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No. 262

Wahhabism vs. Wahhabism: Qatar Challenges Saudi Arabia

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Singapore**

06 September 2013

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ABSTRACT

Qatar, a tiny energy-rich state in terms of territory and population, has exploded on to the world map as a major rival to the region's behemoth, Saudi Arabia. By projecting itself through an activist foreign policy, an acclaimed and at times controversial global broadcaster, an airline that has turned it into a transportation hub and a host of mega sporting events, Qatar has sought to develop the soft power needed to compensate for its inability to ensure its security, safety and defence militarily. In doing so, it has demonstrated that size no longer necessarily is the determining factor for a state's ability to enhance its influence and power. Its challenge to Saudi Arabia is magnified by the fact that it alongside the kingdom is the world's only state that adheres to Wahhabism, an austere interpretation in Islam. Qatari conservatism is however everything but a mirror image of Saudi Arabia's stark way of life with its powerful, conservative clergy, absolute gender segregation; total ban on alcohol and houses of worship for adherents of other religions, and refusal to accommodate alternative lifestyles or religious practices. Qatar's alternative adaptation of Wahhabism coupled with its lack of an indigenous clergy and long-standing relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood, the region's only organised opposition force, complicate its relationship with Saudi Arabia and elevate it to a potentially serious threat.

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Wahhabism vs. Wahhabism: Qatar Challenges Saudi Arabia

Introduction

As Saudi Arabia seeks to inoculate itself against the push for greater freedom, transparency and accountability sweeping the Middle East and North Africa, a major challenge to the kingdom's puritan interpretation of Islam sits on its doorstep: Qatar, the only other country whose native population is Wahhabi and that adheres to the Wahhabi creed. It is a challenge that is rooted in historical tensions that go back to Qatari efforts in the nineteenth century to carve out an identity of its own. It also stems from long-standing differences in religious interpretations that are traceable to Qatar's geography, patterns of trade and history; and a partially deliberate failure to groom a class of popular Muslim legal scholars of its own. More recently, Qatar's development of an activist foreign policy promoting Islamist-led political change in the Middle East and North Africa as well as a soft power strategy designed to reduce its dependence on a Saudi defence umbrella was prompted by a perception that it no longer can assume that the kingdom would be able to effectively protect it. Although long existent, the challenge has never been as stark as it is now, at a time of massive change in the region. The differences are being fought out in Syria and Arab nations who, have in recent years, toppled their autocratic leaders, Egypt being one of the first and foremost.

While the differences in social, foreign and security policies cannot be hidden, Qatar, which hosts the largest U.S. military base in the Middle East, and Saudi Arabia have nevertheless moved in recent years from a cold war to a modicum of good neighbourly relations and cooperation with clearly defined albeit unspoken red lines to outright proxy confrontation. In the process, Qatar has emerged as living proof that Wahhabism, the puritan version of Islam developed by the eighteenth century preacher, Mohammed Abdul Wahhab, that dictates life in Saudi Arabia since its creation, can be somewhat forward and outward looking rather than repressive and restrictive. It is a testimony that is by definition subversive and is likely to serve much more than the case of freewheeling Dubai as an inspiration for conservative Saudi society that acknowledges its roots but in which various social groups are increasingly voicing their desire for change. The subversive nature of Qatar's approach is symbolized by its long-standing, deep-seated ties to the Muslim Brotherhood that faces one of its most serious litmus tests at a time of the ascension of a

new emir and a successful Saudi counter-revolutionary campaign that helped topple the government of Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi in July 2013, and that same month, curtailed Qatari influence within the rebel movement opposed to embattled Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad.

Everything but a mirror image

A multi-domed, sand-coloured, architectural marvel, Doha's newest and biggest mosque, symbolizes Qatar's complex and volatile relationship with Saudi Arabia as well as its bold soft power policy designed to propel it to the cutting edge of the twenty first century. It is not the mosque itself that has raised eyebrows but its naming after an eighteenth century warrior priest, Sheikh Mohammed Abdul Wahhab, the founder of Islam's most puritan sect. The naming of the mosque that overlooks the Qatar Sports Club in Doha's Jubailat district was intended to pacify more traditional segments of Qatari society as well as Saudi Arabia, which sees the tiny Gulf state, the only other country whose native population is Wahhabi, as a troublesome and dangerous gadfly on its doorstep challenging its puritan interpretation of Islam as well as its counterrevolutionary strategy in the Middle East and North Africa. Qatar's social revolution in the past two decades challenges Saudi efforts to maintain as much as possible of its status quo while impregnating itself against the push for greater freedom, transparency and accountability sweeping the region. By naming the mosque after Abdul Wahhab, Qatar reaffirmed its adherence to the Wahhabi creed that goes back to nineteenth century Saudi support and the ultimate rise to dominance of the Al Thani clan, the country's hereditary monarchs until today who account for an estimated twenty per cent of the population.¹

Yet, despite being a traditional Gulf state, Qatari conservatism is everything but a mirror image of Saudi Arabia's stark way of life with its powerful, conservative clergy, absolute gender segregation; total ban on alcohol and houses of worship for adherents of other religions, and refusal to accommodate alternative lifestyles or religious practices. Qataris privately distinguish between their "Wahhabism of the sea" as opposed to Saudi Arabia's "Wahhabism of the land," a reference to the fact that the Saudi government has less control of an empowered clergy compared to Qatar that has no indigenous clergy with a social base to speak of; a Saudi history of tribal strife over oases as opposed to one of communal life in

¹ Alan J. Fromherz. Qatar, A Modern History, London , 2012, I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, p. 91

Qatar, and Qatar's outward looking maritime trade history. Political scientists Birol Baskan and Steven Wright argue that on a political level, Qatar has a secular character similar to Turkey and in sharp contrast to Saudi Arabia, which they attribute to Qatar's lack of a class of Muslim legal scholars.² The absence of scholars was in part a reflection of Qatari ambivalence towards Wahhabism that it viewed as both an opportunity and a threat: on the one hand it served as a tool to legitimise domestic rule, on the other it was a potential monkey wrench Saudi Arabia could employ to assert control. Opting to generate a clerical class of its own would have enhanced the threat because Qatar would have been dependent on Saudi clergymen to develop its own. That would have produced a clergy steeped in the kingdom's austere theology and inspired by its history of political power-sharing that would have advocated a Saudi-style, state-defined form of political Islam.

By steering clear of the grooming of an indigenous clergy of their own, Qatari leaders ensured that they had greater maneuverability by ensuring that they did not have to give a clergy a say in political and social affairs. As a result, Qatar lacks the institutions that often hold the kingdom back. In contrast to Saudi Arabia, Qatari rulers do not derive their legitimacy from a clerical class. Qatar's College of Sharia (Islamic Law) was established only in 1973 and the majority of its students remain women who become teachers or employees of the endowments ministry rather than clergymen.³ Similarly, Qatar does not have a religious force that polices public morality. Nor are any of its families known for producing religious scholars. Qatari religious schools are run by the ministry of education not as in the Saudi kingdom by the religious affairs authority. They are staffed by expatriates rather than Qataris and attended by less than one per cent of the total student body and only ten per cent of those are Qatari nationals.⁴ Similarly, Qatari religious authority is not institutionally vested. Qatar has for example no Grand Mufti as does Saudi Arabia and various other Arab nations; it only created a ministry of Islamic Affairs and Endowments 22 years after achieving independence.

