Wahhabism vs. Wahhabism: Qatar challenges Saudi Arabia

by James M. Dorsey

As Saudi Arabia seeks to inoculate itself against the violence, civil disobedience and potential re-writing of colonial-era borders that characterize the Middle East and North Africa’s convoluted push for greater freedom, transparency and accountability, a major challenge to the kingdom’s puritan interpretation of Islam sits on its doorstep: Qatar, the only other country whose native population is Wahhabi and that adheres to the Wahhabi creed.

It is a challenge that is rooted in historical tensions that go back to Qatari efforts in the 19th century to carve out an identity of their own and long-standing endeavors by the dominant Al Thani family, who hail from same Bin Tamim tribal group as Wahhabism’s founder, Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab to ensure its grip on power or what a US inter-agency assessment of Qatar described as “an unceasing evaluation by the Al Thanis of the domestic and international risks to their family’s 140-year grip on power.”

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The Qatari challenge also stems from long-standing differences with Saudi Arabia in religious interpretations that hark back to Qatar’s geography, patterns of trade and history; and a partially deliberate refusal to groom a class of popular Muslim legal scholars of its own. More recently, Qatar’s pursuit of an activist foreign policy promoting Islamist-led political change in the Middle East and North Africa as part of a soft power strategy designed to reduce its dependence on a Saudi defense umbrella was prompted by a perception that it no longer could rely solely on the kingdom or the US defense umbrella for its protection. The Economist’s question, “Where is Globocop?” against the backdrop of the United States’ perceived weak response to Russian annexation of Ukrainian territory, Chinese encroachments in the East and South China Sea, the civil war in Syria, and jihadist advances in Iraq, is prominent in the minds of Qatari strategic planners. Although long existent, Qatar’s challenge to the kingdom was never as stark as at a time of massive change in the region. It has sparked an increasingly cold war among Gulf states as well as in Syria and Arab nations who have in recent years toppled their autocratic leaders, first and foremost among which Egypt. For all practical purposes, Qatar’s refusal to toe Saudi Arabia’s counter-revolutionary line constitutes a litmus test for the kingdom’s ability to project itself as the region’s foremost Arab power capable of imposing its will. So does Bahrain, a festering wound in the Gulf’s backyard where discontent is boiling at the surface following the Saudi-backed brutal crushing of a popular revolt in 2011. A renewed crisis in Bahrain where frustrated youth are becoming increasingly militant and violent would also severely test Qatar’s policy. If there is one thing Qatar and its Gulf distractors agree on, it is a desire to ring fence their neck of the woods against the messy, volatile and bloody process of change sweeping the rest of the Middle East and North Africa.

A shot across the bow

Given their differences in social, foreign and security policies, Qatar, which hosts the largest US military base in the Middle East, and Saudi Arabia supported by the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain have fought a tacit cold war often involving proxies for much of the of the last 25 years punctured by relatively short periods of good neighborly relations and cooperation albeit with clearly defined but unspoken red lines. Increasingly, those

differences could no longer be papered over. A five-year period of relative calm in bilateral relations ended in March 2014 when Saudi Arabia together with Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates withdrew its ambassador from Doha, charging that continued Qatari support for the Muslim Brotherhood amounted to interference in the domestic affairs of fellow members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Saudi Arabia fired a month before the withdrawal of Gulf ambassadors from Doha a shot across Qatar’s bow with the publication of a story in a London-based Arab newspaper warning of a possible suspension of diplomatic relations as well as other sanctions, including the closure of Saudi airspace to Qatar and the suspension of trade agreements. The UAE added its bit by rebuking the Qatari ambassador for allowing Doha-based Sheikh Yusuf al Qaradawi, widely seen as a spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, to attack the Emirates for not supporting Islamic government. A UAE court convicted at the same time a Qatari national, dubbed a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International, for aiding a banned UAE Islamist group that the authorities claim was linked to the brotherhood.

In refusing to bow or pay at best lip service to Saudi demands that it cut its ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, Qatar has put Saudi credibility on the line and targeted a key weakness of the kingdom – its inability to impose its will on the Arab world on its own steam. If anything, that weakness has prompted Qatar to adopt a more proactive and at times panic-driven foreign policy. Saudi support for the overthrow in July 2013 of President Mohammed Morsi was as much designed to destroy the Muslim Brotherhood as it was to compensate for its weakness by creating an Arab leader strong enough to push the Middle East and North Africa in the direction the kingdom would like to see it go. Analyst Barak Barfi argues that Saudi anger at US policies, including rapprochement of Iran, tacit support for the overthrow in 2011 of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, and criticism of the coup against Morsi, a Muslim Brother, reflects Saudi frustration that the United States has been unwilling or unable to advance at least some of the kingdom’s goals in the absence of...
of a strong Arab leader.\(^5\) For much of the period since World War Two, Saudi Arabia, relied on leaders such as Egypt’s Anwar Sadat prior to his peace treaty with Israel as well as Mubarak and Iraq’s Saddam Hussein before his 1990 invasion of Iraq to drive elements of its agenda. The absence of such leaders has undermined Saudi Arabia’s efforts to lead from behind and threatens to highlight limitations to its power that is based primarily on financial muscle and moral authority as the custodian of Islam’s two most holy sites. Saudi Arabia’s weak was evident when interior minister Prince Mohammed Nayef failed shortly after the rupture in diplomatic relations with Qatar to persuade a gathering of Arab security chiefs in March 2014 to join it in banning the Brotherhood.

By defying the kingdom, Qatar, a country former Saudi intelligence chief Prince Bandar bin Sultan al-Saud denounced as "nothing but 300 people...and a TV channel"\(^6\) is shining the spotlight on the limits of Saudi power. Qatar drove the point home by responding to Saudi pressure with at best nominal concessions. In a conciliatory move, Sheikh Qaradawi, an Egyptian-born naturalized Qatari citizen and fierce critic of Saudi and UAE attitudes towards political Islam, who has long advised Qatari rulers, expressed his love for Qatar’s Gulf detractors.\(^7\) “My personal position does not reflect the position of the Qatari government ... I do not take on an official position, but just express my personal opinion. I would like to say I love all the countries of the Gulf, and they all love me: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Bahrain. I consider them one country and one house. What I said, and I say, is a matter of sincere advice, which will prove its sincerity after a while,” Qaradawi said.

Saudi concern about Qatari policies went beyond the Gulf state’s support for the Brotherhood and its alignment with brewing discontent across the Middle East and North Africa. The kingdom feared that Qatari actions could undermine Saudi national security and policies. It saw Qatar’s facilitation in March 2014 of the release by Syrian jihadists of 13 kidnapped Greek Orthodox nuns by allegedly paying a $67 million ransom as a move that

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strengthened the very forces Saudi Arabia was seeking to combat. Similarly, Saudi officials saw Qatari support for Houthi rebels in northern Yemen near the kingdom’s border and Yemen’s Brotherhood-affiliated Al Islah party as a national security threat. The Houthis were among several groups listed by Saudi Arabia as terrorists in March 2014.

In defying Saudi Arabia, Qatari emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al Khalifa benefitted from his father and predecessor’s ability to turn his country’s lack of size and population into strategic assets that made its dispute with Saudi Arabia not quite a struggle between David and Goliath. Tamim unlike Saudi rulers is moreover relatively unencumbered by factional politics, geographical disparities, and sectarian differences. He enjoys relative domestic security and has no institutions like a parliament or an autonomous clergy that inhibit his ability to set policy. That has enabled Qatar to emerge as a rare example of a government that has successfully sought to harness the power of political Islam without losing control and seeing its effort backfire.

Recent decades are littered with failed government attempts at exploiting political Islam without becoming a target. These attempts include Israel’s tacit backing of Hamas in the 1980s in a bid to counter Palestinian nationalism, former Egyptian President Anwar Sadat’s use of the Brotherhood against the left in his country, and the emergence of Al Qaeda from Western and Saudi backing of Islamist resistance to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In contrast, “the influence of Islamism within Qatari society and politics has been very limited...which highlights the pragmatic and instrumental use of this ideology and movement by the regime in Doha in the pursuit of regime survival,” noted scholar Bernard Heykal. Qatar’s success is all the more remarkable given that the Gulf state and the Brotherhood are strange bedfellows. Qatar adheres to the Hanbal school of Islamic law that mandates obedience to a ruler while the Brotherhood propagates activism against secular regimes and has never favored what it views as feudal monarchies.

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Moreover, Qatar’s Shiite Muslim minority estimated at between 10 and 20 percent of the Qatari population has been integrated economically and politically.\(^\text{10}\) As a result, Qatari decision-making is concentrated in a small, tightly knit circle of driven associates and advisors of the emir. The regime moreover has forged a relationship of mutual dependency with merchant families that makes it less likely that they would turn against the ruler even in times of stress or economic downturn.

33 year-old Sheikh Tamim took the long view with the bursting into the open of Qatar’s differences with kingdom as he confronted an aging and ailing Saudi leadership. Saudi king Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, who at approximately 90 reportedly needs a walker because of back ailments, uses oxygen tubes to breathe and allegedly lacks the energy to attend meetings that last more than two hours, appeared to recognize the advantage of youth when he issued his binding, unchangeable appointment of his 71-year old half-brother and deputy prime minister, Prince Muqrin bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, as deputy crown prince. Prince Muqrin is the youngest of the surviving sons of King Abdulaziz, the founder of Saudi Arabia. His appointment appeared to confirm concerns about the health of 78-year old Crown Prince Salman bin Abdulaziz.\(^\text{11}\)

\(^{10}\) Yousef Kamal, a Qatari Shiite, served as finance and economy minister from 1998 until XX. Moreover some of Qatar’s richest merchant families including the Al Fardans, Darwish and Fakhru are Shites.

\(^{11}\) Simon Henderson. 2014. ‘Saudi succession change risks royal family squabble,’ Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 27, http://washin.st/1rGLFGp
Sheikh Tamim’s approach has served to reinforce Saudi Arabia’s view of Qatar as potentially subversive. Saudi Arabia’s aging leaders fear that Qatar could serve much more than freewheeling Dubai as an inspiration for a conservative Saudi society that acknowledges its roots but in which various social groups increasingly are voicing a desire for change. The subversive nature of Qatar’s approach is symbolized by its long-standing, deep-seated ties to the Muslim Brotherhood whose predicament serves as a serious litmus test for Sheikh Tamim barely a month after his father abdicated in his favor. In addition to
the setback Qatar suffered with the successful Saudi counter-revolutionary campaign that helped topple the Morsi government in Egypt, Sheikh Tamim was confronted with Saudi efforts to curtail Qatari influence in the rebel movement opposed to embattled Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad. To some degree, pressure on Tamim has been alleviated by the region’s preoccupation with the jihadist Islamic State in Iraq and Syria’s (ISIS) territorial expansion from Syria into Iraq.

Sheikh Tamim’s refusal to cave into Saudi demands has forced Gulf states to lower the temperature and tone down the rhetoric in the realization that there was with little prospect of any real meeting of the minds. Those demands included not only the silencing if not the expulsion of Sheikh Qaradawi and the toning down if not the shutdown of Al Jazeera, Qatar’s global television network that frequently gives voice to opposition forces in the Middle East and North Africa including the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as of two Doha-based think tanks, the Brookings Institution, whose executives were barred from entry into the UAE because they were allegedly close to the Brothers, and the Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS). Dubai’s notoriously anti-Islamist security chief, Dhahi Khalfan has repeatedly denounced ACRPS head Azmi Bishara, an Israeli Palestinian and advisor to the Qatari emir, as an Israeli spy tasked with destabilizing the Gulf. In a further affront to the Qataris, Khalfan also called on the government in Abu Dhabi to assert the claim of the UAE, a federation of seven emirates, to Qatar as its eighth emirate.

