

# On Both Sides of the Fence

Qatar's niche diplomacy methods across the region have fused an emerging courtship with the Muslim Brotherhood and resulted in underlying tensions with its GCC partners.

By Jamie Etheridge, Kuwait

Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood, a rejuvenated political force in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, has become a point of contention with fellow Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states.

In recent times members of the council have accused the Islamist group of working to undermine the stability of their Gulf monarchies. Whether Doha's differing stance toward the Brotherhood will result in a serious rift within the GCC remains unclear; Qatar's lone wolf tactics are nothing new and may, in time, help facilitate a broader GCC understanding with the changing landscape of the Middle East.

Historically, Qatar has, at times, had an uneasy relationship with its GCC partners. Tensions with Bahrain date back to the 18th century. After the tribal migration from central Arabia, the Al Khalifa tribe, now ensconced in Bahrain, initially estab-

lished their trading center in Zubara on the Qatari peninsula. By the early 1800s, Al Thani in Doha moved to assert their dominance throughout Qatar and over islands claimed by Al Khalifa. This led to a long simmering conflict and border dispute, with the International Court of Justice resolving the matter in 2001.

As the British withdrew from the region in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Qatar considered a federation with Bahrain and the seven emirates of the Trucial Coast. The plan fell through, however, and Qatar eventually declared independence. Qatar has also had disputes with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, and both Abu Dhabi and Riyadh opposed the leadership change in Qatar in 1995 when the current Emir, Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani, replaced his father in a bloodless coup. Doha even accused the UAE of attempting to help the ousted Emir orches-

trate a counter coup to regain the throne.

In recent times, Qatar's utilization of Al Jazeera has sometimes soured relations between Doha and its Gulf neighbors. The satellite Arabic news channel exploded onto the scene in the mid 2000s, capitalizing on the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, to become the most-watched news channel in the Arab world. Part of its appeal and popularity derived from the station's leeway in criticizing other Gulf and Arab governments. Doha had also developed a more public, seemingly accommodating relationship with Iran, at a time when the rest of the GCC had grown highly suspicious of the Islamic Republic's intentions and regional geopolitical ambitions.

It has been argued that Qatar's maverick attitude derives from its unique geopolitical reality. Jutting out from the continent-sized Arabian Peninsula, it is smaller than the US state of Connecticut and has







Qatar is also home to the Brotherhood's leading jurist, the prominent Islamic scholar and guide, Yousef al Qaradawi, and has hosted dozens of others.

a native population of less than 250,000, making it vulnerable to outside influence by its much larger neighbors, as well as to interference from the Gulf's other power player, Iran.

To set itself apart, and to create some geopolitical depth and reach, Doha has pursued its individualist agenda across the region. Massive revenues from its

natural gas exports – its 2012 Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has been estimated at \$182 billion – provide a financial tool that it has deftly employed to gain a foothold into many Arab issues, which its small size and limited natural geopolitical reach would normally not permit. Qatar, for instance, mediated the 2008 Lebanese crisis and, prior to the Arab Spring,

played a critical role in engaging Iran more directly.

#### The Brotherhood's backer

Doha's support for the Muslim Brotherhood is a facet of this geopolitical strategy. Mehran Kamrava, a Professor and Director of the Center for International and Regional Studies at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service in Qatar, situates Doha's 'niche diplomacy' within the context of the Gulf emirate's national security, noting in a 2011 paper that "Enhancing its stature as an 'impartial mediator' can reduce the number of regional or global opponents Qatar might face otherwise... By being involved in the global diplomatic scene, Qatar seeks to prevent itself from being elbowed aside by larger rivals."

The relationship itself stretches back to the 1950s, when Brotherhood exiles from Egypt fled to the Gulf Arab states. Since then, exiles in Doha have been identified

#### \$182 BILLION

Qatar's 2012 Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which provides a financial tool to gain a foothold in the region's affairs.

#### 4.3 PERCENT

Is the projected rate of growth for Qatar's GDP in 2013, falling from 6.3 percent during 2012, the slowest rate of growth since 2002, according to IMF.

#### \$8 BILLION

The total amount Qatar has given to Egypt in the past 12 months to assist the North African Arab Spring nation.