² Birol Baskan and Steven Wright. 2011. Seeds of Change: Comparing State-Religion Relations in Qatar and Saudi Arabia, *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 33(2), 96-111

³ Mehran Kamrava, 'Royal Factionalism and Political Liberalization in Qatar,' 2009, *Middle East Journal*, Vol:63:3, p. 401-420

⁴ *Ibid.* Baskan and Wright

The lack of influential native religious scholars allowed Qatar to advance women in society, and enable them to drive and travel independently; permit non-Muslims to consume alcohol and pork; sponsor Western arts like the Tribeca Film Festival; develop world-class art museums; host the Al Jazeera television network that revolutionized the region's controlled media landscape and has become one of the world's foremost global broadcasters; and prepare to accommodate Western soccer fans with un-Islamic practices during the 2022 World Cup. The absence of an indigenous clerical class risked enhancing the influence of Saudi and other foreign scholars, particularly among more conservative segments of Qatari society.

In doing so, Qatar projects to young Saudis and others a vision of a less restrictive and less choking conservative Wahhabi society that grants individuals irrespective of gender a greater degree of control over their lives. Qatari women, in the mid-1990s, were like in Saudi Arabia: banned from driving, voting or holding government jobs. Today, they occupy prominent positions in multiple sectors of society in what effectively amounted to a social revolution. It's a picture that juxtaposes starkly with that of its only Wahhabi brother. In doing so, Qatar threw down a gauntlet for the kingdom's interpretation of nominally shared religious and cultural beliefs. "I consider myself a good Wahhabi and can still be modern, understanding Islam in an open way. We take into account the changes in the world and do not have the closed-minded mentality as they do in Saudi Arabia," Abdelhameed Al Ansari, the dean of Qatar University's College of Sharia, a leader of the paradigm shift, told *The Wall Street Journal* in 2002.⁵ Twenty years earlier Al Ansari was denounced as an "apostate" by Qatar's Saudi-trained chief religious judge for advocating women's rights. "All those people who attacked me, most of them have died, and the rest keep quiet," Al Ansari said.

Qatar's long-standing projection of an alternative is particularly sensitive at a time that Saudi Arabia is implicitly debating the very fundamentals of the social and political arrangements that the Qataris call into question. The kingdom's conservative ulema and Salafis worry that key members of the ruling family, including King Abdullah; his son, Prince Mutaib, who heads the National Guard; and Prince Turki al-Faisal, former head of intelligence and ambassador to the United States and Britain, are toying with the idea of a

⁵ Yaroslav Trofimov. October 24, 2002, *Lifting the Veil: In a Quiet Revolt, Qatar Is Snubbing Neighboring Saudis*, *The Wall Street Journal*,

separation of state and religion in a state that was founded on a pact between the ruling Al-Sauds and the clergy and sees itself as the model of Islamic rule. The clergy voiced its concern in the spring of 2013 in a meeting with the king two days after Prince Mutaib declared that “religion (should) not enter into politics.” Prince Turki first hinted at possible separation 11 years ago when he cited verse 4:59 of the Quran: “O you who have believed, obey God and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you.” Prince Turki suggested that the verse referred exclusively to temporal authority rather than both religious and political authority. Responding to Prince Mutaib in a tweet, Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdul-Aziz al-Tarifi warned that “whoever says there is no relationship between religion and politics worships two gods, one in the heavens and one on earth.”⁶

To be sure, Qatar’s greater liberalism hardly means freedoms as defined in Western societies. Qatar’s former emir, Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, who abdicated in June 2013 in favour of his son, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al Khalifa, silenced opposition to reforms. Sheikh Hamad, for example, arrested in 1998 the religious scholar, Abdulrahman al Nuaimi, who criticized his advancement of women rights. Al Nuaimi was released three years later on condition that he no longer would speak out publicly. Qatari poet Muhammad Ibn al-Dheeb al-Ajami, was sentenced in November 2011 to life in prison in what legal and human rights activists said was a “grossly unfair trial that flagrantly violates the right to free expression” on charges of “inciting the overthrow of the ruling regime.” His sentence was subsequently reduced to 15 years in prison. Al-Ajami’s crime appeared to be a poem that he wrote, as well as his earlier recitation of poems that included passages disparaging senior members of Qatar’s ruling family. The poem was entitled “*Tunisian Jasmine*”. It celebrated the overthrow of Tunisian president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. A draft media law approved by the Qatari cabinet would prohibit publishing or broadcasting information that would “throw relations between the state and the Arab and friendly states into confusion” or “abuse the regime or offend the ruling family or cause serious harm to the national or higher interests of the state.” Violators would face stiff financial penalties of up to one million Qatari riyals

⁶ Ibrahim Hatlani, ‘Saudi Arabia wrestles with its identity,’ July 12, 2013, The Daily Star, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Opinion/Commentary/2013/Jul-12/223366-saudi-arabia-wrestles-with-its-identity.ashx#axzz2Yu58z44W>

(US \$275,000).⁷ In a rare public criticism, Qatari journalists demanded in June 2013 greater freedoms and criticized the absence of a media law and press association.⁸

Ring-fencing the Gulf

With the reforms and their implicit challenge to the kingdom notwithstanding, Qatar shares with Saudi Arabia a firm will to ring-fence the Gulf against the popular uprisings in other parts of the Middle East and North Africa. The two countries' diverging world views have however manifested themselves in differing approaches towards the popular revolts and protests sweeping the region. While Saudi Arabia has adjusted to regional change on a reactive case-by-case basis by recently launching a successful counter-revolutionary effort in Egypt and trying to counter the Brotherhood's influence among Syria rebels, Qatar has sought to embrace it head on as long as it is not at home or in its Gulf neighbourhood. For that reason, Qatar supported the dispatch to Bahrain in 2011 of a Saudi-led force to help quell a popular uprising in its own backyard.

The rift between Saudi Arabia and its major Gulf allies was evident in a commentary by Abd al-Rahman Al-Rashed, the general manager of Al Arabiya, the Saudi network established to counter Qatar's Al Jazeera. Accusing Qatar, the only Gulf state critical of the Egyptian military's crackdown, of fuelling the flames of the Muslim Brotherhood campaign against the Egyptian military's toppling of Morsi in the summer of 2013, Al-Rashed wrote: "We find it really hard to understand Qatar's political logic in a country (Egypt) to which it is not linked at the level of regimes or ideologically or economically. Egyptians in Qatar moreover are only a minority. Qatar's insistence that the moving force of the army and Egyptian political parties accept the Brotherhood's demands is not only impossible but also has dangerous repercussions. Supporting the Brotherhood at this current phase increases (the Brotherhood's) stubborn insistence to stick to its guns and creates an extremely dangerous situation. So why is Qatar doing it? We really don't understand why! Historically and over a period of around 20 years, Qatar has always adopted stances that oppose the positions of its Gulf brothers, and all of Qatar's opposing policies have ended up unsuccessful."⁹ In

⁷ James M. Dorsey, 'Persian Gulf Futures,' Global Brief, March 5, 2013, <http://globalbrief.ca/blog/2013/03/05/persian-gulf-futures/>

⁸ Journalists call for overhaul of QNA, July 14, 2013, The Peninsula, <http://thepeninsulaqatar.com/qatar/244976-journalists-call-for-overhaul-of-qna.html>

