

Cultural Sociology of the Middle East, Asia, & Africa: An Encyclopedia

Qatar: 1920 to Present: Middle East

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Print Pub. Date: 2012

Online Pub. Date: May 31, 2012

Print ISBN: 9781412981767

Online ISBN: 9781452218458

DOI: 10.4135/9781452218458

Print pages: I334-I335

This PDF has been generated from SAGE knowledge. Please note that the pagination of the online version will vary from the pagination of the print book.

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10.4135/9781452218458

10.4135/9781452218458.n170

The State of Qatar is a small peninsula situated in the Persian Gulf and located west of Saudi Arabia, northeast of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), southeast of Kuwait and Iraq, and southwest of Iran. It is an emirate (a territory ruled by an emir, who is the head of a royal family) with a mix of sharia (Islamic law) and a civil code of law comprising the constitution. It has been ruled by the Al-Thani family since 1916, based on the signing of an agreement with the British Empire establishing Qatar as one of its protectorates in the Middle East. Qatar gained independence in 1971 after it considered joining a federation with Bahrain and UAE (seven former Trucial States), a federation that failed to materialize.

The emir and many of the cabinet of ministers, as well as other high-ranking officials, are members of the Al-Thani family and are overwhelmingly male. However, some high-level appointments have been made outside the ruling family. Because of the concentration of power within the Al-Thani family, divisions or disputes among members of this large kin group influence political relations. In 1998, Qatar held open elections for a municipal council. This was the first election ever held in Qatar, and the campaign was not only lively but drew in large portions of Qatar's citizenry. While a number of women ran for office, none were elected in this first vote. Both women and men turned out to vote for representatives from their residential sectors. The municipal council represents local residential sectors to other governmental bodies.

Qatar Citizenry

The citizens of Qatar, or the Qataris, comprise the Arab Bedouins; the Hadars, mostly of Iranian descent; and the Abd or Alabd, the descendants of slaves from east Africa. In addition, the Hadars were the settled townspeople, though many had their origins among the Bedouin tribes' people. They are also called the "sea people," as not only were they often settled close to the sea but they also took part in pearl diving.

Qataris are strongly characterized as being family oriented, and every member of a larger family (a clan) is linked with tribal affiliations, religious denominations (Sunni or Shia, the two political sects in Islam dating back to the question of who would succeed the Prophet Muhammad after his demise), and local patterns of historical settlements. The government has established complacent policies regarding foreign workers' identities by allowing them to exercise their own cultural rights, speak their own language (e.g., the schools' medium of instruction can be in their native language), and practice their own religion, among other things. However, there are cases of labor discrimination and abuses; for example, some domestic workers are subject to commercial sexual exploitation.

Based on a study conducted by the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs of the U.S. Department of State, approximately 85 percent of the total population of 1,699,435 comprises expatriates (mostly foreign workers); the official 2010 census was the first in the Arab world, spearheaded by the Qatar Statistics Authority under the supervision of Hamad bin Jassim bin Jaber Al-Thani, the prime minister of Qatar. The population has a staggering gender gap between males (1,284,739) and females (414,696), and 90 percent of the labor force is made up of foreign workers. Eighty percent of the total population lives in the capital, Doha. The capital is famous for its illuminating waterfront architecture, exciting promenades, and relaxing parks. In addition, its local food is a mix of different cuisines as a result of the many foreign workers, particularly from Iran, India, and some southeast Asian countries.

Economy and Politics

In recent years, Qatar has served as a prominent partner in contributing to peace-building and peacekeeping efforts in the international community. It mediated conflicts in Western Sahara, Yemen, Ethiopia-Eritrea, Indonesia, Somalia, and famously in Darfur and Lebanon. It has also involved itself in deep negotiations between the Palestinian authorities, Hamas, and Fatah. Qatar's involvement in all these mediations can be vindicated by its lack of ties to any supranational regional powers, and its strategy of neutrality made it an unbiased mediator in conflicts. Its unbiased stance can be determined from the fact that Qatar is the only nation in the Middle East that

has meaningful relations [p. 1334 ↓] to differing degrees with the United States, Iran, Hezbollah, and Israel.

Qatar currently ranks third-highest in large gas reserves and 12th-largest in oil reserves in the world, based on the Central Intelligence Agency's *World Factbook*, and has the second-highest gross domestic product (GDP) based on purchasing-power-parity (PPP) per capita in the world (highest in the Arab world), as stated in the 2010 World Economic Outlook Database of the International Monetary Fund. The government is now concentrating on developing a knowledge-based economy by strengthening the links among the education (specifically, in the fields of science and technology), energy, and financial (business) sectors.

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10.4135/9781452218458.n170

Further Readings

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