

Qatar plays key role in US Middle East/North Africa plans

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Following the eruption of the mass protests that overthrew Tunisia's Ben Ali and Egypt's Mubarak two years ago, Qatar, along with Saudi Arabia and Turkey, has become a crucial US ally in securing its predatory interests throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

Qatar is determined to ensure its own domination and that of the other ruling cliques in the Gulf, particularly its larger neighbour Saudi Arabia, on which it depends. To this end, it has sought to install Sunni Muslim regimes headed by the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates as a means of suppressing the working class throughout the region.

This is in line with Washington's broader strategy of cobbling together an anti-Iran alliance and suppressing the Middle East masses in order to gain control of the region's energy resources at the expense of its rivals, Russia and China.

Qatar, with considerable oil resources, is the world's largest exporter of liquefied natural gas (LNG). It has 14 percent of the world's known gas reserves, the third largest after Russia and Iran, in its massive offshore North Field adjacent to Iran's South Pars field.

LNG provides the government with 70 percent of its revenue. But high operating costs necessitate economies of scale and large markets that can only be provided by an extensive network of pipelines carrying the LNG to Europe via the Eastern Mediterranean if Qatar is to compete with Indonesia and Nigeria. Saudi Arabia has refused permission for gas pipelines across its territory, despite this being the shortest route into Europe.

This has determined Qatar's interventionist foreign policy, particularly in Syria, which occupies a strategic position between the major producers and their key markets in Europe.

Qatar, ruled by the Al-Thani family since independence from Britain in 1971, has a per capita income of \$90,000, the highest in the world, but few have benefited. All but

225,000 of the 1.7 million population are migrant workers, mainly from South and South East Asia, who work for a pittance without rights or protection. The regime has maintained its grip on power by suppressing all dissent, strikes and protests. However, it was forced to respond to social unrest with a \$65 billion spending programme on housing and extensive public and social infrastructure projects, spread over five years.

Qatar has used its Sovereign Wealth Funds to reward and buy friends and influence, and championed the Muslim Brotherhood as its overseas emissaries while disbanding them at home. The Emir has sought to raise Qatar's profile by its sponsorship of the Al Jazeera satellite TV channel as its own foreign policy arm.

Al Jazeera has cultivated the Sunni Islam cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi, of Egyptian origin, who is head of the International Union of Muslim Scholars, and financed and broadcast religious education programmes. This has spawned Islamic militants, including senior Al Qaeda members whom Qatar has sheltered, such as the alleged mastermind of 9/11, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. He was sheltered by Qatar's Minister of Religious Affairs and held a government job in the Ministry of Electricity and Water. His nephew, Ramzi Yousef, was convicted of masterminding the 1993 World Trade Center bombing.

Qatar's relationship with the US took off after the first Gulf War in 1991 when the Emir allowed the coalition forces to operate from Qatar, destroyed his own US-made Stinger anti-aircraft missiles bought on the black market that been the source of friction with Washington, and sent his troops to fight in the coalition against Iraq. In 1992, he signed a defence treaty that now involves joint defence exercises and three US bases.

The current ruler, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, who deposed his father in 1994, has spent more than \$1 billion constructing the Al-Udeid air base south of Doha, which serves as a base hub for US operations against Iraq

and Afghanistan, and its assassination by drone operations in Pakistan. The US has spent about \$100 million a year constructing further facilities at Al-Udeid and Doha International Air Base, and Al-Sayliyah Army Base, for US Central Command (CENTCOM) Forward Headquarters, where 5,000 US troops are stationed.

Doha, along with the rest of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), sent troops into neighbouring Bahrain to help crush the Shi'ite protests against the al-Khalifa dynasty.

In Tunisia, Qatar played a leading role in bringing the Ennahda party to power in the 2011 elections following Ben Ali's overthrow, providing it with finance and favourable coverage from Al Jazeera. It has signed numerous agreements for economic aid and investment, including a \$500 million loan to quadruple Tunisia's oil refining capacity.

Qatar played a leading role in the NATO-led war against Libya's Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. It exerted enormous international pressure via the Arab League and GCC and sent its air force to join NATO and its own special forces to arm, train and lead the Islamist militias, particularly those groups affiliated to the Libyan Islamic Movement for Change.

Mustafa Abdul Jalil, the head of the National Transition Council (NTC), acknowledged that success was largely due to Qatar, which he said had spent \$2 billion. Jalil said, "Nobody travelled to Qatar without being given a sum of money by the government".

With Qatar's support, these same Libyan militia groups are now providing weaponry and volunteers in the efforts to unseat the Assad regime.

Qatar had invested \$10 billion in Libya, with the Barwa Real Estate Company investing \$2 billion in the construction of a beach resort near Tripoli. Doha backed various horses in the race to take Libya, signing deals worth \$8 billion with the NTC, and financing Abdel Hakim Belhaj, an Islamist leader, and Sheikh Ali Salabi, a Doha-based cleric.

Prior to Mubarak's ouster, Doha's relations with Damascus and Tehran had warmed just like Turkey's—largely as a result of its shared oil and gas fields with Iran—with Qatar even trying to mediate between the US and Iran over Tehran's nuclear programme. This culminated early in 2011 in an agreement for a \$10 billion Iran-Iraq-Syria gas pipeline, with the possibility of further pipelines to Lebanon and Turkey, including one from Egypt to Lebanon, and another from Kirkuk in Iraq's autonomous Kurdish

region as the Syrian civil war erupted in late March 2011.

All that changed with the imperialist powers' decision to engineer a Sunni Islamist regime to replace Bashar-al-Assad. Qatar has played a key role, funding and arming armed Islamist gangs that are carrying out sectarian and terrorist attacks on the civilian population, and providing diplomatic support via the Arab League and GCC for Western intervention.

Last November, Doha brokered the establishment of the Syrian National Coalition for Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SNC) to replace the hopelessly split Syrian National Council.

As part of its offensive to isolate the Assad regime, Qatar forced Khaled Meshaal, the exiled leader of Hamas, the Palestinian offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, to break with Syria. Assad had sponsored his office in Damascus since 1999 when he was expelled from Jordan. Meshaal moved to Doha and has sought to reengage in unity discussions with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, at Qatar's behest.

Doha is doing its best to prop up Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood government of President Mohammed Mursi, who faces massive opposition from the Egyptian working class, providing \$5 billion in loans to stave off bankruptcy and \$18 billion in investment funds. This includes \$8 billion for major projects in Sharq al-Tafria, East Port Said, to secure its control of the Suez Canal as a transit route. The funds came after Mursi gave his full and very public support for Assad's overthrow at the Tehran conference of non-aligned nations last summer.



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