

Saudi Arabia and Qatar: Dueling Monarchies

Sunday 11 November 2012, by [CAFIERO Giorgio](#) (Date first published: 26 September 2012).

Contents

- [Historical Tensions](#)
- [The Arab Awakening](#)
- [The Muslim Brotherhood-Salafi](#)
- [The View from Riyadh](#)

The demise of secular autocratic regimes in the Middle East and North Africa has heralded a renaissance for Islamist parties in the region, igniting a rivalry for the hearts and minds of the Sunni world between the Gulf powers of Saudi Arabia and Qatar. These neighboring petro-monarchies have sought to influence political transformations in the Levant and North Africa on their own respective terms, both to advance geopolitical interests and to ensure that their own populations do not initiate popular uprisings.

Although neither country is a bastion of democracy at home, Qatar has proven much more amenable than Saudi Arabia to bolstering democratic Islamist movements abroad. The resulting Saudi-Qatari rivalry undermines Saudi Arabia's historic role as the "self-proclaimed bulwark of Islamic conservatism" in the Middle East and the powerhouse of the Gulf Cooperation Council [\[1\]](#).

Historical Tensions

Historically, the Saudi-Qatari relationship has been defined by mutual distrust, albeit tempered by a common interest in maintaining stability in the Persian Gulf. Prior to Qatar's independence in 1971, the Saudi royal family's connections with Qatari businessmen, members of Qatar's ruling family, and Qatari Bedouin tribes facilitated strong Saudi influence in the affairs of its tiny Gulf neighbor.

In 1992, two Qatari guards were killed in a clash along the Saudi-Qatari border, precipitating a decade of poor relations. A few years later, members of Qatar's government accused Riyadh of attempting a counter-coup in 1996 after Emir Shaikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani overthrew his father in a bloodless palace coup in 1995. Relations worsened as each country's state-owned media portrayed the other country negatively throughout the 1990s. In July 2006, Saudi officials contacted the financial backers of the Dolphin undersea natural gas project [\[2\]](#), a \$3.5-billion pipeline linking Qatar to the U.A.E., and reported that the pipeline would enter Saudi territorial waters without Riyadh's consent. A proposed pipeline linking Qatar and Kuwait created similar tensions.

Nonetheless, a rapprochement began during September 2007, when Qatar's head of state paid a visit to the Saudi royal family in Riyadh, followed by a visit of Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz to Doha in December. Throughout 2008 and 2009, Saudi and Qatari officials exchanged diplomatic visits and resolved many of the tensions from the previous 15 years, although Qatar's cordial ties with Iran remained a thorn in relations between Riyadh and Doha.

The Arab Awakening

Despite the warming of relations that began half a decade ago, the Arab Awakening has reignited tensions. Saudi Arabia—frequently labeled the “counter-revolutionary state” for its role in suppressing democratic movements throughout the region [3]—fears the wave of popular uprisings that threatens its position as the anchor of a conservative order that has defined the regional balance of power for generations. By contrast, except in neighboring Bahrain, Qatar has sided with revolutionary forces.

Opposing positions on the Muslim Brotherhood have become a source of particular tension.

The Saudi royal family holds a dim view of the democratic victories of the Muslim Brotherhood’s various affiliates in the region, viewing the Brotherhood’s explicitly Islamist mode of democratic politics as a threat to its own autocratic monarchical system. David Ottaway, a senior scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center, explains [4]: “In Saudi Arabia, there are no political parties, no labor unions, and very little civil society,” he writes. “In Egypt, it’s almost the exact opposite. You have lots of political parties, labor unions, civil society. The Muslim Brotherhood accepts the realities of Egypt - realities that the Saudis reject for their own society.” In return, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is stridently opposed to the Saudi monarchy, which it views as a decadent and corrupt puppet of Western powers.

By contrast, Qatar has fostered a congenial alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood. Enthusiastic coverage of the Egyptian uprising by Al Jazeera, Qatar’s state-owned news network, unquestionably contributed to the fall of dictator Hosni Mubarak. “Once the protest momentum had begun to build, communication and coordination became less essential. Everyone could simply watch al-Jazeera to find out where and when protests were happening,” writes Marc Lynch [5], director of the Institute for Middle East Studies at George Washington University. Al-Jazeera “became the unquestioned home of the revolution on the airwaves,” providing “a focal point for audiences everywhere to share in revolutionary protest.”

Indications of Qatar’s influence continued to surface after the fall of the regime. In March 2011, Khairat al-Shater—then the Muslim Brotherhood’s nominee for president—visited Qatar for several days to discuss “coordination between the Brotherhood, the Freedom and Justice Party, and Qatar in the upcoming period,” according to the *Egyptian Independent*, implying that Doha had vested interests in the outcome of Egypt’s democratic elections [6]. Additionally, a popular Al Jazeera television host—Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a Qatari national of Egyptian origin—is a member of the Muslim Brotherhood [7].

But while Al Jazeera was championing the uprising in Tahrir Square, Saudi King Abdullah was offering to bankroll Mubarak. The Saudi king advised the Obama administration to remain loyal to the dictator to the very end, even if Egyptian forces began killing unarmed protestors [8]. When President Obama refused to heed Riyadh’s advice, the Saudi regime bitterly accused Washington of discarding Mubarak “like a used kleenex.” [9]

In Tunisia, too—the birthplace of the Arab Awakening—many have attributed the Islamist Ennahda party’s success to an infusion of Qatari petro-dollars. The fact that Prime Minister Rashid al-Ghannouchi’s first post-election international visit was to Qatar—and that his son-in-law, formerly a researcher for Al Jazeera in Doha, became his Foreign Minister—has further stoked suspicions about ties between the Gulf emirate and the Ennahda party [10].

