their home countries. Many also reported having borrowed heavily to pay fees charged by recruiters in their countries of origin and needing to work for months or years in Qatar just to pay off these debts.

These abuses are made possible by an inadequate legal and regulatory framework that grants employers extensive control over workers, leaves workers vulnerable to exploitation during the recruitment process and provides little effective redress.

### **A Restrictive Sponsorship System**

Qatar has one of the most restrictive sponsorship laws in the Gulf region, as workers cannot change jobs without their employer's permission and all workers must get their sponsoring employer to sign an "exit permit" before they can leave the country.<sup>2</sup> While other GCC countries such as Kuwait and Bahrain have amended labor legislation to allow migrant workers to transfer sponsorship to a new employer after a set period of time without having to seek an employer's consent (in Kuwait, three years, and in Bahrain, one year), in Qatar workers have no right to transfer sponsorship without their employer's consent regardless of how long they have worked for that employer. The law grants the Interior Ministry authority to temporarily transfer sponsorship when there are lawsuits pending between a sponsor and his employees and the Ministry can grant workers permanent transfer of sponsorship "in the event of abuse by the employer or as required by the public interest." However, we found that workers have only a remote chance of taking advantage of these

provisions. According to data provided by Qatar's Ministry of Labor, there have been only 89 cases in which a migrant worker has permanently changed sponsors between 2009 and 2011.

In addition, while Qatar's Sponsorship Law prohibits the confiscation of passports, almost all workers we interviewed reported that their passports had been confiscated by their employers upon arrival. Labor Ministry officials told us that labor inspectors do not monitor passport confiscation, and showed little concern for curbing this widespread practice.

**The real challenge for Qatar is not going to be whether it succeeds in building beautiful stadiums or enough hotel rooms. The real test is whether it will succeed in doing so without trampling on the rights of hundreds of thousands of workers.**

In May 2012, Deputy Labor Minister Hussein al-Mulla announced that Qatar may replace the sponsorship system with contracts between employers and employees, but failed to specify how these contracts would impact the current sponsorship system.<sup>3</sup> On October 3rd, Qatar's cabinet ordered the establishment of a committee that would study the sponsorship rules. But so far, no changes have been made and there is no information about a timetable for abolishing the sponsorship system.<sup>4</sup>

### **Labor Laws: Inadequate and Often Not Enforced**

Qatar's 2004 Labor Law provides, on its face, some strong protections for workers in the country but also has significant gaps and weaknesses, including no minimum wage, a ban on migrant workers unionizing or engaging in collective bargaining and the complete exclusion of domestic workers.<sup>5</sup>

Workers' top complaints to us focused on wages, which typically ranged from \$8 to \$11 for between nine and eleven hours of grueling outdoors work each day. This is typically less than what recruitment agents had promised workers in their home countries, and workers said it did not adequately cover their food costs and recruitment loan fees.

Even with the prevailing low salary levels, many workers reported that their employers arbitrarily deducted from their salaries, while some said that their employers had not paid them for months. Qatar's Labor Law requires companies to pay workers' salaries monthly, and the Ministry of Labor told us that the "the Ministry conducts monthly inspections of all companies

**While Qatar adds new workers at staggering speeds, its recruitment and employment system do not offer these migrants basic rights.**

and institutions and audits their accounts to ensure that workers receive their wages." Yet, a 2011 study by the Qatar National Human Rights Committee – an official state commission – that surveyed 1,114 migrant workers in the country found that 33.9 percent of workers surveyed said they were not paid on a regular basis.<sup>6</sup>

Some workers also told us they worked under unhealthy and often dangerous conditions, doing construction work on roofs or high scaffolding without safety ropes, or working in trenches or enclosed pipes where they risked suffocation. The Ministry of Labor informed Human Rights Watch that only six workers had died in work-related accidents during the last three years, and that all deaths had been caused by falls. However, this contrasts sharply with information received from home country embassies, which indicate a much higher death rate. For example, the Nepali embassy reported to local media that of the 191 Nepali workers who died in Qatar in 2010, 19 died as a result of worksite accidents.

A further 103 died after suffering cardiac arrest, though workers do not fall into the typical age group at risk of cardiac failure. The Indian embassy reported 98 Indian migrant deaths, including 45 deaths of young, low-income workers due to cardiac arrest in the first half of 2012.<sup>7</sup>

Living conditions for workers are often abysmal. Qatari regulations on worker accommodation state that no more than four workers should be housed in a room, that space provided for each worker must be at least four square meters, and that employers should not provide "double beds" (bunk beds) for workers.<sup>8</sup> However, this is not the case in practice. Most migrant construction workers in Qatar live in what are called "labor camps," or communal accommodations meant to house large groups of workers. Some companies maintain company camps, while others rent space for their workers in camps owned and maintained by another company. While some workers said they lived in clean rooms with adequate space and good facilities, many lived in cramped and unsanitary conditions. At all six of the labor camps we visited, rooms housed between eight and 18 workers, and some workers reported sleeping in rooms with as many as 25 other people. At one of the labor camps we visited in Doha's Industrial Area, workers slept on wooden planks, rather than foam mattresses.

Qatar's laws make it hard on workers to challenge their working conditions by prohibiting them from unionizing or striking. Such restrictions are a clear violation of the core labor right of free association. In May 2012, the Ministry of Labor proposed to set up the country's first labor union, but the government's proposal fails to meet minimum requirements for free association by restricting all decision-making positions to Qatari citizens.<sup>9</sup> In September 2012, international trade unions – the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and the Building and Woodworkers' International (BWI), which claim to represent 175 million workers in 153 countries – filed a complaint to the International Labour Organization (ILO) that Qatar's refusal to allow

migrant workers to freely unionize violates international standards and is responsible for the country's high rate of workplace deaths. The international trade unions threatened to launch a global boycott of the 2022 World Cup if Qatar fails to comply with internationally recognized labor standards.<sup>10</sup>

### **An Abusive Recruitment System**

Migrant workers obtain jobs in Qatar through two main routes. Some workers approach recruitment agencies in their home countries, which work either with Qatar-based recruitment agencies or contract directly with employers in Qatar to provide requested manpower. Other workers find jobs through personal contacts in Qatar whose

**These abuses are made possible by an inadequate legal and regulatory framework that grants employers extensive control over workers, leaves workers vulnerable to exploitation during the recruitment process and provides little effective redress.**

employer has asked them to recruit others for jobs.

Qatari law prohibits employers and manpower agents from charging recruitment fees, yet 69 of the 73 workers interviewed by HRW had paid recruitment fees of between \$726 and \$3,651, usually after borrowing the money from private moneylenders at prohibitive interest rates. To pay for these fees, many workers told us that they mortgaged their homes or sold off family property, and thus faced tremendous pressure to stay in their jobs regardless of the conditions.

