

Qatar and Islamism

By Bernard Haykel

■ Executive summary

Qatar is ruled by an emir who has been very adept at using Islamists, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, to promote his country's interests and bolster his own domestic legitimacy. The success of this policy has materialised in the coming to power of Islamists in Tunisia and Egypt, and in Qatar's ability to turn the Palestinian Islamist organisation Hamas away from Syria and Iran. The influence of Islamism within Qatari society and politics has been very limited, however, which highlights the pragmatic and instrumental use of this ideology and movement by the regime in Doha in the pursuit of regime survival.

The authoritarian emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, rules his country in a highly personalised and opportunistic fashion. Because of this, the country's foreign policy has an idiosyncratic and unpredictable quality. The emir should not be seen as firmly adhering to any particular religious or political ideology. He is driven by the motivation to secure his dynasty's rule and the independence and autonomy of his tiny, but very rich country. Much larger and politically aggressive countries, such as Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia, surround Qatar and the emir has to accommodate the military presence of the U.S. in the Gulf, which provides Qatar and the other Gulf Co-operation Council countries with protection from both Iran and eventually a resurgent, Shia-dominated Iraq. Qatar has had a long history of contending with imperial and regional hegemony, and this has made its rulers non-ideological and practical in their outlook and in the policies they pursue. But unlike its smaller neighbours, such as the United Arab Emirates or Kuwait, for example, Qatar has chosen a hyperactive style of diplomacy and foreign policy, acting as a mediator and financial supporter whenever and wherever possible in an attempt to make itself valuable to all sides. Qatar's success overseas, moreover, translates domestically into greater popularity and legitimacy for the ruler and his family: success abroad has made the regime more popular at home. And when it comes to foreign affairs, rarely has Qatar adopted a position from which it cannot reverse direction.

One strategy Qatar has chosen to employ in its own defence since the early 1960s has been to cultivate the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood, despite the fact that this movement, which was established in Egypt in 1928, does not subscribe to Qatar's traditional interpretation of Islam. The Brotherhood is a vanguard political movement with a popular mass base of support, and its members seek to rule in the name of Islam, which they describe as a comprehensive ideological and social system. By contrast, Qatar officially subscribes to Wahhabism and adheres to the Hanbali school of law, which insists on the political obedience of subjects to their ruler, who is effectively a monarch. Put differently, the Muslim Brotherhood is an activist and anti-Western political movement ultimately seeking to topple secular nationalist regimes, and it is not particularly in favour of monarchical systems of rule, especially those that are in close economic and military alliance with the West. Not only is Qatar allied closely to the U.S., but its version of Islam does not tolerate political activism of any kind unless it is controlled and sanctioned by the ruler. This is one of the many contradictions of the Qatari political situation and policies, but it appears not to bother the emir at all.

Qatar shares the same religious tradition as Saudi Arabia, a country that has often been unfriendly – even hostile – to the regime in Doha, but this antagonism is due to territorial and political rivalry, and not religion. The Qatari royal family, the Al-Thani, claim descent from the central

Arabian tribe of Banu Tamim, the tribe to which Sheikh Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792) belonged. The latter was the founder of Wahhabism and had made a political alliance with the Saudi royal family in the 18th century. As such, Qatar can claim the Wahhabi mantle, as Saudi Arabia has done, but it has chosen not to base its legitimacy on the promotion of Wahhabism. The reason for this is that Qatar, unlike Saudi Arabia, has not needed to promote a reformist version of Islam to bind its people together in a united nation. In Islamic terms Qatar has greater liberty to patronise non-Wahhabi groups and it has decided to cultivate the Muslim Brotherhood. But the specific way in which the ruler of Qatar has handled the Brotherhood has been to direct its activities and energies overseas and to establish the clear understanding that domestic Qatari politics are off limits.

The Qataris, like the Saudis, welcomed members of the Muslim Brotherhood who were persecuted by the nationalist and socialist regimes of Jamal Abd al-Nasser in Egypt from the mid-1950s onwards and later by the Baath regime in Syria from the late 1970s (culminating in the massacre at Hama in 1982). Many of the Muslim Brothers became teachers and public servants in the religious institutions of both host states. The Saudis, however, broke their ties to the Brotherhood after the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait when it sided with Saddam Hussein. The Saudis also never forgave the Brotherhood for politicising their youth, who became radicalised against the regime in Riyadh in the 1990s, culminating in al-Qaeda's attacks against the regime.

