

Analysis -The Gulf Crisis: Small States Battle It Out

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Buried in the Gulf crisis is a major development likely to reshape international relations as well as power dynamics in the Middle East: the coming out of small states capable of punching far above their weight with Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, a driver of the crisis, locked into an epic struggle to rewrite the region's political map.

Goals dictate strategy

Underwriting the struggle are different strategies of the Gulf's small states, buffeted by huge war chests garnered from energy exports, to project power and shape the world around them.

Both Qatar and the UAE project themselves as regional and global hubs that are building cutting-edge, 21st century knowledge societies on top of tribally-based autocracies. Despite their different attitudes towards political Islam, Qatar and the UAE have both developed societies in which religious scholars have relatively little say and Islamic mores and norms are relatively liberally interpreted.

That, however, may be where the communality in approach ends. At the core of the different strategies as well as the diplomatic and economic boycott imposed in June 2017 on Qatar by a Saudi-UAE-led alliance, lie opposed visions of the future of a region wracked by debilitating power struggles; a convoluted, bloody and painful quest for political change; and a determined and ruthless counterrevolutionary effort to salvage the fundamentals of the status quo ante.

The UAE views autocracy as the key to regional security and the survival of its autocratic regime. It is seeking to “impose a narrative of authoritarian stability onto the Middle East,” said security studies scholar Andreas Krieg.[1]

As a result, the UAE has backed regime change in a number of countries, including Egypt[2] and reportedly Turkey;[3] supported anti-Islamist, anti-government rebels in Libya; joined Saudi Arabia’s ill-fated military intervention in Yemen; and in the latest episode of its campaign, driven imposition of the boycott of Qatar. The UAE was also a driving force in persuading Saudi Arabia in 2014 to follow its example and ban the Muslim Brotherhood. It has attempted with relatively little success to create a more acquiescent, apolitical, alternative Muslim grouping.[4]

In contrast to the UAE, Qatar has sought to position itself as the regional go-to go-between and mediator by maintaining

relations not only with states but also a scala of Islamist, militant and rebel groups across the Middle East and northern Africa. It moreover embraced the 2011 popular Arab revolts that toppled the leaders of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, and supported Islamist forces, with the Brotherhood in the lead that emerged as the most organized political force from the uprisings.[5] Qatar's support for the Brotherhood, despite their differing interpretations of Islam and contradictory political outlooks, amounted to aligning itself with forces who were challenging Gulf regimes and that the UAE alongside Saudi Arabia was seeking to suppress.

The UAE and Qatar's starkly different visions and the determination of both small states to shape the Middle East and North Africa in their mould as a matter of a security and defence policy designed to ensure regime survival made confrontation inevitable. It is an epic struggle in which Qatar and the UAE, governed by rulers who have a visceral dislike of one another, could in the short and middle term both emerge as winners even if it is at the expense of those on whose backs the battle is fought and with considerable damage to their carefully groomed reputations.

The UAE and Qatar's duelling visions complicate the region's lay of the land wracked by multiple rivalries in which the interests of regional and external protagonists at times coincide but more often than not exacerbate the crisis. That has been nowhere more evident than in Syria where the Gulf's major players supported Syrian rebels fighting the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, yet aggravated the struggle by at times aiding rival groups.

Joe Biden, a man known not to mince his words, complained as Barak Obama's vice president that "our allies in the region were our largest problem in Syria. The Turks were great friends...

The Saudis, the Emiratis, etc. What were they doing? They were so determined to take down Assad and essentially have a proxy Sunni-Shia war. What did they do? They poured hundreds and millions of dollars and tens and thousands of tons of weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad. Except that the people who were being supplied were Al-Nusra and Al-Qaeda and the extremist elements of jihadis coming from other parts of the world... We could not convince our colleagues to stop supplying them.”[6] Biden was referring to Jabhat al-Nusra, initially an Al Qaeda affiliate that later distanced itself from the group.

Similarly, then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton complained in cable made public by Wikileaks that “UAE-based donors have provided financial support to a variety of terrorist groups, including Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, LeT and other terrorist groups, including Hamas.” Clinton warned “that the UAE’s role as a growing global financial centre, coupled with weak regulatory oversight, makes it vulnerable to abuse by terrorist financiers and facilitation networks.”[7] To be fair, the cable named and shamed virtually all Gulf states except for Oman.

At the bottom line, the rival strategies that involve the UAE working the corridors of power of the Gulf’s behemoth, Saudi Arabia, whose focus is its existential fight with Iran, and Qatar sponsoring opposition forces, has left the Middle East and North Africa in shambles. Beyond Syria, Libya and Yemen are wracked by wars. Egypt is ruled by an autocrat more brutal than his autocratic predecessor who has made his country financially dependent on Saudi Arabia and the UAE and has been unable to fulfil promises of greater economic opportunity.

Offense is the best defense

Qatar’s vision of a future Middle East and the survival of its ruling family is rooted in the creation in 1971 of a state, the only

country alongside Saudi Arabia that adheres to Wahhabism, an austere interpretation of Islam, that was intended to be everything that the kingdom is not.[8] 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. Some Qataris also attribute their country's more outward looking perspective as well as its willingness to accommodate political exiles and opposition forces to a tradition of being an oasis of refuge dating back to the 19th century when the desolate territory offered sanctuary to pirates, fugitives and people fleeing persecution elsewhere in the Arabian Peninsula. Qatar's founder, Jassim bin Mohammed AL Thani, is quoted by Qataris as having described their country as the 'ka'aba of the dispossessed,' a reference to the black cubicle in Mecca that is a focal point of the pilgrimage to the holy city. [9]

The notion of a more outward looking form of Wahhabism while rooted in history is in some ways a modern-day fallacy. Iranians and Africans accounted for the bulk of foreigners in Qatar in the 1930s who constituted 39 percent of the Qatari population and with whom Qataris had contact with for centuries. Originally slaves, many of the Africans were

absorbed by the tribes as honorary members, became Qatari citizens with evidence and were not as a cultural threat. The discovery of oil and the rise of the rentier state changed all of that.[10] Qataris have largely been insensitive to regular reports of abuse of Asian domestic workers, but protested in 2009 when reports emerged that Qataris were hiring Saudis as maids. The protest was grounded in fears that if Saudis, their closest kin in the Gulf, could be reduced to that status of a maid, so could Qataris, pampered by a cradle-to-grave state.[11]

The absence of religious scholars was in part a reflection of Qatari ambivalence towards Wahhabism that it viewed as both an opportunity and a threat: on the one hand, it served as a tool to legitimise domestic rule, on the other it was a potential monkey wrench 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. By steering clear of the grooming of an indigenous clergy of their own, Qatari leaders ensured that they had greater manoeuvrability. They did not have to give a clergy a say in political and social affairs. Qatar's pragmatic relationship to Wahhabism eased the forging of a close relationship with the Brotherhood even before it achieved independence.[12]

Qatar's relationship with the Brotherhood was moreover facilitated by the fact that key figures from the group like controversial Sheikh Yusuf Al Qaradawi, an Egyptian-born, naturalized Qatari citizen who became a major influence in the absence of a class of religious scholars, Libyan imam Ali Al Sallabi, and fellow Egyptians Sheikh Ahmed Assal and Sheikh Abdel Moez Abdul Sattar have had a base in Doha for decades.