Few attributed credibility to the announcement by a GCC foreign ministers’ meeting in late April 2014 that the difference between Qatar and the Saudi-led block had been resolved. The skepticism was reinforced by a refusal by Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain to return their ambassadors to Doha. “Without precisely the kind of meaningful change that Qatar cannot undertake, relations seem set for an extended cold snap, punctuated by personally-

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led spurts of anger, potentially peripatetically lurching relations from one mini-crisis to the next,” said Gulf expert David Roberts.15

The UAE like Saudi Arabia has long resented the Brotherhood’s use of Doha as a base to expand into Dubai and other emirates. Abu Dhabi Crown Prince and Armed Forces Chief of Staff Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed bin Zayed warned US diplomats as far back as 2004 that "we are having a (culture) war with the Muslim Brotherhood in this country.” The US embassy in Abu Dhabi reported that “Sheikh Mohammed and his brothers Hamdan and Hazza rarely miss an opportunity to talk to high-level USG (US Government) interlocutors about the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood on moderate-thinking Emiratis. In a meeting with Deputy Secretary Armitage on April 20, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed noted that UAE security forces had identified ‘50 to 60’ Emirati Muslim Brothers in the Armed Forces, and that a senior Muslim Brotherhood sympathizer is within one of the ruling families - a reference, we believe, to Sharjah Ruler Sheikh Sultan Al Qassimi, whose ties to Saudi Arabia are well known. Sheikh Mohammed has told us that the security services estimate there are up to 700 Muslim Brotherhood sympathizers in the UAE. He also said that when the Armed Forces discovered Muslim Brotherhood sympathizers within their ranks, they were arrested and given a form of reverse brainwashing.” 16

In 2009, Sheikh Mohamed went as far as telling US officials that Qatar is "part of the Muslim Brotherhood."17 He suggested that a review of Al Jazeera employees would show that 90 percent were affiliated with the Brotherhood. Sheikh Mohammed charged that Qatar was facilitating Iranian inroads into the Arab world and that "he sees Iranian influence in the Brotherhood very clearly as both a way to agitate the Arab populace and render the traditional leaders of Arab society impotent.”18 Other UAE officials privately described Qatar as “public enemy number 3”, after Iran and the Brotherhood.19

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18 Ibid. US Embassy Abu Dhabi
19 Ibid. Hammond
Because of the Brotherhood’s inroads into the UAE, Sheikh Mohammed said he had sent his son with the Red Cross rather than the Red Crescent on a humanitarian mission to Ethiopia to cure him of his interest in Islamist teachings. “His son returned from the mission with his vision of the west intact and in fact corrected. He was astonished that the Christians with the Red Cross were giving food and support to anyone who needed the support, not just to Christians. His son had only heard the stories of the west through the lens of Al Jazeera and others similarly aligned,” the embassy recounted Sheikh Mohammed as saying.

At the heart of differences between Qatar and Saudi Arabia and its allies is the fact that Qatar has emerged as living proof that Salafism and even more importantly, Wahhabism, the puritan version of Islam developed by the 18th century warrior preacher and scholar Abdul Wahhab who forged an alliance with the Al Sauds that dictates life in contemporary Saudi Arabia since its creation, can be somewhat forward and outward looking rather than exclusively repressive and restrictive. Qatar has also demonstrated that adherence to Abdul Wahhab’s creed need not be threatened by regimes that cloak themselves in Islam and/or assert legitimacy through some modicum of free elections or by groups that adhere to alternative, at times politicized, interpretations of Islam. Writing in Saudi-owned pan-Arab newspaper Ash Sharq al Awsat, Farag Abdel Fattah implicitly defined Saudi Arabia’s differences with Qatar as well as the Brotherhood as one between regimes whose policies are exclusively inspired by allegedly pure religion such as the kingdom and those whose interpretations of Islam were informed by politics. “We must first differentiate between a government that rules through religion, and one that infuses its political outlook with religion,” Abdel Fattah said.

An assessment of Qatar’s approach to religion by the US embassy in Doha concluded that “Qatar’s brand of Islam…is both traditional and progressive. It is traditional in that it is based on scripture and standing interpretations, but progressive in its tolerance for various Islamic schools of thought and moderate social strictures. Even though Amirs of Qatar have referred to themselves and their subjects as ‘Wahabi,’ use of this term is increasingly pejorative in Qatar today. The current Amir (Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani) several years ago

20 Ibid. US Embassy Abu Dhabi
21 Farag Abdel Fattah. 2014. Debate: Political Islam has survived in Sudan because it controls the military, Ash Sharq al Awsat, 14 June, http://www.aawsat.net/2014/06/article55333224
made a point of using the Wahabi term as a descriptor in public, but his director of communications at the time believes he did so to make clear to Saudi Arabia that Qatar alone would dictate the terms of its religious practices and the vocabulary used to describe them.”

The communications director, Adel al-Malki, according to the embassy, said that Sheikh Hamad made his comment at a time that Saudi Arabia was pressuring Qatar to adhere to Saudi interpretations of Islam, Al Malik said the emir’s use of the term Wahabi was his way of saying, ‘Thank you very much, but we Qataris will do things our way.’

The embassy’s cable to the State Department in Washington concluded that “judging by the extent to which Qataris seek to distance themselves from Saudi Arabia in all spheres, it should come as no surprise that even in religion Qataris define themselves by how they differ from their Saudi neighbors and yield to no one the right to define the terms or vocabulary by which Qataris live.”

Everything but a mirror image

Doha’s newest and biggest mosque, a multi-domed, sand-colored, architectural marvel, symbolizes Qatar’s complex and volatile relationship with Saudi Arabia as well as its bold soft power policy designed to propel it to the cutting edge of the 21st century. It’s not the mosque itself that raised eyebrows among critics of Wahhabism but it’s naming after Sheikh Mohammed Abdul Wahhab, a warrior, cleric and scholar who founded contemporary Islam’s most puritan sect.

The naming of the mosque that overlooks the Qatar Sports Club in Doha’s Jubailat district was intended to pacify more traditional and Salafi segments of Qatari society as well as Saudi Arabia, which sees the tiny Gulf state as a troublesome and dangerous gadfly on its doorstep challenging its puritan interpretation of Islam as well as its counterrevolutionary strategy in the Middle East and North Africa. Qatar’s social revolution in the past two decades contrasts starkly with Saudi efforts to maintain as much as possible of its status quo while impregnating itself against the push for greater freedom, transparency and accountability sweeping the region. By naming the mosque after Abdul Wahhab, Qatar reaffirmed its adherence to the Wahhabi creed that goes back to 19th century Saudi support


23 Ibid. US Embassy Doha (Qatar)
24 Ibid. US Embassy Doha (Qatar)
and the ultimate rise to dominance of the Al Thani clan, the country’s hereditary monarchs who account for an estimated twenty percent of the population.25
Yet, despite being a traditional Gulf state, Qatari conservatism is everything but a mirror image of Saudi Arabia’s stark way of life with its powerful, conservative clergy; absolute gender segregation; total ban on alcohol and houses of worship for adherents of other religions, and refusal to accommodate alternative lifestyles or religious practices. Qataris privately distinguish between their ‘Wahhabism of the sea’ as opposed to Saudi Arabia’s ‘Wahhabism of the land,’ a reference to the fact that the Saudi government has less control of an empowered clergy compared to Qatar that has no indigenous clergy with a social base to speak of; a Saudi history of tribal strife over oases as opposed to one of communal life in Qatar; and Qatar’s outward looking maritime trade history. Political scientists Birol Baskan and Steven Wright argue that on a political level, Qatar has a secular character similar to Turkey and in sharp contrast to Saudi Arabia, which they attribute to Qatar’s lack of a class of Muslim legal scholars.26
The choice against grooming a powerful clergy of its own reflected Qatari ambivalence towards Wahhabism that many viewed as both an opportunity and a threat: it served as a tool to legitimize domestic rule, but also constituted a potential monkey wrench that Saudi Arabia could employ to assert control. Opting to generate a clerical class of its own would have enhanced the threat because Qatar would have been dependent on Saudi clergymen to develop its own. That would have produced a clergy steeped in the kingdom’s austere theology and inspired by its history of political power-sharing that would have advocated a Saudi-style, state-defined form of political Islam.
This is not to say that Qatar takes its adherence to Wahhabism lightly. Plotting an alternative course did not prevent tribal religious leaders in the late 19th and early 20th century under then emir Sheikh Jassim bin Mohammed Al Thani from shifting their frame of Islamic legal reference from the more liberal Maliki to the more restrictive Hanbal school of Islamic law.

The Al Thanis greater maneuverability by steering clear of the grooming an indigenous clergy that would demand a say in political and social affairs. Unlike Saudi rulers, the Al Thanis do not derive their legitimacy from a clerical class. Their ability to avoid grooming a local clergy was made easier by the absence of a strong merchant class and urban centers in the 19th and early 20th century. As a result, Qatar lacks the institutions that often hold the kingdom back and was slow and cautious in creating religious infrastructure. Religious authority is not institutionally vested. Qatar has for example no Grand Mufti as do Saudi Arabia and various other Arab nations; it only created a ministry of Islamic Affairs and Endowments 22 years after achieving independence. Qatar’s College of Sharia (Islamic Law) was established only in 1973 and the majority of its students remain women who become teachers or employees of the endowments ministry rather than clergymen.\(^{27}\)

Qatari religious scholars on a career path to become sharia court judges were sent for further education to Egypt’s al-Azhar University rather than Saudi institutions like the Imam Mohammed Ibn Saud University in Riyadh. Similarly, Qatar does not have a religious force that polices public morality. Nor are any of its families known for producing prominent religious scholars. Qatari religious schools are mostly run by the ministry of education unlike Saudi Arabia where they resort under the religious affairs authority. They are staffed by expatriates rather than Qataris and attended by less than one percent of the total student body of which only ten percent are Qatari nationals.\(^{28}\)

Moreover, the majority of Qatar’s religious scholars are South Asians or Arabs hired as migrant workers who are wholly dependent on their employers and thus unlikely to challenge authority. The lack of influential native religious scholars enabled Qatar to advance women in society, allow them to drive, and travel independently; permit non-Muslims to consume alcohol and pork, sponsor Western arts like the Tribeca Film Festival, develop world-class art museums, host the Al Jazeera television network that revolutionized the region’s controlled media landscape and has become one of the world’s foremost global broadcasters, and prepare to accommodate Western soccer fans with un-Islamic practices during the 2022 World Cup. While the absence of an indigenous clerical class gave Qatari rulers a freer hand


\(^{28}\) Ibid. Baskan and Wright
it did not stop Saudi and other foreign scholars from gaining influence, particularly among more conservative segments of Qatari society.

Qatar nevertheless projects to young Saudis and others a vision of a conservative Wahhabi society that is less restrictive and less choking and grants individuals irrespective of gender a greater degree of control over their lives. Women who in the mid-1990s were like in Saudi Arabia banned from driving, voting or holding government jobs today occupy prominent positions in multiple sectors of society in what effectively amounted to a social revolution. It’s a picture that juxtaposes starkly with that in its only Wahhabi brother. The contrast was starkest when young Saudis took to social media to demand that they be recognized as citizens with rights and responsibilities rather than treated as subjects. Couching their criticism and demands in religious terms, they denounced the Al Sauds for stealing their country’s land and wealth and depriving unemployed youth of perks due to them in an oil-rich nation. They also took the clergy to task for failing speak out on behalf of the underdog.29

In projecting a more compassionate interpretation of Wahhabism, Qatar threw down a gauntlet for the kingdom’s interpretation of nominally shared religious and cultural beliefs. "I consider myself a good Wahhabi and can still be modern, understanding Islam in an open way. We take into account the changes in the world and do not have the closed-minded mentality as they do in Saudi Arabia," Abdelhameed Alansari, the dean of Qatar University’s College of Sharia, a leader of the paradigm shift, told The Wall Street Journal in 2002.30

Twenty years earlier Al Ansari was denounced as an "apostate" by a Qatari Saudi-trained chief religious judge for advocating women’s rights. "All those people who attacked me, most of them have died, and the rest keep quiet," Al Ansari said.

