Qatar’s ‘larger than life’ Geo-Political Stretch

In traditional frameworks of analysis of foreign policies and power potential of states, geography and ‘size’ of the states are given considerable importance. It is commonly held that ‘size’ of a state directly corresponds to its power. However, if ‘size’ alone could be taken as a criteria to assess the power potential of any state, tiny states, such as Qatar, would fail to capture our attention or fail to be at helm of some major geo-political games. The above said assumption, perhaps, held well when the world was ruled by few empires. However, today the world is being ruled by states, with ‘size’ of the states losing its importance as a primary denominator of power potential, and the element of resources gaining primary significance. If states like Qatar and UAE are considered to be major players in global geo-politics, especially in the Middle East, it is because they have enough resources to conduct the ‘kind’ of geo-politics which can designate them as ‘major’ powers. Notwithstanding their geographical stretch, states like Qatar are ‘larger than life’ in terms of causing disruptions beyond their orders, in terms of securing their geo-political interests, and in terms of pouring in enough resources to give life to groups like the ISIS/ISIL and Al-Nusra Front.

During the last few years or so, Qatar has been at the helm of creating or precipitating all major trouble spots in the Middle East and in accelerating the growth of radical and jihadi factions. The results have ranged from bad to catastrophic in the countries that are the beneficiaries of Qatari aid: Libya is mired in a war between proxy-funded militias, Syria’s opposition has been overwhelmed by infighting and overtaken by extremists, and Hamas’s intransigence has arguably helped prolong, apart from Israel’s own refusal to find an agreeable solution, the Gaza Strip’s humanitarian plight.

For years, the US officials have been unwilling to shrug off Doha’s proxy network — and have even taken advantage of it from time to time. Qatar’s neighbors, however, have not. Over the past year, fellow Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain have went to the extent of publicly ridiculing Qatar for its support of political Islamists across the region, notwithstanding that these states, too, have been financing militant groups. These countries, the rival “Sunni” states, have even threatened to close land borders or suspend Qatar’s membership in the regional Gulf Cooperation Council unless the country backs down. After nearly a year of pressure, the first sign of a Qatari concession came on Sept. 13, when seven senior Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood figures left Doha at the request of the Qatari government. However, both Qatar and its rival states in the Gulf are working to ensure that Washington comes down on their side of the intra-Gulf dispute; for, at stake is the future political direction of the region — and their respective position in guiding or influencing it.

The US, on the other hand, is playing with the internal division and, as such, keeps altering its support in favour of or against these states. Developments during the past few months have shown that so far, Washington appears unwilling to confront Qatar directly. Aside from the US Treasury Department, which last week designated a second Qatari citizen for supporting al Qaeda in Syria and elsewhere, no senior US administration officials have publicly called out Doha for its troublesome clients. It is precisely because the US, too, is greatly benefitting from this infighting, and by altering its support, she keeps reinforcing this intra-Gulf war. This becomes evident when we take into account that the US State Department released a fact sheet on Aug. 26, 2014 that describes Qatar as “a valuable partner to the United States” and credits it with playing an influential and central “role in the region through a period of great transformation.”
That the US reinforces this internal division and that she progressively propels Qatar to play a ‘larger than life’ role also becomes evident from the fact that the US has not objected to Qatar’s support for Muslim Brotherhood, despite the fact that Saudi Arabia—a US ally in the Gulf—declared Brotherhood a terrorist organization. On the other hand, the reason for Qatar’s support for Brotherhood is not merely out of ideological affiliations; the Qatari ruling family sought, as a pragmatic move to wean away from Saudi block, to differentiate itself from competing monarchies of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, both of which frowned upon political Islam as dangerously power-seeking. “It was pragmatism,” argues Salah Eddin Elzein, head of the Al Jazeera Center for Studies, a think tank associated with the Qatar-owned satellite network, “Islamists came [to the region] in the 1980s, and Qatar was trying to ally itself with the forces that it saw as those most likely to be the dominant forces for the future.”

However, the global Muslim Brotherhood isn’t Qatar’s only—or even its most important—network. Nor does the royal family subscribe to the Brotherhood’s ideals per se. Largely and most often overlooked is a second strand that bows closer to Qatar’s official sympathies: the Salafi movement. Emerging in the 1990s, activist Salafists merged the purist ideology of Saudi Arabia’s clerical establishment with the politicized goals of the Muslim Brotherhood. It was in Qatar that the activist Salafists found their benefactor. Over the last 15 years in particular, Doha has become a de facto operating hub for a deeply interconnected community of Salafists living not only in Qatar but also in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, and elsewhere. Clerics have been hosted by ministries and called to talk for important events. Charities have touted the cause—charities like the Sheikh Eid bin Mohammad al Thani Charity, regulated by the Qatari Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, which is “probably the biggest and most influential activist Salafi-controlled relief organization in the world,” according to a recent report.

By building a sort of political networks through semi-political or non-political entities, Qatar has been and is still aiming at setting off Saudia’s ambitions to establish its hegemony in the “Sunni” world specifically, and in the Middle East and Arab world generally. However, this ambition of Qatar also sets it against the US itself. This co-operation-cum-tussle between the US and Qatar was quite obvious during the Libyan crisis, where there was a broad regional consensus—as well as the US support—to oust the then-leader Muammar al-Qaddafi. Qatar, together with the UAE, had signed on to Western airstrikes against the regime. But Doha also wanted to help build up rebel capacity on the ground. To achieve this end, Doha lined up a collection of businessmen, old Brotherhood friends, and ideologically aligned defectors, plying them with tens of millions of dollars and 20,000 tons of arms, according to some careful estimates. And, after a months-long war, when these “rebels” took Tripoli, Doha’s clients found themselves among the most powerful political brokers in the new post-Qaddafi Libya. These “rebels” were later on also allegedly involved in the killing of the US ambassador. Similarly, in the case of Syria, Qatari supported Salafists in Kuwait sat together with Syrian expatriates to build, fund, and supply extremist brigades that would eventually become groups such as al-Nusra Front and its close ally, Ahrar al-Sham.

However, since at least 2013, Qatar has been facing serious hurdles in carrying out its plans in the Arab world. Qatar’s Arab Spring strategy began to fail in the same place it was conceived. With demonstrators cheering the ouster of Mohammad Morsi’s government in Egypt and with rival “Sunni states” extending their support to the new military-backed government with combined pledges of $13 billion in aid, Qatar found itself increasingly marginalized in regional affairs, and was as such compelled to focus “more on its internal affairs.” Qatar’s rival “Sunni” states are certainly on the rise. That Qatar itself and its main rivals are all “Sunni States” also constitutes an evidence strong enough to denounce the myth of a strong and homogenous “Sunni” world pitted against the “Shia” world. Qatar’s “larger than life” geo-political stretch is clearly on the decline; however, it is not failing. She certainly have the potential and resources to continue to pump militant groups; for, she cannot afford to lose its influence to any other state, especially Saudi Arabia.

Salman Rafi Sheikh, research-analyst of International Relations and Pakistan’s foreign and domestic affairs, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”