**POLICY**  
PRESENTS

# PLANNING THE FUTURE



#### INSUREX AWARDS ENTRY DEADLINES

First entry fee: \$150 per entry by June 13, 2013

Second entry fee: \$250 per entry by June 27, 2013

Insurex Conference & Awards 2013 will be launching the exclusive special report *Getting things done: a leadership perspective*  
A highly comprehensive survey of attitudes and working practices in the insurance sector in the GCC

**Wednesday, October 2, 2013, Dubai**

For bookings and sponsorship opportunities please email:  
[Insurex@mediaquestcorp.com](mailto:Insurex@mediaquestcorp.com) or call: +971 4 433 0987

PLATINUM SPONSOR



MEDIA PARTNERS



partner in media, partner in digital, partner in events... partner in success





© Getty Images

**“By being involved in the global diplomatic scene, Qatar seeks to prevent itself from being elbowed aside by larger rivals.”**

as influential in the early shaping of the country’s education and culture ministries, as well as serving as imams at mosques.

Qatar is also home to the Brotherhood’s leading jurist, the prominent Islamic scholar and guide, Yousef al Qaradawi, and has hosted dozens of other prominent MB-affiliated Islamists and politicians, such as Rafiq Abdulsalaam, the son-in-law of Rashid Al Ghanouchi, who incidentally is the head of Tunisia’s Brotherhood party, Ennahda.

By acting as a backer and mediator to the Brotherhood in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Syria and the MB-linked group, Hamas, in Gaza, Qatar adds to its geopolitical clout, strengthening its reach and ability to project influence around the region and shape events in sync with its own agenda.

This has been aptly demonstrated by the election of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 2012.

That influence is not, however, unlimited. As with its support for Al Jazeera, or its ties with Iran, Doha’s relationship with the Brotherhood has consequences, as well as benefits. The outstanding question remains how dire will those consequences eventually be?

Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi, a prominent commentator on Arab affairs, noted in a January 2013 article in *Al Monitor*, that a schism between the Gulf Arab states is emerging over Qatar’s support for the Brotherhood, which represents “the first time that a member state has allied itself closely with a party that another member state accuses of undermining its system of government.

“While Qatar has publically supported the Brotherhood, some of the Gulf states accused the MB of attempting to undermine the Gulf’s stability.

Speaking at a conference in Doha in March this year, Qatar State Minister for Foreign Affairs, Khalid Bin Mohammed Al Attiyah, denied that Doha’s support for the MB was running counter to the broader GCC position toward the Islamists. His remarks came in response to a question; the mere fact the question was asked is rather indicative of concerns about the divergence between Qatar and the rest of the GCC states over the Brotherhood’s regional rise.

With this said, traditionally Qatar’s nonconformist stance has never threatened the underlying unity of the GCC. “Qatar has been, since the rule of Sheikh Hamad, something of a maverick in the region, so the MB issue is not one that stands out in this regard,” says Dr Christian Koch, Director of the Geneva-based, Gulf Research Center Foundation. Dr. Koch expects, that while Doha’s support for the MB may create some friction between GCC states, it is unlikely to lead to a fracture. “There will likely be consultations to try and get Qatar to take a less activist approach and to come back to the GCC fold,” he notes.

Indeed, Qatar shares a range of common interests with its GCC neighbors, including a geopolitical imperative to limit Iranian reach, the desire to maintain the stability and security of the region as a whole, and, the longevity of the region’s monarchies.

“One could argue that, having member states that at times take opposing positions, allows the GCC to play all sides of the table and to utilize one or the other positions, as developments demand,” Dr. Koch explains.

It may also be that Qatar’s interest in the Brotherhood is less about switching allegiance, than positioning itself on both sides of the fence; a role that leaves Doha well positioned to broaden its niche diplomacy characteristics to include mediating between the rest of the Gulf and the rising power of the Brotherhood. ■



# news from every angle

your international 24/7 news service  
available in 12 language services worldwide  
on tv, internet, mobile & tablet apps and smart tv



most-watched news channel in Europe

download our apps



[www.euronews.com](http://www.euronews.com)