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Countering Qatar's Negative Regional Impact

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Qatar's support for Hamas and the vehement opposition by Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia to the US attempt to let Qatar play a role in the efforts to achieve a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip have stirred the debate about Qatar's conduct in the regional and international arenas and its position, influence, and ambition. The longstanding support by the tiny and very wealthy emirate for rogue elements in the Middle East and the use it makes of al-Jazeera, its popular and influential broadcasting station, reveal its negative, even dangerous effect on the region's stability and security.

Qatar's policy and conduct can be described as two-pronged. Alongside support for terrorist organizations and the challenge to the moderate Arab coalition (led by Egypt and Saudi Arabia), Qatar enjoys US support and sponsorship, serves as a mediator between the West and Iran, has the ability to influence Hamas, and together with Western nations, is (some claim) engaged in covert efforts against Iran and other elements viewed by Western nations as hostile. This duality seems to be the keystone of the survival strategy of the emirate, which is militarily weak and potentially threatened by several powerful regional players, be they states or non-state entities. At the same time, the duality makes it difficult for Western nations, especially the United States, to take action against Qatar's dangerous, sometimes subversive conduct.

The logic that dictated Qatar's survival strategy has proved itself over almost two decades. Emir Hamad ibn Halifa al-Thani, who ousted his father in June 1995, led Qatar to political and economic prosperity and turned his country into an influential regional player. However, through its conduct in recent years, especially since the Arab Spring, with emphasis on its support for Muslim extremists in Syria, Iraq, and Libya, alongside overt support for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Hamas in the Gaza Strip, Qatar has unsettled other regional players and threatened their vital interests. As such, Qatar seems to have overplayed its hand.

Economic Power as a Survival Strategy

Immense oil wealth (in terms of per capita GNP, Qatar is the world's richest nation) and a willingness to use it to intervene in conflicts from the Maghreb to the Levant have put

Qatar on the map. More fundamentally, Qataris believe that financing and other support for Hizbollah, Hamas, the Taliban, and their ilk buy them immunity against these elements, as in: “We’re willing to support you and help you, as long and you and your ideologies remain far removed from our palaces.” Al-Jazeera, the network owned by the royal family, operates similarly: it criticizes the lack of democracy in Egypt while the royal household remains firmly in control domestically. In other words, undermining stability elsewhere maintains stability at home.

In the past Qatar had some influence in Jerusalem. Doha took great pride in the open relations with Israel, a sort of de facto normalization, which distinguished it from the general Arab landscape. But Operation Cast Lead (2008-9) and Qatar’s ties with elements such as Iran and Hamas, which was awarded a check for \$400 million by the previous emir during a media-saturated visit to Gaza, eventually led to the severing of relations between Israel and Qatar.

Qatar’s economic capabilities and geostrategic location between Iran and Saudi Arabia make it difficult for powers such as the United States, which has significant economic and security interests in Qatar, to ignore it. Qatar hosts the US Central Command’s forward headquarters, is home to the largest US Air Force base in the Middle East, and recently signed a huge contract of some \$11 billion to purchase advanced US weapons (including Apache helicopters and Patriot and Javelin defense systems). The security support provided by the United States frees the emirate to engage in diplomatic hyperactivity.

But the emirate’s power is not unlimited. Many are unhappy with Qatari activism – not to say opportunism – in the Arab world. Some of its neighbors are in open conflict with Qatar because of its support for the Muslim Brotherhood and its satellite organizations, such as Hamas. Indeed, in March 2014, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain recalled their ambassadors from Qatar because of its support for the Muslim Brotherhood, a movement they view as subversive and a risk to their religious legitimacy and stability.

Qatar as a Destabilizing Element

In modern history, it is difficult to find a similar instance of a country so small and young that has carried out so ambitious a foreign policy. The emirate, home to only some 250,000 citizens (as well as close to two million foreign workers) has in recent years played in the big leagues, but its reach may now be exceeding its grasp.

Qatar’s support for extremist organizations in the Middle East, which work to undermine current regimes, feed civil wars, and operate terrorism machines, undermines the regional system and damages vital interests of important regional players, such as the United States and other members of the free world. In a decidedly imbalanced dynamic, Qatar tries to leverage tremendous economic power in an irresponsible manner, resulting in an

absurd disparity between its size, heritage, and its showy exploitative conduct on the one hand, and its negative, dangerous influence on regional stability on the other.

The key to Qatar's influence and change in its conduct lies with the United States. In the past, the United States demonstrated its ability to exert pressure on Qatar, for example, when Qatar broadcast al-Qaeda videos. The United States needs Qatar, especially since the status of the United States in the region took a downward shift. Qatar can serve as a mediator between the United States and various radical outfits such as the Taliban, ISIS, and of course, Hamas, and therefore the United States must move carefully when applying pressure to Qatar. At the same time, however, Qatar needs the United States just as much, if not more, as the United States supplies it with defense without which it could easily fall prey to its enemies.

Beyond the United States, there are additional methods of putting pressure on Qatar and reining in its negative behavior. Regional players, whose vital interests are now threatened by Qatar, can join forces, enlist other partners in the international community – states and organizations – and work creatively and firmly to stop Qatar. Action must be taken both out in the open and behind the scenes to make sure that the emirate's leaders are sufficiently deterred.

Overt action would include enlistment of human rights organizations and legal action against the shameful exploitation of foreign workers and the rampant human rights violations in Qatar. Qatar should be sued in every eligible court and be forced to defend itself legally, which would cost it a great deal of money, though the real objective would be to erode its international image. In addition, an international campaign can be launched to prohibit Qatar from hosting the 2022 World Cup. This would be a serious blow to the country's prestige, as Qatar views hosting the championship as an important achievement and global recognition of its status. It is unclear whether Qatar bought the right to host the games with bribes (FIFA has opened an investigation into those allegations), but there is no reason not to try to revoke Qatar's right to host the event because of its exploitative treatment of hundreds of thousands of foreign workers hired to build the infrastructures and facilities for the games. In addition, Qatar should be vilified from every possible podium, with the implications of Qatar's support for terrorist organizations made explicit. If Qatar is painted into a corner, it will be forced to go on the defensive and think at least twice before it opens its large coffers to finance terrorists. Covertly, one can think of a range of creative actions that would make it clear to Qatar that its support for destabilizing elements in the region is liable to disrupt its financial stability and cost it enough to interfere with its decadent complacency.

United forces and a smart combination of overt and covert action can highlight the determination of the moderate camp to foil Qatar's dangerous influence. This will help undermine the self-confidence of the Qatari royal family and prompt it to rethink the

cost-benefit ratio of support for radical elements, and perhaps also modify the emirate's policies, in order to reduce the country's negative effect on the region's security and stability.

