

A Seed Planted in the Desert

Qatar is ruled by the Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani and his tribe, the Al Thani. In proportion to the country's small size, the Al Thani family is the largest of all the ruling families in the Middle East. It also has a reputation for being the most argumentative. Transition from one ruler to another has rarely been smooth and the family's propensity for spilling one another's blood won them the title 'the thugs of the Gulf' from one pre-independence British administrator.

The previous Emir was Sheikh Hamad's father, Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad Al Thani. He seized power in a coup immediately after Qatar's independence in 1971 and for the next twenty-three years presided over important developments in Qatar's infrastructure, domestic and foreign policies, effectively creating the modern state. In later years the old Sheikh developed a fine taste for luxury, spending more and more time out of the country, often on the French Riviera.

Today's Emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, is the eldest of Sheikh Khalifa's five sons. His first exposure to democracy was on a trip to London when he was still a boy and legend has it that the concept seemed so ridiculous to him that he had to be led in hysterical laughter from the balcony of the House of Commons after witnessing his first parliamentary debate. He later went to Britain's Sandhurst military academy, until he returned to Qatar in 1977, when he became Minister of Defence. He still has a house near Windsor, Berkshire.

In 1995 the elderly Sheikh Khalifa briefly returned to Qatar after one of his many trips abroad, demoted one son from his position as Prime Minister and promoted another in his place. Crown Prince Hamad was rattled by his father's habit of arbitrary promotion and dismissal. Thinking that one day this might put his own claim to the throne in jeopardy, he proclaimed himself the new Emir on 27 June that year, while the old Emir was in Switzerland on holiday. It is said that Sheikh Khalifa learned of the coup while listening to the radio in his hotel room in Geneva. Others say his son told him on the phone and then promptly hung up. If it had happened today he probably would have heard about it on Al-Jazeera.

The coup ushered in a year of strife and bickering between father and son. Sheikh Khalifa, who had every intention of clinging on to power, embarked on a tour of the Gulf to stir up dissent against his own son, whom he publicly disowned. Rumours of plots against the young Emir's life abounded, climaxing in a foiled counter-coup attempt on 14 February 1996. It was said that the Sheikh had taken many billions of dollars - possibly as much as twenty-five billion - out of the Qatari government coffers.

It was now Sheikh Hamad's turn to act. With the help of the Washington law firm Patton Boggs, he froze the money that his father had ladled out of the national reserve, thus ending his dream of a return to power. Sheikh Hamad quickly consolidated his position as Emir politically by ceding some of his power to a broader authority and by constitutionally safeguarding the role of Prime Minister.

On acceding to power Sheikh Hamad was, at just forty-four, the youngest ruler in the Gulf. The other Arab countries, with the exception of Oman, were governed by rulers in their sixties, seventies or eighties, many of whom had held power for a quarter of a century or more. The young Emir and his new political team of young, Western-educated technocrats belonged to a different generation, more open to political and social ideas from the West.

It was not long before it became clear that Sheikh Hamad had plans quite unlike his father's. He dispensed with the ritual and baroque finery of the court, and began instead to govern Qatar more like a managing director running a large corporation. Understanding the importance of privatization, he quickly turned many institutions in need of quick reform over to the private sector, among them Qatar's antiquated postal service.

Like any sensible hands-on manager, he developed good personal relationships with his trusted top staff and always kept a handle on the cash. Unlike other Arab rulers, who remained aloof from their subjects, the new Emir made a habit of explaining his policies and ideas, often speaking directly to the press. He shied away from the kind of ceremony typical of most Arab leaders and even made a point of working in the afternoons.

Nowadays he sometimes drives around Doha and if he sees a problem he calls the appropriate minister to tell him what needs to be fixed. He is known for showing up in Doha restaurants with no entourage except for a few security men and sitting down to eat with amazed diners. Although for security reasons no one is allowed to leave before him, he does not have the restaurant cleared, as other Arab leaders do.