The most famous member of the Muslim Brotherhood who made Qatar his base is the Egyptian tele-Islamist Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi. But al-Qaradawi is not the only Muslim Brother to have found refuge in Qatar; there have been others, like Sheikh Abd al-Mu`izz Abd al-Sattar, Sheikh Ahmad al-`Assal and Dr Kamal Naji. And just as in Saudi Arabia, the Muslim Brotherhood has influenced a generation of Qataris in its particular interpretation of Islam, but these young people, unlike their politicised peers in Saudi Arabia, have not become opponents of the regime in Doha. Qatar has done a better job of managing the energies of the Brotherhood and channelling these towards the outside world. One way it has done this is to have given the Brotherhood media outlets with which to propagate its ideas. The most successful user of these outlets has been Sheikh al-Qaradawi, who became extremely prominent throughout the Arab world and beyond after the mid-1990s with his *fatwa* show on the Qatar-based Al Jazeera television station. The Internet has also been another medium through which the Brotherhood has spread its teachings from Qatar: the websites Islamonline.com and Islamweb.net represent good examples of this.

From his pulpit, al-Qaradawi has promulgated reformist Islamic teachings and has also intervened in the politics of the Arab world, including most famously the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. He has, however, never commented on

domestic Qatari politics. Since the start of the Arab Spring uprisings al-Qaradawi has been vociferous in his support of Qatar's policies towards the various peoples in rebellion (in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria), and here the position of the Muslim Brotherhood and Qatar are in complete harmony. Significantly, however, al-Qaradawi has also adhered to Qatar's unequivocal support of the minority Sunni regime in Bahrain and adopted a strong anti-Shia posture, in flagrant contradiction to the ecumenical and tolerant views of the Shia that he had been promoting for decades.

The success of the Muslim Brotherhood in Tunisia and Egypt has given Qatar strong new allies and clients in both countries. But an equally important success has been Qatar's ability to detach Hamas's leadership from its alliance with Syria and Iran. Qatar had cultivated Khalid Meshal, the leader of Hamas, for some time before the Arab Spring, as part of its policy of mediation in Arab and Islamic disputes, which it has been pursuing, with varied success, since the early 2000s. The Muslim Brotherhood, with its long-established networks and affiliates throughout the world, provides Qatar with considerable influence – the Brotherhood is a force multiplier. And unlike Saudi Arabia, which has assiduously built up its own network of Salafis since the 1930s, the Qataris have obtained their network at relatively little cost and effort.

Another important dimension of Qatar's religious politics is that it has built a strong identity of interest with the ruling Turkish AK (Justice and Development) Party, which has itself also developed strong ties to the Muslim Brotherhood. One perceives the Turkish-Qatari alliance most prominently in Syria, where the Qataris and Turks are backing the same groups opposing the Assad regime. Most of these are allegedly affiliated with the Brotherhood. Saudi Arabia has been particularly annoyed by this development and it is now backing Salafi factions in Syria from across the borders of Lebanon and Jordan. The Turkish-Qatari alliance is also evident in the two countries' backing of the Morsi government in Egypt, the Ennahda Party in Tunisia and Hamas in Gaza.

It is alleged that certain members of the Qatari ruling family subscribe to Islamist views and have even joined the Muslim Brotherhood or patronised groups like the Salafis, and perhaps even offered financial support to al-Qaeda. There is no solid evidence of a connection to al-Qaeda, but it is certain that some members of the royal family are Islamist in orientation and deeply religious. One of these is the interior minister, Sheikh Abdullah bin Khalid Al-Thani. Quite interestingly, however, these members of the family have been sidelined politically and are not allowed to manage the relationship with the Islamists. This illustrates the general observation that Qatar is ruled by non-ideologically driven policies, i.e. by pragmatic ones. This underscores that Qatar might one day abandon the Islamists and Islamism if the cost of patronising them become too burdensome.

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