The Qatari government pins responsibility for the problem of workers' recruitment fees almost exclusively upon agencies abroad and protection gaps in labor-sending countries. However, a recent World Bank study indicates that, in some cases, the fees paid outside of Qatar appear to

go to Qatari agencies in the end. A 2011 World Bank study on migration from Nepal to Qatar estimated that 43 percent of the fees workers paid to recruitment agencies in Nepal actually went to middlemen or recruitment agencies in Qatar, compared to the 12 percent that went to Nepali agents.<sup>11</sup>

### **Inadequate Monitoring and Redress Mechanisms**

Critical elements of any protection scheme include effective monitoring of employers, work sites, and labor camps, as well as accessible mechanisms for timely redress. But Qatar's current system of labor inspection and complaints reporting fails to provide effective protection against abuse and exploitation in the construction industry.

Qatar's current system for protecting workers relies heavily upon individual workers to present complaints of abuse or violation. However, many workers told us that they remained reluctant to bring complaints to the Labor Complaints Department because they expected that once they did so, their sponsor would terminate the employment relationship and they would no longer be able to work in Qatar. With no alternate source of income and no place to live should they complain, many workers tolerate exploitation and abuse rather than face the alternative. A June 2011 study from Qatar's National Human Rights Committee found that "in most cases, if not all, the workers usually do not submit any complaints to the concerned authorities (police, the Department of Labor, the National Commission for Human Rights...etc.) for fear of losing their jobs or expulsion or deportation from the Country."

Qatar's labor ministry has taken positive steps to inform migrant workers of their rights by publishing an informational booklet for migrant workers, and requesting local embassies' assistance in translating the information into workers' native languages. Labor ministry officials informed us that they have conducted "know your rights" seminars for workers, and conducted outreach through local media. However, more efforts could be done to facilitate complaint mechanisms. At present, both the Labor Ministry

hotline and the Labor Complaints Department provide services only in Arabic, a language rarely spoken by workers who migrate to Qatar for low-wage jobs in the construction sector. In addition, Qatar's labor inspections unit employs only 150 labor inspectors to monitor compliance with Qatar's Labor Law and accompanying regulations. The head of the Labor Ministry's Legal Affairs Unit told us that inspectors speak Arabic and sometimes English, but none speak languages commonly spoken by migrant workers in the country and that inspections do not include interviews with workers. The obvious consequence is a disconnect between the Labor Ministry's information and the realities of life for many workers.

### A Way Forward

The real challenge for Qatar is not going to be whether it succeeds in building beautiful stadiums or enough hotel rooms. The real test is whether it will succeed in doing so without trampling on the rights of hundreds of thousands of workers. The local organizing committee for the tournament, the Supreme Committee for Qatar 2022 (the "2022 Committee"), as well as the company it appointed to help it oversee World Cup construction, CH2M HILL, have said they will establish labor standards that builders and

**If Qatar wants to be a trailblazer, it should be the first country in the region to abolish the sponsorship system.**

other contractors hired to build World Cup venues must meet. The 2022 Committee's Secretary General Hassan al-Thawadi, during a January 2012 address at Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar, stated that, "there are labor issues here in the country, but Qatar is committed to reform. We will require that contractors impose a clause

to ensure that international labor standards are met." These broad commitments are a beginning but additional steps are needed. Qatar should require private contractors involved in World Cup-related construction to set minimum labor standards in line with Qatari law and international labor standards. Any minimum standards that Qatar sets and enforces for contractors should strictly prohibit the confiscation of workers' passports and require that contractors take all possible steps to ensure that workers do not pay recruiting fees or reimburse workers who do pay them. Qatar should also engage independent labor monitors to publicly report on contractors' compliance with the laws and ensure that contractors who violate them face material and prohibitive sanctions. But if Qatar really wants to be a trailblazer, it should be the first country in the region to abolish the sponsorship system.

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Qatar's 2010 census figures reported 74,087 economically active Qataris over the age of 15 and 1,201,884 economically active non-Qataris. Census 2010, pp.12-13, 19, Qatar Statistics Authority, available via [www.qsa.gov.qa](http://www.qsa.gov.qa)
- <sup>2</sup> Law No. 4 of 2009 Regulating the Entry and Exit of Expatriates, their Residency and Sponsorship (the "Sponsorship Law").
- <sup>3</sup> "Qatar may allow trade unions, scrap 'sponsorships' for foreign workers," Gulf News, May 1, 2012, available via <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/qatar/qatar-may-allow-trade-unions-scrap-sponsorships-for-foreign-workers-1.1016594>.
- <sup>4</sup> "Qatar: Cabinet forms panel to study sponsorship," The Peninsula, October 4, 2012, available via <http://www.menafn.com/menafn/1093565993/Qatar-Cabinet-forms-panel-to-study-sponsorship>.
- <sup>5</sup> Law No. 14 of the year 2004 promulgating the Labor Law. Article Three states that, "the provisions of this law shall not apply to the following categories [...] 4) the persons employed in domestic employment such as nurses, cooks, nannies, gardeners, and similar workers."
- <sup>6</sup> Qatar National Human Rights Committee, Study on the Conditions of Unskilled Labor Force in the Construction Sector in Qatar, "Executive Summary" (Doha: National Human Rights Committee, 2011), p.13. On file with Human Rights Watch.
- <sup>7</sup> See Human Rights Watch, "Building a Better World Cup," June 12, 2012, available via <http://www.hrw.org/node/107841/section/6>.
- <sup>8</sup> Decree of the Minister for Civil Service and Residential Affairs No.18 of 2005, parts 2 and 3.
- <sup>9</sup> "Qatar to set up first labor union," UPI, May 22, 2012, available via [http://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/World-News/2012/05/22/Qatar-to-set-up-first-labor-union/UPI-58501337693591/](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2012/05/22/Qatar-to-set-up-first-labor-union/UPI-58501337693591/).
- <sup>10</sup> "Global Pressure Builds on Qatar World Cup," September 28, 2012, available via <http://www.equaltimes.org/news/global-pressure-builds-on-qatar-world-cup>.
- <sup>11</sup> The Qatar-Nepal Remittance Corridor: Enhancing the Impact and Integrity of Remittance Flows by Reducing Inefficiencies in the Migration Process, (Washington DC: World Bank, 2011), p.9.

# Domestic Violence Legislation and Reform Efforts in Qatar

Recently a group of law students at Qatar University proposed a law that would criminalize domestic violence. The proposed legislation was the end result of a legal clinic on domestic violence. Students developed an interest in the issue as a result of a course they took on family law that was offered by a visiting scholar. The students started organizing workshops on the weekends to collect additional information on issues dealing with women. As a result of this interest, the Law School agreed to offer a class specifically on



domestic violence. Soon students wanted some forum to apply the theoretical work that they had covered in class. The end result was a year-long clinic on domestic violence. During this clinic, students looked at domestic violence legislation in other Arab and Muslim states, as well as met with different practitioners, including social workers, psychologists, judges and lawyers. During the clinic, the wife of the Emir of Qatar, Sheikha Moza, made a point of stopping by the class during a campus visit. Her visit gave tremendous support to the students involved in these efforts and more importantly showed that at least one powerful person supported the students' initiative. The final result of this effort was a formal draft of proposed legislation that

students will submit to the Supreme Council on the Family, to be used as a guide in adopting a new law criminalizing domestic violence in Qatar. If ratified, this law would be a first for Qatar, and first for the Gulf states.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has argued that, "one of the most common forms of violence against women is that performed by a husband or male partner. This type of violence is frequently invisible since it happens behind closed doors, and effectively, when legal systems and cultural norms do not treat domestic violence as a crime, but rather as a 'private' family matter, or a normal part of life." Gender-based violence was defined in 1993 by the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women as "[a]ny act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life."