Headhunted by the head of Islamic sciences at Qatar's education department, Abdullah bin Tukri al-Subai, Al-Assal arrived in Qatar in 1960 and where he taught in schools, lectured in mosques, and helped form Brotherhood groups.

Al-Sattar, the personal emissary to Palestine of Brotherhood founder Hassan al-Banna was appointed in the early 1960s director of Islamic Sciences at the ministry of education and co-authored numerous textbooks for the nascent Qatari school system that allowed for an approach that was not exclusively informed by Saudi interpretations of Wahhabism.[13] Qaradawi and Al-Sallabi were among 59 people listed by the Saudi-UAE-led alliance as Qatar-supported terrorists at the outset of the Gulf crisis.[14]

Qaradawi, who has been resident in Doha since he was forced into exile in 1961 by Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's crackdown on the Brotherhood, has emerged as one of the Muslim world's most influential religious scholars. He is believed to have opted for Qatar as his new home rather than Saudi Arabia that accommodated the largest number of fleeing Brothers in consultation with the Brotherhood's leadership.[15]

Freshly out of prison, Qaradawi's move to Qatar was likely facilitated by Abdul-Badi Saqr, an Egyptian who came in 1954 at the invitation of the Qataris as one of the first of the Brothers to help set up their education system. Saqr had been recommended by Muhib al-Din al-Khatib, the proprietor of a Salafi bookshop in Cairo.[16] 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." [17]

The role of the Brotherhood was further enhanced by the fact that Qatar limited the institutional opportunities available for

religious scholars of any description to exert influence domestically. Religious schools as first founded by Qaradawi in 1961 remained niche and in 2008 to 2009 only taught 257 students, the vast majority of whom were not Qatari. Taking a leaf out of the books of Kemalist Turkey and the late president Habib Bourgiba's Tunisia, two secular states that sought to ensure that Islam was perceived as a personal rather than a public practice, Qatar University's College of Sharia and Islamic Studies, the country's sole provider of higher religious education, unlike multiple similar institutions in Saud Arabia, enjoyed no special status even though Qaradawi was its first dean.[18]

Instead, with Qaradawi, Qatar created a global mufti[19] who in the words of Islam scholar Yahya Michot represented the three dimensions of a spiritual leader that many in the global community of faithful were looking 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.[20]

Qaradawi offered the Al Thanis, who hail from the Bani Tamim, the tribal group that brought forth Wahhabism's founder, Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab, a powerful shield against religious criticism. Moreover, he 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*. [21] They counterbalanced the influence of local Saudi-influenced scholars and Salafis who were influential in the ministries of justice and religious endowments.

The dismantling of the Brotherhood's Qatari branch in the 1990s, a reformist voice within the group, assured the Gulf state that it 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 reached a global audience of tens of millions of Arabic speakers, helped give Al Jazeera its Islamist stamp. It also was a fixture on Qatar state television which broadcasted his Friday prayer sermons live.

The Qatari media strategy offered the Gulf state influence across the Middle East and North Africa where Brotherhood off-shoots were active including Gaza with Hamas, which Qatar lured away from Syria and Iran, as well as the Islamic Action Front in Jordan. The setting up of Al Jazeera paralleled the structuring of the Gulf state's ties to the Brotherhood. While Al Jazeera steers clear of critical coverage of Qatar, the Brotherhood was allowed to operate everywhere except for in Qatar itself.

Instead, Qatar funded institutions that were designed to foster a generation of activists in the Middle East and North Africa as well as to guide the Brotherhood in its transition from a clandestine to a public group. Former Qatari Brother Jassim Al-Sultan established the Al-Nahda (Awakening) Project[22] to promote Islamist activism within democracies.

A medical doctor, Al-Sultan has since the dissolution of the group in Qatar advised the Brotherhood to reach out to other groups rather than stick to its strategy of building power bases within existing institutions. He has also criticized the Brotherhood for insisting on its slogan, 'Islam is the Solution.' Instead, he urged Egyptian Islamists to drop their notion of

“infiltrating the society to control it” in favour of what he termed “partnership thought.”[23]

Al Nahda cooperated closely with the London and Doha-based Academy of Change (AOC)[24] that focused on the study of “social, cultural, and political transformations especially in the Arabic and Islamic region.” AOC, headed by Hisham Morsi, an Egyptian-British paediatrician and British national married to one of Qaradawi’s daughters,[25] appeared to be modelled on Otoper, the Serbian youth movement that toppled President Slobodan Milosevic and has since transformed itself into a training ground for non-violent protest. Arrested during the 2011 popular revolt that toppled Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and later released, Morsi has authored manual on the tactics of non-violent resistance. In 2005, AOC organized its first three-day seminar in Cairo on civil disobedience tactics, including operating through decentralized networks and ensuring adherence to non-violence even if law enforcement intervenes brutally.[26]

Former Qatari justice minister and prominent lawyer Najeeb al Nauimi encapsulated the strategic relationship between Qatar and the Brotherhood as well as the Gulf state’s more liberal interpretation of Wahhabism by noting that “Saudi Arabia has Mecca and Medina. We have Qaradawi — and all his daughters drive cars and work.”[27]

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 Yemen and Morocco, and opponents of Syrian president 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 Qaddafi.[28] He asserted further that historic links between Egypt and Syria put Syria in protesters' firing line.[29] In response, Syrian officials accused Qaradawi of fostering sectarianism.[30]

Plausible deniability

If Qatar's strategy was confrontational, the UAE opted for an approach that granted it a measure of plausible deniability by influencing the policies of Big Brother Saudi Arabia, establishing close ties to key policy makers in Washington, acquiring ports straddling the world's busiest shipping lanes, and crafting a reputation as Little Sparta,[31] a military power that despite its size and with the help of mercenaries[32] could stand its ground and like the big boys on the block establish foreign military bases.