Qatar’s long-standing projection of an alternative is particularly sensitive at a time that Saudi Arabia is implicitly debating the fundamentals of the social and political arrangements

the Qataris question. The kingdom’s conservative ulema as well as Salafis worry that key members of the ruling family, including King Abdullah; his son, Prince Mutaib, who heads the National Guard; and Prince Turki al-Faisal, a former head of intelligence and ambassador to the United States and Britain, are toying with the idea of a separation of state and religion in a state that was founded on a pact between the ruling Al-Sauds and the clergy and sees itself as the model of Islamic rule. The clergy voiced its concern in the spring of 2013 in a meeting with the king two days after Prince Mutaib declared that “religion (should) not enter into politics.” The notion of a separation of state and religion first emerged when Prince Turki a decade earlier cited verse 4:59 of the Quran: “O you who have believed, obey God and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you.” Prince Turki suggested that the verse referred exclusively to temporal authority rather than both religious and political authority. Responding to Prince Mutaib in a tweet, Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdul-Aziz al-Tarifi warned that “whoever says there is no relationship between religion and politics worships two gods, one in the heavens and one on earth.”

To be sure, Qatar’s greater liberalism hardly means freedoms as defined in Western societies. Qatar’s former emir Sheikh Hamad silenced opposition to reforms. Hamad, for example, arrested in 1998 religious scholar Abdulrahman al Nuaimi who criticized his advancement of women rights. Al Nuaimi was released three years later on condition that he no longer would speak out publicly. Qatari poet Muhammad Ibn al-Dheeb al-Ajami, was sentenced in November 2011 to life in prison in what legal and human rights activists said was a “grossly unfair trial that flagrantly violates the right to free expression” on charges of “inciting the overthrow of the ruling regime.” His sentence was subsequently reduced to 15 years in prison. Al-Ajami’s crime appeared to be a poem that he wrote, as well as his earlier recitation of poems that included passages disparaging senior members of Qatar’s ruling family. The poem was entitled “Tunisian Jasmine.” It celebrated the overthrow of Tunisian president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

Recent media-related legislation reflects the Al Thani’s effort to maintain tight control. A new media law prohibits publishing or broadcasting information that would "throw

relations between the state and the Arab and friendly states into confusion” or “abuse the regime or offend the ruling family or cause serious harm to the national or higher interests of the state.” Violators face stiff financial penalties of up to one million Qatari riyals (US $275,000).  

In rare public criticism of the law, Qatari journalists demanded in June 2013 greater freedoms and criticized the absence of a media law and press association.  

Journalists further expressed concern that a draft cybercrime law would restrict freedom of expression and the press. The draft “stipulates punishment for anyone who exceeds any principles of social values,” according to state-owned Qatar News Agency. It would also ban the publishing of “news or pictures or audio-video recordings related to the sanctity of the private and family life of individuals, even if they are correct, via libel or slander through the Internet or an IT device.”

**Ring-fencing the Gulf**

Qatar shares with Saudi Arabia a firm will to ring-fence the Gulf against the popular uprisings in other parts of the Middle East and North Africa. The two countries’ diverging world views have however manifested themselves in different approaches towards the popular revolts, protests and violence sweeping the region. While Saudi Arabia initially adjusted to regional change on a reactive case-by-case basis and has more recently launched a successful counter-revolutionary effort in Egypt and has tried to counter the Brotherhood’s influence among Syria rebels, Qatar has sought to embrace it head on as long as it is not at home or in its Gulf neighborhood. For that reason, Qatar supported the dispatch to Bahrain in 2011 of a Saudi-led force to help quell a popular uprising in its own backyard but backed regime change elsewhere in the region. Qatar’s ties to the Muslim Brotherhood nonetheless meant by implication that it supported, the most organized, albeit clandestine, opposition force Saudi Arabia, Al Sahwa (The Awakening), a powerful Islamist network nurtured by members of the Brotherhood.

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32 James M. Dorsey, ‘Persian Gulf Futures,’ Global Brief, March 5, 2013, http://globalbrief.ca/blog/2013/03/05/persian-gulf-futures/

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Adding insult to injury, Qatar also funded to the tune of $50,000 a month two prominent London-based Saudi dissidents: Saad-Faqih, who was blacklisted until 2012 by the United Nations Security Council on suspicion of terrorism, and Mohammed al-Masari.\textsuperscript{35}

Al Sahwa’s support for the Brotherhood was not an issue for the Saudis for much of the second half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century during which the kingdom accommodated the group. Saudi Arabia as far back as the 1950s offered refuge to thousands of Brothers who fled repression in Egypt and Syria. Over time, they integrated into Saudi society, occupied key public sector positions, including in the education sector, and blended their politicized Islam with Wahhabism. The Brothers were nevertheless careful to avoid friction with the kingdom’s rulers. That changed during Iraq’s 1990 invasion of Kuwait. Al Sahwa and the Brotherhood hoped to utilize opposition to Saudi support of the US-led coalition that forced the withdrawal of Iraqi troops as a vehicle for pushing for political reform.

Their position sparked a Saudi crackdown and renewed strains in the kingdom’s relations with Qatar. Prominent Brothers including, Mohammed Qutb, the brother of the group’s onetime militant ideologue, Said Qutb, were expelled. Saudi anger at the Brotherhood because of its ties to Al Sahwa erupted in a rare public condemnation in 2002 as the kingdom came to grips with the fact that the majority of the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington were Saudi nationals. Then Interior Minister Prince Nayef bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud charged that the group was the “source of all evils in the Kingdom.”\textsuperscript{36} A Saudi human rights activist and former member of the Brotherhood described how security services told him during an interrogation that they had been monitoring all members of his cell in an indication of how serious Saudi authorities took the potential threat posed by the group.\textsuperscript{37}

The eruption of popular revolts in early 2011 in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Yemen again sparked tension with Al Sahwa which demanded in petitions and open letters political change in the kingdom\textsuperscript{38} and fuelled fears among Saudi rulers that they too could face

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{35} Interview with private investigator, November 11, 2013
\item \textsuperscript{36} Arab News. 2002. ‘Naif says Muslim Brotherhood cause of most Arab problems,’ November 28, \url{http://www.arabnews.com/node/226291}
\item \textsuperscript{37} Interview with the author February 10, 2002
\item \textsuperscript{38} Sheikh Salman al Audeh et al. 2011. (About state of rights and institutions), February 23, \url{http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=24%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%}
rebellion at home. Concern about the Brotherhood and Qatari support of the group mounted in August 2013 when Saudi imam Hamad Al-Hoqail denounced the Egyptian military overthrow of Morsi during a Friday prayer sermon in Riyadh’s Al-Ferdous mosque as did prominent Al Sahwa figures using both religious and political terminology. The comparison of Egyptian strongman General Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi to embattled Syrian president Bashar al Assad echoing from pulpits in mosques in Qatar resonated with many Saudis who echoed Islamist sentiment on Twitter and other social media as clips of sermons went viral. Qatar’s challenge to the kingdom was spotlighted with the death of Mohamed AlHadlaq, a nephew of Abdulrahman AlHadlaq, the director of the kingdom’s terrorist rehabilitation program. Mohamed AlHadlaq died in Syria fighting as part of a Qatar-supported jihadist rebel group.

Saudi rulers initially opted to tread carefully in response to Al Sahwa’s sense of empowerment by the Arab revolts. Islamists like Sheikh Mohammed el-Arefi and Mohsen al-Awaji who signed a petition against Morsi’s removal were warned to back off but not detained. Similarly, Sahwa leader Salman Al-Audeh’s popular television show was cancelled but no further steps were taken against him. Al-Audeh’s popular television show was cancelled as were several of his public appearances but no further steps were taken against him. That changed anti-Egyptian coup sentiment at home mounted and Brotherhood protests in Egypt continued. Saudi fears fed on suspicions that the Brotherhood with Qatari backing would stir the pot in the Al Sauds own backyard and even forge an alliance with the kingdom’s arch rival Iran. Throwing away caution, the kingdom went on the offensive. Brotherhood sympathizers in Saudi universities and schools were threatened with losing their jobs. Brotherhood literature was in early 2014 banned for the first time at the Riyadh Book Fair. Ultimately, the kingdom followed Egypt in banning the Brotherhood as a terrorist organization.

References

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http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kVKff_H-7HY


Qatar’s refusal to fall into line with the crackdown in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states and its continued endorsement of political Islam constituted a challenge not only to Saudi efforts to cement regional hegemony but also to what political scientist Stephane Lacroix sees as a Saudi move to ensure that a quietist and politically subservient strand of Salafism reemerges to replace political Islam as the kingdom and the Muslim world’s dominant trend. “Seen from Riyadh, the solution is to turn the clock back to the pre-1970s era, when the official religious establishment’s quietist brand of Salafism had a monopoly over Saudi Islam,” Lacroix argued.

Qatar on the other hand appears to be banking on the hope that replacing political Islam with quietist Salafism may be easier said than done. Saudi Arabia is on the cusp of a generational change in leadership with an ailing king in his late 80s and a crown prince in his late 70s who may not be able to stymie the mobilizing power of political Islam in an era in which winds of change are blowing through the region.

Qatar had already kindled the fire in 2013 with its concession to human rights groups not to extradite a dissident Saudi diplomat to the kingdom. Instead, the diplomat, Mishal bin Zaar Hamad al-Mutiry, who accused his government of involvement in terrorism, was allowed to go into exile in Morocco. “The spotlight shone on this case resulted in the Qatari authorities curtailing their plans to deport Mishal al-Mutiry long enough for him and his family to leave of their own accord, and the assistance of the NHRC (Qatar’s National Human Rights Commission) was crucial to ensuring they could travel,” said Philip Luther, Middle East and North Africa Programme Director at Amnesty International.

Abd al-Rahman Al-Rashed, the general manager of Al Arabiya, the Saudi network established to counter Qatar’s Al Jazeera, further signaled the growing rift with Qatar in a commentary in the summer of 2013. Accusing Qatar, the only Gulf state critical of the Egyptian military’s crackdown. of aggravating tension as the Muslim Brotherhood campaigned against the Egyptian military’s toppling of Morsi, Al-Rashed wrote: "We find it really hard to understand Qatar’s political logic in a country (Egypt) to which it is not linked at the level of regimes or ideologically or economically. Egyptians in Qatar moreover...

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44 James M. Dorsey, FIFA reviews, Qatar’s World Cup bid, The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer, 26 January 2013, http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.com/2013/01/fifa-investigates-qatars-world-cup-bid.html
are only a minority. Qatar’s insistence that the moving force of the army and Egyptian political parties accept the Brotherhood’s demands is not only impossible but also has dangerous repercussions. Supporting the Brotherhood at this current phase increases (the Brotherhood’s) stubborn insistence to stick to its guns and creates an extremely dangerous situation. So why is Qatar doing it? We really don’t understand why! Historically and over a period of around 20 years, Qatar has always adopted stances that oppose the positions of its Gulf brothers, and all of Qatar’s opposing policies have ended up unsuccessful.”

In scathing remarks days later criticizing those opposed to the Egyptian military’s removal of Morsi Saudi King Abdullah fired a further shot across Qatar’s bow without naming it. “Let it be known to those who interfered in Egypt’s internal affairs that they themselves are fanning the fire of sedition and are promoting the terrorism which they call for fighting. I hope they will come to their senses before it is too late; for the Egypt of Islam, Arabism, and honorable history will not be altered by what some may say or what positions others may take.” the monarch said.

Al Jazeera journalists have paid a heavy price for Egyptian and Saudi anger at Qatari policy. Egypt charged a score of mostly Al Jazeera journalists or ones whom authorities alleged were associated with the network with spreading false information, endangering national security and being members of a terrorist organization, a reference to the Brotherhood. Three journalists of the network’s English-language service were sentenced to lengthy prison terms even though pro-Brotherhood sympathies were reflected more in the network’s Arabic broadcasts than on its English-language channel.

Egyptian and Saudi chagrin was further fuelled by the fact that Al Jazeera Arabic provided post-Morsi the Brotherhood and Islamist leaders their foremost platform on a major global network. Doha, home to Sheikh Qaradawi, moreover emerged as a potential base for a Brotherhood and Egyptian Islamist leadership in exile that included men who were wanted...