Demands for a law on domestic violence in the Arab region are increasing with the escalation in the number of domestic violence victims. These demands were long postponed due to the sensitivity of this issue within the region.

Arab states share a number of cultural and social beliefs that influence the manner in which society members conduct their affairs with each other. The authority and superiority that is often both assumed by men, and granted them in most Arab societies is an example of such beliefs. Customs and traditions play a strong role in shaping people's views of what is considered wrong or right; so when it comes to domestic violence, the already established social roles and character affect the public's understanding

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and interpretation of what is considered to be domestic violence.

**Placing the law under the jurisdiction of a criminal court will not only criminalize the act, but will also go a long way in changing societal conceptions that this is in fact a crime and should be dealt with as a crime.**

Given these barriers, thus far only two states in the Middle East have adopted laws against domestic violence. In Jordan, the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence was approved by the parliament in 2008. Provisions of the law assign special departments in different ministries to deal with cases of domestic violence, including the Ministries of Health, Education, Justice and Social Development. It describes the basic measures to be taken to protect family members from domestic violence. The law obliges citizens and service providers to report both witnessed, and suspected abuse cases. Furthermore, it assigns the Ministry of Social Affairs to be the responsible governmental entity to provide shelter services for victims of domestic violence.<sup>1</sup> A few problems still exist with this law, including the fact it still does not criminalize domestic violence.

Tunisian women on the other hand, enjoy a fair amount of protection against domestic violence under the new law. In cases involving acts of violence, the Tunisian Penal Code increases the punishment by one year of imprisonment and 1,000 Tunisian Dinars, if the attacker is a spouse or relative of the victim.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, female victims of domestic violence have the right to file for divorce; she also has a right to a place of residence, financial support, custody and a financial compensation for any emotional or material damages.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Tunisian law criminalizes marital rape, and is punishable by death.

As in other parts of the world, gender-based violence occurs in Qatar, and, as in other parts of the world, violence against women is justified on the basis of religion, culture, social expectations or through blaming the victim. A recent study that was conducted on the issue over the past four decades found that in Europe, 45% of women had experienced some form of gender-based violence. As elsewhere in the world, the actual numbers of cases of domestic violence is very difficult to obtain. Even though organizations such as the Qatar Foundation for Child and Women Protection (QFCWP) report the number of cases that they receive each year, not surprisingly there are still cases of unreported domestic violence. Of course this is not unique to Qatar. Women worldwide have been reluctant to report cases of abuse for different reasons. As a result, the data available for Qatar is unreliable. Having said that, we can still ascertain certain issues and trends by looking at the reported cases that are available.

#### **The Qatar Foundation for Child and Women Protection**

QFCWP, was founded in 2002 by Sheikha Moza in her capacity as the President of the Supreme Council for Family Affairs. QFCWP was set up not only to help address issues resulting from gender based violence, it also has a mandate to provide psychological, legal, and financial support to victims of gender based violence. QFCWP documented 521 cases of domestic violence against women by the end of September 2012. This represents a significant increase in the numbers of annual reported cases since the organization first released information in 2004, when only 25 cases were reported. This increase could be due to several factors, including the efforts of organizations such as QFCWP, increased awareness, and increased higher educational attainment of women in Qatar. This is why continuous research about the attitudes of people towards issues related to gender-based violence is essential in any society. The increased number of researchers, and significantly the ones commissioned by state agencies to study these

issues, reflect an important effort by the state to not only highlight these cases and convince society to acknowledge these important issues, but also reflects a determination by the state to finally criminalize gender based violence. It is especially encouraging that government agencies and government-sponsored NGOs (GONGOS) have been alarmed by the rise in the rate of domestic violence, and have showed a determination to try to deal with the issue. Although such issues would fall under the domain of civil society, for the most part these GONGOS have taken the lead on such issues. Public awareness campaigns by these GONGOS have been instrumental in raising awareness among the public. Indeed, these measures are important preliminary steps before the introduction of a law criminalizing domestic violence: Changing the mindset of people is essential for any legislation to work.

The limited body of literature on the phenomenon of domestic violence in Qatar

**Whenever government security bodies, such as the police, are called for a case involving domestic violence, they often urge the female victim not to file an official complaint.**

is attributed to different factors. Mainly, these factors contribute to the unreliability of any available representative data. One of the most important factors is the refusal, or the reluctance of women to file an official complaint or a police report. There are obvious social as well as family considerations, if not pressure, brought to bear on women to not come forward and report an issue that is seen by both society, as well as the police, as a private issue that could cause a scandal in this traditional Arab society. Even in situations when the battered woman has gathered enough courage to call the police, she is often confronted with a policeman who will insist that she reconsider filing an official

complaint out of concern that her name would appear in an official document, which may also cause scandal. The women in these cases are often cajoled into settling for a signed pledge from her abuser that he will no longer beat her.

Another important factor that contributes to domestic violence going unreported is the lack of awareness among women about their rights. Some women take the abuse and remain silent because either they are not educated about their rights and actual obligations at home or lack the sufficient knowledge about their legal rights in courts. Moreover, some women accept violence and believe that it is inappropriate to stand against the husband, or any family member, in a court. This reluctance reflects a cultural norm that obliges women to obey and respect their male relatives.

### Religious Considerations

A final factor contributing to domestic violence is the overlap between culture and Islamic understanding, along with a misunderstanding, of Islamic law. Patriarchal interpretations of the Quran constitute the mainstream school followed by many Muslims around the world. This understanding also encourages men to commit violence, as they believe that Islam guarantees this right and provides them with immunity.

Most of the Islamic justification rests on only one *ayah* of the Quran. Verse 4:34 of the Quran has even been used by some religious scholars to justify wife beating. The verse states that:

*“Men are the qawwam and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more strength than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient, and guard in the husband’s absence what Allah would have them guard. As to those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and ill-conduct, admonish them first; next, refuse to share their beds; and last beat them lightly; but if they return to obedience, seek not against*

*them Means of annoyance: For Allah is Most High, great above you all.”<sup>4</sup>*

The meaning of the terms in Arabic has been an issue of major debate. For example the meaning of *qawwam* has been interpreted in a various ways, from superior, to financially obligated to provide for poorer women. This could also have consequence on the entire meaning of the verse. The scholar Nawal H. Ammar identifies at least four different interpretations of this verse. The interpretations range from one who “sees wife beating as permissible if a wife does not obey her husband” to one who “understands Islam as permitting wife beating but with conditions of consideration for her safety.” Yet others interpret the verse by, “acknowledging exceptions when wife beating is allowed because it is generally unacceptable.” Ammar also argues that there are those Muslim scholars who claim that Verse 4:34 “has been misunderstood and does not even refer to beating when using the Arabic word *idribuhunna*.” There have been several recent attempts at deconstructing the Arabic term *idribuhunna*, which comes from the root (d-r-b) which has various meanings including to beat, or to forsake or to leave.

This verse has served as the main source of religious justification for spousal abuse. Having said that, most prominent scholars agree that any physical punishment of a wife should be symbolic and not meant to cause any physical harm or pain.