For much of the last decade, the UAE has argued against the notion of the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) that groups Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman and Bahrain as a defense pact. Instead, the UAE advertised itself as the United States' most partner in the region. "I am not a believer in grouping the GCC together...ask us who wants to be involved and we will step forward, the others will take a step back... Encourage those of us who wish to lead to lead and we will; sooner or later the others will step forward but only when it is necessary," UAE Crown Prince and strongman Mohammed bin Zayed told US officials in 2009.[33]

While Qatar's ever closer military ties to the United States centred on the Al Udeid Air Base, the largest US base in the Middle East that is home to the forward command post of the US Central Command, the UAE deepened relations in part by participating in every US war in the region since 1991 except

for the 2003 invasion of Iraq.[34] Those wars included the 2001 US assault on Afghanistan despite the fact that the UAE, surprisingly unlike Qatar, was only one of three countries alongside Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, to have recognized the Taliban regime.[35]

The fundamental differences in UAE and Qatari strategy also expressed themselves in their different approaches towards hard and soft power. Qatar focussed primarily on the soft power aspect with a fast-paced, mediation-driven foreign policy; a world class airline; high profile investments in arts, real estate and blue chips; and sports with an eye on becoming a global hub and centre of excellence in multiple fields.

Qatar arms acquisitions were modest compared to those of Saudi Arabia and the UAE until 2014[36] when it went on a \$24 billion buying spree days after Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain first withdrew their ambassadors from Doha,[37] and its subsequent \$12 billion acquisition of US fighter planes in 2017 days after the current Gulf crisis erupted.[38] The US embassy in Doha reported prior to the 2014 rupture in relations that Qatar lacked a national military strategy and seemed reluctant to draw one up.[39] The embassy concluded in a cable to the State Department 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.”[40]

Qatar’s inclination to rely more on soft rather than hard power and its positioning as a friend-to-all and mediator is rooted in a tradition of playing both sides against the middle that dates back to the 19th century. Qatari tribes were juggling Ottomans, Brits, Omanis, Saudis and Iranians who were competing for influence on the tribes’ peninsula. They have seen their empires rise and fall. Extrapolating from that experience, modern-day Qatar sees

intellectual creativity and debate as long as it does not involve discussion of the Gulf state itself as a soft power tool. The controversial Al Jazeera television network, the in-gathering of the exiles, and the support of opposition groups are vehicles that position Qatar at the centre of a world of ideas that is likely to shape the future of the Middle East and North Africa.

The UAE adopted some of the same soft power elements, such as world class airlines and museums, blue chip investments, and sports but in contrast to Qatar saw its stepped-up military engagement and projection of strength as both a hard and soft power ploy. While Qatar primarily used its financial muscle, political support for multiple groups, and Al Jazeera to manipulate developments in the region, the UAE flexed not only its financial and commercial muscles, but also its improved military capability to intervene in multiple regional crises to a far greater extent than Qatar did.

By positioning itself as a power behind the Saudi throne, the UAE successfully exploited margins in the corridors of power in Riyadh to get the kingdom to adopt policies like the banning of the Brotherhood, a group that has the effect of a red cloth on a bull on Bin Zayed, but that the Saudis may not have pursued otherwise. The UAE, moreover, by aligning itself with Saudi Arabia rather than antagonizing it, has been far defter in its ability to achieve its goals and project its power without flying too high above the radar.

The UAE's approach has also allowed it to ensure that major policy differences with Saudi Arabia on issues such as the conduct and objectives of the Yemen war, a role for the Brotherhood in a Sunni Muslim alliance against Iran, the degree of economic integration within the GCC and the thwarting of Saudi-led efforts to introduce a common currency, and Hamas' place in Palestinian politics, did not get out of hand. Even more

importantly, the approach ensured that the UAE's policies were adopted or endorsed by bigger powers.

In fact, Bin Zayed's finger prints were all over the Saudi-UAE-led alliance's demands that Qatar halt its supports for Islamists and militants, shutter Al Jazeera and other media outlets, and close a Turkish military base.[41] In 2009, Sheikh Mohamed went as far as telling US officials that Qatar is "part of the Muslim Brotherhood."^[42] He suggested that a review of Al Jazeera employees would show that 90 percent were affiliated with the Brotherhood.

Because of the Brotherhood's inroads into the UAE, Bin Zayed 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 US embassy in Abu Dhabi recounted Bin Zayed as saying.^[43] Distrust of the Brotherhood in Saudi Arabia dates back to post-9/11 Brotherhood-backed calls for reform in the kingdom and its support for Saddam Hussein after Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990 that culminated in then Interior Minister Prince Nayef declaring that the group was at the root of all of the kingdom's problems.[44] Two years later, Bin Zayed took advantage of the fact that ailing King Abdullah had an approximately two-hour concentration span to convince him with the help of the head of the Saudi court, Khaled al Tuwajri, to designate the Brotherhood as a terrorist organization.[45]

It was a decision that was at stake in the power struggle that occurred as Abdullah lay on his death bed. Bin Zayed initially

lost with the dismissal of Al-Tuwaijri and other Saudi officials close to the UAE crown prince by newly appointed King Salman.[46] Within weeks of his rise in 2015, Salman, eager to form a Sunni Muslim alliance against Iran, made overtures to the Brotherhood. In a first public gesture, two weeks after Salman's inauguration, Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al Feisal told an interviewer that "there is no problem between the kingdom and the movement."[47] The Muslim World League, a body established by Saudi Arabia in the 1960s and dominated by the Brotherhood, organized a month later a conference in a building Mecca that had not been used since the banning of the brothers to which Qataris with close ties to the Islamists were invited.[48]

Not to be defeated and determined to stiffen the Saudis back when it came to the Brotherhood, Bin Zayed forged close ties to his namesake, Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the king's son who was being groomed to become Salman's successor. Bin Zayed became young Salman's model for the kind of authority he wanted to project.