45 Abd Al-Rahman Al-Rashed, ‘Why Is The Gulf Divided Over Egypt?’, Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, London, August 18, 2013, http://www.aawsat.com/leader.asp?section=3&issue=no=12682&article=740325&search=%DA%C8%CF%20%C7%E1%D1%CD%E3%E4%20%C7%E1%D1%C7%D4%CF:&state=true#.UhLDHJLfc_B

in Egypt and the kingdom. Among those sited in Doha and featured on Al Jazeera was Essam Abdel Majid, a member of the hardline Gema’a al-Islamiyya. Abdel Majid, who is wanted by Egypt on charges of incitement to murder, spent 25 years in prison for his role in the 1981 assassination of President Anwar Sadat. Other Islamist leaders operating from Doha included Gema’a activist Tarek el-Zomor; arrest, Ehab Shiha, chairman of the Egyptian Salafist al-Asala party; and wanted Brothers Gamal Heshmat, Ashraf Badr el-Din, Amr Darrag, Ashraf Badr el-Deen, Mohammed Mahsub and Hamza Zawba.47

In Syria, Qatari backing of the Brotherhood as well as jihadists contradicted Saudi support of secular and Salafist rebel in its bid to defeat what it sees as an Iranian-backed heretic Alawite (read Shia) regime. Saudi Arabia saw defeat of Bashar al Assad by a combination of secularists and Salafis as a way to weaken Iran and Lebanon’s Shiite militia Hezbollah and thwart a power grab by the Syrian Brotherhood. The Qatari- Saudi rivalry helped undermine the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces whose organizational structure was dependent on Brotherhood networks and complicated the group’s relationships with rebel groups inside Syria.48 It exacerbated tensions within the coalition as groups and figures aligned with Qatar fought a rearguard battle against Saudi encroachment and prevented opposition efforts to create a functioning government-in-exile from getting off the ground.

In contrast to the kingdom, Qatar has been more willing to risk engagement with jihadi groups on the grounds that its priority was to see the Assad regime overthrown sooner than later and that their exclusion would only aggravate Syria’s grief. “I am very much against excluding anyone at this stage, or bracketing them as terrorists, or bracketing them as al Qaeda. What we are doing is only creating a sleeping monster, and this is wrong. We should bring them all together, we should treat them all equally, and we should work on them to change their ideology, i.e. put more effort altogether to change their thinking. If we exclude anything from the Syrian elements today, we are only doing worse to Syria. Then we are opening the door again for intervention to chase the monster,” Qatari Minister of

State for Foreign Affairs Khalid bin Mohamed al-Attiyah told an international security conference in Manama in late December 2012. The official played down the jihadi character of some of the Syrian rebel groups. “They are only close to God now because what they are seeing from blood – and I am saying this for all of Syria. Muslims, Christians, Jews – whenever they have a crisis, they come close to God. This is the nature of man. If we see that someone is calling Allahu Akbar (God is great), the other soldier from the regime is also calling Allahu Akbar when he faces him. This is not a sign of extremism or terrorism,” Al-Attiyah said.49

Qatar and Saudi Arabia’s fundamentally different strategies of self-preservation are rooted in a Qatari perception that the role of the Saudi clergy in policy making has resulted in Saudi Arabia failing in its ambition to provide the region with the vision and effective leadership that would have allowed it to preempt the wave of change and resolve problems on its own. That perception has reinforced Qatar’s raison d’etre: a state that maintains its distinction and tribal independence from the region’s behemoth, Saudi Arabia, with whom it is entangled in a regional shadow boxing match.

While the ruling families of both have sought to buffer themselves against protests by boosting social spending, Saudi Arabia has opted for maintenance of the status quo to the degree possible and has graduated from limited engagement with the Muslim Brotherhood to open confrontation with the group. Saudi Arabia’s attitude towards the Brotherhood is informed by a fear that Islamic government in other nations could threaten its political and religious claim to leadership of the Muslim world based on the fact that it is home to Mecca and Medina, Islam’s two holiest cities, its puritan interpretation of Islamic dogma, and its self-image as a nation ruled on the basis of Islamic law with the Quran as its constitution.

The threat posed by the Brotherhood and Qatari promotion of political activism is reinforced by the fact that concepts of violent jihad have largely been replaced by Islamist civic action across the Middle East and North Africa in demand of civil, human and political rights that hit too close to home.

By contrast, Qatar’s pragmatic relationship to Wahhabism eased the early forging of a close relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood. Qatar’s ties to the Brotherhood may be less motivated by ideology than by a determination to distinguish itself from the kingdom and back what at times appeared to be a winning horse and what remains a force to be reckoned with. The marriage of convenience between Qatar and the group was enhanced by the appeal of the Brotherhood’s fusion of Wahhabi Salafism with the thinking of Western educated Egyptian jurist and religious scholar Muhammed Abduh, widely regarded as the father of Islamic modernism, and even more so his disciple Rashid Rida who struck a more nationalist, anti-colonial tone than his teacher. It was Rida’s push for a political movement that favored Islamic empire over nation states, sought to restore purity to Islamic society and wanted to revive the Caliphate that made the Brotherhood attractive to Qatar. It allowed Qatar to create a challenge to Saudi claim to leadership of the Muslim World.

Ironically, Qatar was joined by Bahrain, one of, if not the Gulf state closest to Saudi Arabia, in bucking the region’s trend and maintaining close ties to the Brotherhood even as the kingdom led a charge against the group. The Bahraini Brotherhood’s political arm, the Al-Minbar Islamic Society, has been allowed to operate openly even if Bahrain joined Saudi Arabia in withdrawing its ambassador from Doha in protest against Qatar’s relationship with the Brotherhood... The group, which has largely supported the government, is widely believed to be funded by the island’s minority Sunni Muslim ruling family and Islamic finance institutions in a bid to counter political forces that represent its Shiite Muslim majority.50

Qatar’s relationship with the Brotherhood was facilitated by the fact that key figures from the group like Qaradawi, a major influence in a country with no real clergy of its own, Libyan imam Ali Al Salabi, and Egyptian Sheikh Ahmed Assal and Sheikh Abdel Moez Abdul Sattar have had a base in Doha for decades. Among the first Brotherhood arrivals was Abdul-Badi Saqr, an Egyptian who came in 1954 at the invitation of the Qatariis to help set up their education system. Saqr had been recommended by Muhib al-Din al-Khatib, the

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proprietor of a Salafi bookshop in Cairo.\textsuperscript{51} To fill the need for teachers, he invited Brothers who according to scholar Abdullah Juma Kobaisi “stamped the education system with their Islamic ideology since the education department was under their control.”\textsuperscript{52}

In his doctoral thesis, Kobaisi noted that “for a period of three years (1953/54 to 1955/56) most of the teachers who were brought in to run the Qatari schools were ideologically in favor of the Muslim Brotherhood Party.”\textsuperscript{53} The teachers’ siding with the Brotherhood when Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, who was widely popular among Qatars because of his Arab nationalism, cracked down on the group, put them at odds with both their hosts and their students. As a result, Saqr was fired and replaced by an Arab nationalist.\textsuperscript{54} The setback was only temporary. A second wave of teachers associated with the Brotherhood and embedded in Cairo’s Al Azhar University began to arrive in 1960, including al-Assal who formed Brotherhood groups in Qatar using his status as an instructor and preacher in mosques. Al-Sattar who served in the mid-1940s as the personal envoy to Palestine of the Brotherhood’s founder, Hassan al-Banna, started as a school inspector in Qatar before he became director of Islamic Sciences at the Qatari ministry of education. Al-Sattar co-authored many of the initial textbooks used in the country’s school system.\textsuperscript{55}

The Brothers were joined in 1961 by Qaradawi who freshly out of Egyptian prison became director of the Religious Institute before graduating to founding dean of Qatar University’s Sharia College. Qaradawi, who became a Qatari citizen in 1969, rose to become one of the world’s most prominent and controversial Islamic religious leaders and a particular eyesore to the Saudis. With Qaradawi Qatar had created a global mufti\textsuperscript{56} in much the same way that it built a global television network and a global airline and hosts global sporting events. He represented in the words of controversial Islam scholar Yahya Michot the three dimensions of a spiritual leader that many in the global community of faithful were looking

\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Ibid.} Kobaisi, p. 123
\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Ibid.} Kobaisi, p. 123
\textsuperscript{54} \textit{Ibid.} Kobaisi, p. 125
\textsuperscript{55} David Roberts. 2014. ‘Qatar, the Ikhwan, and transnational relations in the Gulf,’ Project on Middle East Political Science, March 18, \url{http://pomeps.org/2014/03/18/qatar-the-ikhwan-and-transnational-relations-in-the-gulf/}
for: independence as a Muslim scholar and activist, representation of a transnational movement such as the Muslim Brotherhood, and association with an international organization such as the Qatar-backed International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS) that Qaradawi chairs. Qaradawi constituted a powerful shield for the Al Thanis against religious criticism. The Brotherhood’s pledge to dismantle its Qatari branch provided further assurance that Qatar would be spared the emergence of a home-grown Islamist movement. Diverting the Islamist focus away from Qatar was further facilitated by Qatar’s funding of Brotherhood media outlets, including a show for Qaradawi on Al Jazeera, Islamweb.net and Islamonline.com. Qaradawi’s show, Al Sharia wal Hayat (The Shariah and Life) that reaches a global audience of tens of millions of Arabic speakers, helped give Al Jazeera its Islamist stamp. It is also a fixture on Qatar state television which broadcasts his Friday prayer sermons live. The Qatari media strategy offered the Gulf state influence across the Middle East and North Africa where Brotherhood offshoots were active including Gaza with Hamas, which Qatar lured away from Syria and Iran, as well as the Islamic Action Front in Jordan.

In the run-up and immediate aftermath of the toppling of Mubarak in Egypt, Qaradawi sought to counter calls by conservative Al Azhar clerics seeking to persuade Egyptians not to protest by pointing to Islam’s quietist legal tradition that commands Muslims to obey their ruler even if he is unjust because it could lead to civil strife. Qaradawi strove to develop a new strand of legal thought that he described as fiqh al-thawra or jurisprudence of the revolution. He argued that protests were legitimate if they sought to achieve a legitimate end such as implementation of Islamic law, the release of wrongly incarcerated prisoners, stopping military trials of civilians or ensuring access to basic goods. Yet, in line with Qatari policy, Qaradawi rejected around the same time a request by a fellow IUMS member to support on those grounds the predominantly Shia uprising in Bahrain.

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58 Yusuf al-Qaradawi. 2011. ‘(The legitimacy of peaceful demonstrations),’ Qaradawi.net, March 13, [http://qaradawi.net/fatawahkam/30/4929-2011-08-08-08-17-10.html](http://qaradawi.net/fatawahkam/30/4929-2011-08-08-08-17-10.html)
Describing Qaradawi’s importance to Qatar, former Qatari justice minister and prominent lawyer Najeeb al Nauimi said; "Saudi Arabia has Mecca and Medina. We have Qaradawi -- and all his daughters drive cars and work."\(^{60}\) Qaradawi and other Brothers, helped Qatar develop its own fusion of Salafist and Brotherhood thinking that was initially expressed in publications such as Majalat al Umma.\(^{61}\) They counterbalanced the influence of local Saudi-influenced clergymen and Salafis who controlled the ministries of justice and religious endowments.

With the eruption of the protests in various Arab countries in 2011, Qaradawi was instrumental in persuading Qatar to use its political and financial muscle to support the Brotherhood in Egypt; the revolt in Libya against Col. Moammar Qaddafi; the post-Ben Ali Ennahdha-led government in Tunisia; an assortment of Islamist groups in Libya, Yemen, and Morocco and opponents of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. Three days after a triumphant appearance in Cairo’s Tahrir Square in early 2011, Qaradawi issued on Al Jazeera a fatwa or religious opinion authorizing the killing of Libyan leader Col. Moammar Qaddafi.\(^{62}\) He asserted further that historic links between Egypt and Syria put Syria in protesters’ firing line.\(^{63}\) In response, Syrian officials accused Qaradawi of fostering sectarianism.\(^{64}\)

Qaradawi took his advocacy of resistance to Assad a significant step further by effectively endorsing the sectarian Sunni-Shia Muslim divide in a speech in late May 2013. Initially, Qaradawi’s remarks a month before the ascension of Tamim, who under his father was Qatar’s main interlocutor with the kingdom, were seen as a hint at a possible aligning of Qatari policy with that of Saudi Arabia. Qaradawi appeared to back Saudi encouragement of the divide between Sunni and Shia Muslims. He urged Muslims with military training to join the anti-Assad struggle in Syria. His condemnation of Lebanese Shiite Muslim militia Hezbollah (Party of God) as the “party of Satan” was immediately endorsed by Saudi grand

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\(^{60}\) Ibid. Trofimov


\(^{62}\) Ibid. Michot


mufti Abdul Aziz al-Sheikh as was his assertion that al-Assad's Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shia Islam, was "more infidel than Christians and Jews." In a surprisingly overt gesture to Saudi Arabia, Qaradawi went on to say that "I defended the so-called (Hezbollah leader Hassan) Nasrallah and his party, the party of tyranny... in front of clerics in Saudi Arabia. It seems that the clerics of Saudi Arabia were more mature than me." It however did not take long for Qaradawi to revert to his fiery self and burying suggestions that Tamim would be more accommodating than his father towards the Saudis. In a blistering attack on Egypt’s military-backed government and armed forces, Qaradawi charged in November 2013 that Egypt was being ruled by thugs who kill people and steal their money." Speaking in Doha’s Omar Ibn al-Khattab Mosque, he said that "those oppressors have killed worshipers, fasters, pious people and readers of Quran who did not harm anybody. The military, police, thugs, and snipers killed thousands in Rabaa al-Adawiya which was obvious injustice,” a reference to the Cairo Square on which the Brotherhood camped out for weeks to protest against the removal of Morsi.

