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Qatar: The Gulf state gaining influence out of proportion to its size

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In an air-conditioned room down an alley in the old market of Qatar's capital, Doha, enthusiasts of damah gather most evenings. The ancient board game is a contest of strategy and finesse - and a metaphor for the high-stakes manoeuvring by the Gulf state and its hereditary leader, 59-year-old Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, in recent weeks.

For a country the size of Belgium with a population of 1.7 million, Qatar has been playing a high-profile role. This weekend four Qatari fighter jets are to join the allied forces off the Libyan coast. The deployment is the first by an Arab or Muslim-majority country and thus of critical diplomatic significance.

Then there is the key role played in the "Arab spring" by al-Jazeera, the satellite TV channel set up by the emir in 1996. Broadcasting from Doha, al-Jazeera is now the dominant Arabic-language news outlet in the region.

"Al-Jazeera were the first on to the events in Tunisia. Its reports from there were watched by the Egyptians. Then its reports from Egypt were watched by everyone else. It has been a very important catalyst," said Hugh Miles, author of *Al-Jazeera: How Arab TV News Challenged the World*. Others have described the successive uprisings as "fundamentally driven" by the TV channel.

Al-Jazeera's role and Qatar's decision to send planes are both rooted in Qatar's size, its location on a spur of the Arabian peninsula and the emir's efforts to ensure independence from bigger neighbours such as Iran and Saudi Arabia.

As in a game of damah, the emir, who seized power from his father in 1995, has eschewed confrontation in favour of a more subtle strategy. "Any wise person would do the same", said Faraj Almohammed, a 45-year-old economic advisor and keen damah player, in Doha's old market last night. For despite wealth from its vast oil and gas reserves which means its inhabitants do not pay income tax or utility bills and enjoy average incomes of pounds 50,000, Qatar is vulnerable.

"The [Sandhurst-trained] emir is a military man and knows that Qatar is basically indefensible," said Blake Hounshell, the Doha-based managing editor of *Foreign Policy* magazine. "He has thought laterally about ways of making Qatar more secure." The emir's

main two strategic assets are al-Jazeera and diplomacy, said Mustafa Alani, analyst at the Gulf Research Centre in Dubai. "The aim is to give Qatar an importance out of proportion to its size. Al-Jazeera gives it a loud voice and the emir has made a huge effort to make Qatar the local mediator of choice too."

Al-Jazeera broke with the stultifying style of government-run channels in the region and became an integral part of the cultural landscape. "Al-Jazeera pitches itself at its viewership. It is Arab-owned, Arab-financed, based in an Arab city and . . . gives people what they want to hear in a language they understand," said Miles. For protesters, the presence of al-Jazeera cameras means a measure of security. In Syria this week, demonstrators chanted: "We want al-Jazeera." In Sana'a in Yemen, a sign read: "Al-Jazeera is part of our revolution."

Such influence has caused problems. Last year al-Jazeera, which means "the peninsula", was banned in Morocco, suspended in Bahrain and caused a diplomatic incident with Jordan. A crew was arrested by Nato-led troops in Afghanistan for "making propaganda". The channel has been restricted or targeted by almost every Arab state and many others, including the US. But it has also given the emir huge credibility and prestige among ordinary people.

Al Anstey, managing director of al-Jazeera's English-language channel, said any challenge to governments was not deliberate but simply came from reporters covering "the facts on the ground".

For Alani, "like Qatar's role as a mediator, al-Jazeera makes enemies but is a net gain in terms of influence".

Successfully bidding for the 2022 World Cup attracted global attention, as it was meant to. Qatar has good relations with the US, hosting its vast airbase at al-Udeid, and, relative to the rest of the region, with Israel. It also maintains contacts with Hamas and Hezbollah, shares an oilfield with Iran and is friendly to Riyadh. Angering the latter is "not an option", said one western diplomat in the region, a factor in what some claim is al-Jazeera's "downplaying" of news of its neighbour. Anstey denied any bias. "We are financed by the state of Qatar but editorially entirely independent. We cover every story on its merits," he said.

Qatar is seen as moderate compared with its neighbours. Alcohol is not illegal, though it is an offence to drink in public. Homosexuality is illegal. Political parties are banned and, according to Amnesty International, the founder of a human rights organisation was detained this month. To the surprise of some, al-Jazeera reported the arrest.

The effects of the channel may be greater than the emir bargained for.

"Over the last decade, al-Jazeera has done more to educate Arabs about human rights, civil rights, democracy and the world than anyone else," said Miles. "Now anywhere in the Arab world you can have an informed discussion about what's happening in the world."

The "Arab spring" appears likely to remain foreign news for al-Jazeera. "Qatar is unique in

that there are really very few local tensions," said Dr Jennifer Heeg, a Doha-based human rights specialist. "A day of rage was called recently and no one turned up."

There is little discontent in Education City, a vast complex of colleges set up by the emir. Students in the open-air cafeteria of the private Carnegie Mellon University said it was the killing of an al-Jazeera cameraman near Benghazi that justified Qatar's military commitment. "I think all Arab countries should do the same. We are all Arab and we all should help each other," said Muhammad Hadi, a 20-year-old business administration student. "I think Qatar wants to have more influence on the world [and] I am proud to live in this country."

With additional reporting from Omar Chatriwalla and Shabina Khatri in Doha

Captions:

Al-Jazeera's newsroom in Doha, Qatar Photograph: Karim Jaafar/AFP/Getty Images

