



The Qatar conundrum

Qatar has lowered its contrary profile for the moment, but it will surely continue to go its own way

THE MID-SEPTEMBER announcement that Qatar had asked seven leading members of Egypt's banned Muslim Brotherhood to depart the country was an attention-getter.

Not coincidentally, the news came just three days after US Secretary of State John Kerry announced the formation of an Arab-Western coalition to combat Islamic State (IS) jihadis wreaking havoc in Iraq and Syria, and a subsequent visit of high-ranking Saudi officials to Qatar.

However, in light of Qatar's foreign policies over the past two decades, its decision to lower the public profile of its long-standing support for the Brotherhood was probably more tactical than strategic in nature, and not a harbinger of a radical departure from past praxis.

For almost two decades, Qatar, a country of 11,000 sq. km (just over half the size of pre-1967 Israel), and just under 300,000 citizens, has posed a conundrum. Determined to punch above its weight in regional affairs, it has cultivated diverse and contradictory relationships with a host of regional and global actors.

Since 2003, its Al-Udeid air base and other facilities have served as a major hub for US operations in the region; it has maintained cordial economic ties with Shia Iran, while providing a secure platform for the leading Sunni theologian and preacher, the Egyptian Yusuf al-Qaradawi; Qatari forces fought to help defend Saudi Arabia during the 1991 Gulf war, but Qatar has taken every opportunity it could to tweak its much larger Saudi neighbor, as it sought to avoid falling under Riyadh's hegemony within the club of Gulf Arab monarchies; Qatar has long been a congenial home for Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal (to the consternation of Mahmud Abbas's PLO), but for most of the last two decades also maintained open channels of communication with Israel, and even allowed Israeli diplomats to maintain a presence in Doha.

Of course, Doha is best known as the home of Al-Jazeera, the satellite-television news station that revolutionized news coverage and viewing in the region. Ironically, but not surprisingly, Qatar's ruling Al Thani family has been exempt from Al-Jazeera's incessant championing of open debate and willingness to criticize the praxis of authoritarian Arab rulers.

So what drives Qatar, and how is it able to do what it does?

Like all authoritarian regimes, its overriding goal is to ensure the survival of the regime. To that end, it employs its abundant wealth to try to win friends and influence people. Qatar is the largest exporter of liquefied natural gas in the world, fourth largest exporter of dry natural gas, and a significant oil exporter as well.

The Arab Spring protests, beginning in late 2010, raised the stakes for Qatar. Al-Jazeera played a leading role in real time, spreading the dramatic images from Tunis, Cairo and Bahrain, and supporting the narrative of Arab citizens rising against their authoritarian oppressors in the name of freedom and democracy.

In the last three years, Al-Jazeera and Qatari officials tilted decisively in favor of Sunni Islamist groups. Hence, the election of Mohammed Morsi to the Egyptian presidency in 2012 was heralded, and his overthrow a year later by the Egyptian military and the Brotherhood's sub-



Qatar's army takes part in a military parade in Doha

sequent crushing by the Egyptian authorities was harshly and continuously condemned.

At the same time, Qatar joined Turkey and Saudi Arabia in providing support, both official and unofficial, for the Sunni rebellion in Syria against the Assad regime, including funds for radical jihadis. Qatari (and UAE) warplanes also joined NATO forces in their game-changing support for the rebellion against Libya's Qaddafi and Qatar provided generous funding for Tunisia's Ennahdah Islamist party. Throughout, Qatar's policy has been guided by a belief that Sunni Islamist movements were likely to come out the winner in the post-Arab Spring uprisings and that Qatar's support was ultimately an investment in its own survival.

Although the Saudis had hosted Muslim Brotherhood refugees from the Nasser regime in the 1960s, they look upon the Brotherhood's vision of Islamic government with trepidation, fearing that it could serve as an attractive pole for disgruntled Saudi youth. Hence, they opened their wallets to the Sisi regime in Cairo this past year, together with the Kuwaitis and the UAE, to the tune of at least \$20 billion.

In March, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE withdrew their ambassadors from Doha in reaction to Qatar's alleged interference in their internal affairs, its support for the Brotherhood and overly independent foreign policy.

Egypt's hostility toward Hamas and Qatar was expressed during the recent Israel-Hamas war when Doha tried to undercut the Egyptian cease-fire proposal. And recently, as Libya descended into civil war, UAE planes flying out of an Egyptian airfield bombed the forces of a Qatari-supported Islamist faction.

With all eyes on Islamic State militants, Qatar has lowered its contrarian profile for the moment. But it will surely continue to go its own way. ■

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