Hundreds of people were killed in August 2013 when security forces brutally broke up the protest. In January 2014, Qaradawi further distanced himself and Qatar from the pro-Saudi camp in the Gulf by condemning the UAE as a country opposed to Islamic rule.

Promoting Islamist activism

Ironically, the setting up of Qatar’s state-owned Al Jazeera television network which at times handles Gulf states with velvet gloves, parallels the structuring of the Gulf state’s ties to the Brotherhood. The Brotherhood, like Al Jazeera, which more often than not is the last to report on controversial domestic Qatari issues, cut a deal in the late 1990s with the Al Thanis which guaranteed it continued Qatari support in exchange for the dismantling of its operations in Qatar and a pledge that it would operate everywhere except for in Qatar itself. For its part, Qatar moved to fund institutions designed to foster a generation of

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65 Qaradawi admits Saudi clerics are more mature than him on Hezbollah, June 1, 2011, Middle East Online, http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=59139


activists in the Middle East and North Africa as well as guide the Brotherhood in its transition from a clandestine to a public group. One such institution, the Al-Nahda (Awakening) Project⁶⁸ to promote Islamist activism within democracies, was established by Jassim Al-Sultan, a former Qatari Brother. A medical doctor, Al-Sultan has since the dissolution of the group in Qatar advised the Brotherhood to reach out to others rather than stick to its strategy of building power bases within existing institutions. He also criticized the Brotherhood for insisting on its slogan, ‘Islam is the Solution.’ Al Nahda cooperates closely with the London and Doha-based Academy of Change (AOC)⁶⁹ that focuses on the study of “social, cultural, and political transformations especially in the Arabic and Islamic region.” AOC appears to be modelled on Otoper, the Serbian youth movement that toppled President Slobodan Milosevic and has since transformed itself into a training ground for activists from across the globe in non-violent protest. The Brotherhood campaigned for AOC founder Hisham Morsy’s release after he was detained during the popular revolt in 2011 that toppled Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

The threat to Saudi Arabia posed by Qatari fostering of popular protest was compounded by the nature of the social contract in the kingdom and other energy-rich rentier Gulf states. The state’s generous cradle-to-grave welfare and social and no taxation policy approach in exchange for the surrender of political rights meant that the Brotherhood challenged ruling families on issues where they were most vulnerable: culture, ideology and civic society. As a result, Qatari government support of Al Nahda and AOC was part of its effort to control the world of national non-governmental organizations by creating and populating its own NGOs.

In doing so, Qatar targeted what according to scholar Hootan Shambayati effectively amounts to the Gulf states’ Achilles Heel. “The rentier nature of the state limited the regime’s ability to legitimize itself through its economic performance... Consequently, culture and moral values became sources of conflict between the state and segments of the

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⁶⁸ [http://www.4nahda.com/content/1005](http://www.4nahda.com/content/1005)
⁶⁹ [http://aoc.fm](http://aoc.fm)
civil society,” Shambayati wrote. The government’s support for activists paralleled Qatar’s earlier bypassing of Arab elites by initially appealing to the public across the region with its groundbreaking free-wheeling reporting and debate on Al Jazeera that at its peak captivated an Arabic speaking audience of 60 million.

**Sharpening the rivalry**

Beyond historic differences in religious experience and practice, two events sharpened the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Qatar: the 1991 US-led expulsion of Iraqi forces from Kuwait and the rise to power in a 1995 bloodless coup of Sheikh Hamad. The US-led invasion called into question Qatar’s alignment with Saudi Arabia since its independence in 1971, which involved Saudi guarantees to protect the tiny emirate. To the Qataris, the invasion demonstrated that it could not rely for its defense on a country that was not capable of defending itself. That realization coupled with Kuwait’s ability to rally the international community to its assistance reinforced Sheikh Hamad’s belief that Qatar’s security was best enhanced by embedding and branding itself in the international community as a cutting-edge, moderate, knowledge-based century nation.

To that end Sheikh Hamad adopted not only a soft power strategy but also one of subtle power which scholar Mehran Kamrava defines as “a new form of power and influence, one less obvious and more discreet, rooted in a combination of contextual opportunities and calculated policies meant to augment one’s influence over others.” Kamrava argued that the replacement of Saudi Arabia by the United States as the guarantor of Qatari security enabled Qatar to build its subtle power on the positioning of itself as a good citizen by mediating in regional disputes, revolutionizing the Arab media landscape through Al Jazeera, financial generosity and a doses of marketing, and high profile acquisitions. Qatar could “devote its attention to issues that are not strictly security-related and to instead pursue goals and strategies that enhance its diplomatic stature and strengthen its political economy both at home and abroad,” Kamrava wrote. Qatari soft and subtle power highlighted a shift of regional power in the Middle East and North Africa away from the

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traditional behemoths Egypt, Syria, Iran and Iraq to Gulf states in which in the words of scholar Giacomo Luciani oil is more important than weaponry and financial muscle tops population.\textsuperscript{73}

Qatar’s emphasis on soft and subtle power did not mean abandoning a semblance of hard power involving 12,000 most foreign men under arms and another 8,000 in the security forces. In what was primarily a symbolic gesture that was also adopted by the UAE, Qatar adopted in November 2013 a law making military service of up to four months compulsory for its mail citizens aged 18 to 35.\textsuperscript{74} A Qatari official said the move was intended to create a reserve force and enable Qataris to rely on themselves. Similarly, the Kuwait parliament was debating reintroducing compulsory military service abolished after the 1990 Iraqi invasion. Qatar’s first 2,000 recruits were drafted in April 2014.\textsuperscript{75}

At the same time Qatar announced it was purchasing $24 billion in military hardware, one of the larger buying sprees in its history.\textsuperscript{76} Qatari realization that its defense would have to be built on soft rather than hard powers was nevertheless highlighted in an earlier US embassy cable that described the Gulf state’s requests for advanced weaponry as modest and said that Qatar had a number of times backed out of arms deals.\textsuperscript{77} The embassy said it felt that Qatar lacked a national military strategy and seemed reluctant to draw one up.\textsuperscript{78} It concluded that “the QAF (Qatar Air Force) could put up little defense against Qatar’s primary perceived threats – Saudi Arabia and Iran – and the U.S. military’s presence here is larger and far more capable than Qatar’s forces.”\textsuperscript{79}

\textsuperscript{73} Giacomo Luciani. 2009. ‘Oil and political economy in the international relations of the Middle East, in Louis Fawcett (ed), International relations of the Middle East, Oxford

\textsuperscript{74} Gulf News., 2013. Qatar to make military service compulsory for 4 months, 14 November 2013, http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/qatar/qatar-to-make-military-service-compulsory-for-4-months-1.1255124

\textsuperscript{75} Nada Badawi. 2014. ‘Qatari men report for first day of mandatory national service,’ Doha News, April 1, http://dohanews.co/first-day-mandatory-national-service-kicks-2000-recruits/


\textsuperscript{78} Ibid, US Embassy

The rift with Saudi Arabia deepened in the mid-1990s with Saudi rejection of the notion that a son could revolt against his father as Sheikh Hamad did with the overthrow of his father, Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad bin Abdullah bin Jassim bin Muhammed Al Thani. Saudi outrage translated into efforts to undermine if not unseat the new ruler by sabotaging Qatar’s endeavors to export natural gas to other states in the region and build a bridge linking it with the UAE. By all accounts, Hamad’s voluntary abdication in favor of Tamim should have provoked similar ire from the Saudis in a region in which rulers hang on to power until death even if they at times have experienced a deterioration of health that has incapacitated them not only physically but also mentally. One reason it did not is the fact that Saudi officials had hoped that Tamim’s more accommodating interaction with them as crown prince would result in a reversal of the activist and adventurist nature of his father’s foreign policy.

Relations between the two countries however had already almost ruptured before Hamad’s 1995 coup because of border skirmishes in 1992 and 1994 that were rooted in longstanding disputes over Saudi projection of itself as first among the region’s Bedouins. They further deteriorated as a result of several allegedly Saudi-backed coup attempts in the late 1990s designed to restore Sheikh Khalifa to power. The attempts prompted Qatar almost a decade later to strip some 6,000 members of the Al-Ghafran clan, a branch of the Al Murra tribe, of their Qatari nationality because they had allegedly patrolled the border on behalf of the Saudis. The Al Thanis have long had a complex relationship with the Al Murra who populate northern and eastern Arabia and are believed to be Qatar’s largest tribe. Qatari officials asserted at the time that they had lost their nationality because they had refused to renounce their Saudi nationality in line with Qatari law that does not allow dual citizenship. All but 200 of the Al Ghafran regained their Qatari citizenship a year later at the request of Saudi King Abdullah. 21 of those arrested in connection with the failed coup attempts were released in 2010 after 14 years in prison and immediately flown to Saudi Arabia.

The deteriorating relationship with its big brother made it even more imperative for Qatar to strike out on its own – the very thing Saudi Arabia thought to preempt. A struggle for a multi-billion dollar Qatari project to supply gas to Kuwait reflected the Saudi effort. Asked in 2003 why the Kuwait project was stalled then Qatari industry and energy minister Abdullah Bin Hamad Al-Attiyah said: "We have received no clearance from Saudi Arabia."
Hence it is not feasible." It took a rollercoaster of repeated Saudi denials and approvals for the project to be finally completed in 2008.

If the natural gas deal was emblematic of Qatari-Saudi relations, so was a London libel case in which the wife of former emir Sheikh Hamad and mother of new emir Sheikh Tamim, Sheikha Mozah bint Nasser al-Missned, sued Saudi-owned Ash Sharq al Awsat newspaper for falsely reporting that her husband had secretly visited Israel. In her petition to the court, the Sheikha charged that the paper was "controlled by Saudi intelligence paymasters who used the newspaper as a mouthpiece for a propaganda campaign against Qatar and its leadership."

Saudi and Qatari national interests diverge further when it comes to Iran with whom Qatar shares the world’s largest gas field. Saudi Arabia sees Iran as a major rival that is instigating civil unrest in the region. It is also the spiritual home of the Shiites, the sect most despised by Saudi Wahhabis. To navigate this minefield, Qatar has projected itself as the mediator par excellence of the wider region’s conflicts. To do so, it has forged relationships with other Saudi nemeses such as Hamas and Hezbollah and Israel.

The kingdom has since forged its own alliance with Israel in response to a potential rapprochement between the United States and Iran. Qatari relations with Israel initially however provoked Saudi ire. Then Saudi Crown prince Abdullah refused to attend an Arab summit in 2000 because of the presence in Doha of an Israeli trade office. The appearance on Al Jazeera two years later of Saudi dissidents persuaded the kingdom to withdraw its ambassador to Qatar much like it did again in 2014. In 2009, Saudi Arabia and Qatar held rival Arab summits within a day of each other despite an improvement in relations in the two preceding years that included a deal allowing Al Jazeera to open a bureau in Riyadh provided it did not air dissident Saudi voices.