Although Qatar has phenomenal natural gas reserves - a trillion cubic feet of gas and potentially a trillion-dollar economy - the old Emir had believed conservatively that Qatar's interests would better be served if the country never moved too far ahead of others in the region, culturally, economically or politically. The new Emir decided to abandon this policy. Rather than try to blend in with the other Gulf countries, he has done all he can to elevate Qatar's position on the world stage, inviting Bill Clinton and Al Gore to Qatar, hosting the World Islamic and World Trade Organization conferences and soliciting major sporting events like World Championship motorcycle racing and the Asian Games of 2006. Qatar, he has stated, should be 'known and noticed'.

Sheikh Hamad has plans to turn Qatar into an important regional hub, a kind of Arab version of Switzerland: rich, neutral and secure. The massive airport that is currently being built, capable of carrying forty-five million passengers a year, shows that he is thinking big and long-term.

Before any other Gulf country, the Emir introduced democratic elections for a number of establishments and authorities, delivered a new constitution, established an elected national body, the Municipal Council, and founded Al-Jazeera.

When I visited Doha, loyal Qataris assured me that the new Municipal Council, or Majlis Ash Shura, two-thirds of whose forty-five members are directly elected, the rest appointed by the Emir, had real political bite. When I asked my Qatari friends what kind of dramatic reforms it had helped implement recently I was told it had helped precipitate a major overhaul in the way the police calculate fines for traffic offences.

Although Qatar is often cited today as a paragon of virtue in the Middle East, it is important to keep this claim in perspective. Greater public participation in decision-making is a good start, but Qatar is still not a democracy. But then it is not a police state either: it is an autocratic state subject to the whim of one man, the Emir, who, although fortunately not a tyrant, is unelected, unaccountable and all-powerful. The Municipal Council may decide traffic laws but it does not discuss the military budget or the Emir's personal expenditure.

Political parties in Qatar are still outlawed, as is anything that vaguely resembles one: for example, an environmental lobby group, a consumer association or an association of professionals. Opposition is not tolerated and there is still no real debate about how the country is run. In 1998 local Qatari newspapers published a letter from a Qatari religious scholar called Abdul Rahman al-Nuaimi which criticized the emancipation of women in Qatar, one of the government's key policies. Nuaimi wrote that this trend was un-Islamic and that awarding women political rights risked turning them into men. He was arrested and jailed for nearly three years without trial.

With a word the Emir can change the course of the life of any individual or family in Qatar, even powerful members of his own tribe, and all Qataris depend on his benevolence. On 5 August 2003 the Emir announced that his successor would no longer be his elder brother, who had been in ill health, but would instead be his own fourth son. In a moment one man's autocratic decision changed the future of Qatar for ever.

Nor is it only Qataris who watch what they say in Qatar. At an expat party during my first week in Doha, I was politely asked whether I had yet met anyone from the Qatari CID. The CID, so expat rumour had it, is the secret arm of the Qatari police and has the job of mingling with the expat community to gauge its disposition towards the state. Since there is no democratic forum for people to air their opinions, the government has to employ policemen to stay abreast of the mood on the street. It is the task of CID officers to spot seditious trends in behaviour before they start. If they stumble across anyone fishy among the expatriate community, they tip off the regular police, and the authorities, rather than hold a long and potentially embarrassing court case, simply expel suspect expats at once.

'This is why,' a veteran British expatriate policeman told me over a tray of sausages at an expat house party in Doha, 'there has been no terrorism so far in Qatar. The Qataris run a very tight ship. They know who goes into the country and who comes out, and if you want a long-stay visa they run a thorough background check on you. Not to mention AIDS tests, even for children. Any doubt at all, you get deported.'

Another highly unusual aspect of Sheikh Hamad's regime is that the second of his three wives, Sheikha Moza bint Nasser al-Misned, has an important role in running the nation's affairs. She is the chairperson of the Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development and sits on several other committees. Qataris see her as a sovereign in her own right. The royal couple rule almost as a partnership: sometimes she speaks in public with complete authority while he sits in the audience and watches. A glamorous mother of seven in her forties, Sheikha Moza possesses the positivity and self-confidence that characterize the Arab women's movement. One Qatari technocrat who worked for her told me he was impressed by her capacity for speed-reading lengthy technical documents and then asking intelligent, pertinent questions.