"A close working relationship has developed between the two men, who share a 'can-do' mentality that favours ambitious 'big-picture' approaches to national and regional issues... Most significantly, for Qatar, Bin Zayed has secured Saudi backing for his hard-line approach to the Muslim Brotherhood and other regional Islamist groups... Although King Salman pragmatically engaged with members of the Brotherhood after he came to power in January 2015, the Saudi stance has once again moved closer to the Emirati one in recent months," said Gulf scholar Kristian Coates Ulrichsen.[49]

Obsessed

If change in the Middle East and North Africa is ultimately inevitable, the UAE is no less vulnerable than Qatar. While the rulers of the seven emirates that constitute the UAE under the leadership of Abu Dhabi's Al-Nahayan family may well agree on the threat posed by the Brotherhood, it remains unclear whether they are equally enthusiastic about Bin Zayed's aggressive policies towards Qatar.

The Gulf crisis "is about Abu Dhabi asserting its dominance in foreign policy issues, because this is not in Dubai's interest," said former British ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Sir William Patey. By implication, Sir Patey was suggesting that unease among the various emirates may be one reason why Abu Dhabi refrained from tightening the screws on Qatar by closing a partially Abu Dhabi-owned pipeline from Qatar that supplies Dubai with up to 40 percent of its natural gas needs.

Bin Zayed's obsession with Qatar and the Brotherhood is rooted in the fact that the Brotherhood-affiliated Jamiat Al-Islah party, founded in the Emirates in 1974 by Emiratis who had met Brothers while studying in Egypt and Kuwait, was created after a decade in which Brothers operating from Qatar had agitated in the UAE.[50] Paving the way for the establishment of the party, Abdel Badie Sakkar, an early Muslim Brotherhood migrant to Qatar, travelled regularly to the Emirates where he established Al-Iman school in Dubai's Rashidiya neighbourhood of Dubai that was staffed by Al-Sattar's relatives and associates.[51]

Bin Zayed's obsession with the Brotherhood, believed to have been fed by fierce opponents of the group like former Egyptian State Security chief, retired General Fuad Allam, a lecturer at Cairo's Police Academy and the National Center for Criminal and Social Research and Riyadh's Naif Arab University for

Security Sciences, put an end to UAE founder Sheikh Zayed al-Nahyan's willingness to indulge the group.

Bin Zayed's concern was further fuelled by a declaration in 1994 by the International Organisation of the Muslim Brotherhood stating that "we believe in the existence of multiple political parties in Islamic society. Authorities should not inhibit the formation of political parties and groups as long as the Shari'a is the supreme constitution ... The recognition of multiple political parties entails the consent to a peaceful transfer of power between political groups and parties by means of periodic elections." [52]

The US embassy in Abu Dhabi reported in 2004 that "in a meeting with (US) Deputy Secretary (of State Richard) 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." [53]

At its peak, Al-Islah enjoyed significant support among Emiratis as well as within the country's armed forces. [54] Al-Islah's size and influence was ultimately limited by restrictions on political activity that forced the group to focus on social, cultural and educational activities. Al-Islah campaigned against Westernization and sought to imbue younger Emiratis with Islamic mores.

The restrictions were part of a collapsed deal negotiated in the late 1990s under which the party would have been allowed to remain active in exchange for ending its allegiance to the Brotherhood's global leadership, a halt to its recruitment in the UAE's armed forces and end to political activities. [55] Bin Zayed estimated that in 2004 Al-Islah had a some 700

members.[56] Scores of Al-Islah members were put on trial in 2012 on charges of plotting to undermine the government in through recruitment in the military and the bureaucracy.[57]

Bin Zayed's obsession despite the Brotherhood's small numbers in the UAE itself has prompted the government to spend tens of billions of dollars on fighting the group. "By doing so, the UAE isn't fighting a real threat, rather it is trying to suppress a popular trend," said analyst Galip Dalay.[58]

Dalay's assertion was countered by a Muslim Brother serving a 15-year jail sentence in the UAE who was trotted out for an interview with Abu Dhabi Television in which he asserted that Qatar had trained Brothers to use social media to mobilize protests. "Qatar believes that it is only a matter of time before it would bring people into the streets (of the UAE) as it did in other countries," said Abdulrahman bin Subaih Khalifa Al Suwaidi, a former Al-Islah board member.[59]

Shaping the environment

If Qatar's strategy was to promote political change by supporting legitimate opposition forces, the UAE's was to help engineer coups that would put in power men who were more to their liking. The Gulf crisis, provoked according to US intelligence officials, by the UAE orchestrating the hacking of Qatari government news and social media sites in order to post incendiary false quotes attributed to Qatari emir Sheikh Tamim, was but the latest example of the Emirates' interventionist policies. The US intelligence assertion carries weight given that Qatar invited the FBI to investigate the hacks that were allegedly approved by senior UAE officials. The false reports planted by the hack constituted the basis for the boycott of Qatar declared by the Saudi-UAE-led alliance.[60]

The hack followed a pattern. In 2013, the UAE bankrolled a military coup in Egypt that toppled Mohammed Morsi, a Brother and Egypt's first and only democratically elected president, and together with Saudi Arabia has kept his successor, general-turned-president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who brutally cracked down on the Brotherhood, financially afloat.[61]

The UAE, in a twist of irony, may have created in Turkey, which has sent troops to Qatar in the wake of the Gulf crisis, one of the major obstacles to the ability of the Saudi-UAE-led alliance to impose its will on the Gulf state. Turkish media aligned with the government have accused the UAE of funding the 2015 failed coup aimed at overthrowing Islamist President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, a watershed event in modern Turkish history, that served as an excuse for his massive crackdown on dissent. Erdogan has arrested tens of thousands of his critics; dismissed up to 140,000 people from jobs in the judiciary, the military, law enforcement, civil service and education sector; declared a pro-longed state of emergency; and used the failed takeover to introduce a presidential system of government in which he has far-reaching powers.