The improvement was nonetheless a reflection of relative Saudi leverage that ironically was enhanced by Qatar’s own success in deploying soft power. The winning of the hosting rights for the 2022 World Cup meant that Qatar needed to project stability in its backyard. Its ability to do so independent of Saudi Arabia was enhanced with the eruption of the Arab

80 Mona Lisa Freiha, 2011. ‘Saudi refuses Qatar gas project; An Nahar, July 23,
81 Lawrence Smallman. 2005 ‘Qatar’s first lady wins UK libel case,’ January 5, Al Jazeera,
http://www.aljazeera.com/archive/2005/01/200849139943889.html
popular revolts that allowed Qatar to project itself as an island of stability, modernity and progress in a sea of volatility and conservatism. While a majority of Qataris would likely back improved relations with Saudi Arabia, they also appear to be ambiguous about their country’s relationship with the kingdom. Qataris participating in a 2009 broadcast of the BBC’s Doha Debates overwhelming described their country’s relations with the kingdom as a ‘cold war’.82 Students in universities often glorify past Qatari tribal defense of Qatar’s only land border that separates it from Saudi Arabia. Their distanced attitude to the kingdom reflects a resentment among young Qataris of the fact that Sheikh Hamad’s ousted father, Sheikh Khalifa, had to pay homage to the Saudi king in exchange for security guarantees.83 If Saudi Arabia’s goals – maintenance of the status quo to the degree possible, retention of its leadership role, limiting the rise of Islamist forces, preservation of monarchical rule and restrictive political reform – seem straightforward, Qatar’s idiosyncratic policies have at times raised questions about what it is trying to achieve and how it went about it. Politicians and analysts struggled, for example, to understand how Qatar’s competition with Saudi Arabia for influence was playing out in Yemen, a strategic nation at the southern tip of the peninsular. Qatar maintains close ties to the powerful Islamist Brotherhood-related Al-Islah movement, supports Al Houthi rebels in the north, and emerged at one point as a mediator in Yemen. It succeeded for a brief period of time in superseding Saudi Arabia as the go-to-address in a country in which kidnapping for political and criminal purposes are a fixture of life as was evident with the release of a kidnapped Swiss teacher.84 Qatar’s influence was both remarkable and sensitive given long-standing Saudi bankrolling of the government of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh as well as the country’s major tribes, including that of the president, the Hashid tribal confederation. Qatar built its inroads in a country Saudi Arabia viewed as its preserve on its relationship with the Brotherhood as well as a history of mediation in Yemen that dated back to the 1990s. In competing in Yemen, Qatar initially benefited further from the fact that it was a tiny nation rather than the region’s giant and was not a supplier of jihadists to Yemen-based Al Qa’ida in the Arabian Gulf (AQAP). Qatar’s influence was sufficiently significant to

82 The Doha Debates, This House believes that after Gaza, Arab unity is dead and buried, February 15, 2009, http://www.thedohadebates.com/debates/item/?d=47&mode=opinions
83 Jill Crystal. 1995. Oil and Politics in the Gulf, Cambridge, p. 164-165
84 Michael Peel, Rivals make play for power in Yemen, Financial Times, April 15, 2013
prompt tribal leaders, including prominent businessmen and politician Hamid al-Ahmar, to balance their relations between the two Gulf rivals after they broke with Saleh during the 2011 popular uprising against him and joined the opposition. The divergence of Qatari and Saudi goals in Yemen was also evidenced by Qatar’s ties to Nobel Prize winner and prominent Yemeni activist Tawakkol Karma, who emerged as the face of the popular revolt against Saleh.

On the back of its relationship with the Brotherhood, Qatar garnered popularity among Saleh’s opponents by becoming the first Arab country in 2011 to call on the president to step down in response to the demand of protesters camped out on the capital Sana’a’s Change Square. It forged close ties to Nobel Prize winner and prominent Yemeni activist Tawakkol Karma, who emerged as the face of the popular revolt against Saleh. It further capitalized on its relationship with Maj. Gen. Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, a Muslim Brother and powerful advisor to President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi who succeeded Saleh in 2012 in a deal with the opposition mediated by Gulf states under Saudi leadership that was designed to preserve the core structure of the outgoing president’s regime.

Al Ahmar’s first armored division which joined the mass anti-Saleh protesters in early 2011, played a key role in the Saleh’s ultimate demise after 30 years in office, when it attacked the presidential palace in 2012, killing several senior officials and severely wounding the embattled Yemeni leader and various of his key aids. Qatar relationship to Al Ahmar dated back to 2008/9 when the general was negotiating on behalf of Saleh an end to armed confrontation with rebel Houthi tribesmen in north Yemen.

Qatar initially participated in the Saudi-led diplomatic effort to resolve the Yemen crisis but later pulled out because of what it described as "indecision and delays in the signature of the proposed agreement" and "the intensity of clashes" in Yemen. More likely is that Saudi Arabia pushed Qatar out. In an interview with Russia Today, Saleh had warned a month earlier that "the state of Qatar is funding chaos in Yemen and in Egypt and Syria and throughout the Arab world. We reserve the right not to sign (the Gulf-negotiated deal) if the representatives of Qatar are present" at the ceremony. Earlier, Saleh had thundered in

85 Middle East Online, 'Qatar pulls out of Gulf’s Yemen mediation,' 13 May 2013, http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=46106.
86 Ibid. Middle East Online
Reflections No. 4
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a speech: “We derive our legitimacy from the strength of our glorious Yemeni people, not from Qatar, whose initiative we reject.”

Qatar’s success in breaking the Saudi political monopoly in Yemen was evident to all in July 2013 when Hadi stopped in Doha on his way to Washington for an official visit. Hadi was accompanied by General Al-Ahmar. Similarly, when Al Islah leader Muhammad al-Yadumi travelled to Doha in 2012 to thank the government for its support he did not include Saudi Arabia on his itinerary. It was a glaring omission given Saudi Arabia’s key role in brokering the agreement that eased Saleh out of office.

Turning the page?

When Tamim took over the reins of power in June 2013, he inherited a state that his father ensured was tightly controlled by his wing of the Al Thanis. Hamad created institutions and government offices that were populated by loyalists as well as his offspring and bore the characteristics of autocracy: centralized and personalized decision-making, reliance on patronage networks and an absence of transparency and accountability.

Few Qatari question the achievements of Hamad. Those accomplishments notwithstanding, conservative segments of Qatari society with whom Sheikh Tamim at times appeared to empathize, have questioned some of the effects of the former emir’s policies, including:

- Huge expenditure on a bold foreign policy that put Qatar at the forefront of regional demands for greater freedom and change but also earned it significant criticism and embarrassment. A survey conducted in 2013 by the Doha campuses of Northwestern and Georgetown University concluded that 77 percent of Qataris polled believes that more resources should be invested domestically rather than overseas. Only 13 percent wanted increased spending on “international affairs and investments,” while 10 percent said they were content with the current balance.

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88 Ibid. Kamrava
Unfulfilled promises of change at home that would give Qataris a greater say in their country's affairs;

A stark increase in foreign labor to complete ambitious infrastructure projects many of which are World Cup-related and have exposed Qatar for the first time to real external pressure for social change;

More liberal catering to Western expatriates by allowing the controlled sale of alcohol and pork;

Potential tacit concessions Qatar may have to make to non-Muslim soccer fans during the World Cup, including expanded areas where consumption of alcohol will be allowed, public rowdiness and dress codes largely unseen in the Gulf state, and the presence of gays.

A discussion in Qatar about possibly transferring ownership of soccer clubs from prominent Qataris, including members of the ruling family, to publicly held companies because of lack of Qatari interest in “the sheikh’s club” suggests a degree of sensitivity to popular criticism.

Ali Khalifa al Kuwari, a prominent government critic and author, traces opposition to Qatari policies to a set of 35 demands articulated in a 1963 petition at a time of strikes to which the regime initially responded by imprisoning and expelling its opponents but ultimately promised to enact reform and ratify the majority of the petition’s demands. “Demands for reform did not stop there, however, but continued at a lower intensity, urged on in carrot and stick fashion for the next two decades, before finally emerging into the light in 1992 in the form of two petitions. The most important of these petitions’ demands was the election of a consultative council, appointed and tasked to draw up a permanent constitution. As a consequence of this, the signatories were punished with prison sentences, travel bans, the denial of their rights and the threat to rescind their Qatari citizenship,” Al Kuwari said. Al Kuwari lists five obstacles to reform in Qatar: concealing and preventing the publishing of information related to public affairs; a lack of transparency; the absence of freedom of

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opinion and expression, the absence of clearly defined boundaries between public and private interests and inadequate public administration. Reform, he argues, has to address the long-term population imbalance in Qatar and other GCC nations; imbalances in the economy, the country’s social contract and the transition from autocracy to democracy in the region.” There are five starting points for reform, as follows: halting and reforming the rising imbalance in the population; reforming and developing the public administration; transitioning to a democratic political system; revising and completing the National Vision and the National Strategy documents; continuing to strengthen the institutions of the judiciary and ensuring the right to a court of law,” Al Kuwari said.91

Tamim has nonetheless managed to enhance his popularity through his close relationship to Qatari tribes, his upholding of Islamic morals exemplified by the fact that alcohol is not served in luxury hotels that he owns, and his accessibility similar to that of Saudi King Abdullah. Even before becoming emir, he banned the serving of alcohol in 2011 on Pearl-Qatar, an artificial island popular with expatriates, after Qatari complained about foreigners appearing intoxicated in public. Tamim was also the driving force behind the replacement in 2012 of English by Arabic as the main language of instruction at Qatar University. He is further believed to have been empathetic to unprecedented on-line protest campaign in recent years by Qatari activists against the state-owned telecommunications company and Qatar Airways. Hamad appeared to anticipate a potentially different tone under Tamim by urging Qatari “to preserve our civilized traditional and cultural values.” If Hamad used initial promises of greater liberalization to garner support within his fractured tribe, one of the first to settle in Qatar in the 18th century, Tamim may well employ his conservatism to rally the wagons.

The underlying theme of Tamim’s accession speech was one of Qatari independence and of the Gulf state being distinct from others. Tamim praised his father and predecessor for transforming Qatar from “a country that some people could hardly locate on the map to a principal actor in politics, economics, media, culture, and sports at a global level... We should not become arrogant. The humility that Qatari are known for is a sign of the strong who are sure of themselves, and arrogance leads to committing mistakes... We don’t live on

91 Ibid. Amin
the edge of life, lost without direction, and we are not answerable to anyone or wait on anyone for instructions. Qatar is known for its independent behavior now, and those who deal with us know we have our own vision.”92

The Saudi counter-revolutionary campaign in Egypt and Syria barely a month after Tamim’s ascension followed by the near-rupture in diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt and a Saudi-led campaign to isolate Qatar in the Middle East and North Africa constituted a serious foreign policy crisis for the new emir. Saudi Arabia supported by Egypt sought to increase the pressure by exploiting the threat to Qatar’s hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup posed by its treatment of foreign workers. Egged on by the kingdom and Egypt, Arab trade unions and non-governmental organizations added their voices to criticism by international trade unions, human rights groups and world soccer body FIFA. The criticism coupled with allegations of corrupt practices in Qatar’s bid could potentially lead to Qatar being deprived of its right to host the 2022 World Cup, one of the world’s largest sporting events.

