

*On November 30, the Middle East Program hosted a meeting, "Who Leads the Arab World?" with **Robin Wright**, USIP-Wilson Center Distinguished Scholar; **David Ottaway**, Senior Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center; and **Hanin Ghaddar**, Public Policy Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center and Managing Editor, NOW News, Lebanon. These scholars discussed regional players in the Arab world and the domestic and international challenges they face in maintaining their influence in the rest of the Middle East. The following paper expands upon Ghaddar's presentation at the November 30 meeting.*

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Qatar, from Soft to Hard Power

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Qatar's strategy was for a long time similar to that of Turkey's, a "zero problems" foreign policy that focused on acting as a peace broker in the region and a crisis mediator with a strategy based on winning friends.

For example, during the May 2008 events in Lebanon, when a government bid to curb Hezbollah's power brought Lebanon close to a new civil war when militants led by Hezbollah seized large swathes of Sunni areas in Beirut and killed more than 100 people.

Qatar played a key role in ending the crisis, brokering the Doha agreement that led to the formation of a national unity government.

In 2006, Qatar also helped in reconstruction of the South after Israel's war with Hezbollah.

I was in Beirut during the July 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel. Right after the war, I went up to the South to check on my family and village. Huge banners with "Thank you Qatar" written in big letters were placed all over the coastal road up to the very last village in the South.

Today, the same banners with the same "Thank you Qatar" can be found in the northern city of Tripoli and the Sunni areas in the North of Lebanon. Qatar is now being thanked for its help and aid to the Syrian opposition.

This explains Qatar's pragmatic approach and growing role in the region. It is an issue of self-validation. Qatar is a small but very wealthy state with enormous ambition.

With the Arab Spring, as other Arab leaders started to look inward, and with the U.S. absence from the scene, Qatar seized its opportunity to take on a more active role.

But Qatar's strategy today is that of taking sides. It is not investing in post-Spring countries, but in certain parties. This is considered by many as a short-term strategy that will not be fruitful in the long run.

How is Qatar doing that?

Qatar saw an opportunity of the void created by the weakness of three actors, and is trying to fill it:

The United States, whose power and influence are declining in the region; Saudi Arabia, which is also comparatively retreating because of several reasons; and Iran, which is suffering from the repercussions of the Arab Spring on its allies in the region, mainly in Syria and Lebanon.

Qatar decided to shift from soft power, usually translated through its media arm, Al-Jazeera, and financial aid, to a more hard power strategy by directly funding and arming rebels.

Its foreign policy also shifted from a state that is neutral to one that takes stands. While eagerly placing itself the main U.S. ally in the region today, Qatar is also supporting the Islamists in the region, mainly the Muslim Brothers in Syria, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Gaza.

Qatar's support of the winning parties in Tunisia and Egypt is evident. For example, in September, Qatar announced its plans to invest \$18 billion in Egypt. This came after a \$2 billion Qatari loan to the Egyptian state, the first installment of which was deposited at the Central Bank of Egypt in August.

This announcement came just a week after Egyptian President Mohamed Mursi made headlines at the Non-Aligned Movement summit in Tehran when he announced his full support for the Syrian revolution against what he called an "oppressive regime."

In Gaza, Qatar was the first to send a head of state, Sheik Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, to visit the Palestinian territory since Hamas came to power in 2007, and he pledged \$400 million.

Khaled Mashal, chief of Hamas in Syria, moved to Doha after closing the Hamas bureau in Damascus. Qatar saw Hamas' isolation as an opportunity, not as a problem.

This new policy is most evident in Syria, where Qatar is explicitly supporting the rebels with money, equipment, and weaponry.

In Tunisia, too, many have attributed the Islamist Al-Nahda Party's success to Qatari financial support. Al-Nahda's leader Rachid Al-Ghannouchi's first post-election international visit was to Qatar.

Qatar's support of the Brotherhood is not because it is trying to replace the Shia Crescent with a Brotherhood power. Doha is much more pragmatic; it is leveraging its relations where they exist and looking to bolster popular, effective, loyal Muslim parties with whom it has relations.

They know that the Islamists are the new power in the Arab world. This way, Qatar is positioning itself to be a bridge between the West and the new Middle East if and when the time comes.

Challenges

But Qatar is and will face challenges. It has jumped into the middle of the heat in an attempt to be on the right side of history. They immediately assumed that with money and media campaigns, the Muslim Brothers will not only win the new Arab world, but will last.

However, the golden age of Islamists could be very temporary, and Qatar will have to reconsider its enthusiasm and probably listen to and understand the other voices in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Syria.

For example, in Syria, many rebels pretend to be Islamists in order to receive the weapons and money needed from Qatar intermediaries. The rebels often adapt their rhetoric and appearances to appeal to those distributing weapons. For instance, many rebels have grown the long beards after hearing that Qatar was more inclined to give weapons to Islamists.

(Example: In Tripoli, the Islamist-looking Free Syrian Army fighter asked where he could find beer.)

Qatar could have overestimated the power and popularity of Islamists in Syria.

In Libya, for example, Qatar supported Islamist groups that did not gain any popular support on the ground and did not get any seats in the national assembly.

Also, the most recent demonstrations in Egypt's Tahrir Square in late November proved that the Muslim Brothers are not as popular or as strong as Qatar thought or desired they would be. Nevertheless, Qatar's Al-Jazeera stayed in denial vis-à-vis the protests against Mursi's decisions. The same thing happened in Bahrain, where Al-Jazeera did not report or discuss the protests that are still happening today.

Also in Syria, Al-Jazeera is not considered credible. It strengthened the Islamists' agendas, with very little attention to the peaceful attempts still taking place despite the militarization of the revolution. Also, Al-Jazeera rarely reports on women, especially secular and liberal women who are heavily involved in the revolution.

Anti-democracy Qatar

While supporting pro-democratic movements, Qatar is not really doing this for democracy. On the contrary, Qatar is a monarchy that does not like changes in the region.

A Qatari poet, Mohammed al-Ajami, who was arrested in November 2011 in Doha and who had spent a year in solitary confinement, was recently reportedly charged with "inciting to overthrow the ruling system" and "insulting the Amir." In November 2012, he got a life sentence in prison.

The prosecution's case against him is reportedly based on a poem he wrote in 2010 criticizing Qatar's Amir, but activists have suspected the real reason for his arrest was his "Jasmine Poem," about the Arab Spring across the Middle East and North Africa.

Conclusion

Qatar might not be able to sustain its influence. The long-term consequences of Qatar's support for Sunni Islamist movements, in the context of the increasingly apparent sectarian divisions everywhere, could be dangerous for this small country.

Equally challenging for Qatar is that its new hard power policies may undermine the network of friendships it has worked so hard to develop, especially with Iran, its strong neighbor with whom it shares the biggest natural gas field.

The Qataris seem to have succeeded in agitating the protests, facilitating political opposition, financing rebels, and tipping power balance, especially in Syria. But punching so far above its weight can leave Qatar on the region's frontlines, a place where Qatar may not want to be.