Yeni Safak columnist Mehmet Acet quoted Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu as saying that “we know that a country provided \$3 billion in financial support for the coup attempt in Turkey and exerted efforts to topple the government in illegal ways. On top of that, it is a Muslim country.” Acet said the minister identified the country as the UAE in a subsequent conversation.[62] Daily Sabah, another paper with close government ties, as well as Turkish foreign ministry officials repeated the assertion.[63]

Middle East Eye, an allegedly Qatar-supported online news website, quoted Turkish intelligence officials as charging that

Mohammed Dahlan, an Abu Dhabi-based former Palestinian security chief with close ties to the UAE's Bin Zayed, Al-Sisi and Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman, had served as the UAE's bagman and contact with Fethullah Gulen, the exiled Turkish in the United States, whom Erdogan blames for the attempted coup.[64] The UAE, in a bid to mend fences with Erdogan once the coup had failed, detained two Turkish generals at Dubai airport and deported them to Istanbul.[65] Moreover, a senior UAE foreign minister official, Abdullah Sultan al-Nuaimi,, told a Turkish columnist that his country had offered to drop its objection to the Turkish military base in Qatar and was willing to hand over Gulen supporters resident in the Emirates in exchange for the extradition of nine Emiratis members of the Brotherhood in Turkey.[66]

While there is no independent confirmation of the Turkish allegations against the UAE, what is clear is that Gulen with his propagation of a liberal and tolerant interpretation of Islam would fit the Emirati efforts to create an alternative, anti-Salafi, anti-Islamist and anti-Brotherhood religious authority.

In Libya, the spectacle of small states punching above their weight and waging proxy wars against each other far from home has at the very least aggravated the struggle for the future of the country since the 2011 toppling of Colonel Moammar Qaddafi. In a twist of irony, Qatar rather than the UAE is backing the legitimate, United-Nations-recognized Islamist government while the Emirates and Egypt support an anti-Islamist alliance led by a renegade general.

Five of the 59 people listed by the Saudi-UAE-led alliance as Qatar-supported terrorists were Libyans, including Al Sallabi, the intellectual and spiritual leader of the Libyan Brotherhood and a disciple of Qaradawi. Al Sallabi served as the main conduit of Qatari financial and material support for Islamist

rebels in Libya.[67] Also listed were Abdul Hakim Belhadj, a former jihadist who was rendered by the CIA before being returned to Libya, where he emerged as a military commander and conservative politician; former mayor of Tripoli Mahdi al-Harati who commanded an anti-Qaddafi militia before heading an anti-Assad group in Syria; Ismail Mohammed Al Sallabi, Ali al-Sallabi's brother and the head of another Libyan rebel group; and Libyan Grand Mufti Al-Sadiq Abdulrahman Ali Al Gharyani.

In the case of Palestine, Bin Zayed convinced the Saudis to drop Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood offshoot that controls the Gaza Strip, from the list of groups the Saudi-UAE-led alliance wanted Qatar to distance itself from to create an opportunity for the return of Mohammed Dahlan, the UAE-backed Palestinian politician and former security chief who frequently does the Emirati crown prince's bidding[68] and whom US President George W. Bush described during an internecine Palestinian powers struggle in 2007 as "our boy." [69] If successful, the UAE would have succeeded in clipping Hamas wings and installing its own man in the Gaza Strip in a move that would likely strengthen cooperation with Israel, potentially facilitate an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement, and take the Jewish state's increasingly close ties to the Gulf state out of the shadows.

The UAE effort involved a carrot and stick approach in which Israel and Palestine Authority (PA) President Mahmood Abbas played bad cop while Egypt was the good cop in a pincer move that was intended to weaken Hamas. A lowering of public sector salaries in Gaza by Abbas and reduced electricity supplies by Israel at the Palestinian leader's behest[70] drove Hamas into the arms of the UAE and Egypt as the International Red Cross and other international agencies warned of an impending calamity.[71]

In response, Egypt and the UAE moved to alleviate the economic crisis in Gaza in a bid to sweeten an agreement on power sharing between Hamas and Dahlan that was being negotiated in Cairo. At the same time, Egypt began to send diesel fuel at market prices, but without taxes imposed by the PA, and has signalled that it would open the crucial Rafah border crossing between Gaza and the Sinai. Associates of Dahlan were reported to be preparing the border station for re-opening with a \$5 million donation from the UAE.[72]

Egypt reportedly was supplying barb wires, surveillance cameras and other equipment to enhance border security.[73] The UAE, moreover, has earmarked \$150 million to build a power station and has hinted that it would fund construction of a port. “If the plan does come to fruition, it could make an Israeli-Egyptian dream come true... It will ensure a fine profit for all sides, except for Abbas and Palestinian aspirations to establish a state,” said prominent Israeli columnist Zvi Bar’el.[74]

In Yemen, the UAE walked a tightrope between ensuring that it had a seat at the table in Riyadh while pursuing its own goals that at times differed from those in the kingdom and managing a widening rift with Saudi-backed Yemeni President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi. Hadi fired in April 2017 two ministers known for their close ties to the UAE.[75] One of the ministers, Aidarous al-Zubaidi, a former governor of Aden, declared the formation of a transition council that would govern southern Yemen.[76] Al-Zubaidi’s move fuelled concern that the UAE was laying the groundwork for a return to the pre-1990 era when Yemen was divided between two states in the expectation that the south would align itself with the Emirates. “The extent of this rift reverberates in the Arab coalition, particularly as the sidelined southern leaders are supported by the UAE,” said Yemeni a government official.[77]

In a twist of irony, the UAE and Qatar were both seeking to project themselves as key US allies by focusing on different aspects of overall US policy. While the UAE positioned itself as Little Sparta, Qatar largely appealed to values underwriting US foreign policy such as freedom and more pluralistic societies. Both countries presented themselves as pushing reform of Islam, albeit in ways that supported their visions of regime survival.

The UAE quietly nurtured the creation of moderate Islamic institutions such as the Muslim Council of Elders, the Global Forum for Prompting Peace in Muslim Societies and the Sawab and Hedayah Centres in a bid to counter the influence of Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the Brotherhood, and more militant Islamist forces.[78] For its part, Qatar promoted itself as a centre of theological change that endorsed basic political rights and opposed autocracy.

