

Qatar's Soft Power Is Alive and Well

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Brief Analysis

More than a year after the quartet blockade of Qatar, it appears that the collective American establishments of the State and Defense Departments have minimized the strong early statements of President Donald Trump on the issue. Despite implied U.S. support for the blockade last year, regional observers have noted a change in the position of the American president, with the question of American-Saudi relations continuing to linger following the Saudi regime's involvement in the assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate.

While the United States has traditionally maintained a strong relationship with the Saudi government, this juncture provides a moment to consider the longstanding strategic soft power Doha possesses within the broader Middle East, and the United States' potential to benefit from this angle—especially given its current limited support within the region. Although geography and population are among the most important drivers of state power and international standing, Doha has managed to play an outsized role in regional dynamics—even in light of the year-long blockade.

Despite the current crisis, Qatar still possesses significant regional cache for its support of the Arab spring. Qatar's emir, during an interview with [CBS \(https://www.cbsnews.com/video/the-blockade-of-qatar/\)](https://www.cbsnews.com/video/the-blockade-of-qatar/), characterized his country's position in this light: "We stood with the people because they wanted freedom and dignity, and I think we made the right choice when we stood with the people." Most significant is the Qatari government's blanket support of revolutionary movements—despite its previously warm relationship with the Assad regime, Doha nevertheless supported the uprising against the government.

While this may have made Qatar suspect in the eyes of other Arab governments, the impact of its support in the minds of the public is unknown but undoubtedly significant. In a number of countries, expressing sympathy with Doha even on Twitter is potential grounds for imprisonment. Even so, Doha's relationship with many social grassroots movements that formed the main nucleus of the Arab Spring is one of the most important factors of Doha's soft power.

Western observers have often linked this support most closely to Doha's interest in the Arab world's Islamist current, yet many within the region also perceive Qatar as supporting liberalizing elements as well. In contrast to other Gulf countries' abandonment of their support for the Tunisian economy after President Sebsi's Nidaa Tounes party allied with the Islamist Ennahda movement, Qatar continued to demonstrate their commitment to the country through its participation in an [international conference](#)

(<http://www.assabah.com.tn/article/142054/%D9%85%D8%A4%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%B1-%C2%AB%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%86%D8%B3-2020%C2%BB-%D9%82%D8%B7%D8%B1-%D8%AA%D8%AF%D8%B9%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%86%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D8%A8%D9%85%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%88250-%D9%85%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B1>) to support the

economy and investment in Tunisia. Furthermore, Qatar demonstrated its ongoing commitment to Tunisia through its donation of \$1.25 billion in support for the Tunisian economy.

North African observers in particular took note of Qatar's financial backing of the Tunisian government. Doha's relationship with the Arab Spring's societal movements—despite the tension it causes to relations with the rest of the countries—continues to be an important source of popular regional power for Doha and will continue to serve the country well in the future.

Doha's international soft power can also be traced to its extensive information production. Understanding how this soft power developed is clear; Qatari media, led by Al Jazeera, is both deeply influential in the region and occupies a prominent position among international media. Al Jazeera News continues to be considered one of the most watched channels in the Arab world. Al Jazeera English also enjoys a special standing and has won numerous prestigious international awards, such as the AIB international award in London. The Al Jazeera Media network includes a wide network of diverse channels: Al Jazeera Balkans, Al Jazeera Turkey, Al Jazeera Documentary, and others.

In particular, the beIN Sports network—formerly Al Jazeera Sport—dominates the sports media market and exclusively broadcasts the vast majority of European and international sporting events in the Arab world. While its prestigious position in the market has led to piracy attacks, the large majority of Arab viewers continue to associate beIN with sports coverage. Doha's media production also extends to more scholarly output; Qatar hosts a group of prestigious international universities including Georgetown, Carnegie Mellon, Texas A&M, University College London, and a number of connections to international research institutions that help shape the international dialogue on the Middle East. Considered in tandem with Qatar's reputation as a supporter of democratic movements, Qatar's media output continues to serve as a major influence in the Arab world.

Qatar's influence is not new, but now is an important time to analyze how the United States can stand to benefit from this soft power. Specifically, Qatar has proven in the past to be an effective mediator between the United States and groups that Washington is unwilling to meet with directly. The 2013 opening of an office for the Taliban in Doha—supported by the U.S. government—allowed for negotiations toward the release of American sergeant Bowe Bergdahl, who had been detained by the Taliban for years. Qatar has also played a quiet role in ongoing negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians.

This role extends outside of the United States' own interests; Qatar has also demonstrated its ability to shape regional issues through its past role in mediation between the Khartoum government and rebel movements in the Darfur region, as well as between Eritrea and Djibouti, resulting in the release of a number of Djiboutian prisoners in Eritrea. While Qatar's complicated position in the Gulf has reduced its overt negotiating role in the region over the past year, the country's ability to act as negotiator in the future should not be discounted. Rather, the United States could greatly benefit from Qatar's ability to leverage its soft power in order to navigate negotiations that the United States could not on its own.

A year after the quartet's blockade on Qatar, the U.S. administration's view of the country still remains somewhat inscrutable to those in the region. After the firing of Secretary of State Tillerson, a group of UAE officials close to their state's circles of power expressed delight in this decision, considering it a victory for the countries blockading Qatar

and the removal of one of the obstacles that stood in the way of their goal to push U.S.-Qatar relations towards greater tension. However, subsequent interactions between the U.S. government and Doha, including meetings between high-level officials on both sides, have suggested the United States is still open to a deeper relationship with Qatar. Given recent shifts in power within the region, now is the ideal time for the U.S. administration to clarify its position and take advantage of what Doha has to offer. ❖

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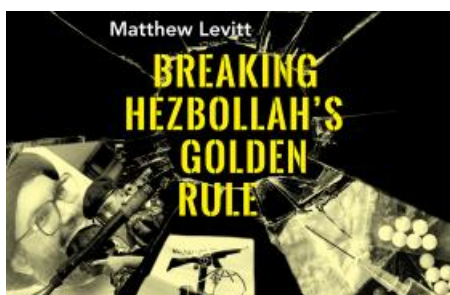
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