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The Rise of Qatar

Yoel Guzansky and Oded Eran

The upheavals in the Arab world have done much to highlight Qatar's rising prominence and its policy of active involvement in most of the areas of regional unrest. This policy – a mixture of opportunism and ambition – together with tremendous economic power and the willingness to use it for political ends, as well as the weakness of major centers of power in the region and beyond, enable the emirate's entry into the vacuum that has been created and the emergence of its new political status.

Qatar's economic strength is a direct result of its natural gas reserves. Currently the largest exporter in the world of natural gas (LNG), the emirate has the largest natural gas reserves in the world after Russia and Iran. This coveted resource has ensured that Qatar's 250,000 citizens (out of about one million residents) have the highest per capita gross income in the world, with the extraordinary growth rate of more than 18 percent in 2011. Alongside this economic clout, the ruling al-Thani family has created an enormously influential tool in the form of the al-Jazeera television network, which since its launch in 1996 has become an effective tool in the emirate's foreign policy. The network has long enjoyed large audiences in the Middle East, and the revolts in the region only increased its popularity. Furthermore, the network is a key instrument for gaining state influence. The network adapts the nature of its reports so as to curry favor with certain leaders, even outside the Arab world, and criticizes those who recognize the impact the station has on public opinion – as a means of applying pressure to change positions vis-à-vis Qatar. Indeed, more favorable TV coverage of the Saudi royal household on al-Jazeera proved itself to be valuable in improving Qatar-Saudi relations.

Al-Jazeera gives the conflicts within the Arab world a great deal of exposure, and this in itself provides the ruling dynasty with much immunity against criticism of the lack of democracy in the emirate. The events of the "Arab spring" placed all the royal households of the Arab world, including that of Qatar, in a difficult position. On the one hand, all are trying to preserve the traditional regime and the absolute control of internal political processes; on the other hand, there is an impetus to adopt a position that ostensibly

identifies with the masses that took to the streets to protest corruption and oppression. Significantly, al-Jazeera director Wadah Khanfar, who had made a name for himself as an ardent supporter of democratic processes and the involvement of civil society in the Arab world (as well as being a supporter of Islamic movements, including Hamas) was already ousted in September 2009, in order to ensure network obedience to the emir. Not coincidentally his successor is a member of the al-Thani tribe.

Qatar's involvement in the Arab world over the last decade is impressive. In the crisis in Yemen, Qatar served alongside other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council as a mediator and arranged the ouster (though with good terms) of former President Saleh. Among Arab states, it leads (with considerable Saudi backing) the activism regarding the civil war in Syria; leaders do not even deny that they are sending weapons and major financial aid to the Syrian opposition. Naturally these arms shipments are raising important questions, such as where were the weapons bought, how do they reach their destinations, is Qatar getting encouragement, support, or cooperation from other states that are not interested in being revealed as actively assisting the Syrian rebels, and more.

Qatar is also involved in the establishment of the new government in Tunisia and perhaps more than any other Arab entity helped topple Qaddafi's regime. It pushed for NATO military action in Libya and even sent (in addition to the UAE) six fighter jets as symbolic assistance to the NATO effort to enforce the no-fly zone over Libya. Qatar was the first Arab state to recognize the rebel government of Libya, it sold oil in its name, and it supplied it with extensive economic and military aid. It trained and equipped the opposition forces and even sent its own forces to help with the actual fighting. This policy enabled Qatar to divert attention away from what has been happening in the Gulf and prove it is a responsible member of the international community. From its perspective, it has already reaped the benefits of its investment: Western leaders have been effusive in their praise of Qatar's act of moral leadership.

The emirate's recent involvement in the inter-Palestinian conflict is also noteworthy, and it has at least temporarily taken the place of Egypt, which is preoccupied with its own internal issues, as the primary mediator between Fatah and Hamas. The framework agreement achieved on February 6, 2012 between Fatah and Hamas was signed in Doha, Qatar's capital, and bears its name. Qatar also mediated between Jordan and Hamas leader Khaled Mashal, and the Qatari heir to the throne attended the meeting between the King Abdullah of Jordan and Mashal.

In late February 2012, the Emir of Qatar announced a new initiative calling for an international investigation of all Israeli activity in Jerusalem since 1967 designed to "erase its Muslim and Arab sites." The Emir called on the participants of the Doha

International Conference for Defending and Protecting Jerusalem to demand that the UN Security Council convene a committee to investigate the issue. This initiative will earn Qatar more bonus points in the Arab street – points it needs because of its policy towards Syria – though the initiative’s chances of realization are very slim.

Qatar’s public activism on the Palestinian-Israeli issue has hurt Israel. Qatar’s connections with entities such as Iran and Hamas – connections that, in its view, immunize it against harm from those same elements – led Israel in March 2011 to sever its ties with Qatar and close the diplomatic mission in Doha, forbid Qatari passport bearers from visiting the West Bank, and stop the cooperation between Qatar and Israel’s security industry. Nonetheless, Qatar has not hidden its willingness to maintain open relations with Israel on condition that Jerusalem prove its serious commitment – in Qatar’s view – to the political process, a low threshold condition compared to the terms posed by the rest of the Arab world for establishing open relations with Israel.

Qatar’s investments in East Asia, Europe, and the United States in infrastructure projects, real estate, financial institutions, and even soccer clubs are turning the emirate into a key player with influence in these arenas. In the annals of modern history, it is hard to find a similar instance of so tiny a nation implementing a foreign policy of such high profile. For the sake of comparison, Luxembourg has similar statistical characteristics but its ambitions – and its political influence – are far more humble.

Qatar excels in identifying processes and trends in the region and beyond and is quick to confront them. For Qatar, the rapid identification with trends in Arab public opinion is necessary in order to maintain its security, as long as these trends do not reach its own doorstep or threaten its relations with its stronger neighbors, Saudi Arabia and Iran. This was true in the case of the Arab spring and the key role Qatar played in its events. At home too, Qatar is trying to preempt the criticism that might be leveled against it. Emir Hamad Ben Khalifa recently announced that for the first time in the nation’s history he would hold elections for the Qatari Shura Council in the second half of 2013. According to him, in light of the huge changes in the region, pacifying messages are not enough; it is necessary to promote ongoing reforms. The promise to hold elections will allow Qatar to weather at least the next few months peacefully. Accordingly, and spurred primarily by survival instincts, the emirate can continue to enjoy political and economic stability and furnish political and economic support for the radical forces in the region, while taking advantage of the leadership vacuum left by larger nations to promote its own particular agenda.