

Race for Relevance

The tiny peninsula of Qatar has propelled itself to the forefront as regional influencer by rapidly imprinting its foreign policy across the Middle East's volatile political spectrum.

By Mike Byrne, Dubai

To succinctly define and map a coherent foreign policy of Qatar to date is almost as difficult as predicting the contours of future positioning by this Gulf State. Partially understanding the strategy of Qatar would entail aligning it to but a few allegiances, and yet even this can prove troublesome.

Qatar initially began its ascent to the upper echelons of Mena regional politics by engaging in neutral party facilitating and diplomatic comprises. In 2008 it played a pivotal role in resolving a Lebanese deadlock over the formation of the government, ending with the Doha Agreement; it has, since 2007, worked to maintain a brokered peace deal between Juba and Khartoum and mediate “confidence-building measures” over the Darfur debacle and, in recent times, has also acted as a facilitator with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict

and with building a path of reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas.

Rarely taking sides, Qatar sought in this period to establish relationships and endeavored to assimilate its indispensability, not only to regional colleagues, but also to global influencers with a focus and presence across the Mena landscape.

With many of the region's countries either engulfed with internal political disparity or economic wrangling, Qatar, with its comparatively stable government and its seemingly unlimited cheque book, has embarked on a sequence of resolute and often aggressive undertakings. It's tripod leadership dictates the day-to-day operations of Qatar, but it is the carefully and intelligently marked agenda of the Emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani and his loyal Prime Minister, Hamad bin Jassim bin Jaber Al Thani, that shapes and molds foreign policy.

“Qatar has made its mark in the last two years, especially on the regional and international scene. Its bold moves in Libya, vocal leadership in Syria and investments in Europe, have all seen a rise in the prominence of the country. Yet, this visibility raises a new question as to its purpose and its motives,” Taufiq Rahim, a Dubai-based political analyst and Director of strategic advisory firm, Globesight, told TRENDS.

Shifting tide

Indeed, since the onset of the Arab Spring, Qatar has wielded the full voice and sway of its foreign policy directives and begun to dilute its role as mediator, instead actively and officially taking sides across a sea of struggles. Its cross-over into active participation first ignited with the conflict in Libya; with little flourish and less notice, it was the first Arab state to vocally back military action against ►





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Muammar Qaddafi. Imploring the Arab League to endorse NATO support to the militants in Libya, Qatar even went so far as to provide air-support to the struggle, thus stamping Arab participation on military intervention.

Since Qaddafi's removal, the leadership of Qatar has initially aided the Libyan

National Transitional Council and now the General National Conference, elected in June 2012. This has been in part to influence the political decision-making in Libya, as well as to influence Libya's reformation of its oil and gas policies, which of course could potentially affect Qatar's gas policies.

Perhaps Doha's most successful intervention in the Arab Spring to date has been in Egypt. It is no secret to most inhabitants of the region that Qatar has, in recent years, thrown huge political and financial support behind the resurgence of the Muslim Brotherhood (MBH). With this group's rise to the leadership of Egypt and dominant appointment in Egypt's cabinet, Qatar continues to offer an abundance of resources to prop up the questionable policies of Mohamed Morsi's government.

In fact, British writer and Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York, Ed Husain, in a radio broadcast discussion in February of this year, noted that Qatar's relationship with the MBH is intertwined in a policy to use the group to project power and influence, acting as a force multiplier for Qatar.

1996

Qatar established trade relations with the State of Israel in 1996. Following the 2008-2009 Israel-Gaza conflict, ties with Israel were cut.

2008

The Doha Agreement was reached by rival Lebanese factions in May 2008 in Doha, Qatar, ending an 18-month political crisis in Lebanon.

\$ 3 BILLION

Estimated amount spent by Qatar in the past two years supporting the opposition in Syria - each rebel fighter operating at a cost of \$50,000.



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In essence, Qatar is on a mission to firmly establish and maintain relevancy, not only within its immediate regional boundaries, but also globally.

The ferocious and continuing conflict in Syria is where Qatar has perhaps misjudged the landscape and committed itself to a cause it did not foresee lasting as long as it has. “The Syrian conflict is not going to simply fizzle out. Support for Assad’s regime by Hezbollah and Iran, as well as inaction from Russia, will lead to a prolonged crisis. The Syrian state will fragment, but will still exert partial central influence from the capital along the corridor to Homs and onto the coast. If the Arab forces supporting the rebels, as well as the Western influencers, refuse to introduce game-changing tactics and artillery, Qatar and other big investors in Syria will continue to have one eye firmly on Damascus,” Alison Baily, Middle East

analyst for global analysis and advisory firm, Oxford Analytica, told TRENDS.

Doha has thrown its full public and private support behind the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the Syrian National Council, indirectly supplying arms to the rebels primarily through Turkey. An investigative paper released by the *Financial Times* on May 17 has revealed that Qatar has spent \$3 billion in the past two years on supporting the opposition, which far exceeds any other government. A further breakdown of this figure suggests that each rebel fighter is operating at a cost of \$50,000.