In Qatari society, as in many other Muslim societies, this verse remains one of the most important justifications for gender-based violence. The intentional misinterpretation of the Verse has allowed the extent of violence not only to be more prevalent than any other time in the history of the region, but it appears to be becoming more socially acceptable as well. In a 2007 groundbreaking study sponsored by the Supreme Council on the Family, Dr. Kaltham al-Ghanim conducted a study in which she discovered 23 percent of the respondents were subjected to some form of violence. In the same study she recorded that the rate among the married respondents was higher at

24 percent. Of those subjected to violence, 64 percent stated that the violence took the form of beatings, and 1.2 percent indicated that they experienced sexual violence in the form of rape. Dr. Ghanim’s study also discusses the difficulties in reporting cases of violence. She argues that, “in a culture such as that of Qatar, where women are expected to uphold the family’s honor, it is unacceptable to reveal anything that might bring shame and dishonor on the family or the tribe. Since governmental security bodies are part of this cultural context, their performance is restricted by the social attitudes, rendering their statistics inaccurate and their enforcement of laws against violence ineffective.” In addition, whenever governmental security bodies, such as the police, are called for a case involving domestic violence, they often urge the female victim not to file an official complaint, and just settle for a written promise from the perpetrator that he will never use violence again. This approach is taken, the female victim is told, to help her and her family avoid any possible scandal. The pressure on the female victim to keep quiet is understandably more intense if the perpetrator is from the same family, such as a brother, or in a situation of wife battery, if the woman is married to a cousin.

More recently, in 2010, the Social and

**There are obvious social as well as family considerations, if not pressure, brought to bear on women to not come forward and report an issue that is seen by both society, as well as the police, as a private issue that could cause a scandal.**

Economic Survey Research Institute (SESRI) at Qatar University conducted a face to face interview with 689 Qatari nationals, and asked the following question: “It is normal for husbands and wives to have differences and



argue sometimes. Sometimes, husbands may reprimand their wives, and some husbands may beat their wives. In your opinion, is it justifiable for a husband to be hitting or beating his wives (under the following conditions)?” The respondents were then presented with six different situations including: “a) If the wife goes out to market without telling him; b) if the wife visits friends without telling him; c) if the wife visits relatives without telling him, d) if the wife neglects children; e) if she shows disrespect towards her husband; and f) if she shows disrespect for parents-in-law.” The survey results showed that there is still a significant segment of the population that justifies wife beating. Almost 33 percent of male respondents along with 24.2 percent of female respondents justified wife beating for at least one of the reasons mentioned in the survey. These kind of results were also comparable to the results found in Dr. Ghanem’s 2008 report which showed that 13.5 percent of the sample subjects totaling 1,117 persons accepted violence against women, believing in the superior authority of men.

### Moving Forward?

Recent legal reforms by the state of Qatar have highlighted the state’s desire to reduce the rates of domestic violence in the country. Spearheaded by Sheikha Moza, the Supreme Council for Family Affairs was formally established in 1998 to deal with issues that could jeopardize the safety and security of the family, chiefly among them issues dealing with domestic violence. Through the Supreme Council for Family Affairs, a legal reform agenda was pushed over the last decade and a half that has led to some change in the political atmosphere of Qatar.

Most significantly, however, in 2006 the government passed the Qatari Family Law that represents an important advance in the rights of women in Qatar when it comes to issues of marriage, divorce, maintenance, custody and inheritance. Indeed, before 2006, when deciding on cases related to these issues, judges had full discretion to interpret Islamic Sharia according to their own personal interpretation. The result

was decisions that were inconsistent and more frequently prejudicial to women. In the process of codifying family law, all the rights and rules related to it were decided and standardized based on a consensus of scholars and judges, in accordance with Sharia. Although this of course did not solve many outstanding issues related to women’s rights under Sharia, women and their children were no longer as vulnerable to the many different Sharia interpretations of individual judges.<sup>5</sup>

Additionally, the Supreme Council for the Family has been instrumental in supporting some of the research done on the topic, including the research conducted by Dr. Ghanem. Another important step has been the inclusion of the need to deal with the increasing rate of domestic violence in the 2011-2016 Qatar National Strategy. This is Qatar’s first strategic plan or action plan to achieve the goals set out by the Emir’s 2030 vision. The strategy proposes the adoption of legislation that criminalizes domestic violence. According to the action plan “The government will reduce domestic violence by establishing a comprehensive protection system that ensures privacy, protection and support for victims as well as anyone reporting violent incidents, establish help centres, streamline data collection methods and, most important, criminalize domestic violence.”<sup>6</sup>

In the struggle against domestic violence, it is important to establish the exact jurisdiction under the law. If it is relegated to family law courts it will be more difficult to criminalize them. Applying the law will also be left up to the personal interpretation of the family court judge, and his interpretations of Verse 4:34. Placing the law under the jurisdiction of criminal court will not only criminalize the act, but will also go a long way in changing societal conceptions that this is in fact a crime and should be dealt with as a crime. For any legal reform to work, it is vital that these cases are criminalized and are placed under the jurisdiction of civil criminal courts and not Sharia courts. This change would also go a long way in dealing with the issue of underreporting, since once the act is

criminalized it is more likely that a female victim will come forth, and even more likely that her family will be supportive of that decision.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> *Violence against Women Assessing the Situation in Jordan*: UN, 2009. Accessible via [http://www.un.org/womenwatch/ianwge/taskforces/vaw/VAW\\_Jordan\\_baseline\\_assessment\\_final.pdf](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/ianwge/taskforces/vaw/VAW_Jordan_baseline_assessment_final.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> "If the attacker is a relative or spouse of the victim, the punishment shall be a term of imprisonment of two years and a fine of 2,000 dinars." Tunisian Penal Code, Article 218.

<sup>3</sup> The Personal Status Code, Article 31.

<sup>4</sup> Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Quran: Translation and Commentary*, (Lahore: 1937, Saudi Revision).

<sup>5</sup> To date, Saudi Arabia, which also follows the Hanbali school of Islamic law like Qatar, has not codified family status issues unlike all other GCC states.

<sup>6</sup> Qatar National Strategy 2011-2016 published by The Qatar General Secretariat for Development Planning, March 2011.

# Qatar and the Arab Spring

During most of their post-independence lifetimes, small and weak Arab states used to surrender the business of intricate regional politics to their bigger and stronger brothers. In the Arab region of the eastern Mediterranean, Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Saudi Arabia would take the lead and the rest would follow. In North Africa, Algeria and Morocco would, more or less, play the same role. Smaller states would consequently be enticed, or forced, to join rival alliances with this “big brother” or that. Zooming into the Gulf area specifically, Saudi Arabia used to hash out regional political routes then shepherd other smaller states in their directions. Saudi leadership enjoyed bold endorsement with the formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1981 bringing six Gulf countries (UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain in addition to Saudi Arabia) under a regional cooperative umbrella. The GCC, although a loose system that falls far short of full integration, was meant to bring nervous Arab Gulf countries together in order to face up to the rising threats of Iranian and Iraqi regional ambitions especially after the 1979 triumph of the Islamic revolution in Iran. Within this broad context, Qatar was part of the Saudi axis, and remained so until 1995 when its current Emir, Hamad Bin Khalifa al-Thani, overthrew his father in a bloodless palace coup, changing Qatar’s fortunes and politics radically, and perhaps for quite some time. Since then, Qatar broke ranks with its Arab big brothers, especially Saudi Arabia, and started formulating its own independent foreign policy. Over the following years, a combination of young ambitious leadership and enormous wealth transformed what used to be a negligible small

peninsula into an assertive political actor in the region.

