

News Analysis: Attack highlights Qatar's importance in Gulf

By Otto Pohl International Herald Tribune
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Policies may have put nation at risk

DOHA, Qatar A car bomb that exploded here over the weekend, killing one British citizen and injuring over a dozen more, is deadly confirmation of the importance this Gulf country has attained in recent years.

Qatar's willingness to engage in political brinkmanship has given this country an influence in the region far beyond its diminutive size. That growing influence also could have given terrorists ample reason to stage an attack on Saturday, the second anniversary of the invasion of Iraq.

While Qatar officials have not confirmed any connection between terrorist groups and the detained suspect, Omar Ahmad Abdullah Ali, an Egyptian, the country's recent policies may have put it at risk.

"They knew that moving in the direction of the West would create a vulnerability for them," said Gordon Brown, a political adviser to Norman Schwarzkopf, commander of U.S. forces in the first Gulf war.

Qatar is home to the largest U.S. air base in the Middle East, outside of Iraq, and is developing a large U.S. naval base. Enormous gas projects under development by ExxonMobil and Royal Dutch/Shell have further guaranteed Qatar's importance to vital Western political and economic interests for decades to come.

At the same time, Qatar has carefully balanced Western contacts with appeals to regional political sensibilities. It has the headquarters of Al Jazeera, the Arab satellite television channel. The channel is home to many who express strongly pro-Islamist views, as is the country.

On occasion, Qatar's balancing act has seemed almost absurd. In February 2003, the government played host to a meeting of the Islamic Conference in Doha to discuss ways of avoiding the U.S. invasion of Iraq, even as the United States was making final preparations to start that invasion from its military base a few miles away. At one point, Qatar's foreign minister had to raise his voice in order to be heard over the noise of U.S. military cargo planes roaring overhead as he read out a communiqué defending Iraq's "security and territorial integrity" and rejecting any attack on Iraq.

It has been that willingness to court both sides aggressively that has given Qatar such a high profile.

"They got the attention of the bigger powers in all sorts of different ways by breaking the mold," said Martin Indyk, who was under secretary of state under President Bill Clinton and is now the head of the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution in Washington.

For many years, Qatar was a sleepy backwater run by Sheik Khalifa bin Hamad al-Thani, who seemed more interested in lavish vacations than affairs of state. Since his son, Sheik Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, deposed his father in a palace coup in 1995, Qatar has taken dramatic steps to secure its financial and political interests.

In recent years, growing financial power and political ties have made Qatar a critical element of U.S. policy in the Middle East, Indyk said.

"Many times when we have faced problems with our traditional allies, we could go to the Qataris to create the conditions necessary to line up the support of other Arabs," he said of the Americans.

The recent development of Qatar's natural gas resources has given the government vast new financial power. The North Field, off the coast of Qatar, is the world's largest natural gas field, and the country is home to the world's two largest natural gas development projects. If growth continues as predicted, Qatar will be the world's largest exporter of liquid natural gas in five years.

Until the attack Saturday, there were no overt signs that Qatar was in danger of attack, and to the outside viewer, Doha remains a peaceful, thriving metropolis. Per capita income is one of the highest in the world.

There is no visible dissent within the country; the ruling family retains total political control. But many of the more conservative elements of society are believed to be furious at recent changes that have brought thousands of foreigners to the country. They also object to the enormous U.S. military base, which was built at Qatari expense estimated at \$1 billion.

Despite retaining absolute political control, Sheik Hamad has encouraged education and open political debate as key elements of his country's reform. Sheika Mozah bint Nasser al-Misnad, Sheik Hamad's wife, has actively recruited a number of U.S. universities to open branch campuses in Doha.

The Qatar Foundation, headed by Sheika Mozah, also runs the Doha Debates, a debate series that has tackled such contentious propositions as "The House believes that Arab governments are not interested in genuine reform."

Its guests have sometimes been as controversial as the issues they discuss.

The mere presence of an Israeli on the program was enough to stoke outrage through the region. After the Israeli, Rabbi Michael Melchior, a member of Parliament, took part last month, Al Arabiya television pronounced his visit proof of pro-Israeli machinations inside the Qatari government.

Al Jazeera television continues to broadcast strident Islamist voices. One of the most inflammatory has been Sheik Yusuf al-Qaradawi, whose top-rated program "Shariah and Life" has allowed him to spread his views more widely than ever.

He has been barred from the United States for supporting Palestinian suicide bombers, but he was also one of the first Islamic clerics to condemn the Sept. 11 attacks.

Qaradawi, in other words, has at times angered people all along the political spectrum. But so has Qatar itself, and he retains at least the implicit support of the Qatari regime.

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