It was that ideological divide that deepened the rift between the Gulf states. Accusing the UAE of being against Islam,”[79] Qaradawi rejected religious edicts by UAE and Saudi-backed clerics as well as Egyptian Grand Mufti Ali Juma during the 2011 uprisings that insisted that Muslims had an obligation to obey an unjust ruler as long as he publicly did not commit apostasy. Drawing on the jurisprudential principle of quietist Islam that stipulates that legitimate peaceful protests are rendered illegitimate on the basis that they will lead to civil strife, Juma ordained that for “the youth of Egypt, it is obligatory for all of you to withdraw ... Coming out to challenge the legitimacy (of the regime) is forbidden, forbidden, forbidden! Right now, you are guilty of causing this unrest which is not in the country’s interests.”[80]

In opposition to the backing of autocratic regimes beleaguered by protesters by Juma and other UAE-and Saudi-backed

scholars, Qaradawi developed a jurisprudence of revolution that was anathema to Emirati rulers.[81] “If they are used to achieve a legitimate end, such as calling for the implementation of the Sharia, or freeing those imprisoned without legitimate grounds, or halting military trials of civilians, or cancelling a state of emergency which gives the ruler absolute powers, or achieving people’s general aims like making available bread, oil, sugar, gas, or other aims whose legitimacy admits of no doubt-in things like these, legal scholars do not doubt the permissibility (of demonstrations),” Qaradawi ruled.[82]

Adding fuel to the fire, Qaradawi took his support of dissent a step further by calling for the killing of Libyan leader Moammar Qaddafi. “To shed “the blood of this man is lawful. His blood is halal for two reasons... Because of the massacres which he has perpetrated against the Libyan people ... and...as a preventive measure against what may happen (if he is not stopped)... Therefore, it is from out of the jurisprudence of balancing, the jurisprudence of consequential outcomes, and the jurisprudence of priorities that we sacrifice one man for the sake of the salvation of a people... Whoever is able to draw nearer to God by killing him, may he do so, and may his blood rest upon my shoulders! By God, this man (Qaddafi) is a criminal man, truly!”, Qaradawi ordained in a sermon at a Doha mosque.[83] Qaradawi’s fatwa fed claims made by Saudi Arabia after the eruption of the 2017 Gulf crisis that Qatar had been a party to a 2003 Libyan plot to assassinate Saudi King Abdullah.[84] It also coincided with one of the few occasions in which Qatar participated in military intervention as Qatari fighter jets and troops joined Western forces in support of anti-Qaddafi rebels.[85]

In effect, Qaradawi was conveying religious legitimacy to Qatari policy by redefining the traditional notion banning rebellion against the ruler as relating to the rebellion of the ruler

against his people. “When it is not the people who rise in arms against a regime but it is the regime which starts massacring them – because of peaceful demonstrations for example – that power loses its legitimacy and religious scholars must intervene to defend the believers,” Qaradawi argued.[86]

Qatar’s sincerity and willingness to back political change and let the chips fall where they fall and Qaradawi’s ideological legitimization of Qatari policy quickly failed their litmus test with the eruption not long after the revolts in Egypt and Libya of uprisings in Bahrain and Syria. Bahrain was simply too close to home for Qatari comfort while Iranian support of President Bashar al-Assad and the growing involvement of Lebanon’s Iran-backed Hezbollah militia in the Syrian conflagration threatened the delicate balance between Iran and Saudi Arabia that Qatar sought to manoeuvre.

Acting as a barometer of Qatari policy, Qaradawi was quick to condemn the Bahraini revolt, even though it started like others in the region as a peaceful, cross-section protest in demand of greater equality and social and economic opportunity, and as in Syria, stopped short of calling for the fall of the regime. “Truly the Bahraini revolution, it’s not a revolution, rather it’s a sectarian uprising... That’s the problem, it’s Shiite against Sunni, I’m not against the Shia, I’m against fanaticism... They aren’t peaceful, they’re using weapons,” Qaradawi said.[87] Qaradawi spoke as Saudi and UAE forces entered Bahrain in March 2011 with the blessings of Qatar and at the invitation of the minority Sunni Al Khalifa ruling family that had deliberately turned the revolt into a sectarian conflict with the island state’s majority Shiite population.

Similarly, advances in Syria in 2013 by Hezbollah and Assad’s forces that alarmed Qatar and other Gulf states prompted Qaradawi, even more clearly than he did in the case of Bahrain,

to break with his long-standing advocacy of improved Sunni-Shia relations and support of Hezbollah against Israel, again legitimizing Qatari support for militant Sunni rebel groups. In a further indication of a brief rapprochement in Qatari and Saudi policy, Qaradawi's condemnation of Hezbollah also constituted a reversal of his earlier support of the group against Saudi condemnations of it because it was a Shiite militia. It also reflected Qatar's naïve belief that it could ring fence the process of regional change, supporting it in some countries and joining the UAE-Saudi-led counterrevolutionary roll back of achievements elsewhere, as well as the reputational cost of picking and choosing rather than acting on principle.

“Tens of thousands of these men have come from Iran! From Iraq! From Lebanon! From such a multitude of countries, from all the countries of the Shia! They're coming from all over the place – to fight the Sunnis... Everyone who is able, who knows how to fight, who knows how to use weapons, who knows how to use the sword or the gun...must go to Syria to aid their brothers,” Qaradawi thundered from his pulpit in Doha.[88] Similarly, Qaradawi turned on the Alawite sect from which Assad and many of his associates hail and that is a pillar of the Syrian regime, condemning its adherents with the words of 14th century, controversial Islamic scholar Taqi ad-Din Ahmad ibn Taymiyyah as “more unbelieving than Christians or Jews.”[89]

War of words

The Gulf crisis is but the latest instalment of the battle of the small states. The UAE and Qatar have been waging a covert war in the media and through fake NGOs even before Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain first withdrew their ambassadors from Doha in 2014. The media war substituted for imposition

of a diplomatic and economic boycott of Qatar at the time of the withdrawal. The three states contemplated a boycott but opted at the time to first try a less aggressive attempt to force a change in Qatari policies.

The UAE, the world's largest spender on lobbying in the United States in 2013^[90], sought, according to US media reports to plant anti-Qatar stories in American media. To do so, it employed California-based Camstoll Group LLC that was operated by former high-ranking US Treasury officials who had been responsible for relations with Gulf state and Israel as well as countering funding of terrorism.^[91] Camstoll signed a consulting agreement with Abu Dhabi's state-owned Outlook Energy Investments LLC in December 2012,^[92] a week after it was incorporated in Santa Monica.^[93] Camstoll reported receiving \$4.3 million in 2012^[94] and \$3.2 million^[95] from Outlook in 2013 as a retainer and compensation for expenses. Under the contract, Camstoll would consult Outlook on "issues pertaining to illicit financial networks, and developing and implementing strategies to combat illicit financial activity."^[96] In its registration as a foreign agent, Camstoll reported that it "has conducted outreach to think tanks, business interests, government officials, media, and other leaders in the United States regarding issues related to illicit financial activity."^[97]