Yet the radical change that was brought about by the Emir continued to face strong opposition by “two big brothers”: Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Both favored the Emir’s ailing and timid father who had always been under the wing of the Saudis. A year later, a failed military coup against the new leadership was exposed, and Cairo and Riyadh were accused of orchestrating it. This led the new Emir to adopt vigilant and, for some, hostile policies against the Saudis and the Egyptians. With vast gas resources having been discovered in the country, the Emir has sparked vigorous expansive projects and policies, domestically and regionally, covering a whole spectrum of areas, but all serving this new self-esteemed foreign policy. It has become clear that the new approach meant to prove to all others that “size doesn’t matter,” refuting the belittling of the tiny country with its indigenous population at only 225,000 persons. Protecting Qatar by hosting the biggest American military base outside the US, the strategy was to cut out any regional third party (mainly the Saudis) that would want to control the smaller states in the Gulf. Swiftly, Qatar managed to carve out an astonishing (if not gambling) network of relationships with adversarial parties, each of which held specific and different interest. At one end, Qatar would maintain good relations with the US, all other Western countries and even Israel, if at a lesser levels. At another end, it would establish strong relationships with the Palestinian Hamas and the Lebanese Hezbollah movements, many Islamist parties and “rogue” countries (including Iran and Syria).

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The rising role of Qatar during the Arab Spring is in fact a continuation of its active and growing foreign policy over the preceding decade. During those years and in a number of protracted issues in the region it was the Qataris who have succeeded in mediation and brokering deals. To the south of Egypt, the Qataris have fronted efforts in Sudan to bring peace between the government and rebels in Darfur, while Cairo merely watched the situation for years. To the South of Saudi Arabia, the Qataris have also engaged the Yemeni government and the Houthi rebels in talks, gaining the confidence of both parties, while Riyadh merely watched the situation, again, for years. If both cases were showing Doha's robust and successful diplomacy, they also exposed the ineffectiveness and indifference of those big Arab states and their failure to sort out the problems that were aggravating them in their backyard.<sup>1</sup>

Then it was the Qataris who adroitly prevented Lebanon from sliding into yet another imminent civil war, in May 2008, by hosting the main Lebanese protagonists (and arguably engaging with other actors who are influential in Lebanon behind the scene) in its capital and striking a last minute agreement. On the Palestinian front, Doha maintained a very active role opening channels with both the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah and Hamas in Gaza. During the Israeli war against Gaza in 2008/2009 Qatar rivaled Egypt in calling for an Arab Summit in order to lead a concerted effort to stop the War. Later on, in February 2012, Doha succeeded in bringing the Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas and Hamas's leader Khaled Mashaal to sign a surprising agreement for a national unity government. The culmination of all Qatari involvement in the Palestinian issue came in October 2012 when the Emir visited Gaza, in spite of the blockade, and promised aid and projects to stricken Gazans, and by so doing infuriated Washington, Tel Aviv and Ramallah at once.

Within the GCC, Doha remained active, yet keeping warm relations with Tehran (at least until the outbreak of the Syrian revolution) used to

upset Riyadh and Abu Dhabi: Both have long experienced tensions with their frightening, nuclear-ambitious neighbor and its aggressive regional politics. Balancing out relations with all belligerent actors has therefore exemplified an astonishing exercise of proactive foreign policy, although it has come with risks and gambles.

The Qatari adventure is driven by the Emir himself who believes that there has been a regional leadership vacuum where he can step in against all odds related to his country's size in terms of geography and demography. In this sense, then, Qatar's assertive role is designed to compensate for the lack of Arab influence in the Arab region itself. If neither of the large Arab countries fill in the visible leadership vacuum in the region, the Arab sphere will be sliced between Iran and Turkey. Support for the Arab revolutions and their accompanying new generation of leaders, would maintain the favor of these emerging regional surges and grant vast credit to Qatar—all of which would fall within the Emir's scheme of leadership.

The Arab revolutions have been genuine uprisings of the people against decades of authoritarian regimes and their oppression, corruption and family and clique exploitation of national wealth. The rapid spread and magnitude of these revolutions caught almost everyone by surprise. Not initially driven by any specific ideological force, the people in the Arab countries themselves have outpaced opposition parties of all colors, amassing regional and global sympathy. Conservative countries and political players could not keep up with the fast pace of the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings of January 2011, fearing the challenges that could be brought about by these uprising and missing out on any opportunities that they could offer.

Qatar acted differently. It stood out almost as a unique country in the Arab region in welcoming and supporting the uprisings with seemingly little reserve. One could argue that the Qatari leadership saw the Arab Spring as the chance that it was waiting for in order to affirm its regional leverage and standing. Qatar's immediate response to the Arab uprisings was

effective deployment of its media arsenal, diplomatic activism, financial support and even military backing if requested by some parties (as in Libya and Syria).

After swift and relatively low-cost successful revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and half success in Yemen, Qatar led Arab and regional efforts to support Libyans and then Syrians against their regimes. The Qataris assumed the rotating leadership of the Arab League in 2011, after asking the Palestinians, who were supposed to take that leadership for one year, to step aside for the events of the Arab Spring were much too sensitive for the Palestinians to handle. After the collapse of the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes in February 2011, the Qatari capital Doha became the main regional hub for diplomatic and logistical support for the uprisings in Libya, Yemen and Syria. Representatives and spokespersons of these uprisings have become stationed and/or frequently visiting Doha, announcing declarations and statements. At an international level, the Qataris orchestrated the efforts within the Arab League to produce a demand to the United Nations (UN) to intervene in Libya, which facilitated the issuance of the Security Council resolution that allowed the

**When conventional media evolves into geo-media it creates its own semi-autonomous dynamics too; affecting politics and compelling its patron in some occasions to adopt positions which otherwise would not be necessarily adopted.**

North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to intervene against late Muammar Qaddafi and his regime by imposing a no-fly zone.

The Qataris have been trying to do the same against the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in Syria. The case has proven to be far more difficult because of the vehement Russian

and Chinese opposition to changing the regime and strong Russian and Iranian military support for the regime on the ground.

**Doha and Washington seemed to be agreeing and welcoming the emergence, after bitterly long talks and arm twisting, of a broader representative body other than the SNC.**

Still, the Emir of Qatar was the only leader in the region and beyond who called, as early as January 2012, for an Arab military intervention in order to end the bloodshed in Syria; repeating the same call in a speech before the UN in September 2012. Qatar's backing of the Syrian revolution takes almost all forms: Diplomatic, media, humanitarian, financial and military. Doha is considered to be the main Arab capital for meetings of Syrian opposition parties. Recently, in November 2012, Doha hosted the extensive and much media-covered meetings of various Syrian groups, including the Istanbul-based Syrian National Council (SNC) who elected its new head there and oversaw the foundation of a broader opposition platform including the SNC.