Arab trade unionists conceded that their criticism was motivated more by political divisions in the Middle East and North Africa than concern for workers’ welfare. In an interview with Al Monitor, Abdul Wahab Khudr, said that the trade union moves were motivated primarily by a Saudi-led effort to isolate Qatar. “Qatar has a bad record with the Egyptians because of its role in the January 2011 and June 2013 revolutions. Qatar played a clear inciting role and sought to create confusion and support terrorist groups in Egypt,” Khudr said. He was careful not to mention in his criticism of Qatar’s labor policy the Gulf state’s kafala or sponsorship system that puts foreign workers at the mercy of their employers and is at the core of international pressure on the Gulf state because Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates also have similar sponsorship systems and do not allow the formation of independent trade unions.93 In fact, the outlawing of strikes and banning of independent trade unions in much of the Gulf is part of an almost region-wide

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92 Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, 26 June 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rMsrQpi7D9g
policy to maintain political control through segmentation and dominance of various population groups, first and foremost among which the majority of migrant workers.\textsuperscript{94} The labor issues touches the Achilles heel not only of Qatar but also other smaller Gulf states in which the citizenry constitutes a minority of the overall population. In Qatar, the numbers are the most extreme with Qatariis accounting for only ten to twelve percent of the Gulf state’s more than two million inhabitants. In other words, Qatar has the highest percentage of migrants in the world. As a result, the labor controversy puts Qatar in a Catch-22. It undermines achievement of a key goal of the Gulf state’s heavy investment in sports, including the World Cup: the development of the kind of soft power that would compensate for the absence of the hard military power to defend itself. That soft power is dependent on its ability to embed itself at multiple levels in the international community. Yet its public image has been tainted by the labor controversy as well as the corruption allegations. Reversing that involves existential and painful decisions that go to the very nature of society. Granting political rights and greater freedoms to workers and other foreigners would significantly alter the character of a state in which nationals are a small minority. While these are issues which most of the Gulf states have been grappling with for years without coming up with acceptable solutions, Qatar has become the battleground because of its hosting of the World Cup which gave leverage to trade unions with real clout – 175 million members in 15 countries – as opposed to human rights groups that have long criticized the Gulf’s foreign worker region but have only moral authority. Qatar has responded to the criticism, fuelled by reports of hundreds of deaths annually of predominantly Asian workers allegedly as a result of working conditions, by issuing improved safety, security and welfare standards, pledging to step up enforcement of existing rules and regulations, and developing plans to cut corruption out of the recruitment process that puts foreign workers into debt even before they arrive in the Gulf state. The moves are designed to protect Qatar’s projection of itself as a cutting edge 21st century nation, fight off calls that it be deprived of its right to hold the world’s foremost sports tournament, and fend off demands that it dismantle its controversial sponsorship or

kafala system that subjects workers to the whims of their employers, and allow labor to freely organize and engage in collective bargaining.
Qatari critics of the government charge that they are also designed to ensure that Qatari nationals remain a small minority of the total population. Al Kuwari, the government critic and democracy activist, reflects sentiment among a wide swath of Qataris with his repeated call for the halt to the import of foreign labor. If adopted, that would threaten the government’s effort, including the hosting of the World Cup, to turn Qatar at break-neck speed into a 21st century city state.
In a twist of irony, Al Kuwari argues that Qatari rulers as well as other rulers in the Gulf benefit from a growing population imbalance in which foreigners account for an ever larger percentage of the population. “The great influx of immigrant workers, regardless of how necessary they are, is a benefit to the ruler, who is keen to treat people as temporary and readily disposable, rather than as citizens with all their attendant rights,” Al Kuwari said in an interview with Germany’s Heinrich Boell Stiftung. He noted that the number of Qatari nationals as a percentage of the total population had dropped from 40 percent in 1970 to 12 percent in 2010. As a result, Qataris dropped from accounting for 14 percent of the work force in 2001 to a mere six percent in 2014. If population projections of five million inhabitants in 2022 used, according to Mr. Al Kuwari, for Qatar’s multi-billion dollar metro and railway projects are correct, the percentage of Qatari nationals would drop even more dramatically.
Demographic fears as well as concerns that Qatar’s still evolving national identity could be eroded have at times prompted conservative responses to government liberalism. An online boycott campaign against Qatar Airways was sparked in part by its decision to sell pork in a shop it owns in Doha that is already licensed to sell alcohol. The objection to pork had little to do with religious conservatism and everything to do with fear that Qatari culture was on the defensive against the mores of a majority population that is not Qatari.

95 Qatar’s 2010 census figures reported 74,087 economically active Qataris over the age of 15 and 1,201,884 economically active non-Qataris. Census 2010, pp.12-13, 19, Qatar Statistics Authority, www.qsa.gov.qa
“Ppl don’t get it. It’s not about the pork – it’s about us feeling more and more like a minority in our own county,” said one Qatari on Twitter.97

Al Kuwari warned that “if Qatari’s are unable to apply pressure to halt this growing imbalance and begin gradual reform, their natural position at the head of society will fall away and they will be rendered incapable of reforming the other and newer problems. Indeed, they will be transformed into a deprived and marginalized minority in their own land. The perpetuation of this growing imbalance threatens to uproot Qatari society, to erase its identity and culture, to take its mother tongue, Arabic, out of circulation, and erode the role of its citizens in owning and running their own country.”98

Noting that the government is careful not to refer to Qatari’s as a minority, Al Kuwari charged that government policy “transforms Qatari’s from citizens, with corresponding rights, to a dwindling class of the population, forced to compete with immigrants for job opportunities, education and social services, all in a language not their own, even as they remain deprived for one reason or another of their political rights.”

Al Kuwari’s assertion could apply just as well to the UAE where Emiratis are about 15 percent of the population. With Dubai hosting the 2020 World Expo, the controversy over foreign labor in Qatar has put the UAE too in the firing line as has criticism of the condition of workers building world class museum on Saadat Island as well as the Abu Dhabi campus of New York University.

**Successful Counter-revolution**

The Saudi-backed coup in Egypt in July 2013 was Saudi Arabia’s third successful counter-revolutionary strike in a matter of weeks against the wave of change in the Middle East and North Africa and its most important defeat of Qatari support of popular revolts and the Brotherhood. As the anti-Morsi protests erupted in Egypt, Qatari-backed Syrian National Council (SNC) Prime Minister-in-exile Ghassan Hitto resigned under Saudi pressure and Saudi-backed Ahmed Assi Al-Jerba defeated his Qatari-supported rival, Adib Shishakly, in SNC presidential elections. Earlier, Saudi Arabia succeeded in restricting Qatari support for the Brotherhood within the SNC and the Free Syrian Army as well as for more radical

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98 Ibid. Al Kuwari
Islamists by suggesting that it had allegedly reached agreement with the Obama administration that it would be allowed to supply non-US surface-to-air missiles to Syrian rebels as long as distribution was handled by the rebel Supreme Military Council to ensure that weapons did not flow to jihadist forces. Qatar had little choice but to follow into line. As a result, Qatar sought to rejigger its role by exploiting the subsequent Russian-brokered agreement on the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons and efforts to achieve an end to the Syria war in peace talks in Geneva by repositioning itself as a mediator between Assad and his opponents much like it had done at the very beginning of the conflict. Sheikh Hamad at the time prior to the emergence of an armed resistance that he had convinced Assad to strike a reconciliatory note by promising reforms. In return, Sheikh Hamad pledged his support, including positive reporting on the Gulf state’s Al Jazeera network. Hours before he was scheduled to publicly confirm the strategy agreed with Hamad, Assad discarded the conciliatory speech that had been drafted for him by Syrian Vice President Farouk Alsharaa and opted instead for a hard line against the demonstrators. 99

To position itself again as a mediator, Qatar after a two-year lull revived its contacts with Hezbollah. A senior Qatari official met in November 2011 with Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah. That meeting was followed by consultations between Qatar’s ambassador to Lebanon Ali bin Hamad Al Merri and Naim Kassem, a senior official of the Shiite group.100 Qatar’s about face was further evident in remarks made by Foreign Minister Khalid bin Mohammed Al Attiyah at a conference in Bahrain in which he called for humanitarian intervention in Syria rather than military struggle. Al Attiyah’s comments contrasted starkly with his call a year earlier at the same conference for expanding the Syrian Military Council and ensuring that it includes Islamist and jihadist groups. Qatar’s setbacks in Syria were the result of an underestimation of the diversity and complexity of Syrian society, an overestimation of the abilities of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, a misreading of Syrian Kurdish aspirations and an over-reliance on tribal links forged through marriage and geography. As a result, Qatari hopes were dashed that the Brotherhood would be able to dominate the SNC and re-establish itself in the country.

100 Ibid. Hashem
after having been driven into exile with the 1982 crackdown in Hama by Bashar’s father, Hafez al-Assad, in which some 20,000 people were killed.

Like in Syria, the stakes for Saudi Arabia and Qatar in Egypt were high. A successful Brotherhood-led democratic transition would have cemented the success of popular uprisings and the role of Islamists in implementing change. It would have also restored Egypt, the Arab world’s most populous nation, to its traditional leadership role in the region in competition with Saudi Arabia. Thwarting the revolt and the Brotherhood would not only eliminate these threats but constitute a substantial body blow to Qatari encouragement of change in the Middle East and North Africa.

The Saudi moves left Qatar with little choice but to congratulate the Egyptian military on its intervention asserting that it accepted the will of the Egyptian people. But unlike Saudi Arabia and the fiercely anti-Islamist UAE, who remained silent about the killings of Brotherhood supporters in the wake of the coup, Qatar in a bid to retain its independent position expressed regret at the incidents and urged self-restraint and dialogue. At about the same time, Qaradawi called on Al Jazeera and in a fatwa issued in Doha for Morsi’s reinstatement. He declared the coup unconstitutional and a violation of Islamic law. Ironically, Qaradawi’s own son, Abdelrahman Al-Qaradawi, took his father to task on his support for Morsi. Abdelrahman noted that Qaradawi had long argued that a ruler is bound by the opinion of a majority of those who swear loyalty to him. He argued further that the sheikh had taught him that freedom superseded Islamic law.

Saudi countering of Qatari policy coincided with a turning of the tide in countries where Doha had helped topple an autocratic leader. Yemeni President Saleh’s rejection of Qatari participation in the Saudi-led Gulf effort to resolve the crisis in his country was but one setback. Qatari funding of multiple armed Islamist groups in Libya sparked outrage after documents were discovered disclosing the extent of its support. The outrage wiped out the initially sympathy for the Gulf state that was evident when rebels hoisted the Qatari flag on ousted Libyan leader Moammar Qaddafi’s palace in Tripoli the day it fell. Then Libyan oil...
and finance minister Ali Tarhouni made a thinly veiled reference to Qatar when he declared in October 2011 that “it’s time we publicly declare that anyone who wants to come to our house has to knock on our front door first.” 104 A month later relations with Algeria turned sour after Hamad, according to Arab media, warned Algerian Foreign Minister Mourad Medleci to “stop defending Syria because your time will come, and perhaps you will need us.” 105 Hamad further broke off a visit to Mauritania in January 2012 hours after arriving in the country after President Mohammad Ould Abdel Aziz rejected his demand that he initiate democratic reform and a dialogue with Islamists. 106

Qatari foreign policy setbacks were paralleled by Al Jazeera’s mounting problems resulting from perceptions that it was promoting the Brotherhood 107 and changes in the pan-Arab television market. The network experienced a boom as the primary news source in the heyday of the Arab revolts that toppled the leaders of Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Yemen, but has since seen its viewership numbers decline with Arabs turning increasingly to a plethora of newly established local news broadcasters. Market research company Sigma Conseil reported that Al Jazeera’s market share in Tunisia had dropped from 10.7 in 2011 to 4.8% in 2012 and that the Qatari network was no longer among Egypt’s 10 most watched channels. Tunisia’s 3C Institute of Marketing, Media and Opinion Studies said that Al Jazeera Sports was the only brand of the network that ranked in January among the country’s five most watched channels.

Al Jazeera reporters were increasingly harassed as they sought to do their jobs in countries like Tunisia and Egypt. Protesters in Tunisia charged in the wake of the 2013 assassination of prominent opposition leader Shukri Belaid that “Al Jazeera is a slave of Qatar.” They accused it of biased reporting on the murder because of the Gulf state’s support for

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Ennahada, the country’s dominant Islamist grouping.\textsuperscript{108} Egyptian colleagues expelled in July 2013 Al Jazeera Cairo bureau chief Abdel Fattah Fayed from a news conference organized by the military and the police. The prosecutor general issued an arrest warrant for Fayed on charges of threatening national security and public order by airing inflammatory news. Twenty-two journalists resigned from Al Jazeera’s Egyptian affiliate days earlier in protest against its alleged bias towards the Brotherhood. Three Al Jazeera reporters were convicted in June 2014 to lengthy prison terms on charges of collaborating with the Brotherhood and disseminating false information.