Camstoll's "public disclosure forms showed a pattern of conversations with journalists who subsequently wrote articles critical of Qatar's role in terrorist fund-raising," The New York Times reported.^[98] Camstoll reported multiple conversations with reporters of The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Daily Beast, Dow Jones News Wires, Financial Times, Bloomberg News, CNN and the Washington Free Beacon.^[99]

The lobbying effort resulted among others in a Daily Beast feature entitled ‘U.S. Spies Worry Qatar Will ‘Magically Lose Track’ of Released Taliban’ that asserted that Qatar’s track record is troubling” and that “the emirate is a good place to raise money for terrorist organizations”^[100]; a CNN special report asking ‘Is Qatar a haven for terror funding?’^[101] The Washington Post carried stories reporting that “private Qatar-based charities have taken a more prominent role in recent weeks in raising cash and supplies for Islamist extremists in Syria,”^[102] there was “increasing U.S. concern about the role of Qatari individuals and charities in supporting extreme elements within Syria’s rebel alliance” and linked the Qatari royal family to a professor and U.S. foreign policy critic alleged by the U.S. government to be “working secretly as a financier for al-Qaeda.”^[103]

One Washington Post story quoted among others “a former U.S. official who specialized in tracking Gulf-based jihadist movements and who spoke on the condition of anonymity because much of his work for the government was classified.” The description of the source appeared to fit the bios of Camstoll executives, including the company’s owner, Matthew Epstein, a former Treasury Department official who served as its financial attaché to Saudi Arabia and the UAE; Howard Mendelsohn, former Acting Assistant Secretary of Treasury, who according to a US State Department cable “met with senior officials from the UAE’s State Security Department (SSD) and Dubai’s General Department of State Security (GDSS)” to coordinate disruption of Taliban financing,^[104] and other former Treasury officials who had been contact with Israel regarding their strategy to counter funding of Palestinian groups.^[105]

In disclosing the UAE’s efforts to influence US media reporting on Qatar, The Intercept’s Greenwald argued that “the point here

is not that Qatar is innocent of supporting extremists... The point is that this coordinated media attack on Qatar – using highly paid former U.S. officials and their media allies – is simply a weapon used by the Emirates, Israel, the Saudis and others to advance their agendas... What’s misleading isn’t the claim that Qatar funds extremists but that they do so more than other U.S. allies in the region (a narrative implanted at exactly the time Qatar has become a key target of Israel and the Emirates). Indeed, some of Qatar’s accusers here do the same to at least the same extent, and in the case of the Saudis, far more so.”^[106]

Qatar’s response to the media campaign against it was illustrative of its ineptitude in fighting its public relations and public diplomacy battles, clumsiness in developing communication strategies, meek denials of various accusations, and failure to convincingly defend its controversial policies. In a bid to counter its World Cup critics, Qatar contracted Portland Communications founded by Tony Allen, a former adviser to Tony Blair when he was prime minister, according to Britain’s Channel 4 News.^[107]

The television channel linked Portland to the creation by Alistair Campbell, Blair’s chief communications advisor at Downing Street Number Ten and a former member of Portland’s strategic council, of a soccer blog that attacked Qatar’s detractors. Britain’s Channel 4 reported that the blog projected itself as “truly independent” and claimed to represent “a random bunch of football fans, determined to spark debate.” The broadcaster said the blog amounted to “astro-turfing,” the creation of fake sites that project themselves as grassroots but in effect are operated by corporate interests. Portland admitted that it had helped create the blog but asserted that it was not part

of its contractual engagement with Qatar. The blog stopped publishing after the television report.

Qatar also thought to undermine UAE efforts to tarnish its image with the arrest in 2014 of two British human rights investigators of Nepalese origin. The investigators worked for a Norway-based NGO, the Global Network for Rights and Development (GNRD), that was funded to the tune of €4.2 million a year by anonymous donors believed to be connected to the UAE.[108] The investigators were detained and later released at a time that Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain had withdrawn their ambassadors from Qatar in a bid to force it to stop its support for the Muslim Brotherhood.

Founded in 2008, GNRD was headed by Loai Mohammed Deeb, a Palestinian-born international lawyer who owned a UAE-based consultancy, and reportedly operated a fake university in Scandinavia, according to veteran Middle East author and journalist Brian Whitaker who took a lead in investigating the group.[109] GNRD said it aimed to “to enhance and support both human rights and development by adopting new strategies and policies for real change.”[110]

In 2014, GNRD published a human rights index that ranked the UAE at number 14 in the world and Qatar at 97. Heavy criticism of the index persuaded the group to delete the index from its website. GNRD, moreover, consistently praised the UAE’s controversial human rights records with articles on its website on the role of women, the UAE’s “achievements in promoting and protecting the family, environmental efforts, care for the disabled and its protection of the rights of children.[111]

Appointed as a monitor of Egypt’s 2015 parliamentary election GNRD reported that “the Egyptian people have experienced a unique process toward democratic transition, and despite the fact that minor errors and inaccuracies occurred, these do not

shed a negative light on the overall results of the electoral process.”[112] GNRD made no mention of the fact that the election occurred in an atmosphere in which hundreds of Muslim Brothers were killed by security forces, thousands more were incarcerated and repression limited expression of dissenting opinions and independent media coverage.[113]

GNRD was closed following police raids in 2015, the confiscation of \$13 million in assets, and charges of money laundering that have yet to be heard in court.[114] Norwegian investigators said that UAE diplomats had fought hard to prevent the case going to court.[115]

Punching above their weight

The Gulf crisis is not about to end any time soon. Yet, it has already established that small states need not surrender to larger neighbourhood bullies and can not only stand their ground but also shape the world around them. That is a conclusion that small states like Singapore that were debating their place in the international pecking order and their ability to chart an independent course of their own in the wake of the Gulf crisis, appear to have drawn. The debate in Singapore, echoed in other small states, was sparked when former UN ambassador and dean of the Lee Kwan Yew School of Public Policy Kishore Mahbubani asserted that Qatar’s troubles showed that small states should always behave like small states and be wary of getting entangled in affairs beyond their borders. “In the jungle, no small animal would stand in front of a charging elephant, no matter who has the right of way, so long as the elephant is not charging over the small animal’s home territory,” Mahbubani said.[116]