#### **Al-Jazeera: Qatar's "Geo-Strategic Media"**

All the above was, one could argue, difficult to achieve without the formidable media efforts deployed by Al-Jazeera. The brainchild of the Emir himself, the station has championed his forward-leaning, sprawling politics hand-in-hand, offering a new case for understanding the role of transnational modern media in furthering foreign policy.

This needs further contemplation. In classical approaches, the term "geo-politics" typically helps describe politics among nations. "Geo-economics," later in the 1990s, was coined to capture processes of competition between political and economic rising powers within the context of the globalization. By extension

and deriving from Qatar's case, I offer here the term "geo-media" in an attempt to describe the more recent (and successful) dynamics of using the intensive transnational and global media by countries in order to compensate for weak, or lacking, aspects of their "geo-political" or "geo-economic" strengths. From a "geo-media" perspective we can then account more accurately for the parallel rise of Al-Jazeera's influence and Qatar's assertive foreign policy. Because of magnitude and impact of Al-Jazeera, Qatar was stimulated, then enabled, to circumvent certain existing shortcomings that a geo-political analysis could point at.

But when conventional media evolves into geo-media it creates its own semi-autonomous dynamics too; affecting politics and compelling its patron in some occasions to adopt positions which otherwise would not be necessarily adopted. It is a reversal process whereby the media that was supposedly made by the foreign policy of its creator becomes so influential to rebound and affect that same foreign policy. This may apply to Al-Jazeera where its unwavering supportive coverage of the first cases of the Arab Spring, Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, made it extremely difficult for Qatari politics not to shift away from years of a friendly relationship with Assad's regime when the revolution erupted there. In the first two or three weeks of the revolution Al-Jazeera was reluctant to undertake the same coverage that it granted to other uprisings, echoing reluctance at higher political levels in Doha. Failing to stay in the same line of strong support of Arab revolutions, by shying away from the Syrian popular revolt, Al-Jazeera would lose all the great success that it achieved, and with it the political clout that Qatar as a state had by then amassed. Promptly placing itself at the heart of the Arab Spring, Al-Jazeera had no option but to start gearing up support for the Syrians opposition, and consequently, speeded up the shift in the Qatari line vis-à-vis Syria. All in all, critics and exponents of Al-Jazeera (and Qatar) agree that since the inception of the station in 1996 its influence in the region along with the

leverage that it allowed Qatar to accomplish is, quite simply, strategically impressive.

On the eve of the Arab Spring the station, as well as Qatar itself, was more than ready. With its global and unbeatable resources, Al-Jazeera mobilized all that it could to cover and support protesters in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, then Libya and Syria, coining from the start terms such as 'revolution' and 'revolutionaries'. Days after the protests originated in Tunisia and spread afterwards to Egypt, the station was fully engaged in live coverage through its correspondents away from the eyes of local security, or by relying on social media networks streaming from the field. The screen of Al-Jazeera has been full of Arab masses conveying their powerful demand to

**One could argue that the Qatari leadership saw the Arab Spring as the chance that it was waiting for in order to affirm its regional leverage and standing.**

the world: "The people want to overthrow the regime."

Banned from their local media, arrested and mostly on the run, many leading revolutionaries used Al-Jazeera as their platform to reach out to their people and mobilize them. Cancelling its regular programs, the channel was transformed into an around the clock workshop of live news and interviews, switching from one revolution to another. The two main channels in Arabic and English immediately became the main source of news and coverage, repeating the demands of the people and, in fact, fuelling the atmosphere. In Arabic, a sister channel to the main news broadcasting, one called Al-Jazeera Mubashir (Al-Jazeera Live), was also devoted to live feeds from whoever could get through by phone calls, text messaging or video clips. In giving lengthy airtime to opponents of the regimes, and the favorable coverage of the revolutionaries, it was obvious that there was a bold policy line within

the channel to side with the people, reflecting the policy of the state itself. The accusations by the falling, ruling regimes that Al-Jazeera was not neutral in its coverage of the protest movements against them were in fact true. A widespread joke captures this by relaying a conversation that takes place in hell between the three Egyptian presidents, Gamal Abdul Nasser, Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak, asking each other how they were killed. Nasser's answer was "by poison;" Sadat's was "by assassination;" while Mubarak's answer was "by Al-Jazeera."

In the cases where Al-Jazeera still managed to mount dozens of cameras for live broadcast, the around-the-clock coverage of massive crowds multiplied the popular spirit. More importantly, it provided protection to the masses being filmed exercising their peaceful revolution to the entire world and consequently paralyzed the might of the security apparatuses, since any crackdown on the protesters would be globally viewed. The live filming of hundreds of thousands of persistent and peaceful protesters attracted world attention and support, embarrassing the Western powers that had so longed backed the falling regimes (in Tunisia and Egypt) and compelling them to change policies and support the anti-regimes movements.

However, in the cases where the revolutions turned messy and bloody (Libya and Syria), the central role of Al-Jazeera in the Arab Spring would have been highly diminished had it not been for the advent of social media: Facebook, Twitter and mobile phones. Al-Jazeera correspondents were soon banned from entering these countries where protest was accumulating rapidly, but regime resistance had managed to retain a foothold particularly insofar as keeping control of media activity within its borders. Prepared and well-acquainted with this typical measure by Arab governments, Al-Jazeera announced dozens of phone numbers to receive calls and text messages from the streets, and set up ad-hoc websites to receive video clips taken by ordinary people. These hot feeds which would arrive within moments would be transmitted immediately giving the

revolutionaries double service: Small and large scale events became amplified and made known to the entire population; and the population itself would know where to mobilize and gather. By the same token, had these hot feeds not been able to be broadcast at the largest scale, reaching an audience of millions by Al-Jazeera, the impact of this form of social media in these revolutions would have been minimal. Because of poverty and scandalously high illiteracy rates in the Arab world, the spread of computers and the penetration rates of Internet usage are low and not particularly reliable in mobilization processes. But everyone had access to television.

### Not all rosy

Yet, Qatar's ambitious bid for regional leadership in the post-Arab Spring era faces challenges and challengers. In the first instance, there is the credibility question. In the eyes of its critics, Qatar is an undemocratic state whose steps toward constitutional reform are frustratingly slow. Qatar spearheading support for overthrowing authoritarian regimes in the region is therefore perceived with skepticism. Almost in all cases of the Arab Spring critics have criticized Qatar for promoting externally the democratic system that it lacks internally. The Qatari response to this accusation hinges on the idea that unlike the masses in Arab Spring countries, the vast majority of the people in the country, as is the case in most GCC countries, are content with the status quo, at least for now. It is true that Bahrain, Oman and the Eastern province of Saudi Arabia have witnessed different levels of unrest, but all remained far short from reaching a tipping point where the entire people were mobilized against the ruling elite.