Divergence

Syria symbolizes a juncture, whereby

Qatar is projecting an open divergence with the GCC on important policy. While Doha is backing the MBH elements active in Syria, the GCC states are supplying arms and support to the majority national salafist elements of the Free Syrian Army. Qatar’s backing of the MBH and its excessive monetary strategy within the crisis, is polarizing the emirate among its Gulf counterparts. “The Muslim Brotherhood is much more centralized and authoritarian and therefore easier to mould and manipulate – this is partly the reason why Qatar utilizes them as a main vehicle for furthering their interests, instead of the much more fragmented and disorganized collection of salafist groups operating across the region,” says Ed.

Qatar is very much in support of the aspirations of the Gulf States in terms of aligning the region with Sunni-led governments – Doha’s involvement with Bahrain and the support of the FSA in Syria are moves that have indirectly challenged some of Iran’s most central interests. If there has been behind-the-scenes diplomatic back-channels with Tehran in the past, these backdoors might well have now been shut since Qatar’s adoption of more aggressive and vocal policies. And yet it has chosen to put its punching power behind the MBH in North Africa, contrary to the approach by the remainder of the GCC states.

“Although Qatar is throwing much of its weight behind the MBH in North Africa, one should not forget that Doha wants to maintain relationships with all groups, in order to keep domestic security and stability in check. This is why you see Qatar not only backing the MBH, but also in talks with the Taliban and other Islamist militant groups across the region. What it demonstrates is a wish to play with all sides, but it is a dangerous tightrope to walk,” says Alison.

Crossroads

In essence, Qatar is on mission to firmly establish and maintain relevancy, ►



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not only within its immediate regional boundaries, but also globally. It is seemingly committed to manipulating the political and economic outcomes that will surface from the instability it is helping to perpetuate. But as this vastly rich nation accelerates towards the top, it is making enemies on the way up.

With its initial mediation tactics Qatar attempted to symbolize that it was the bridge between, not only competing parties within the region, but also between internal parties and outside influencers. It has proven a soft policy and the further this tactic has been stretched, the further Doha is exposing itself to criticism. Con-

tradictory policies and claims of unwavering loyalty on both sides can only go so far without being noticed.

Indeed not only is this a political touch-point with parties within the Middle East, but this juggling of allegiances also represents concerns for the Western powers with vested interests across the region. Qatar's support for US strategy in the region cannot be overlooked – since 2003 the US has stationed the Combat Air Operations Center for the Middle East out of the Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar. But Doha's refusal to publicly condemn and actively turn their back on extremist groups has led many in the West to question Qatar's long-term potential as an iron-cast ally.

In a recent interview surrounding the controversy of his latest book, Jacques Marie Bourget outlines the glaring contradictions of Qatar's policies – he

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\$8 BILLION

Qatar released \$3 billion in low-interest loans to Egypt in May, bringing the total amount to \$8 billion over the past two years.

2011

Qatar admits sending hundreds of troops to Libya to aid rebels with training, communications and strategy against Gaddafi.

\$1 BILLION

Qatar's emir proposed in 2013 that the Arab League create a \$1 billion fund to protect the Arabic and Islamic heritage of Jerusalem.



The more the Emir and Prime Minister stretch their gaze, the less able they are to follow-through on every initiative they have undertaken to sustain.

contends that while US aircraft take off from Al Udeid Air Base on missions to Afghanistan, a Taliban co-ordination office based in Doha, sits in full view to witnesses.

Titled *The Ugly Qatar – The Friend Awho Wants to Harm Us*, the book also claims that Qatar's foreign policy across the region is in direct compliance with that of the US and Israel. He contends during the interview that Qatar's strategy with Palestine is to disassemble Fatah through a strong Hamas; wherein Hamas will then abandon any notion of struggle under the direction of the Muslim Brotherhood. Far-fetched perhaps, but one cannot ignore the fact that the leader of Hamas, Khaled Meshaal, resides in Doha; TRENDS sources have also confirmed that the relations between the Emir

and Meshaal is not simply political, but that both men are long-time friends.

Hairline cracks

The aggressive charge of Qatar is not slowing down, but the glossy exterior is beginning to show small hairline fractures. With more exposure comes the backlash of more media spotlight and criticism. The more the Emir and Prime Minister stretch their gaze, the less able they are to follow-through on every initiative they have undertaken to sustain. "The institutional and diplomatic expertise and frameworks are not in place; mediation is one thing, but prolonged exposure to an on-going conflict is leaving Qatar far from its comfort zone. Economically it may be able to sustain this

trend, but politically it cannot," Alison tells TRENDS.

With the Syrian conflict on the fringe of dragging sectarian undertones into the mix, one must ask of Qatar's position if this spills over to Iraq – representing the only remaining shia led government alongside Iran, the stakes are much higher and the potential for a prolonged campaign even greater than that of Syria.

Sources close to TRENDS have revealed that there is a strong possibility that Qatar's Prime Minister, Hamad bin Jassim bin Jaber Al Thani, will be replaced in the coming months by Qatar's Crown Prince, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani. Reasons for this are as of yet not conclusive, but there are indications that the failing strategies devised by the Emir and his Prime Minister cousin may be the driving force behind this sudden reappointment at the top. ■



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