By the 1980s, when Qatar had become a seriously wealthy country, its Gulf neighbours, Dubai, Bahrain and Abu Dhabi, had already had a chance to establish themselves in the region as regional banking and commerce capitals. Unlike the other Emirates, Qatar traditionally had never been a trade hub, so the American-educated first lady, thinking laterally, decided that rather than compete with them she would concentrate on developing Qatar as a regional leader in education. Education has since become an obsession for both the Emir and his wife.

Buying wholesale into the American university system, the educational foundation which she heads paid \$750 million for a branch of Cornell University to open a campus in Doha. At present the Weill Cornell Medical College turns out just sixty graduates a year, but, when it comes to royal projects, money is never a deciding factor, and Sheikha Moza has identified a regional demand for quality educational facilities. Virginia University, Carnegie Mellon, Texas A&M University and the prestigious American think tank the Rand Corporation have all recently opened branches in Qatar. According to one Qatari academic I spoke with, this has already had a positive effect far beyond anyone's hopes. With so many world-class institutions located on one block in Qatar's new science and technology park, the prospects for academic cross-fertilization during the lunch hour are enormous.

Academics have been given important roles in drafting Qatar's new democracy. For example, the President of the University of Qatar chaired the committee that drew up the new constitution. He had the final word over all the others who contributed to it, the Foreign Minister among them, so an academic took precedence over a minister.

Although women in Qatar still face discrimination, Sheikha Moza, who is a Unesco special envoy for education, has helped effect a dramatic improvement in their status. Women in Qatar vote, drive and make up 40 per cent of the workforce. Unlike in any Western democratic country, Qatari women were enfranchised at the same time as men. In March 1999 six women ran in the municipal elections. Although none of them won a seat, this was the first time that women had been allowed to stand for election in any of the six countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates), and more women voted than men.

Public education for women has reached a standard so high that women now account for nearly two-thirds of the University of Qatar's nine thousand students and win most of the academic prizes. The Dean of the University is a woman, many of the teachers are women and recently women's athletics were introduced for the first time. Increasingly, Qatari women can be found working in both public departments and commercial businesses. Paradoxically, because of the country's strict Wahhabi beliefs, photographs of Sheikha Moza were prohibited until very recently, and when she appeared with her husband for an interview on CBS News's Sixty Minutes the Arab world was astonished.

Besides representing Arab women, Sheikha Moza has also worked hard on behalf of children, and she chairs Qatar's Supreme Council for Family Affairs. Under her guidance the prodigious use of child labour in camel racing has come to an end. In Qatar camel racing is a traditional sport in which the jockeys are usually children. Being a jockey in a camel race is not like being a jockey in a horse race. Unlike horses, camels do not need a lot of goading: they run as hard as they can by themselves and just need someone to point them in a straight line. Since the jockey's job is simply to hold the reins, the principal prerequisite for the job is being small and light, so children are ideal. But this is not humane, ruled Sheikha Moza. Now Qatari technologists have pioneered a robotic camel jockey, and children are no longer needed. The camel, I was told, runs just as well.

In the West, Qatar's radical reforms have been hailed as a rare example of better Arab governance. Power had been passed down from one generation to the next peacefully, if not exactly democratically. But, in the Gulf, neighbouring cranky septuagenarian despots began to wonder if the same thing might happen to them. The little Emirate's sweeping new policies were seen as a wild and dangerous precedent.

The Qataris and the Saudis in particular have long been uneasy neighbours. Although Qataris practise the same brand of conservative Wahhabi Islam as Saudis, they are more moderate in outlook and more tolerant of the expatriate majority among whom they live.

Continues...

Excerpted from **Al-Jazeera** by **Hugh Miles** Copyright © 2005 by Hugh Miles. Excerpted by permission. All rights reserved. No part of this excerpt may be reproduced or reprinted without permission in writing from the publisher.