⁹ Abd Al-Rahman Al-Rashed, مصر حول التدخل في انقسام (Why Is The Gulf Divided Over Egypt?), Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, London, August 18, 2013,

scathing remarks criticizing those opposed to the Egyptian military's removal of Morsi, Saudi King Abdullah referred to Qatar without naming it: "Let it be known to those who interfered in Egypt's internal affairs that they themselves are fanning the fire of sedition and are promoting the terrorism which they call for fighting, I hope they will come to their senses before it is too late; for the Egypt of Islam, Arabism, and honourable history will not be altered by what some may say or what positions others may take." the monarch said.¹⁰

By maintaining support for the Brotherhood as it fought for its survival, Qatar aligned itself with the very Islamists in its own backyard who were challenging Gulf regimes and that the Saudi-led bloc was seeking to suppress. In doing so, it also identified with Gulf Islamists who were exploiting their criticism of Gulf backing of the Egyptian coup to campaign for increased support for anti-Assad rebels in Syria. by comparing Egyptian military leader General Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi to Assad. The often blunt criticism by Gulf Islamists speaking from the pulpit in mosques and on Twitter resonated with the public, as tweets and videos of sermons went viral. Qatar's positioning implicitly recognized attempts by Saudi Arabia to co-opt Islamist forces like the Sahwa, a powerful Islamist network nurtured by members of the Brotherhood that had supported the government in the early days of the Arab popular revolts, was failing. The widening rift between the Islamists and the ruling Al-Saud family was further highlighted by the death of Mohamed Al Hadlaq, a nephew of the kingdom's terrorist rehabilitation program who died in Syria fighting as part of a jihadist rebel group.¹¹ The Brotherhood, the only organized opposition force in the kingdom, albeit clandestinely, stands at the core of differences between Qatar and Saudi Arabia over Syria even though they coordinated to become the first Arab states to withdraw their ambassadors from Damascus in 2011. Their divergence over the Brotherhood posed however a dilemma for the kingdom which gravitated towards more secular as well as Salafi rebels in its bid to topple Assad's secular Alawite (read Shiite and heretic in Saudi eyes) regime; weaken Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah; and thwart a power grab by the Syrian Brotherhood. Support of Salafi forces risked a repeat the fallout of Saudi aid to Afghan mujahedeen fighting the

http://www.aawsat.com/leader.asp?section=3&issueno=12682&article=740325&search=%DA%C8%CF%20%C7%E1%D1%CD%E3%E4%20%C7%E1%D1%C7%D4%CF:&state=true#.UhdHJLfc_8

¹⁰ Abdullah bin Abdulaziz bin Abdulrahman bin Faisal bin Turki bin Abdullah bin Muhammad bin Saud, 'Saudi King Abdullah declares support for Egypt against terrorism,' 16 August 2013, Al Arabiyah, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2013/08/16/Saudi-King-Abdullah-declares-support-of-Egypt-against-terrorism.html>

¹¹ The Gulf Institute, 'Close Relative of Senior Saudi Counterterrorism Official Killed Alongside AlQaeda in Syria,' Washington, 19 August 2013, press release by email

Soviets in the 1980s who once intoxicated by their defeat of a superpower turned against the kingdom and its allies. In contrast to the kingdom, Qatar has proven more willing to risk engagement with jihadi groups on the grounds that its priority was to see the Assad regime overthrown sooner than later and that their exclusion would only aggravate Syria's grief. "I am very much against excluding anyone at this stage, or bracketing them as terrorists, or bracketing them as al-Qaeda. What we are doing is only creating a sleeping monster, and this is wrong. We should bring them all together, we should treat them all equally, and we should work on them to change their ideology, i.e. put more effort altogether to change their thinking. If we exclude anything from the Syrian elements today, we are only doing worse to Syria. Then we are opening the door again for intervention to chase the monster," Qatari Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Khalid bin Mohamed al-Attiyah told an international security conference in Manama in late December 2012. The official played down the jihadi character of some of the Syrian rebel groups. "They are only close to God now because what they are seeing from blood – and I am saying this for all of Syria. Muslims, Christians, Jews – whenever they have a crisis, they come close to God. This is the nature of man. If we see that someone is calling Allahu Akbar (God is great), the other soldier from the regime is also calling Allahu Akbar when he faces him. This is not a sign of extremism or terrorism," Al-Attiyah said.¹²

The fundamentally different strategies of self-preservation of Qatar and the Gulf states are rooted in a Qatari perception that the role of the Saudi clergy in policymaking has resulted in Saudi Arabia failing in its ambition to provide the region with vision and effective leadership that would have allowed it to perhaps pre-empt the wave of change and resolve problems on its own. That perception has reinforced Qatar's *raison d'être*: a state that maintains its distinction and tribal independence from the region's behemoth, Saudi Arabia, with whom it is entangled in regional shadow boxing match.

While the ruling families of both have sought to buffer themselves against protests by boosting social spending, Saudi Arabia has opted for maintenance of the status quo wherever possible and limited engagement with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Syria and elsewhere, overshadowed by its deep-seated distrust of the group. Saudi Arabia's attitude

¹² International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Priorities for Regional Security: Q&A Session*, 8 December 2012, <http://www.iiss.org/en/events/manama%20dialogue/archive/manama-dialogue-2012-f58e/second-plenary-session-f3e9/qa-3d28>

towards the Brotherhood is informed by a fear that Islamic government in other nations could threaten its political and religious claim to leadership of the Muslim world based on the fact that it is home to Mecca and Medina, Islam's two holiest cities, its puritan interpretation of Islamic dogma, and its self-image as a nation ruled on the basis of Islamic law with the Quran as its constitution. The threat posed by the Brotherhood and Qatari promotion of political activism is reinforced by the fact that concepts of violent jihad have largely been replaced by Islamist civic action across the Middle East and North Africa in demand of civil, human and political rights. That hits close to home. Saudi efforts to co-opt the Sahwa movement in the kingdom whose positions are akin to those of the Brotherhood have only succeeded partially. Sahwa leader Salman al-Odeh warned the government in an open letter in March 2013 against ignoring widespread public discontent.¹³

By contrast, Qatar's pragmatic relationship to Wahhabism eased the early forging of a close relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood. Qatar's ties to the Brotherhood may be less motivated by ideology than by a determination to distinguish itself from the kingdom and back what at times appeared to be a winning horse. Ironically, Qatar is joined by Bahrain, one of, if not the Gulf state closest to Saudi Arabia, in bucking the region's trend and maintaining close ties to the Brotherhood. The Bahraini Brotherhood's political arm, the Al-Minbar Islamic Society, has been allowed to operate openly. The group, which has largely supported the government, is widely believed to be funded by the island's minority Sunni Muslim ruling family and Islamic finance sector in a bid to counter political forces that represent its Shiite Muslim majority.¹⁴

Qatar's relationship with the Brotherhood was moreover facilitated by the fact that key figures from the group like Egyptian-born Yusuf Al Qaradawi, a major influence in a country with no real clergy of its own, Libyan imam Ali Al Salabi, fellow Egyptian Sheikh Ahmed Assal and Sheikh Abdel Moez Abdul Sattar have had a base in exile in Doha for decades. Qaradawi, who has been resident in Doha since the 1970s, wields intellectual and

