

Persian Gulf Power Play: Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood

By Yuram Abdullah Weiler

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“Qatar’s strategy of embracing the Muslim Brotherhood and putting itself at the cutting edge of change elsewhere in the region as well as its soft diplomacy contain risks that Saudi Arabia is likely to exploit.” – James M. Dorsey, Senior Fellow at S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies.¹

The Persian Gulf petro-powers Saudi Arabia and Qatar are engaged in a struggle for ideological and geopolitical supremacy in the Sunni Islamic world. Both nations have been actively involved in the so-called Arab Spring revolutionary movements that have erupted throughout the Middle East since the spring of 2011, but differ in their sociopolitical views of how to manage the inevitable transition that is taking place in the region while maintaining the status quo within their respective monarchies. High on the list of differences between the two countries are their diametrically opposed views on the Muslim Brotherhood.²

Combining elements of Sufi spirituality, Salafi dogma and political reform, the Muslim Brotherhood, or the *Ikhwan* as it is known, was founded in Egypt in 1928 by primary school teacher Hassan al-Bana, but the movement soon spread to Palestine, Sudan, Iraq, Syria and beyond.³ By 1939, the Muslim Brotherhood, whose goal was to eliminate foreign intrusions and establish an Islamic state, had become one of Egypt’s largest and most influential organizations. Seen as a threat, the *Ikhwan* was banned by the Egyptian government in 1948 and leader al-Bana was assassinated in Cairo on February 12, 1949.⁴ Despite initially supporting the July 1952 coup by the Free Officers’ Movement ousting the British-supported monarch King Faruq, the Muslim Brotherhood was banned again by January 1954 after being accused of an assassination attempt on Jamal 'Abd al-Nasir.⁵ Subsequently, al-Nasir persecuted the *Ikhwan*, causing thousands of members to flee to the Persian Gulf states, among them Saudi Arabia. Middle East Scholar Alain Gresh explains that Saudi alarm resulted from “the establishment of the Brotherhood in the Gulf states and its involvement in protests that have affected the kingdom since the first Gulf war.” Continuing, Gresh adds, “Their political vision — an Islamic state, but a democratically elected one — diverges from that of Saudi Arabia, which is founded on unquestioning loyalty to the royal family.”⁶

Muslim Brotherhood leaders in Tunisia, Sudan, Yemen, and Turkey all supported Iraqi dictator Saddam during the 1990-91 Persian Gulf War, whereas Saudi Arabia sided with the west and George H.W. Bush’s coalition. Saudi Arabia also opposed the Muslim Brotherhood in efforts to topple former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. Clarifying the diverging views on the Muslim Brotherhood, Woodrow Wilson Center Senior Scholar David Ottaway writes: “In the past, the Saudis blamed the Muslim Brotherhood for politicizing the Saudi brand of Islam known as Wahhabism and turning Wahhabis into political activists. This led Osama bin Laden (a Saudi national) and al Qaeda to promote extremism, including a call to overthrow the House of Saud. So that background is a very important factor in the strains between the Saudi rulers and Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood.”⁷

Historical relations between the two kingdoms have been mostly cool except for a period of detente from 2007 to 2011. While there is a dispute between the two brewing over oil in Yemen,⁸ at the root of the political sparring are differing perspectives on maintaining the respective monarchies: Qatar is open to supporting “democratic” political Islamic movements, while the Saudis move quickly to suppress any political opposition. Dorsey explains: “At the core of the regional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Qatar are fundamentally different strategies of self-preservation. While the royal families of both have sought to buffer themselves by lavish social spending, Saudi Arabia has opted for maintenance of the status quo where possible and limited engagement with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Syria, toward which it harbors deep-seated distrust.”⁹

Qatar, which has thrown its full support behind the Muslim Brotherhood, also funds the popular Al-Jazeera media network that Gresh refers to as “the mouthpiece of the Brotherhood, in Egypt and, to a lesser extent, in Tunisia.” Qatar is the leading arms supplier to insurgents Syria, with 85 plane loads of weapons flown – apparently under CIA auspices and with Turkish oversight – from Doha to Ankara and from there, trucked into Syria and distributed among rebel factions. Saudi Arabia is a distant second with only 37 planeloads and Zagreb, Croatia a close third with 36 military cargo flights as of March 2013.^{10,11} The reason for this vociferous assault, according to Dr. Ibrahim Kazerooni and Rob Prince, is that “Syria is seen as the main obstacle to unifying the region’s states against Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon.”¹² And while Saudi Arabia and Qatar share the goal of toppling the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad, they disagree on the nature of the successor regime, as Dr. Masood Assadollahi explains, “[T]he Qataris support the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria and demand that the Muslim Brotherhood come to power following the downfall of the government in Syria. But due to its old enmity with the Muslim Brotherhood, Saudi Arabia does not pursue such a development.”¹³

