

## The Two Faces of Qatar

Smaller than the state of Connecticut, with a native population of less than 300,000 and occupying a small peninsula on the coast of the Arabian Peninsula, this small Persian Gulf State called Qatar has been a significant international player in the recent years. Currently ranking amongst the highest in oil and gas reserves, as well as the country's GDP (\$150,6bill) and GDP/Capita (\$179,000), this small Arab emirate has experienced one of the worst economic times as well as becoming the world's richest country. As far as their involvement with other countries in the Middle East and North Africa, Qatar has played a leading role in shaping the events in the Libya and Syrian, as well as Emir Sheikh's visit to the Gaza Strip last month; one of the most fascinating and intriguing visits the Hamas territory has ever experienced. This art of "shuttle diplomacy"<sup>1</sup> as Michael Stephens calls it in one of his articles, essentially legitimized Hamas, who has been in control of the Gaza Strip since 2007. Qatar's favoritism on pursuing the Palestinian cause by supporting Hamas and the values of the Muslim Brotherhood means that they are also engaged in promoting Islamist movements. It is not out of charity the emir of Qatar pledged \$400 million to invest in schools, housing, and construction because he suddenly felt like a philanthropist. It is because Qatar is seeking to achieve an Arab unity by playing the "rich man of the Middle East" only to gain the dominance in Arab politics, which could eventually be beneficiary to U.S. Foreign Policy concerning the Middle East; especially now that President Barack Obama has been re-elected for a second term in the White House. From Ottoman rule to its independence from Great Britain; from a devastation following World War II to become one of the richest and most influential countries in the world, one would think that this tiny country in the Middle East must also be one of the most developed ones when it comes to the uniqueness of the Qataris.

However, the only unique thing about the Qataris that they are the minority in their own homeland. With a population of approximately 885,000 and only 25% being *from* Qatar, there is no denying that ethics, religion, and patriotism are highly and strictly valued in the Qatari society. As an absolute Monarchy, the government is responsible with providing employment and housing for every family, and sole focus on the importance of religion, morals, and values. One would assume that life in Qatar would be much easier than in any other country in the Middle East - well, maybe for men. As a rich and growing country, Qatar is also very backwards concerning gender equality and has been criticized by many women's rights activists. Despite its influential role in diplomacy between the West and Iran, Qatar is culturally very conservative, second in following Saudi Arabia's cultural oppression against women. Women have to be covered from head to toe, and the image of the "hidden face of eve," as Nawal el Saadawi labels in her book, has become a sinking sadness with a complete lack of identity as to what it is to be called a woman. Although Qatar favors and endorses the education of women, they are still separated from men, and are not allowed - or rather not advised - to speak or interact with men in any sort of way while on university grounds. Sound familiar? In Saudi Arabia, a rival neighbor to Qatar, women are not allowed to walk down the streets without being accompanied by a man; they are not allowed to drive cars, or chew gum, or even watch television if a man is not present.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.opendemocracy.net/michael-stephens/shuttle-diplomacy-qatar-playing-politics-in-palestine>

This extremeness hardly applies to Qatari culture that much, but the patriarchal system of dominance is still very much embedded into society; an example, for the most part, marriages are still arranged, and women are “passed over” to a stranger they will see for the first time after the wedding ceremony; a similar Chinese culture. Interestingly enough, although the abaya is not as penalized for not wearing it in public, many women do so anyway. This is an indication that although religious culture is taken very seriously in Qatar, modernity and liberalization still linger in the air like microscopic dust particles; you can’t see them but they definitely affect you in some way.