The credibility question was also raised forcefully when Al-Jazeera failed in covering fully, let alone supporting, the uprising in neighboring Bahrain, which proved to be the most difficult case of Arab Spring uprisings for the Qataris. The Bahraini protest was portrayed as being led by Shia groups that were supported by Iran against the Saudi-backed Sunni ruling family. For next-door nervous Saudi Arabia, Bahrain was a

bold red line where any prospect of the country falling in the hands of the Shia majority has always been perceived as a real national security threat. In fact, the Saudis took no chances with the Bahraini protest and when developments in the country seemed to be evolving beyond the control of the regime, Riyadh sent military troops under the auspices of the GCC and put off the uprising. Qatar approved the Saudi steps and seemingly neutralized itself on the Bahraini issue, perhaps because of the extra sensitivity and proximity of the issue. Additionally, and at a time when it has been too engaged with other cases of the Arab Spring, Qatar was rationally preventing itself from being spread too thin, especially in the Gulf area, and keeping the Saudis at bay without antagonizing them in Bahrain.

Another set of accusations revolve around the charge that Qatar has in fact been functioning as an American prawn in the region. Critics refer to Qatar's hosting of the biggest American military base and to the country's open door policy with Israel. During the Arab Spring, as the theory of American proxy goes on, Washington would ask Doha to undertake initial steps that would facilitate the implementation of American policies which would follow. Ironically, much of these accusations have been repeated by exponents of falling regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, and Syria – the first three were considered as close allies of the US, and the latter two used to try their best in order to have strong relations with the Americans. But more importantly, a closer look at Qatari and American regional politics exposes certain oddness and divergences between the two. Doha's warm relationships with Hamas (and previously Hezbollah) among other Islamist movements have always been a source of tension with Washington. The recent visit to Gaza by the Emir along with his wife and a large delegation was heavily criticized by Tel Aviv and tellingly ignored by Washington. The Qataris seem to have been conscious on creating their own space of maneuverability despite their strong relationship with the US. One could date a gradual Qatari drifting from American

foreign policy in the region by the War against Afghanistan in 2001, with tension peaking on occasion, mainly because of Al-Jazeera's critical coverage of George W. Bush's "war on terror" in Afghanistan first, then in Iraq 2003. Senior Americans then, including Donald Rumsfeld, the secretary of defense, accused Al-Jazeera of being the mouthpiece of Al-Qaeda and its leader Osama Bin Laden.

Differences between American and Qatar positions regarding regional issues continued during the Arab Spring. In the very first two weeks of the Tunisian and Egyptian protests against the Zein el-Abidine Ben Ali and Mubarak regimes, the responses of Washington and Doha were different. Doha mobilized its media arsenal behind the revolutionaries, whereas Washington was more cautious hoping for maintaining the status quo except with the introduction of serious reforms. The only strong convergence in both approaches was, probably, on the Libyan case upon which there was effectively a worldwide agreement, making the common Qatar-American position unspectacular.

On the Syrian revolution, divergences and convergences between the two have emerged, with a balance sheet probably tilting more in the direction of the former: Doha has been advocating an Arab military intervention under the umbrella of the Arab League whereas Washington never accepted the idea or other forms of military intervention; the language used by the Qatari officials terms the situation in Syria as a genocide war launched by the regime against its people, whereas the official American discourse stayed far more cautious and closer to seeing the situation as a civil war; Doha had also been siding with the SNC since its inception, unlike Washington and its growing skepticism of the inclusiveness and effectiveness of the SNC. And finally, Doha has been pushing for upgrading the quality of the weapons that should reach the armed groups, whereas Washington objected, thus far, to any step in that direction, profoundly factoring into its policy formulation the future security of the state of Israel and any potential threats to the Jewish state that could



follow from the collapse of Assad's regime. However, some of these divergences have been blunted after the Doha meetings of the Syrian opposition groups in November and their outcome. Doha and Washington seemed to be agreeing and welcoming the emergence, after bitterly long talks and arm twisting, of a broader representative body other than the SNC, where the "Islamist component" of this new structure is hoped, by Washington, to be less influential than it used to be within the SNC.

Another major challenge is the emerging perception within the countries of the "successful" cases of the Arab Spring that the Qataris have been meddling in their post-revolution domestic affairs. In the three countries where Qatar strongly supported the toppling of old regimes, Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, there have been growing voices criticizing Qatari politics claiming that Doha favors and supports one force, mostly the Islamists, against the others. In fact, this broader perception of backing the Islamist parties, and specifically the Muslim Brotherhood parties, in these countries is somewhat puzzling

to many observers. It remains to be answered as why the Qataris limit their influence to the Islamists and by doing so creating unnecessary enemies when they can enjoy greater leverage over most parties by staying impartial and friendly to all forces in the newly emerging democracies of the Arab Spring.

That said, Qatar's assertive role in the region, and perhaps beyond, has met a long-standing demand by many Arabs that the fate of the region should not be left to foreign powers to decide on; and that the future of the people could and should be in their own hands and formulated in line with Arab interests first.

While it is true that the ascendance of a bold and assertive political player invokes foes and enemies, especially when the rising player has always been seen as small and under the thumb of others, this need no longer be the case considering the sharp contrast between Qatar's active foreign policy and the almost inactive policies of its neighboring "big brothers" who sluggishly lagged far behind, both during and after the Arab Spring.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>One exception to such ignorant diplomacy is the relative success of the Saudis in the Yemeni Spring that erupted against the authoritarian rule of the former president Ali Abdullah Saleh. The Saudis brokered a compromise by which Saleh stepped down with guarantees granting him immunity from any future prosecution. The terms of the compromise are still hotly debated and controversy surrounded the deal, especially because many key positions in the military and state remained in the hands of pro-Saleh figures. The Saudi involvement in the Yemeni quagmire was provoked by fears that waves of regional uprisings are hitting the Saudi shores, so in essence it should be situated as more of a defensive act rather than a form of proactive diplomacy.

# Qatar and the Palestinians



Palestinian women before the arrival of the Qatari Emir in Gaza

## Mouin Rabbani

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resistance in the most visible manner possible. It was after all the Wahhabi Hamad rather than Baathist Bashar who was the first Arab leader to launch a motorcade from Rafah to Gaza City. And in doing so he made the break between Hamas and Damascus final and definitive.

**As a chief sponsor of Syrian regim change, Sheikh Hamad went to Gaza in order to further isolate Syria's Assad by mocking his claim to be the region's sole remaining sponsor of continued Palestinian resistance.**

That so many theories continue to abound about the Qatari visit reflects the rather extraordinary influence the tiny emirate has managed to project in Palestine. It did not come suddenly, and was nurtured over the course of many years.

Until the mid-1990s Qatar's place in the political consciousness of most Palestinians rather accurately reflected its miniscule size and population. Its policies were determined by and indistinguishable from those of Saudi Arabia and its foreign patrons, and it was the place where one of the less prominent Fatah leaders, Mahmoud Abbas, had carved a special relationship with the ruling family on account of his residency there since the 1950s and role in its civil service.

As with so much else about Qatar, this began to change after Sheikh Hamad in 1995 overthrew his father and – particularly after the Saudis and Egyptians sponsored a failed plot to restore Al-Thani père, initiated a determined effort to emerge from Riyadh's shadow and challenge it and Egypt's primacy in Arab affairs. The primary vehicles for this campaign were Al-Jazeera and the Muslim Brotherhood, and the two were from the outset related phenomena.