Clearly, the stated position of the *Ikhwan* also puts it on a collision course with the United States, which has as one of its main security interests in the region the protection of the Zionist regime. Dr. Mohamed El-Sayed Habib, First Deputy of the Chairman of the Muslim Brotherhood, stated: “The Zionist entity has usurped the land of Palestine, the land of Arabs and Muslims. No proud people can accept to stay put when their land is occupied and their sacred places are assaulted. Resisting occupation is required by Islam and sanctioned by international law, agreements and customs. ... As to the reported statement describing the holocaust as a myth, it was not intended as a denial of the event but only a rejection of exaggerations put forward by Jews.”¹⁴

In its zeal to “contain” the influence of Iran, the U.S. made a strategic shift to support Sunni extremist organizations in 2007, at a time when things were looking poorly for the Bush Junior administration in Iraq. Journalist Seymour Hersh quotes Council on Foreign Relations senior fellow Vali Nasr as stating, “It seems there has been a debate inside the government over what’s the biggest danger—Iran or Sunni radicals,” and apparently, the faction claiming Iran to be the greater threat won the day. The Muslim Brotherhood enters the equation even on the side of Saudi Arabia since, according to Nasr, “The Saudis have considerable financial means, and have deep relations with the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis.”¹⁵ So it would seem that the Saudi monarchy, by funding the Brotherhood, is really working against its own best interests, however Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi offers an explanation of this seemingly contradictory behavior,

suggesting, “Saudi’s financial assistance could be read as an attempt to keep relations relatively warm and not allow this most important of Arab states [Egypt] to drift into an Iranian orbit.”¹⁶

Despite efforts by disposed President Mohammad Morsi to cultivate warmer relations with Saudi Arabia, the *Ikhwan* became a fault line that apparently was impossible to mend. While the Qataris strongly supported the Morsi administration, the Saudis opposed it and spent huge amounts of money to topple it¹⁷ out of fears that a popular democratic revolution might spread to the kingdom, as Ottaway points out, “Saudi Arabia is run by the most conservative Islamic sect among the [ultra-conservative] Salafi groups in the Arab world; the Saudis do not have sympathy for any form of democracy.”¹⁸ Gresh quotes former Saudi interior minister Prince Nayef as saying, “The Muslim Brotherhood is the cause of most of the Arab world’s problems and has done vast amounts of damage in Saudi Arabia”¹⁹ And judging by the record crowds that poured onto the streets of Cairo demanding Morsi’s removal, the overwhelming majority of Egyptians seem to have agreed with Prince Nayef. The army under the command of General Abdul Fattah al-Sissi had little choice but to act, as Drs. Ibrahim Kazerooni and Rob Prince write, “No doubt, the Egyptian military, a cynical player, found it convenient for the moment to side with ‘the people,’ understanding that it would be far worse to repress 32 million protestors than to remove Morsi from power and face down the Brotherhood.”²⁰ In any event, shortly after Morsi’s ouster, the damage control division of the Brotherhood appears to have held a meeting in Ankara²¹ to plan their next move, which appears to be to renew their efforts on Tunisia, where the al-Nahda Party and its head, Mr. Rachid al-Ghannouchi, have close ties with Qatar.²² Al-Ghannouchi condemned Morsi’s ouster, calling upon citizens to demand the return of “legitimacy to President Mohamed Morsi, who was freely-elected by the Egyptian nation.”²³

Saudi Arabia and Qatar also differ over Iran, with Qatar having entered into several economic agreements with the Islamic Republic, specifically in the area of oil and gas.²⁴ At the same time as if hedging its bets, Qatar hosts the U.S. CENTCOM in its capital, Doha.²⁵ Despite their disagreements however, both nations question Washington’s ability to come to their aid as a defender should the need arise, especially in consideration of the current U.S. economic crisis and budget cuts. For this reason, Qatar has focused on soft diplomacy, and its support of the popular Muslim Brotherhood induced rebellions is part of that strategy. In contrast, Saudi Arabia continues its efforts to preserve the status quo by brutally suppressing any signs of revolt while keeping its relations with the Muslim Brotherhood at arm’s length.²⁶

So who will emerge the victor in this regal rivalry? As the world’s largest liquefied natural gas exporter,²⁷ partner with Iran in the massive offshore South Pars natural gas field,²⁸ and a member with Iran and Russia of the so-called “gas troika” that holds some 60 percent of the world’s known gas reserves,²⁹ Qatar appears well placed as an energy leader. Geopolitically however, the reactionary rulers of Saudi Arabia are ahead due to U.S. backing in Egypt and Syria, yet Qatar with its more pragmatic foreign policy approach may ultimately prevail.

Endnotes

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