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Cutting Qatar Down to Size

Yoel Guzansky

Qatar's readiness to use its immense economic power for political purposes, coupled with the weakness of several regional actors in the wake of the "Arab Spring," has put the emirate's foreign policy in the spotlight. Indeed, Qatar became a key country in the Middle East in recent years, wielding significant influence far beyond its borders. All this is likely to change. While American defense support has given Qatar a sense of security and empowered its diplomatic activism (Qatar is host to both the US Central Command Forward Headquarters and the Combined Air Operations Center, America's largest air force base in the Middle East), the emirate's power is not unlimited. Many are unhappy with Qatar's "adventurous" foreign policy and regional activism, not to mention its opportunism.

Several internal and external developments are likely to have a negative impact on Qatar's standing. Last June, in an unusual step, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani handed the leadership over to his 33 year-old son, Prince Tamim, who thereby became the youngest head of state in the Arab world. There are indications that the new emir will seek to gradually focus more on internal affairs and development projects in preparation for the 2022 football World Cup at the expense of the extravagant foreign policy of the recent past, which has aroused criticism at home. Behind closed doors, some in the emirate have urged that the immense wealth be used to develop "roads in Doha, not Lebanon."

In foreign policy, some of the emirate's gambles were unsuccessful. Before the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, Qatar was close to the Syrian regime. Once the civil war began, however, believing that regime's days were numbered, the al-Thani family turned its back on the minority Alawite regime and its allies, Hizbollah and Iran, and began supporting the opposition. Qatar's support for the extremists among the rebels in Syria (as previously in Libya) sparked criticism and damaged Qatar's relations with the US, which fears the consequences of strengthening these factions. Qatar has since reduced its involvement in the crisis and its support for the rebels in general, while Saudi Arabia, its

large neighbor on the west, has become their principal supporter (for example, Ahmad Jarba, who is close to Saudi Arabia, recently replaced Mustafa Sabbagh, who is close to Qatar, as president of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces).

The emirate has been subject to international criticism, following the exposure of conditions for foreign workers (mainly Nepalese and Indians) in development work for the World Cup – 600 foreign workers die each year in the emirate. The possibility that the World Cup will be rescheduled for the winter because of the difficult conditions in the summer in the Gulf could also harm Qatar's prestige, as Doha feels that the World Cup should take place as planned, on the original dates. On a different international front, Qatar offered its "good offices" in negotiations between the US and the Taliban. These negotiations have stalled, due in part to the closure of the Taliban offices in Doha a few months ago, which has hurt Qatar's prestige and its potential ability to assist in such efforts in the future.

With the rise of political Islam, Qatar, to the dismay of its Arab Gulf neighbors, tried to ride the Islamic wave by becoming close to its most prominent representative, the Egypt of Mohamed Morsi, awarding it some \$8 billion in loans and grants. Yet for many years relations between Qatar and Egypt were strained – Egyptian President Husni Mubarak once asked "Why should I pay attention to a country with the population of a small Cairo hotel?" – and the one-year honeymoon between Qatar and Egypt during the brief Muslim Brotherhood era ended. When Morsi fell, Qatar lost both a principal ally and considerable influence in Cairo and the region. In an attempt to resuscitate its relations with Egypt, at least to some extent, Qatar has tried, so far without success, to portray itself after the military takeover in Egypt as having always supported the "Egyptian people," rather than any particular regime.

The new Egyptian regime was not impressed by this posture; it froze LNG supply talks with the emirate, closed down the local branch of al-Jazeera and arrested journalists employed by the network, rejected Qatar's request to increase the frequency of flights between Cairo and Doha, and even in protest returned a \$2 billion grant from Qatar awarded to the previous regime and deposited in Egypt's central bank – an indication of the depth of the tension and the strained relations. In late September 2013 the Egyptian government even issued an arrest warrant against Sheikh Yusuf Qardawi, an Egyptian theologian living in Qatar who is identified with the Muslim Brotherhood, on charges of incitement that led to the killing of Egyptian policemen. Al-Jazeera has lost some of its influence in sizable parts of the Arab world following its coverage of the events in Egypt, which reflected a critical attitude toward the military regime.

Qatar had some influence in Jerusalem, with which it maintained open relations for years – a kind of de facto normalization. Operation Cast Lead in the Gaza Strip in late 2008-early 2009, however, and Qatar's relations with elements such as Iran and Hamas (to which the previous emir gave a \$400 million check on a well-publicized visit that "breached" the Israeli blockade on the Gaza Strip), caused a break in relations between Qatar and Israel. Qatar was proud of these relations, which helped distinguish it in the Arab world, and Qatar does not conceal its willingness to enjoy open relations with Israel, on condition that "Jerusalem proves that it is serious about the peace process," a lower threshold for relations than those stated elsewhere in the Arab world.

As a small country, Qatar must identify processes and trends and keep ahead of its larger neighbors in order to promote its particular agenda, which is driven by pure survival interests. It cannot be ruled out, however, that the small emirate has reached the limits of its power and is now facing opposition to its regional policies. It will have to adjust its regional policy, especially toward Egypt, if it wants to retain its influence in the Arab world. As long as the regime in Egypt is not yet entirely stable, it will find it difficult to completely dispense with aid from Qatar. If and when the situation in Egypt stabilizes, however, and there is no change in relations between Cairo and Doha, the Egyptian military regime will prefer doing without Muslim Brotherhood-supporting Qatar, and settle for the generous aid readily offered by Qatar's oil-rich neighbors: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait.

Until the uprising in Syria began, Qatar's foreign policy was all about keeping as many doors open as possible. Relations were maintained with all elements in the Middle East as an insurance policy, in part as protection against radical forces in the region. This demonstration of an independent policy, which was in inverse proportion to Qatar's geographic size, resulted from its drive to enhance its regional importance and protect its vast natural resources. However, the emirate, home to some 300,000 citizens (in addition to over one million foreign workers), has exceeded its natural boundaries in acting as a major league player in recent years. Given its financial power, it will be hard to ignore it in the long term. Nonetheless, the (temporary?) weakness of political Islam in the region may prompt Qatar to focus more on domestic affairs, exercise a more cautious policy, and wait patiently for auspicious political opportunities. Indeed, Tamim's first official trip abroad was to Saudi Arabia, possible evidence of his attempt to ease the tension with Riyadh and perhaps even adopt a more moderate foreign policy.

