



Qatar: last Arab(ist) standing?

by Florence Gaub

The foreign policy of Qatar has been an enigma to observers ever since Emir Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani ascended to power in 1995. Qatari international engagement has alternatively stood accused of being driven by an erratic and spontaneous leader (overly active, outspoken and omnipresent, though not always consistent), the manifestation of a ‘small state syndrome’, or directed by the United States. Most recently, three of its immediate Gulf neighbours withdrew their ambassadors in a highly-publicised criticism of its diplomatic activities. But, when viewed through the right prism, Doha’s foreign policy appears quite consistent. Every single diplomatic act feeds into one overarching narrative: pan-Arabism.

A royal Nasserist

Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, who abdicated in favour of his son in 2013, was a self-declared Nasserist inspired by Egypt’s strongman, a former officer (like the emir) who governed Egypt from 1954 until his death in 1970. A long-time champion of the Arab cause, Nasser’s movement – in contrast to other brands of pan-Arabism such as Baathism – was founded on the belief that Arabism needed a leading country in order to achieve political unity; only with a leading state can centripetal dynamics lead to integration. Although Nasserism is often associated with domestic socialist tendencies (and therefore seemingly at odds with Qatar’s monarchical system), its pan-Arabist ideology is expansionist at a regional level. But with Nasser’s death, Egypt ceased to be

the promoter of the Arab cause – and the post has remained vacant since.

While Qatar has somewhat restyled this ideology, it very much relies on Nasserist inspirations to both expand its influence abroad and consolidate its regime at home. In his statement of abdication, the emir tellingly declared to the Qatari people: “I am confident that you are fully aware of your loyalty and of your Arab and Muslim identity; I urge you to preserve our civilised traditional and cultural values, originating from our religion, Arab identity and above all our humanity; as we believe that the Arab World is one human body; one coherent structure; it prospers if all its parts are prosperous.”

An eye and a voice for all Arabs

Qatar’s most important contribution to the revival of pan-Arabism was perhaps the creation of the satellite channel Al Jazeera in 1996, only a year after Sheikh Hamad came to power. Echoing Nasser’s influential radio station *Sawt al-Arab* (Voice of the Arabs), Al Jazeera was the first TV station to broadcast to an Arab – rather than national – audience. With the Arab world splintered into 22 states, Al Jazeera sought to reunite them through a single unifying factor: the Arabic language. Although rivals quickly emerged – like *Al-Arabiya* and MBC – Al Jazeera was, and remains, the most successful pan-Arab TV station. Its emphasis on Arab issues and its early embrace of the Arab Spring (a term it helped

coin) resonate well with Arab populations which, despite regional political divisions, remain interconnected.

Al Jazeera has, nevertheless, been the target of much criticism. Saudi Arabia and Libya withdrew their ambassadors in 2002 and 2000 respectively in response to Al Jazeera programmes. In the most recent diplomatic spat, Saudi Arabia demanded Qatar close down the channel altogether. The launch of a new media platform by Qatar (including a TV station, a newspaper and a website), *Al-Arabi al-Jadeed* (The New Arab), in the aftermath of the fallout might be an indication that the Qatari government now deems Al Jazeera to have become too controversial – or it might simply be the brainchild of the new emir.

The mother of all conflicts

Perhaps the most powerful cross-cutting foreign policy issue in the Arab world is the Palestinian question, often dubbed ‘the mother of all conflicts’. All Arab leaders have at least paid lip service to, if not actively defended, Palestine in order to bolster their domestic and regional credentials. In practice, however, Palestine as a foreign policy ‘file’ has not been in Arab hands since the Arab-Israeli war of 1973. Not only have Arab policies proved unsuccessful in attempts to recover Palestine, but Arab states such as Egypt and Jordan have themselves broken ranks with the regional consensus in order to further their own interests. Since then, the Palestinian file has instead been in Iranian hands: Ayatollah Khomeini declared ‘Jerusalem Day’ as a national holiday in 1979 (traditionally held on the last day of Ramadan), and Tehran has both lent support to Hizbullah and Syria in their fight against Israel and stood by Hamas as the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) moved to abandon armed struggle.

Qatar has repeatedly attempted to return the Palestinian file to the Arab camp with a variety of initiatives. The emir visited Gaza in 2012 as the first head of state to do so since the Israeli-imposed blockade, and Doha has offered to host the leadership of Hamas following its departure from Damascus. Qatar is rumoured to be behind the Palestinian statehood-bid at the United Nations, and helped the Palestinian authority out of a financial rut in 2013 by investing \$1 billion in construction projects in the West Bank. Finally, it has also facilitated reconciliation talks between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority.

Elsewhere, Qatar mediated between Hizbullah and other Lebanese constituencies in 2008, and greatly contributed to reconstruction efforts following Lebanon’s war with Israel in 2006 – to the extent that

Hizbullah’s TV station *Al-Manar* repeatedly broadcast a song thanking Qatar for its efforts. Meanwhile, Qatar has adopted a pragmatic approach towards Israel, establishing trade relations with the country in 1996. What matters to Doha, perhaps, is not the resolution of the Arab–Israeli conflict *per se* – but the removal of the file from Iran’s hands.

In the same spirit, Qatar has consistently targeted those states which have fallen out of line with the old Arab consensus. It is no coincidence that Qatar actively participated in the NATO operation which brought down Qaddafi in Libya and has called for military action against Syria (the only two Arab states which sided with Iran during its 1980–88 war with Iraq).

‘Arabising’ pan-Islamism

Qatar has supported different Islamic groups across the region and is currently the staunchest supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Its recent fallout with its Gulf neighbours is largely the outcome of a disagreement over how to deal with this group, which is perceived by most of its neighbours to be a terrorist organisation. But this policy is less ideological than it might seem: Qatar has supported a broad spectrum of Islamists, including Brotherhood opponents such as the political descendants of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group. Pan-Islamism should be seen as being intertwined with pan-Arabism: in its trans-border dimension, it is its extension or, at times, its substitute.

Since the Iranian revolution of 1979, however, pan-Islamism has been hijacked by Iran in a similar manner to the Palestinian file. Qatar seeks to counter this by co-opting various Islamic groups (so different from one another that they cannot be considered a homogenous ideological block) into its foreign policy agenda. Qatar’s current isolation in the Gulf is also very much the result of regional jealousies. Being too successful in furthering the Arab cause – even being the first Arab state ever to host the World Cup in 2022 – ultimately poses a threat to the Arab state system.

Perhaps not coincidentally, Egypt’s foreign minister recently declared upon his arrival at the Arab League summit that his country ‘will remain the heart of the Arab world forever’ and that it was keen ‘to restore its leading regional role’.

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