¹³ Salman al-Odeh, http://twitter.com/salman_odeh/status/3141234567890, March 16, 2013, Twitmail, <http://twitmail.com/email/78010944/6/%D8%AE%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D9%85%D9%81%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%AD-%D8%B3%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A9---%D8%AE%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D9%85%D9%81%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%AD-%D8%AE%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%B3%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A9>

¹⁴ Lori Plotkin Boghardt, 'The Muslim Brotherhood in the Gulf: Prospects for Agitation,' 10 June 2013, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-muslim-brotherhood-in-the-gulf-prospects-for-agitation>

theological influence within the Brotherhood but insists that he is not a member. "Saudi Arabia has Mecca and Medina. We have Qaradawi -- and all his daughters drive cars and work," said former Qatari justice minister and prominent lawyer Najeeb al Nauimi.¹⁵

Qaradawi, a controversial figure in the West, is widely credited for Qatar's early backing of opponents to Syrian president Assad. He noted in the early days of the Syrian uprising that historic links between Egypt and Syria put Syria in protesters' firing line.¹⁶ Qaradawi was immediately accused by Syrian officials of fostering sectarianism.¹⁷ The Qatari support ended the close ties Hamad had forged in the first decade of the twenty first century as a result of his strained relations with the Saudis with Assad, a leader of the more radical bloc in the Arab world.

Qaradawi took his advocacy of resistance to Assad a significant step further by effectively endorsing the sectarian Sunni-Shia Muslim divide in a speech in late May 2013 before the ascension of Tamim, who under his father was Qatar's main interlocutor with the kingdom. By doing so, Qaradawi hinted at a possible change in Qatari policy once Tamim took over the reins. In line with Saudi encouragement of the divide between Sunni and Shia Muslims, Qaradawi urged Muslims with military training to join the anti-Bashar al-Assad struggle in Syria. His condemnation of Lebanese Shiite Muslim militia Hezbollah (Party of God) as the "party of Satan" was immediately endorsed by Saudi grand mufti Abdul Aziz al-Sheikh, as was his assertion that al-Assad's Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shia Islam, was "more infidel than Christians and Jews." In a surprising gesture to Saudi Arabia, Qaradawi went on to say that "I defended the so-called (Hezbollah leader Hassan) Nasrallah and his party, the party of tyranny... in front of clerics in Saudi Arabia. It seems that the clerics of Saudi Arabia were more mature than me."¹⁸

Promoting Islamist activism

¹⁵ *Ibid.* Trofimov

¹⁶ Qaradawi backs Syrian revolution, The Peninsula, March 26, 2011, <http://www.thepeninsulaqatar.com/qatar/146915-qaradawi-backs-syrian-revolution.html>

¹⁷ Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, 'Syria and the 'Resistance' Bloc: Buddies No More,' May 22, 2011, American Thinker, http://www.americanthinker.com/2011/05/syria_and_the_resistance_bloc.html

¹⁸ Qaradawi admits Saudi clerics are more mature than him on Hezbollah, June 1, 2011, Middle East Online, <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=59139>

Ironically, the setting up of Qatar's state-owned Al Jazeera television network which handles Gulf states with velvet gloves, parallels the structuring of the Gulf state's ties to the Brotherhood: the group, which dismantled its operations in Qatar in the late 1990s, was allowed to operate everywhere except for in Qatar itself. Instead of allowing a Qatari branch of the Brotherhood, Qatar moved to fund institutions that were designed to foster a generation of activists in the Middle East and North Africa as well as to guide the Brotherhood in its transition from a clandestine to a public group. Former Qatari Brother Jassim Al-Sultan established the Al-Nahda (Awakening) Project¹⁹ to promote Islamist activism within democracies. A medical doctor, Al-Sultan has since the dissolution of the group in Qatar advised the Brotherhood to reach out to other groups rather than stick to its strategy of building power bases within existing institutions. He has also criticized the Brotherhood for insisting on its slogan, 'Islam is the Solution.' Al Nahda cooperates closely with the London and Doha-based Academy of Change (AOC)²⁰ that focuses on the study of "social, cultural, and political transformations especially in the Arabic and Islamic region." AOC appears to be modelled on Otoper, the Serbian youth movement that toppled President Slobodan Milosevic and has since transformed itself into a training ground for non-violent protest. The Brotherhood campaigned for AOC founder Hisham Morsy's release after he was detained during the popular revolt in 2011 that toppled Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

The threat to Saudi Arabia posed by Qatar's fostering of popular protest was compounded by the nature of the social contract in the kingdom and other energy-rich rentier Gulf states. The state's generous cradle-to-grave welfare and social and no taxation policy approach in exchange for the surrender of political rights meant that the Brotherhood challenged ruling families on issues that they were most vulnerable to: culture, ideology and civic society. The Qatari government's support of Al Nahda and AOC was part of its effort, in contrast to other Gulf states, to control the world of national non-governmental organizations. In doing so, it targeted what, according to Hootan Shambayati, effectively amounts to the Gulf states' Achilles Heel. "The rentier nature of the state limited the regime's ability to legitimize itself through its economic performance... Consequently, culture and moral values became sources of conflict between the state and segments of the civil society," Shambayati

¹⁹ <http://www.4nahda.com/content/1005>

²⁰ <http://aoc.fm>

wrote.²¹ The government's support for activists paralleled Qatar's earlier bypassing of Arab elites by initially appealing to the public across the region with its groundbreaking free-wheeling reporting and debate on Al Jazeera that, at its peak, captivated an Arabic speaking audience of 60 million.

Sharpening the rivalry

Beyond historic differences in religious experience and practice, two more events sharpened the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Qatar: the 1991 U.S.-led expulsion of Iraqi forces from Kuwait and the rise to power in a 1995 bloodless coup of Sheikh Hamad. The U.S.-led invasion called into question Qatar's alignment with Saudi Arabia since its independence in 1971, which involved Saudi's guarantee to protect the tiny emirate. To the Qataris, the invasion demonstrated that Qatar could not rely, for its defence, on a country that was not capable of defending itself. That realization coupled with Kuwait's ability to rally the international community to its assistance reinforced Hamad's belief that Qatar's security was best enhanced by embedding and branding itself in the international community as a cutting-edge, moderate, knowledge-based nation.

The rift with the kingdom was further widened by Saudi outrage at a son revolting against his father that translated into efforts to undermine the new ruler, including attempts to unseat him, sabotage Qatar's endeavours to export natural gas to other states in the region, and build a bridge linking it with the United Arab Emirates. By all accounts, Hamad's voluntary abdication in favour of Tamim should have provoked similar ire from the Saudis in a region in which rulers hang on to power until death even if they at times have experienced a deterioration of health that has incapacitated them not only physically but also mentally. One reason it may not is the fact that Saudi officials appreciated Tamim's more accommodating interaction with them and the fact that his ascension held out the hope of a down toning of the activist and adventurist nature of his father's foreign policy.