Although Arab media had traditionally enjoyed greater leeway to criticize Palestinian

leaders than any of their Arab counterparts, Al-Jazeera set new – professional as well as political – standards in this regard. By the time the Al-Aqsa Uprising erupted on the ruins of Oslo in late 2000, Al-Jazeera was by far the most popular broadcaster in Palestine, and in the region on Palestinian affairs. Its wall-to-wall, in-depth, often live and many times fearless coverage of every aspect of the uprising and Israel's furious efforts to restore the status quo added significantly to Doha's political capital among Palestinians.

During the same period, and astutely taking advantage of Hosni Mubarak's reduction of Egypt to a banana republic and the erosion of Cairo's primacy in Arab politics, Qatar also emerged as a leading regional troubleshooter. In 1999, it provided the Hamas exile leadership temporary refuge after its expulsion from Jordan, but did not hesitate to put them on a flight to Amman after the latter apparently reneged on a pledge to take them back after a decent interval. Qatar's Prime and Foreign Minister, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim al-Thani, also played an important role behind the scenes in resolving the siege of Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat's Ramallah headquarters during Operation Defensive Shield in Spring 2002. A seeming champion of the Palestinian uprising against Israel and its occupation, Qatar's leaders were equally comfortable meeting their

**Qatar is now indisputably in the ascendant, though not unlike Al-Jazeera, perhaps more temporarily than many assume.**

Israeli counterparts and permitting Israel's liaison office in Doha to remain functional after it was officially closed. Twice.

If Doha had remained more aloof from the Palestinian Authority (PA) leadership and closer to that of Hamas than many Arab capitals, crises during the Arafat era rarely graduated beyond punishment of business interests associated with Qatar, such as the imprisonment in Gaza of Issa Abu Issa. The brother of Palestine

International Bank Chairman Issam Abu Issa, and hailing from one of Qatar's most prominent Palestinian families, he was promptly arrested by the PA when accompanying an official Qatari delegation to Gaza in 2000. The delegation had been seeking to resolve a dispute between the PA, which seized Palestine International Bank after accusing it of various irregularities, and Issam Abu Issa, who retorted that his sole crime was a refusal to put the bank at the disposal of the PA. Only after Qatar threatened to sever funding and relations with the PA were the Abu Issa brothers permitted to leave Gaza City for

**Unlike Saudi Arabia, Qatar didn't care much about the ideological affinities of those it sponsored so long as such organizations, institutions and individuals – which spanned the spectrum of contemporary Arab political thought and activism – could further its own ambitions and agenda.**

Doha. Al-Jazeera was during these years often in the forefront of Palestinian-Qatari relations, whether through various exposes of PA politics and malfeasance, or punitive measures against it – including vigilante attacks upon its personnel and premises.

The succession of Abbas in late 2004, coupled with the electoral victory of Hamas in 2006 transformed an already tense relationship into one often characterized by mutual and outright enmity.

On the face of it the developments post-2005 do not appear to make sense. Individual Fatah leaders typically cultivated special relations with specific Arab states – to the point where they were seen as representing their interests within the Palestinian national movement – and Abbas was in this respect understood to be Doha's man.

Abbas has, in fact, throughout this period despite fierce political differences according to many observers managed to maintain warm personal relationships with the Qatari leadership – akin to rugby players who batter each other half to death on the field then go out for drinks afterwards.

For Qatar, the issue was ensuring the integration of Hamas into the Palestinian political system and establishing itself as the Palestinian Islamist movement's undisputed political patron to further augment Doha's influence and prevent the Islamist movement from joining the rival Iranian camp, in the process steering it in a more accommodationalist direction. For Abbas, the objective was preventing the loss of Fatah hegemony and subordinating Hamas to his own agenda.

Reflecting the enormity of the stakes, Qatari diplomacy was during this period unable to punch very far above its weight. While Al-Jazeera's coverage continued to subtly promote official policy while retaining professional standards not easily found elsewhere – whether in the region or beyond – the country's rulers were unable to effectively compete with either Saudi Arabia or Egypt in terms of negotiating Fatah-Hamas understandings before the Islamists' June 2007 seizure of power in the Gaza Strip, or reconciliation agreements thereafter. The one agreement between Abbas and Mashaal Qatar did manage to broker, in 2012, was effectively still-born.

Nevertheless, Qatar was in subsequent years able to leverage the enormous and abiding symbolism of the Palestinian cause to both enhance its own profile and credentials, and solidify its sponsorship of Hamas. At a time when Qatari-Syrian relations were considerably closer than those between Damascus and any other Gulf state, Doha during Israel's 2008-2009 assault on the Gaza Strip succeeded in defying much of the Arab world (including the Arab League) and the West in hosting an emergency summit to highlight Arab inaction. And a year later Al-Jazeera's publication of the Palestine Papers managed to place the Palestinian Authority and

its adherence to a negotiated treaty with Israel within the Oslo framework in the worst possible light. Not much sensationalism was required, but it was thrown into the mix nevertheless.

It bears recollection that Qatar's policy and objectives in this regard were very different from those of Syria and Iran. Where the latter sought to weaken the PA in order to strengthen Palestinian militancy in the context of a proxy conflict with Israel, Qatar sought not conflict but rather a piece of the peace and – whether directly or otherwise – a prominent seat at the table. It is the astuteness and seemingly limitless capacity for opportunism that set Doha so clearly apart from other Arab capitals. Unlike Saudi Arabia, Qatar didn't care much about the ideological affinities of those it sponsored so long as such organizations, institutions and individuals – which spanned the spectrum of contemporary Arab political thought and activism – could further its own ambitions and agenda. And so, unlike Mubarak's Egypt, Qatar was consistently willing to maneuver among and between rival camps, and engage in public disputes with close allies and sponsors, in order to further its own policies.

The uprisings that erupted throughout the region in late 2010 appear to have brought Qatari policy full circle. As the main sponsor of the Muslim Brotherhood – and one with a very considerable capacity for sponsorship – Qatar is

now indisputably in the ascendant, though not unlike Al-Jazeera, perhaps more temporarily than many assume. And drawing much closer to its traditional Gulf Cooperation Council allies in the context of the spread of these rebellions – most notably to Bahrain – and the increasingly sharp rivalry with Iran, it has thrown its weight behind the Syrian opposition to its erstwhile ally Bashar. Aside from direct support to the Free Syrian Army, Qatar's main contribution has been the success with which it has weaned Hamas away from Damascus. Mashaal no longer resides in Damascus, but rather in Doha. Deputy Politbureau Chairman Musa Abu Marzouq has relocated to Cairo, and other Islamist leaders similarly vacated Syria before Damascus went on the offensive against its former Islamist ally.

Upon arriving in Gaza, Sheikh Hamad was thus received by Hamas as a conquering hero rather than perfidious Zionist stooge. The effectiveness with which Qatar has been able to call in favors from those it has supported testifies to the astuteness of its political investment policies of the past two decades. It will be most interesting to see where this leads next: A renewed push for Palestinian reconciliation, or alternatively further support to Hamas to ensure its continued ascendancy within the Palestinian political system, but with a political program eventually indistinguishable from those it seeks to replace.





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