The speculation has even led to protests in Tunisia against Qatari interference in Tunisia’s affairs [11]. By contrast, Ghannouchi is not even allowed in Saudi Arabia, where the deposed

dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali immediately received political asylum after his regime collapsed under the weight of popular protests.

The Muslim Brotherhood-Salafi Divide

To counter the rise of moderate Islamists affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, Saudi Arabia has tended to support Salafis, rivals of the Muslim Brotherhood typically considered more extreme in their Islamism. “The Salafis view the Brotherhood as insufficiently Islamist and too compromising,” explains Khalil al-Anani, a scholar of Middle East politics at Durham University [12]. “The Brothers, in turn, view Salafi positions as naïve, overly rigid, insufficiently centrist, and inappropriate in a modern Egyptian context. The Brothers have shown during sporadic participation in past parliaments that their primary focus is on politics and not on religious or cultural issues.”

Following the 2011-2012 elections, a Muslim Brotherhood leader stated that his party’s priorities were “economic reform and reducing poverty ... not [fighting] bikinis and booze.” [13] The Salafis, by contrast—according to Davidson professor Christopher Alexander—have rallied around “a return to the veil in universities and public offices,” “gender segregation and public prayer on university campuses,” and “an elimination of political parties and elections as infringements on God’s sovereignty.” [14]

According to Mara Revkin [15], a scholar at the Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East, the Salafi Al Nour party—which came in second place behind the Freedom and Justice Party with 24.3 percent [16] of the vote in Egypt—received a “steady stream of funding, much of it originating in the Gulf States, [which] gave Salafi candidates a significant financial edge over their rivals.”

Revkin adds that Saudi support for Egyptian Salafis is “spiritual as well as material.” [17] A Salafi cleric from Saudi Arabia, Adnan Alkhtiry, visited Egypt shortly before the parliamentary elections and delivered a sermon encouraging Egypt’s conservative Muslims to take advantage of “a great opportunity” to “establish an Islamic state” and not to “emerge from the election empty-handed” or “leave it those who don’t live the religious life.” [18]

The View from Riyadh

The “Arab Awakening” is not the first Middle Eastern movement that has unnerved the Saudi regime. The rise of Arab nationalism during the 1950s and 1960s and the Iranian revolution of 1979 both challenged Riyadh’s position as the anchor of a regional order.

Just as Saudi foreign policy proactively countered the rise of Nasser by supporting his enemies in Yemen and struck against Khomeini’s revolutionary regime by financing Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war, Riyadh’s support for Salafi factions in countries undergoing political openings is the latest attempt to counter the rise of regional movements that conflict with the kingdom’s interests. Yet with its own resource wealth and competing regional agenda, Qatar is unusually well placed to rival Saudi largesse in the greater Middle East.

By placing bets on different horses in Egypt and Tunisia, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have become rivals in a transitioning Arab world. The rise of a conservative yet democratic form of Islamism may be a wave that Qatar can ride, to Saudi Arabia’s dismay. However, Qatar’s influence could be crowded out by a rising Egypt or even Iraq in the future. Furthermore, if the Arab Awakening spreads from Bahrain into other Gulf emirates, Doha may need to rein in its international ambitions and address its democratic deficit at home.

Indeed, when it comes to democracy in the Gulf, the two kingdoms are rivals no more.

Giorgio Cafiero, September 26, 2012

P.S.

* From Foreign Policy in Focus:

http://www.fpif.org/articles/saudi_arabia_and_qatar_dueling_monarchies

Footnotes

- [1] http://www.yourmiddleeast.com/opinion/bernard-haykel-saudi-arabia-vs-the-arab-spring_959
- [2] <http://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=24754>
- [3] http://lynch.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/08/10/saudi_arabias_counter_revolution
- [4] <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/islamists/article/new-era-relations-between-egypt-and-saudi-arabia>
- [5] http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=DoA2YAAACAAJ&dq=Marc+Lynch+Arab&source=bl&ots=f69tsqv1LJ&sig=gJoHYjN5ZkVx1RIBUIzfGfpcUok&hl=en&sa=X&ei=ZzlSUIvZM9K90QGRq4HIDQ&redir_esc=y
- [6] <http://www.egyptindependent.com/opinion/qatar-and-saudi-arabia-odds-over-shater's-nomination>
- [7] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/3874893.stm>
- [8] <http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/saudi-arabia/index.html>
- [9] http://lynch.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/08/10/saudi_arabias_counter_revolution
- [10] <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=52341>
- [11] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/feedarticle/9960216>
- [12] http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=b3fwik0GeDEC&printsec=frontcover&dq=The+Islamists+Are+Coming&source=bl&ots=Mh50VBIHFw&sig=0OtljUDNcTy9ZZG9c1WLG_q1z4U&hl=en&sa=X&ei=nzxSUIqTlcXz0gHGz4CQCQ&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false
- [13] http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=b3fwik0GeDEC&printsec=frontcover&dq=The+Islamists+Are+Coming&source=bl&ots=Mh50VBIHFw&sig=0OtljUDNcTy9ZZG9c1WLG_q1z4U&hl=en&sa=X&ei=nzxSUIqTlcXz0gHGz4CQCQ&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false

[14] http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=b3fwik0GeDEC&printsec=frontcover&dq=The+Islamists+Are+Coming&source=bl&ots=Mh50VBIHFw&sig=0OtljUDNcTy9ZZG9c1WLG_q1z4U&hl=en&sa=X&ei=nzxSUIqTlcXz0gHGz4CQCQ&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false

[15] <https://www.acus.org/egyptsource/anatomy-egypts-salafi-surge>

[16] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-16665748>

[17] <https://www.acus.org/egyptsource/anatomy-egypts-salafi-surge>

[18] <https://www.acus.org/egyptsource/anatomy-egypts-salafi-surge>