Relations between the two countries had nonetheless already virtually ruptured before Hamad's 1995 coup after border skirmishes in 1992 and 1994 rooted in long-standing disputes over Saudi projections of itself as first among the region's Bedouins. They further

²¹ Hootan Shambayati, 'The Rentier State, Interest Groups, and the Paradox of Autonomy: State and Business in Turkey and Iran,' *Comparative Politics*, 1994, Vol 6:3, p. 307-331

deteriorated as a result of several allegedly Saudi-backed coup attempts in the late 1990s. The attempts prompted Qatar to strip some 6,000 members of the Al-Gufran clan of their Qatari nationalities because they had patrolled the border on behalf of the Saudis.²²

The deteriorating relationship with its big brother made it even more imperative for Qatar to strike out on its own – the very thing Saudi Arabia thought to thwart. A struggle for a multi-billion dollar Qatari project to supply gas to Kuwait symbolized Saudi power. Asked in 2003 why the Kuwait project was stalled, then Qatar's industry and energy minister Abdullah Bin Hamad Al-Attiyah said: "We have received no clearance from Saudi Arabia. Hence it is not feasible."²³ It took a rollercoaster of repeated Saudi denials and approvals for the project to be finally completed in 2008.

If the natural gas deal was emblematic of Qatari-Saudi relations, so was a London libel case in which the wife of the wife of the former and mother of the new emir, Sheikha Mozah bint Nasser al-Missned, sued Saudi-owned Ash Sharq al Awsat newspaper for falsely reporting that her husband had secretly visited Israel. In her petition to the court, the Sheikha charged that the paper was "controlled by Saudi intelligence paymasters who used the newspaper as a mouthpiece for a propaganda campaign against Qatar and its leadership."²⁴

Saudi and Qatari national interests diverge further when it comes to Iran, with whom Qatar shares the world's largest gas field. Saudi Arabia sees Iran as a major rival that is instigating civil unrest in the region. It is also the spiritual home of the Shiites, the sect most despised by Saudi Wahhabis. To navigate this minefield, Qatar has projected itself in the first decade of the twenty first century as the mediator of the wider region's conflicts and prompted it to forge relationships with other Saudi nemeses such as Israel and Hezbollah.

Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz, when he was still crown prince, refused to attend an Arab summit in 2000 because of the presence of an Israeli trade office in Doha. The appearance of Saudi dissidents on Al Jazeera two years later persuaded the kingdom to

²² Jill Crystal. Political reform and the prospects for democratic transition in the gulf, FRIDE Working Paper, July 8, 2005, <http://www.fride.org/publication/220/political-reform-and-the-prospects-for-democratic-transition-in-the-gulf>

²³ Mona Lisa Freiha, Saudi refuses Qatar gas project, An Nahar, July 23, 2011

²⁴ Lawrence Smallman, 'Qatar's first lady wins UK libel case,' January 5, 2005, Al Jazeera, <http://www.aljazeera.com/archive/2005/01/200849139943889.html>

withdraw its ambassador to Qatar. In 2009, the two countries held rival Arab summits within a day of each other despite an improvement in relations in the two preceding years that included a deal allowing Al Jazeera to open a bureau in Riyadh provided it did not air dissident Saudi voices. Seemingly improved relations were highlighted when the emir amnestied several Qataris-turned Saudi nationals convicted of their alleged involvement in the 1996 Saudi-inspired coup attempts.

The improvement in relations was a reflection of Saudi leverage. That leverage was enhanced by Qatar's own success in deploying soft power. The winning of the hosting rights for the 2022 World Cup meant, for example, that Qatar needed to project stability in its backyard. Saudi Arabia could undermine that perception. Support for the Syrian rebels had a similar potential downside. Qatari backing could backfire on its relations with Iran, driving Qatar in turn closer to the kingdom. While a majority of Qataris are likely to back improved relations, they also appeared to remain ambiguous. Qataris participating in a 2009 broadcast of the BBC's Doha Debates overwhelmingly described their country's relations with the kingdom as a 'cold war.'²⁵ University students often glorify past Qatari tribal defence of Qatar's only land border that separates it from Saudi Arabia.

Finally, while few have any doubt about Saudi Arabia's policy goals – maintenance of the status quo to the greatest degree possible, retention of its leadership role, limiting of the rise of Islamist forces, preservation of monarchical rule and restrictive political reform – Qatar's actions have raised questions about what it is trying to achieve.

Politicians and analysts grappled, for example, to get a grip on how Qatar's competition with Saudi Arabia for influence played out in Yemen, a strategic nation at the southern tip of the peninsular. Questions they were trying to wrap their heads around included Qatar's ties to the powerful Islamist Brotherhood-related Al-Islah movement and its emergence as a mediator in Yemen. Qatar's role, for example, in the release of a kidnapped Swiss teacher²⁶ made it rather than Saudi Arabia, the go-to-address in a country in which kidnapping for political and criminal purposes are a fixture of life.

²⁵ The Doha Debates, This House believes that after Gaza, Arab unity is dead and buried, February 15, 2009, <http://www.thedohadebates.com/debates/item/?d=47&mode=opinions>

²⁶ Michael Peel, Rivals make play for power in Yemen, Financial Times, April 15, 2013

Qatar's influence in Yemen was both remarkable and sensitive given long-standing Saudi bankrolling of the government of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh as well as the country's major tribes, including the president's own tribe, the Hashid tribal confederation. Qatar's close ties to the Brotherhood as well as a history of mediation in Yemen dating back to the 1990s allowed it to make significant inroads into what the Saudis perceived as their preserve. By competing in Yemen, Qatar benefited from the fact that it was a tiny nation rather than the region's giant and was not a supplier of jihadists to Yemen-based Al Qa'ida in the Arabian Gulf (AQAP). Qatar's influence was sufficiently significant to prompt tribal leaders, including prominent businessmen and politician Hamid al-Ahmar, to balance their relations between the two Gulf rivals once they broke off with Saleh during the 2011 popular uprising against him and joined the opposition.

On the back of its relationship with the Brotherhood, Qatar forged ties to other key Yemeni players, including Maj. Gen. Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, a Muslim Brother and powerful advisor to President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi. Hadi succeeded Saleh in 2012 in a deal with the opposition mediated by Gulf states under Saudi leadership that was designed to preserve the core structure of the outgoing president's regime. Qatar initially participated in the diplomatic effort but later pulled out because of "indecision and delays in the signature of the proposed agreement" and "the intensity of clashes" in Yemen.²⁷ In an interview with Russia today, Saleh had warned a month earlier that "the state of Qatar is funding chaos in Yemen and in Egypt and Syria and throughout the Arab world. We reserve the right not to sign (the Gulf-negotiated deal) if the representatives of Qatar are present" at the ceremony.²⁸

The divergence of Qatari and Saudi goals was also symbolized by Qatar's ties to Nobel Prize winner and prominent Yemeni activist Tawakkol Karma, who emerged as the face of the popular revolt against Saleh. Gen. Al Ahmar's first armored division, which joined the mass anti-Saleh protesters in early 2011, played a key role in the president's ultimate demise after 30 years in office, when it attacked the presidential palace in 2012, killing several senior officials and severely wounding the embattled Yemeni leader and various of his key aids. Qatar's relationship to Al Ahmar dates back to 2008/2009 when it was mediating an end to the armed confrontation with rebel Houthi tribesmen in the north. The general was

²⁷ Middle East Online, 'Qatar pulls out of Gulf's Yemen mediation,' 13 May 2013, <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=46106>.