Using an animal metaphor of his own, Singapore ambassador-at-large Bilahari Kausikan retorted, in a rare public airing of

differences, that Mahbubani's approach would amount to surrender of one's sovereignty and set a dangerous precedent. "Singapore did not survive and prosper by being anybody's tame poodle... I don't think anyone respects a running dog," Kausikan said.[117]

Adding his voice, prominent Singaporean diplomat Tommy Koh argued that "the lesson learnt is that, at the end of the day, a small country must develop the capacity to defend itself. It cannot depend on others to do so." said.[118] Ong Keng Yong, the head of RSIS and Singapore's ambassador to Iran and Pakistan asked, "what happens when small states' core interests are impinged upon, and caught within broader big-power dynamics? Or do small states' interests not matter, and should be subordinated to that of big states? Putting it another way, must Singapore be so governed by fears of offending bigger states that we allow them to do what they want or shape our actions to placate them even if they affect our national interests? ... There is no choice but to stand up. Doing otherwise will encourage more pressure from those bigger than ourselves." [119]

The jury on the differing UAE and Qatari approaches is nonetheless still out. Qatar has been able to defy the boycott and, so far convincingly, reject demands of the Saudi-UAE-led alliance that would undermine its sovereignty and turn it into a vassal based on its financial muscle and an international refusal to endorse the approach of its detractors that many view as extreme, unrealistic and unreasonable.

Taking the long view on the assumption that change is inevitable, Qatar could emerge as having been on the right side of history even if the notion that it can promote change everywhere else except for at home is naive at best. A wave of nationalism with Qataris rallying around their emir in defiance

of the Saudi-UAE-led boycott that reinforced the notion that Qatar is Al Thani and Al Thani is Qatar, masked criticism of the ruler's policies and the Gulf state's repression of dissidents.

Assuming Qatar emerges from the crisis with its ability to independently chart its own course and emotions have calmed, Sheikh Tamim's challenge will be the transformation of the wave of nationalism into a form of sustainable support for his regime. "In the marketed image of Qatar, all Qataris accept being ruled by the Emir, and always have done. In the idealized vision of Qatar, the image projected to the outside world, there is no politicking, there are not always even clear positions on international affairs, except a position defined by security, development and prosperity... Yet this idealized narrative obscures a more complicated and interesting history, a history that lies just beneath the five-star hotels, international news channels and premium airport lounges. Qataris themselves have not forgotten this history," noted Qatar scholar Allen J. Fromherz.[120]

The notion that Qatar can be exempted from waves of political change is embedded not only in the Gulf state's approach to support of opposition forces everywhere else and hard-hitting news coverage of everyone but itself, but also in its approach to education. The attraction of top Western universities such as Georgetown and Northwest to Doha's Education City is to ensure that Qataris have internationally marketable skills and can connect to the global community. It is not in Fromherz's words "to create a larger ruling class that is a source of criticism of the ruling Al-Thani family." [121] As a result, there is a dearth of critical histories, analysis, and literature that offers an alternative perspective on official Qatari mythology.

Qatari poet Muhammad Ibn al-Dheeb al-Ajami realized that when he 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.[122]

Al Ajami’s sentencing coincided with Qatar getting its own albeit limited taste of the fallout of the year’s popular uprisings with conservative Qataris organizing online boycotts of the state-owned telecommunications company as well as Qatar Airways and in a few cases publicly questioning the ruler’s authority to issue decrees. The protests were largely connected to concerns related to the Gulf state’s hosting of the 2022 World Cup, including cost, a significant rise in the number of migrant workers, being exposed to criticism of the country’s labour regime and human rights record, and the risk of having to make concessions on public mores and the consumption of alcohol to accommodate fans. Conservative Qataris worry that an increasing number of their compatriots, often dressed in full-length robes, the Gulf’s national dress, would drink publicly in hotels and bars. “It is a taboo in Qatar to see somebody wearing the national dress and drinking,” said Hassan Al Ibrahim, a Qatari commentator.[123] Some Qataris were also critical of Qatar’s support of the Brotherhood.[124]

A group of some 500 Qataris called in early 2012 for a boycott of the state-owned airline, a major tool in the positioning of the Gulf state as a global travel hub, in protest against its serving of alcohol on flights, high fares and failure to allocate more jobs to Qatari nationals. The protesters’ campaign featured the Qatar Airways logo with a no entry sign superimposed on it. It

followed an earlier protest decrying the level in telecommunications services. The protests were fuelled when the Qatar Distribution Company, a Qatar Airways owned-retail shop, introduced pork alongside the alcohol it was already selling to expatriates. “I never thought the day would come that I have to ask the waiter in a restaurant in Qatar what kind of meat is in their burgers,” said a Qatari on Twitter. “Ppl don’t get it. Its not about the pork—its about us feeling more & more like a minority—in our own country,” tweeted another Qatari.[125]

Just the beginning

However the Gulf crisis ends, Qatar’s revolutionizing the Middle East and North Africa’s media landscape with the 1996 launch of Al Jazeera speaks to the ability of small states to shape their environment. The television network’s free-wheeling reporting and debates that provided a platform for long suppressed voices, shattered taboos in a world of staid, state-run broadcasting characterized by endless coverage of the ruler’s every move. Al Jazeera, despite its adherence to the Qatari maxim of change for everyone but Qatar itself by exempting the Gulf state from its hard-hitting coverage, forced irreversible change of the region’s media landscape in advance of the advent of social media.

Qatar’s brash and provocative embrace of change as opposed to the UAE’s subtler projection of power that shies away from openly challenging the powers that be, may be too risky an approach for small states to emulate. What is clear, however, is that the ability of small states to chart their own course is at the end of the day a function of vision, policy objectives, assets small states can leverage, ability to network, appetite for risk, and the temperament of their leaders. Qatar and the UAE

represent two very different approaches that offer lessons but are unlikely to serve as models. In the final analysis, both Qatar and the UAE may pull off punching far above their weight even if they fail in achieving all their objectives. It comes however at a price paid in part by others that ultimately may come to haunt them.

Already, the long-standing media war between the UAE and Qatar in which allegations of support of terrorism bounce back and forth, has prompted victims of 9/11 to consider naming the UAE alongside Saudi Arabia as a defendant in a host of law suits. Court documents filed in New York alleged that Dubai Islamic Bank “knowingly and purposefully provided financial services and other forms of material support to al Qaeda ... including the transfer of financial resources to al Qaeda operatives who participated in the planning and execution of the September 11th attacks.”[126] That could be just the beginning.

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