In his new role as emir, Sheikh Tamim has so far proven capable of sustaining Qatar’s activist support of popular revolts and endorsement of political Islam in the Middle East and North Africa. Like his father, Tamim appears determined to insert Qatar into as many regional and international power structures as possible despite growing Saudi opposition. He has not backed away from the Brotherhood or succumbed to Saudi pressure to expel Islamist clerics like Qaradawi. Tamim’s refusal to bow resembles his father’s rejection of demands that he rein in the freewheeling style of Al Jazeera. Financial muscle coupled with the Gulf state’s key role in the projection of American military power in the region and the fact that Qatar’s vast natural gas resources ensure its importance to the energy security of countries across the globe help guarantee that it will remain a key partner for world powers. Support for the Brotherhood and other Islamists moreover positions Qatar as an important interlocutor with a significant segment of Arab public opinion and one of the region’s important albeit embattled political trends.

Tamim, despite significant differences in style, approach and policy, takes inspiration from Sultan Qaboos of Oman, a leader who also came to power at a young age and has carved out a niche of his own within the GCC. Qaboos was three years younger than Tamim when he assumed power in 1970, becoming at the time like the Qatari leader today, the youngest ruler in the region. Qaboos, much like Tamim was regionally isolated and moreover faced a rebellion at home. Over the years, he has succeeded in charting his own course, declining to break with Egypt after it signed a peace treaty with Israel, establishing relations with Israel,

opposing sanctions against Iran, refusing to join the Gulf in its support for Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war, and more recently mediating contacts between the United States and Iran and thwarting attempts to militarize the GCC under Saudi leadership. Today, Qaboos is the only founder of the GCC still alive and the Arab world’s longest-reigning ruler.

Tamim could not have been oblivious to Qaboos’ experience when he was dressed down for his country’s policies and confronted with demands that he halt support for the Brotherhood, extradite Qaradawi and other Islamists and close down Doha-based think tanks, including the Brookings Institution, in November 2013 at a meeting in Riyadh by 89-year old Saudi King Abdullah Bin Abdul Aziz and 84-year old Kuwaiti emir Shaikh Sabah Al Ahmad Al Sabah.

In Riyadh, Tamim had two options: buckle down and effectively subject himself to Saudi Arabia’s diktat or risk isolation and possible Gulf sanctions in anticipation of the inevitable rise of a new generation of Gulf rulers among whom he might emerge as the region’s elder statesmen. Tamim appears to have taken the long view and opted for a course that maintains his ability to conduct his own, independent foreign, defense and security policy. For Tamim, the road may prove to be bumpier than the one Qaboos travelled. Oman was not threatened with sanctions as it charted its own course. It had the advantage of being bigger than Qatar, geographically better situated at the bottom of the peninsula and having a larger Omani national population. Qaboos moreover made his moves at a time that rulers were not on the defensive against a tidal wave of change that threatened their very existence. It is that wave of change that Tamim hopes to ride. In doing so, Tamim, like the UAE challenges as Kristian Coates Ulrichsen noted, traditional academic wisdom on the limits on the ability of small states to project power and the assumption of an automatic link between size and power.109

**Sports, a double edged sword**

Qatar’s soft power strategy puts it at loggerheads with Saudi Arabia and has raises concerns in the kingdom on how far Qatar may go. The hosting of the 2022 World Cup has already made it more vulnerable to criticism of restrictions on alcohol consumption, the

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banning of homosexuality, and working conditions of foreign labor. Moreover, Qatar’s identification with sports and the role of soccer fans in the popular revolts in North Africa has reverberated in the sports sector in the kingdom particularly with regard to fan power and women’s sports. In doing so, it has reaffirmed the role of sports in the development of the Middle East and North Africa since the late 19th century.\textsuperscript{110} Qatar alongside Jordan was a driving force in the launch of a campaign in 2012 by Middle Eastern soccer associations grouped in the West Asian Football Federation (WAFF) to put women’s soccer on par with men’s football in a region in which a woman’s right to play and pursue an athletic career remains controversial. Saudi Arabia was conspicuously absent at the launch. The campaign defined “an athletic woman” as “an empowered woman who further empowers her community.” In a rebuttal of opposition to women’s soccer by the kingdom and some Islamists in the region, the campaign stressed that women’s soccer did not demean cultural and traditional values. Contradicting Saudi policy, it endorsed the principle of a woman’s right of to play soccer irrespective of culture, religion and race; a women’s right to opt for soccer as a career rather than only as a sport; and soccer’s ability to promote gender equality and level the playing field on and off the pitch.\textsuperscript{111} To be sure, Qatar has been slow in encouraging women’s sports at home and like Saudi Arabia was pressured in 2012 by the International Olympic Committee to for the first time field women at an international tournament during the London Olympics. The WAFF campaign came nonetheless on the back of a Human Rights Watch report\textsuperscript{112} that accused Saudi Arabia of kowtowing to assertions by the country’s powerful conservative Muslim clerics that female sports constitute "steps of the devil" that will encourage immorality and reduce women’s chances of meeting the requirements for marriage. The charges in the report entitled “‘Steps of the Devil’ came as Saudi Arabia backtracked on a plan to build its first stadium especially designed to allow women who are barred from

\textsuperscript{111} James M. Dorsey, January 14,2013, Middle East soccer associations campaign for women’s right to play, The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer, \url{http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.com/2013/01/middle-east-soccer-associations.html}
\textsuperscript{112} Human Rights Watch. 2012. Steps of the Devil, Denial of Women’s and Girls’ Rights to Sport in Saudi Arabia, \url{http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/saudi0212webwcover.pdf}
attending soccer matches because of the kingdom’s strict public gender segregation to watch games. The planned stadium was supposed to open in 2014.\textsuperscript{113} Qatar’s endorsement of women’s sports has made Saudi Arabia the only Arab and virtually the only Muslim state that refuses to embrace the concept. Spanish consultants developing the kingdom’s first ever national sports plan were instructed to develop a program for men only.\textsuperscript{114} Opposition to women’s sports is reinforced by the fact that physical education classes are banned in state-run Saudi girl’s schools. Public sports facilities are exclusively for men and sports associations offer competitions and support for athletes in international competitions only to men.

Saudi opposition to women’s sports and participation in international tournaments was further challenged by a decision by the International Football Association Board (IFAB) backed by Qatar and other Middle Eastern soccer associations to allow women to wear a hijab that met safety and security standards in international matches. It also came as Saudi women encouraged by the winds of change in the region, the advancement of women’s sports in Qatar and elsewhere and the support of liberal members of the royal family were pushing the envelope despite being slammed in Saudi media “for going against their natural role” and being “shameless” because they cause embarrassment to their families.\textsuperscript{115} Similarly, fan pressure forced the resignation in 2012 of Prince Nawaf bin Feisal as head of the Saudi Football Federation (SFF) in an unprecedented move that echoed the toppling of Arab leaders in which militant soccer fans were front row players. Nawaf was replaced by a commoner, renowned former soccer player Ahmed Eid Alharbi, as the first freely chosen head of the SFF in a country that views free and fair polling as an alien Western concept.\textsuperscript{116} The fan pressure erupted after Australia’s defeat of the kingdom in a 2014 World Cup qualifier. Nawaf’s resignation broke a mold in a nation governed as an absolute monarchy and a region that sees control of soccer as a key tool in preventing the pitch from becoming

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid. Dorsey
\textsuperscript{114} Author interviews with the consultants
\textsuperscript{115} James M. Dorsey. March 4, 2012. Muslim players win hijab battle in their struggle for women’s rights, The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer, \url{http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.com/2012/03/muslim-players-win-hijab-battle-in.html}
a venue for anti-government protests, distracting attention from widespread grievances and manipulating national emotions. It also marked the first time that a member of the ruling elite saw association with a national team’s failure as a risk to be avoided rather than one best dealt with by firing the coach or in extreme cases like Saddam Hussein’s Iraq or Moammar Gaddafi’s Libya brutally punishing players.

The Saudi royal family like autocratic leaders throughout the Middle East and North Africa have associated themselves with soccer, the only institution in pre-revolt countries that traditionally evokes the same deep-seated passion as religion. Nawaf’s resignation constituted the first time, an autocratic regime sought to put the beautiful game at arm’s length while maintaining control. The ruling family nonetheless retained its grip on sports with Nawaf staying on as head of the Saudi Olympic Committee and as the senior official responsible for youth welfare on which the SFF depends alongside television broadcast rights for funding. Major soccer clubs moreover continue to be the playground of princes who at times micro manage matches by phoning mid-game their team’s coaches with instructions which players to replace.

“Words such as freedom of choice, equality, human rights, rational thinking, democracy and elections, are terms we came to view with high concern and suspicion. We treat them as alien ideas that are trying to sneak within our society from the outside world. But last week an amazing and irregular event took place, in one of our sporting landmarks. The members of the General Assembly of the Saudi Arabian Football Federation (SAFF) have elected through popular voting, their first president,” wrote columnist Mohammed AlSaif in the Arab News.117

Alharbi, a former goalkeeper of Al Ahli SC, the soccer team of the Red Sea port of Jeddah, who is widely seen as a reformer and proponent of women’s soccer narrowly won the election widely covered by Saudi media. “Saudis were witnessing for the very first time in their lives a government official being elected through what they used to consider as a western ballot system. People eagerly followed a televised presidential debate between the two candidates the previous day,” AlSaif wrote.

Sports also serves as a tool to mold a Qatari national identity very different from that of the kingdom that started in the late 1970s with the establishment of the Qatar National Olympic Committee.\textsuperscript{118} The notion of employing sports in nation-building built on the fact that Doha focused early on the sports becoming in the 1960s the only Gulf city with a stadium that had a grass field.\textsuperscript{119} Similarly, the tradition of hosting sports events dates back to the visit of boxer Mohammed Ali to Qatar 1971\textsuperscript{120} and the hosting two years later of first international friendly between Santos FC from Brazil with Pele as its star and Qatar’s oldest sports club, Al-Ahli SC\textsuperscript{121} as well the Gulf Cup in 1976.

**Conclusion**

Whether the Saudi-Qatari rivalry that has evolved into a cold war with the virtual breaking of diplomatic relations will contribute to sparking change in the kingdom or reinforce monarchial autocracy in the region is likely to be as much decided in Qatar itself as by the political rivalry between the two elsewhere in the region. Saudi-backed Qatari conservatives have questioned the emir’s right to rule by decree, organized online boycotts of state-run companies and forced Qatar University to replace English with Arabic as the main language of instruction. As crown prince, Tamim was often seen to sympathize with those domestic conservative concerns leaving Qatari guessing whether those were his true political instincts or an attempt to garner favor.

Whatever the case, Tamim has proven to be unwilling to back away from Qatar’s embrace of the Brotherhood and effort to put itself at the cutting edge of change in the region despite setbacks in Egypt, Syria and elsewhere. Fault lines in Egypt have deepened with the toppling of Morsi, weakened Qatar’s regional influence and made its Brotherhood allies in other Arab nations in the throes of change reluctant to assume sole government responsibility. Jordan’s Brotherhood-related Islamic Action Front (IAF) boycotted parliamentary elections in January 2013 officially because of alleged gerrymandering. Privately, the IAF, with an eye on Egypt was believed to have shied away from getting too big a share of the pie for their taste. Mounting opposition to the Brotherhood’s Tunisian


\textsuperscript{119} Ibid. Silva

\textsuperscript{120} https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=67CA1AGfCFs

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid. Silva
affiliate, Ennahada, and the assassination in 2013 of two prominent opposition politician prompted the Islamists to allow the formation of a government of technocrats.

Similarly, Qatar’s winning of the right to host the World Cup may have opened a Pandora’s Box of demographic change that could reverberate throughout the Gulf, a region populated by states whose nationals often constitute minorities in their own countries. Under increasing pressure from international trade unions who have the clout to make true on a threat to boycott the 2022 World Cup, the status of foreign nationals could become a monkey wrench for social, if not, political change.

James M. Dorsey is a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Singapore’s Nanyang Technological University, a syndicated columnist and the author of the blog, The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer. A veteran, award-winning foreign correspondent whose career focused on ethnic and religious conflict, James focuses at RSIS on political and social change in the Middle East and North Africa, the impact of change in the Middle East and North Africa on Southeast and Central Asia and the nexus of sports, politics and society in the Middle East and North Africa and Asia.

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