²⁸ *Ibid.ra*

the Saleh government's negotiator. Qatar further garnered popularity among Saleh's opponents by becoming the first Arab country in 2011 to call on the president to step down in response to the demand of protesters camped out on the capital Sana'a's Change Square. In response, Saleh thundered in a speech: "We derive our legitimacy from the strength of our glorious Yemeni people, not from Qatar, whose initiative we reject."²⁹

Qatar's success in breaking the Saudi political monopoly in Yemen was evident to all in July 2013 when Hadi stopped in Doha on his way to Washington for an official visit. Hadi was accompanied by General Al-Ahmar. Similarly, when Al Islah leader Muhammad al-Yadumi travelled to Doha in 2012 to thank the government for its support, he did not include Saudi Arabia on his itinerary. It was a glaring omission given Saudi Arabia's key role in brokering the agreement that eased Saleh out of office.

Turning the page?

When Tamim took over the reins of power in June 2013, he inherited a state that his father ensured was tightly controlled by his wing of the Al Thanis. Hamad created institutions and government offices that were populated by loyalists as well as his offspring and bore the characteristics of autocracy: centralized and personalized decision-making, reliance on patronage networks and an absence of transparency and accountability.³⁰

Few Qataris question the achievements of Hamad. With those accomplishments notwithstanding, conservative segments of Qatari society, with whom Sheikh Tamim at times appeared to empathize, have questioned some of the side effects of the former emir's policies, including:

- (i) Huge expenditure on a bold foreign policy that put Qatar at the forefront of regional demands for greater freedom and change but also earned it significant criticism and embarrassment;
- (ii) Unfulfilled promises of change at home that would give Qataris a greater say in their country's affairs;

²⁹ Al Sharq, 'Doha's influence in Sana'a spring forces taking accounting of new allies (صدعاء في الدوحة ربيع يع), (الجدد دل فاتها ل حساب نفوذاً ي ثمر), 12 December 2012, <http://www.alsharq.net.sa/2012/12/12/620296>

³⁰ *Ibid.* Kamrava

- (iii) A stark increase in foreign labor to complete ambitious infrastructure projects, many of which are World Cup-related, that have exposed Qatar for the first time to real external pressure for social change;
- (iv) More liberal catering to Western expatriates by allowing the controlled sale of alcohol and pork;
- (v) Potential tacit concessions Qatar may have to make to non-Muslim soccer fans during the World Cup, including expanded areas where consumption of alcohol will be allowed, public rowdiness and dress codes largely unseen in the Gulf state, and the presence of gays.

A discussion in Qatar about possibly transferring ownership of soccer clubs from prominent Qataris, including members of the ruling family, to publicly held companies because of lack of Qatari interest in “the sheikh’s club” illustrates a degree of sensitivity to popular criticism. Tamim has however enhanced his popularity by his close relationship to Qatari tribes, his upholding of Islamic morals, exemplified by the fact that alcohol is not served in luxury hotels that he owns, and his accessibility similar to that of Saudi King Abdullah. Tamim was also the driving force behind the replacement in 2012 of English by Arabic as the main language of instruction at Qatar University. He is further believed to have been empathetic to unprecedented on-line protest campaigns by Qatari activists against the state-owned telecommunications company and Qatar Airways. Hamad appeared to anticipate a potentially different tone under Tamim by urging Qataris “to preserve our civilized traditional and cultural values.” If Hamad used initial promises of greater liberalization to garner support within his fractured tribe, one of the first to settle in Qatar in the eighteenth century, Tamim may well employ his conservatism to rally the wagons.

The Saudi counter-revolutionary campaign in Egypt and Syria, barely a month after Tamim’s ascension, constituted a serious foreign policy crisis for the new emir. The Saudi-backed coup in Egypt was Saudi Arabia’s third successful counter-revolutionary strike in a matter of weeks against the wave of change in the Middle East and North Africa, and its most important defeat of Qatari support of popular revolts and the Brotherhood. As the anti-Morsi protests erupted in Egypt, Qatari-backed Syrian National Council (SNC) Prime Minister-in-exile Ghassan Hitto resigned under Saudi pressure, and Saudi-backed Ahmed Assi Al-Jerba defeated his Qatar-supported rival, Adib Shishakly, in SNC presidential elections. Earlier, Saudi Arabia succeeded in restricting Qatari support for the Brotherhood

within the SNC and the Free Syrian Army as well as for more radical Islamists by agreeing with the Obama administration that it would be allowed to supply non-US surface-to-air missiles to Syrian rebels as long as distribution is handled by the rebel Supreme Military Council to ensure that weapons did not flow to jihadist forces. Qatar is likely to have little choice but to follow suit. The Saudi success followed its support in crushing a popular uprising in 2011 in Bahrain, massive financial assistance to less wealthy fellow monarchs in Oman, Jordan, and Morocco, and its effort to dominate transition in Yemen after the fall of President Ali Abdullah Saleh.

The stakes for Saudi Arabia and Qatar in Egypt were high. A successful Brotherhood-led democratic transition would have cemented the success of popular uprisings and alongside Turkey the role of Islamists in implementing change. It would have also restored Egypt, the Arab world's most populous nation, to its traditional leadership role in the region in competition with Saudi Arabia. Thwarting the revolt and the Brotherhood would not only eliminate these threats but constitute a substantial bodily blow to Qatari encouragement of change in the Middle East and North Africa.

The Saudi's moves left Qatar with little choice but to congratulate the Egyptian military on its intervention, asserting that it accepted the will of the Egyptian people. But unlike Saudi Arabia and the fiercely anti-Islamist United Arab Emirates, who remained silent after the killing, days after the coup of 54 Morsi supporters by Egyptian security, and granted Egypt a day later \$8 billion in grants and loans, Qatar in a bid to retain its independent position expressed regret at the incident but urged self-restraint and dialogue. At about the same time, Qaradawi, who runs one of Al Jazeera's most popular shows, "*Ash-Shariah wal-Hayat*" (Sharia and Life),³¹ called on the network and in a fatwa issued in Doha for Morsi's reinstatement. Qaradawi declared the coup unconstitutional and in violation of Islamic law.³² Ironically, Qaradawi's own son, Abdelrahman Al-Qaradawi, took his own father to task on his support for Morsi. Abdelrahman noted that Qaradawi had long argued that a

³¹ <http://www.qaradawi.net/2010-02-23-09-38-15/4.html>

³² Yusuf al-Qaradawi, القرضاوي يفتي بوجوب تأييد الرئيس المصري المنتخب محمد مرسي, July 7, 2013, <http://www.qaradawi.net/component/content/article/6744.html>

ruler is bound by the opinion of a majority of those who swear loyalty to him. He argued further that the sheikh had taught him that freedom superseded Islamic law.³³

Saudi countering of Qatari policy followed a gradual turning of the tide in countries where it had helped topple an autocratic leader. Yemeni President Saleh rejected Qatari participation in the Saudi-led Gulf effort to resolve the crisis in his country after Qatar became the first regional power to call for his resignation. Qatari funding of multiple armed Islamist groups in Libya sparked outrage after documents were discovered disclosing the extent of its support. Then oil and finance minister Ali Tarhouni made a thinly veiled reference to Qatar when he declared in October 2011 that “it’s time we publicly declare that anyone who wants to come to our house has to knock on our front door first.”³⁴ A month later, relations with Algeria turned sour after Hamad, according to Arab media, warned Algerian Foreign Minister Mourad Medleci to “stop defending Syria because your time will come, and perhaps you will need us.”³⁵ Hamad broke off a visit to Mauritania in January 2012 hours after arriving in the country after President Mohammad Ould Abdel Aziz rejected his demand that he initiate democratic reform and a dialogue with Islamists.³⁶

