

Qatar may be tiny, but it is having a major impact across the Arab world. By propping up violent jihadists in the Middle East, North Africa, and beyond, while supporting the United States in its fight against them, this gas-rich speck of a country – the world’s wealthiest in *per capita* terms – has transformed itself from a regional gadfly into an international rogue elephant.

Using its vast resources, and driven by unbridled ambition, Qatar has emerged as a hub for radical Islamist movements. The massive, chandeliered Grand Mosque in Doha – Qatar’s opulent capital – is a rallying point for militants heading to wage jihad in places as diverse as Yemen, Tunisia, and Syria. As a result, Qatar now rivals Saudi Arabia – another Wahhabi state with enormous resource wealth – in exporting Islamist extremism.

But there are important differences between Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Qatar’s Wahhabism is less severe than Saudi Arabia’s; for example, Qatari women are allowed to drive and to travel alone. In Qatar, there is no religious police enforcing morality, even if Qatari clerics openly raise funds for militant causes overseas.

Given this, it is perhaps unsurprising that, whereas Saudi Arabia’s sclerotic leadership pursues reactionary policies rooted in a puritanical understanding of Islam, Qatar’s younger royals have adopted a forward-thinking approach. Qatar is the home of the Al Jazeera satellite television channel and Education City, a district outside of Doha that accommodates schools, universities, and research centers.

Similar inconsistencies are reflected in Qatar's foreign policy. Indeed, the country's relationship with the United States directly contradicts its links with radical Islamist movements.

Qatar hosts Al Udeid air base – with its 8,000 American military personnel and 120 aircraft, including supertankers for in-flight refueling – from which the US directs its current airstrikes in Syria and Iraq. Camp As-Sayliyah – another facility for which Qatar charges no rent – serves as the US Central Command's forward headquarters. In July, Qatar agreed to purchase \$11 billion worth of US arms.

Moreover, Qatar has used its leverage over the Islamists that it funds to help secure the release of Western hostages. And it hosted secret talks between the US and the Pakistan-backed Afghan Taliban. To facilitate the negotiations, Qatar provided a home, with US support, to the Taliban's *de facto* diplomatic mission – and to the five Afghan Taliban leaders released earlier this year from US detention at Guantánamo Bay.

In other words, Qatar is an important US ally, a supplier of weapons and funds to Islamists, and a peace broker all at the same time. Add to that its position as the world's largest supplier of liquefied natural gas and the holder of one of its largest sovereign-wealth funds, and it becomes clear that Qatar has plenty of room to maneuver – as well as considerable international clout. Germany's government found that out when it was forced to retract its development minister's statement that Qatar played a central role in arming and financing the Islamic State.

Qatar's growing influence has important implications for the balance of power in the Arab World, especially with regard to the country's rivalry with Saudi Arabia. This competitive dynamic, which surfaced only recently, represents a shift from a long history of working in tandem to export Islamist extremism.

Both Qatar and Saudi Arabia generously supplied weapons and funds to Sunni extremists in Syria, opening the door for the emergence of the Islamic State. Both have bolstered the Afghan Taliban. And both contributed to Libya's transformation into a failed state by aiding Islamist militias. During the 2011 NATO campaign to overthrow Colonel Muammar el-Qaddafi, Qatar even deployed ground troops covertly inside Libya.

Today, however, Qatar and Saudi Arabia are on opposite sides. Qatar, along with Turkey, backs grassroots Islamist movements like the Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoots in Gaza, Libya, Egypt, Tunisia, Iraq, and the Levant. That pits it against Saudi Arabia and countries like the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Jordan, whose rulers view such movements as an existential threat, with some, including the House of Saud, investing in propping up autocratic regimes like their own.

In this sense, Qatar's tack has produced a rare schism within the Gulf Cooperation Council, whose members collectively possess nearly half of the world's oil reserves. The proxy competition among rival monarchies, which led some of them to withdraw their ambassadors from Qatar in March, is intensifying

violence and instability throughout the region. For example, the UAE, with Egyptian assistance, secretly carried out airstrikes in August to stop Qatari-aided Islamist militias from gaining control of the Libyan capital, Tripoli.

Qatar's leaders are willing to challenge their neighbors for a simple reason: They believe that the grassroots Islamist movements they support – which, in their view, represent majority political aspirations – eventually will win. Anticipating that such groups will increasingly shape Arab politics, displacing strongman regimes, Qatar has set out to empower them.

In doing so, Qatar is destabilizing several countries and threatening the security of secular democracies far beyond the region. For the sake of regional and international security, this elephant must be tamed.