Ever since the rise to power of the current emir of Qatar, women have hoped for a revolutionary change, comparing their role in society with Qatar’s position in the Middle East. There have been municipal elections for women and men, however, it is an approach taken like the slogan used in Bahrain, where “women run, women vote, and women lose.” Yes, women are allowed to vote since 1999, however, political parties are banned in Qatar, therefore it gives limited political and electoral activity. The emir’s wife, Sheika Mozah, has served as an influential role for women’s independence in Qatar; but to what extent this independence is understood is another issue. The only formal independence Sheika Mozah has successfully achieved is enforcing education for women, which in most parts of the Middle East are not even allowed discussing. It is true, Qatari women are allowed to vote, drive a car, and pursue career opportunities, but the restrictions they face in their culture are stronger than anything else, and all those rights they possess which seem to the Western world as a progress in modernization, fade away because women still believe that gender equality does not categorize them. It is a very common psychological approach Muslim women who live under strict patriarchal laws tend to take. Instead, they express their individualism by the way they present themselves in public. For example, even though they are covered completely, with only their eyes and hands showing, they replace the cultural, black abaya with more colorful ones using excessive accessories. And since the only parts which are not covered are the eyes, hands, and feet, shoes - believe it or not - have become an important part of their “dress code.”

Many Qatari women claim that they have a choice and can do as they please, but the extent of how accurate that statement is varies. How can a country so devoted to their religion, so conservative, be so liberal at the same time and allow women to do what they want as if they were “equal to men?” Or is that just a statement for the West to believe? Then again, as a conservative Islamic nation, Qatar did send Noor Hussain Al-Malki, the first Qatari woman ever, to compete in the London’s Summer Olympics. However, culturally conservative Qatar was visible as Al-Malki was wearing a head scarf, long sleeves, and leggings. Afghanistan was also amongst those who send women to compete at the Olympics for the first time. Is this really a step in the right directions or was this mainly an “act” for the sake of the Olympic Games, and to send a message to the West?

Despite all the major reforms Qatar has enacted since 1995 and the several steps taken to promote more equality amongst women, the fight against cultural discrimination can only be won if equality is achieved in both law and practice. Providing women with education can be used as a great tool to educate them about their rights, especially when they are outnumbered by men two to one. This influences women’s participation economically and as well as in all aspects of Qatari society. In 2006, Qatar

enacted the country's first family law, which meant that instead of judges deciding the fate of women regarding marriage, divorce, and inheritance based on their interpretations of the sharia law, this new law gave women an improvement compared to the older system. However the new system may benefit them, women still remain underrepresented in the workforce as well as in the government. Qatar's constitution, Article 35, does say "All people are equal before the law," and that "there shall be no discrimination on account of sex, origin, language or religion,"<sup>2</sup> providing all citizens with equal rights, and although women can complain to the police if they have been victims of gender based discrimination, most of the time their complaints are being over-looked because the courts still operate on the principles of the sharia law. It is not surprising that the emir of Qatar favors the principles and values of the Muslim Brotherhood, hence Qatar's investment in tourism and industry projects along Egypt's Mediterranean coast.

Ultimately, Qatar remains a patriarchal society and although the government has recognized that violence and discrimination against women is an issue, their laws have not specifically outlawed it. As previously mention, Qataris are in their own unique way the minority in their own country, and while foreign women are allowed to obtain a driver's license, Qatari women still need to ask permission of their husbands to do so. When it comes to domestic violence, in 2007 there were a reported 107 cases of women being victims of domestic abuse.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Qatari women also tend to be much more educated then men, with 66.6%of female citizens holding degrees.<sup>4</sup> Despite this, they remain underrepresented in the workforce. Could it be that women have become a threat in the eyes of the patriarchate system? When it comes to women and their reproductive rights, abortion in Qatar is permitted in the first trimester if a licensed physician can determine that the mother's life is in danger or if there is a serious abnormality with the fetus. Ironically, it is impossible to determine the abnormality of the fetus in the first trimester, and whether the child will be born with a mentally disabled; so technically, that assumption can be easily refuted.

To conclude, there is no doubt that Qatar remains one of the richest countries in the Middle East, and while the government has taken steps toward improving the lives of women, many of those reforms still remain uncertain. Providing women with a government based education is far better than not educating women at all. Ultimately, it is through the knowledge they acquire that they will be able to expand culturally, challenging the social norms which keep the trapped; one step away from emancipation. Unless these reforms are firmly institutionalized, they will be of limited consequences.

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<sup>2</sup> Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa, ed. Sanja Kelly and Julia Breslin, (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2010), pp. 399.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. pp. 408

<sup>4</sup> pp. 411