Qatari foreign policy setbacks are paralleled by Al Jazeera’s mounting problems resulting from perceptions that it is promoting the Brotherhood³⁷ and changes in the pan-Arab television market. The network experienced a boom as the primary news source in the heyday of the Arab revolts that toppled the leaders of Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Yemen, but has since seen its viewership numbers decline with Arabs turning increasingly to a plethora of newly established local news broadcasters. Market research company Sigma Conseil reported that Al Jazeera’s market share in Tunisia had dropped from 10.7 per cent in 2011

³³ Abdelrahman Al-Qaradawi, عبد الرحمن يوسف القرضاوى يكتب: عفواً أبا الحبيب ... مرسى لا شرعية لـ, July 7, 2013, <http://www.youm7.com/News.asp?NewsID=1152641>

³⁴ Sam Dagher. Charles Levinson and Margaret Coker, ‘Tiny Kingdom’s Huge Role in Libya Draws Concern,’ The Wall Street Journal, October 17, 2011, <https://global.factiva.com/ha/default.aspx>

³⁵ Hassan Masiky, ‘Qatar Chastises Algeria for defending Assad in Syria,’ Morocco News Board, November 15, 2011, <http://www.moroccoboard.com/viewpoint-5/68-hassan-massiki/5495-qatar-chastises-algeria-for-defending-assad-in-syria->

³⁶ Al-Mokhtar Ould Mohammad, ‘Dispute Mars Emir of Qatar’s Mauritania Visit,’ Al Akhbar English, January 9, 2012, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/dispute-mars-emir-qatar%E2%80%99s-mauritania-visit>

³⁷ Sultan Al Qassemi, ‘Al Jazeera’s Awful Week,’ July 11, 2013, Foreign Policy, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/07/11/al_jazeera_egypt_qatar_muslim_brotherhood?page=full; The Economist, ‘Must Do Better,’ January 12, 2013, charges of threatening national security and public order by airing inflammatory news, <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21569429-arabs-premier-television-network-bids-american-viewers-must-do-better>; Alain Gresh, ‘Gulf cools towards Muslim Brothers,’ November 2102, Le Monde Diplomatique, <http://mondediplo.com/2012/11/02egypt>

to 4.8 per cent in 2012 and that the Qatari network was no longer among Egypt's ten most watched channels. Tunisia's 3C Institute of Marketing, Media and Opinion Studies said that Al Jazeera Sports was the only brand of the network that ranked in January among the country's five most watched channels. Al Jazeera reporters are increasingly harassed as they seek to do their jobs in countries like Tunisia and Egypt. Protests that erupted after the 2013 assassination of prominent opposition leader Shukri Belaid charged that "Al Jazeera is a slave of Qatar," accusing it of biased reporting on the murder because of the Gulf state's support for Ennahada, the country's dominant Islamist grouping.³⁸ In July 2013, Egyptian colleagues expelled Al Jazeera Cairo bureau chief Abdel Fattah Fayed from a news conference in Cairo organized by the military and the police against whom the prosecutor general issued an arrest warrant on charges of threatening national security and public order by airing inflammatory news. Twenty-two journalists resigned from Al Jazeera's Egyptian affiliate days earlier in protest against its alleged bias towards the Brotherhood.

The Qatari setbacks raise the question of whether the idiosyncratic Gulf state will be able to sustain its activist support of popular revolts and endorsement of political Islam in the Middle East and North Africa. They also call into question Qatar's continued ability in opposition to Saudi Arabia to support change in the region as long as it does not occur in the conservative, oil-rich Gulf's own backyard.

Sports, a double edged sword

Qatar's emphasis on soft power contrasts starkly with Saudi Arabia fledgling attempts to follow suit by among other things staging cultural exhibitions. The emirate's strategy like its support for the Brotherhood and popular revolts in the region and its emphasis on country branding constitutes an integral part of its foreign and defense policy, designed to put Qatar on the cutting edge of history and to ensure that the nation is embedded in the international community in a way that enhances the chances that foreign nations will come to its aid in a time of need. In doing so, it like the United Arab Emirates challenges, as Kristian Coates Ulrichsen noted, traditional academic wisdom on the limits on the ability of

³⁸ James M. Dorsey, 'Al Jazeera targets Spain amid dropping viewer numbers in its heartland,' April 4, 2013, <http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.com/search/label/Qatar?updated-max=2013-04-30T16:37:00%2B08:00&max-results=20&start=5&by-date=false>

small states to project power and the assumption of an automatic link between size and power.³⁹

Qatar's soft power approach is based on the realization that no matter what quantity of sophisticated weaponry it purchases or number of foreigners the Gulf State drafts into its military force, it will not be able to defend itself, nor can it rely on Saudi Arabia. The approach also stems from uncertainty over how reliable the United States is as the guarantor of last resort of its security. That concern has been reinforced by the United States' economic problems, its reluctance to engage militarily post-Iraq and Afghanistan and its likely emergence by the end of this decade as the world's largest oil exporter.

Soft power puts Qatar regularly at loggerheads with Saudi Arabia and raises concerns in the kingdom on how far Qatar may go. The hosting of the 2022 World Cup has already made it more vulnerable to criticism of restrictions on alcohol consumption, the banning of homosexuality, and working conditions of foreign labour. Qatar's responses, particularly with regard to alcohol and foreign labour, threaten to sharpen differences with the kingdom and highlight the fact that it is lagging behind in addressing concerns about foreign workers' conditions, which in turn, has made it more difficult for Saudi Arabia to recruit abroad.

Moreover, Qatar's projection of itself as a global sports hub and the role of soccer fans in the popular revolts in North Africa has reverberated in the sports sector in the kingdom particularly with regard to fan power and women's sports, reaffirming the role of sports in the development of the Middle East and North Africa since the late 19th century.⁴⁰

Qatar and Jordan were driving forces in the launch of a campaign in 2012 by Middle Eastern soccer associations grouped in the West Asian Football Federation (WAFF) to put women's soccer on par with men's football in a region in which a woman's right to play and pursue an athletic career remains controversial. Saudi Arabia was conspicuously absent at the launch. The campaign defined "an athletic woman" as "an empowered woman who further empowers her community." In a rebuttal of opposition to women's soccer by the kingdom

³⁹ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, 'Small States with a Big Role: Qatar and the United Arab Emirates in the Wake of the Arab Spring, 2012, HH Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammad al-Sabah Publication Series, Kuwait, October 2012

⁴⁰ Shaun Lopez, On Race, Sports and Identity: Picking Up the Ball in Middle East Studies, International Journal of Middle East Studies, Vol. 41, 2009, p. 359-361

and some Islamists across the region, the campaign stressed that women's soccer did not demean cultural and traditional values. Contradicting Saudi policy, the campaign endorsed the principle of a woman's right to play soccer irrespective of culture, religion and race; a women's right to opt for soccer as a career rather than only as a sport; and soccer's ability to promote gender equality and level the playing field on and off the pitch.⁴¹

To be sure, Qatar has been slow in encouraging women's sports, and like Saudi Arabia, was pressured in 2012 by the International Olympic Committee to, for the first time, field women at an international tournament during the London Olympics.

