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Qatar's Heightened Profile

By John Duke Anthony

EDITORS NOTE:

The State of Qatar: it's not very large -- a little smaller than the state of Connecticut. It's not very populous -- about as many citizens as Memphis, Tennessee. It is known to most -- outside the community of regional specialists -- as the home of the Al Jazeera satellite broadcast channel, if anything about it is known at all. However little has been known about it in the past, Qatar is emerging as a key player in Gulf affairs and U.S. relations with the Gulf states.

What factors are bringing Qatar to the forefront of economic, political and defense agendas among the U.S. and the Gulf states? GulfWire publisher, John Duke Anthony, examines the emergence of Qatar on the world's stage in today's Perspectives. We also provide links to additional material on Qatar and GulfWire reporting on this important country.

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(WASHINGTON - October 27, 2002) With or without the recent reports of regional opposition to some of its policies, Qatar continues to figure prominently in regional and international news. Not least among the reasons is its ongoing chairmanship of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) for the second year of a three-year term. The OIC is the largest international organization of the 57 Islamic countries.

In this capacity Qatar remains center stage for nearly a quarter of humanity. This is not only because of Qatar's intensive involvement in the many issues and interests discussed and debated by adherents to the Islamic faith in communities and institutions globally.

It also has to do with much of the world's focus on Islam in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States and the ensuing campaign against global terrorist networks. As such, Qatar remains a prominent interlocutor with international and regional organizations and, in particular, with the United Nations, the United States and other allied governments engaged in Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

But Qatar's global profile rose considerably earlier this year for another reason -- it significantly upgraded and expanded its defense cooperation with the United States. At Al-Udaid Air Base, Qatar increased exponentially the nature and number of pre-positioned American military equipment in

accordance with its 1991 Defense Cooperation Agreement with the United States. In addition, for the first time, Qatar received several hundred U.S. defense personnel for what were to have been joint military exercises, now postponed, but when and if they do take place, many envision as a potential prelude to a possible United States attack against Iraq.

Media Momentum

The country's pioneering news media, specifically Al-Jazeera Television, remains a major source not only of fast-breaking news and insight regarding world affairs, but also, of regional and international comment as a result of its frequent no-holds-barred approach to many controversial issues.

American and Israeli critics repeatedly charge the station's management with irresponsibly airing negative views of Israeli and American foreign policies. The primary reference of such complaints continues to be the program's graphic portrayals of the Israeli military using hi-tech U.S. manufactured weaponry to attack Palestinian civilians and what many guest commentators claim to be President Bush's unequivocal support for many of the policies and positions of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

Fellow Arab countries such as Bahrain, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia have taken issue with the program for different reasons - mainly its frequent criticisms of their and other countries' forms of governance and various domestic policies. The program's managers, in their defense, cite the principles of freedom of the press and point out how, in previous years, much of the world had strongly criticized Qatar's and other Arab countries' media for practicing self-censorship on newsworthy topics.

Energy Economics

Economically, Qatar continues its ascent within the ranks of the world's major gas producers. Already rivaling Brunei as the country with the highest per capita income, Qatar has been widely recognized for some time as owner of the world's third largest gas reserves. In addition, it is well on its way to becoming the world's leading exporter of both liquefied natural gas as well as gas-to-liquids within the next half decade.

No less portentous in terms of the future, Qatar, situated geographically in the heart of the GCC region, has as good a chance as any country to occupy center stage in the growing trend towards intra-GCC industrial integration. Hastening the day when this will come are three potentially far-reaching developments, all of them advantageous to Qatar and its neighbors.

One is the settlement last year of the long-standing territorial dispute between Bahrain and Qatar. With that thorny irritant out of the way, there is now a growing commitment between the two countries' leaders that they should link their two peoples' economies and societies more closely through the construction of a maritime causeway between them.

The second development is the scheduled January 1, 2003 launching of the pan-GCC Common External Tariff (5%) and Customs Union. The third is in the form of efforts already underway, in the northern gulf, for Qatar to provide low-cost gas supplies to Bahrain, to spur its industrialization, and to Kuwait, to help fuel its power generation and desalination plants.

Simultaneously, in the southern Gulf, Qatar is providing much-needed gas to the UAE Emirate of Dubai to fuel its energy-intensive industries.

Strategic Vision

The lessons embedded in Qatar's steady march to becoming a global energy giant have not been lost on international business strategists. The country's phenomenal economic success has increasingly validated the government's earlier path-breaking role in amassing immense foreign and domestic investment to build the country's state-of-the-art gas infrastructure. It has also confirmed the leadership's prescience in concluding mutually profitable commercial export arrangements with some of the world's most important industrial nations.

In short, Qatar's timely and decisive boldness on the economic and investment fronts, when others were far less knowledgeable or certain of the future, and were accordingly reluctant to assume risks of such scope and scale, has paid off handsomely.

Like nothing else, it has enabled a previously little known country to ensure for coming generations of its citizens an ambitious domestic development program simultaneous to becoming a formidable player in international energy markets for the foreseeable future.

Social and Political Reforms

Qatar has also continued to pioneer on the educational front. In addition to implementing exchange agreements in which select American universities have been permitted to establish branches at Qatar University, with one such institution already having produced its first graduates, Qatar has recently decided to establish the first Center for American Studies in the Arab world.

In another first for the GCC region, Qatar recently announced it would soon inaugurate a ten-year program of providing four-year, all-expenses paid scholarships for outstanding pre-collegiate Americans keen to pursue their undergraduate education at Qatar University.

Finally, Qatar's constitutional process proceeds apace. Building on the experience of the previous year's municipal elections, in which, for the first time within the GCC region, women voted and stood as candidates, Qatar continues to prepare for what, in 2003, will be its first national elections for a parliament.

These developments signal the likelihood of an unusually active and high profile coming year for Qatar, especially in light of the fact that, in late December, it is also scheduled to host the annual heads of state summit for the Gulf Cooperation Council and serve as chairman of the GCC's Supreme Council for the following year.

In being part of the GCC, Qatar stands in good company. The GCC countries, in addition to Qatar, are Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. The GCC region encompasses half of the world's proven petroleum reserves, possesses a substantial and growing proportion of the

world's gas deposits, sits astride or adjacent to several of the world's most vital international maritime routes, and is the site of Makkah and Madinah, the 1.2. billion Muslim world's two holiest places.

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