The WAFF campaign came on the back of a Human Rights Watch report⁴² that accused Saudi Arabia of kowtowing to assertions by the country's powerful conservative Muslim clerics that female sports constitute "steps of the devil" that will encourage immorality and reduce women's chances of meeting the requirements for marriage. The charges in the report entitled "'Steps of the Devil' came on the heels of Saudi Arabia backtracking on a plan to build its first stadium especially designed to allow women who are currently barred from attending soccer matches because of the kingdom's strict public gender segregation to watch games. The planned stadium was supposed to open in 2014."⁴³

Qatar's endorsement of women's sports has made Saudi Arabia the only Arab and virtually the only Muslim state that refuses to embrace the concept. Spanish consultants developing the kingdom's first ever national sports plan were instructed to develop a program for men only.⁴⁴ Opposition to women's sports is reinforced by the fact that physical education classes are banned in state-run Saudi girl's schools. Public sports facilities are exclusively for men and sports associations offer competitions and support for athletes in international competitions only to men.

⁴¹ James M. Dorsey, January 14, 2013, Middle East soccer associations campaign for women's right to play, The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer, <http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.com/2013/01/middle-east-soccer-associations.html>

⁴² Human Rights Watch. 2012. Steps of the Devil, Denial of Women's and Girls' Rights to Sport in Saudi Arabia, <http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/saudi0212webwcover.pdf>

⁴³ *Ibid.* Dorsey

⁴⁴ Author interviews with the consultants

Saudi opposition to women's sports and participation in international tournaments was further challenged by a decision by the International Football Association Board (IFAB), backed by Qatar and other Middle Eastern soccer associations, to allow women to wear a hijab that met safety and security standards in international matches. It also came as Saudi women, encouraged by the winds of change in the region, the advancement of women's sports in Qatar and elsewhere and the support of liberal members of the royal family, were pushing the envelope despite being slammed in Saudi media "for going against their natural role" and being "shameless" because they cause embarrassment to their families.⁴⁵

Similarly, fan pressure forced the resignation of Prince Nawaf bin Feisal in 2012 as head of the Saudi Football Federation (SFF) in an unprecedented move that echoed the toppling of Arab leaders in which militant soccer fans were front row players. Nawaf was replaced by a commoner, renowned former soccer player Ahmed Eid Alharbi, as the first freely chosen head of the SFF in a country that views free and fair polling as an alien Western concept.⁴⁶ Fan pressure erupted after Australia's defeat of the kingdom's football team in a 2014 World Cup qualifier. Nawaf's resignation broke a mold in a nation governed as an absolute monarchy and a region that sees control of soccer as a key tool in preventing the pitch from becoming a venue for anti-government protests, a distraction from widespread grievances, and a tool to manipulate national emotions. It also marked the first time that a member of the ruling elite saw association with a national team's failure as a risk to be avoided rather than one best dealt with by firing the coach or in extreme cases like Saddam Hussein's Iraq or Moammar Qaddafi's Libya, brutally punishing players.

The Saudi royal family, like autocratic leaders throughout the Middle East and North Africa, has associated itself with soccer, the only institution in pre-revolt countries that traditionally evokes the same deep-seated passion as religion. Nawaf's resignation constituted the first time an autocratic regime sought to put the beautiful game at arm's length while maintaining control. The ruling family nonetheless retained its grip on sports, with Nawaf staying on as head of the Saudi Olympic Committee and as the senior official responsible for youth welfare, on which the SFF depends alongside television broadcast rights for funding.

⁴⁵ James M. Dorsey. March 4, 2012. Muslim players win hijab battle in their struggle for women's rights, The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer, <http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.com/2012/03/muslim-players-win-hijab-battle-in.html>

⁴⁶ James M. Dorsey, December 26, 2012. Ground-breaking election of Saudi soccer chief masks Arab revolt fears, The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer, <http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.com/2012/12/ground-breaking-election-of-saudi.html>

Major soccer clubs moreover continue to be the playground of princes who at times micro manage matches by phoning mid-game their team's coaches with instructions on which players to replace.

“Words such as freedom of choice, equality, human rights, rational thinking, democracy and elections, are terms we came to view with high concern and suspicion. We treat them as alien ideas that are trying to sneak within our society from the outside world. But last week, an amazing and irregular event took place, in one of our sporting landmarks. The members of the General Assembly of the Saudi Arabian Football Federation (SAFF) have elected through popular voting, their first president,” wrote columnist Mohammed AlSaif in the Arab News.⁴⁷

Alharbi, a former goalkeeper of Al Ahli SC, the soccer team of the Red Sea port of Jeddah, who is widely seen as a reformer and proponent of women’s soccer, narrowly won the election widely covered by Saudi media. “Saudis were witnessing for the very first time in their lives a government official being elected through what they used to consider as a western ballot system. People eagerly followed a televised presidential debate between the two candidates the previous day,” AlSaif wrote.

Conclusion

Qatar’s foreign policy and soft power strategy effectively puts it at loggerheads with Saudi Arabia. Whether the Saudi-Qatari rivalry will contribute to spark changes in the kingdom or reinforce monarchical autocracy in the region is likely to be as much decided in Qatar itself as by the political rivalry between the two elsewhere in the region. Saudi-backed Qatari conservatives have questioned the emir’s right to rule by decree, organized online boycotts of state-run companies, and led by the crown prince, forced Qatar University to replace English with Arabic as the main language of instruction.

Qatar’s embrace of the Brotherhood, positioning it at the cutting edge of change across the region in addition to its soft power diplomacy, offers opportunities for Saudi Arabia to counter what it perceives as a dangerous policy that the emirate has exploited in Egypt and

⁴⁷ Mohammed AlSaif. December 24, 2012. A healthy election, Arab News, <http://www.arabnews.com/healthy-election>

Syria. Fault lines in Egypt have deepened with the toppling of President Morsi, weakened Qatar's regional influence and made its Brotherhood allies in other Arab nations in the throes of change reluctant to assume sole government responsibility. Jordan's Brotherhood-related Islamic Action Front (IAF) officially boycotted parliamentary elections in January 2013 because of alleged gerrymandering. Privately, the IAF, with an eye on Egypt, is believed to have shied away from getting too big a share of the pie for their taste. Mounting opposition to the Brotherhood's ruling Tunisian affiliate, Ennahada, and the assassination in 2013 of two prominent opposition politician prompted the Islamists to negotiate their replacement by a government of technocrats.⁴⁸

Similarly, Qatar's victory of the right to host the World Cup may have opened the Pandora's Box of demographic change that could reverberate throughout the Gulf, a region populated by states whose nationals often constitute minorities in their own countries. Under increasing pressure from international trade unions which have the clout to make true on a threat to boycott the 2022 World Cup, the status of foreign nationals could become a monkey wrench.

Resolution of the dispute with the unions raises the specter of foreigners gaining greater rights and having a greater stake in countries that have sought to protect national identity and the rights of local nationals by ensuring that foreigners do not sprout roots. That effort, so far, goes as far as soccer clubs opting for near empty stadiums because there are not enough locals to fill them rather than offering the population at large something that even remotely could give them a sense of belonging.

As a result, Qatar's foreign, sports and culture policy seems forward looking despite Saudi-backed conservative opposition at home and at first glance appears to put the tiny Gulf state in a category of its own. Yet, the challenge it poses to Saudi Arabia is increasingly proving to be a challenge to itself.

⁴⁸ Bouazza Ben Bouazza, 'Tunisia Compromise May Head off Gov't Crisis,' 22 August 2013, AP/ABC News, <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/tunisia-compromise-head-off-govt-crisis-20032542>

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