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Qatar not on al-Qaida radar screen

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"Nothing bad happened this week" is not a headline to set the pulses racing, but in Qatar they are thankful that it remains that way. Despite predictions to the contrary, the small oil- and natural gas-rich sheikhdom in the Gulf has been free of any terrorist attack since the one isolated suicide bombing on March 19, when an Egyptian drove his car into a theater in Doha, the capital, killing one British citizen and injuring 12 people.

The blast destroyed the one-floor building. Inside, theatergoers were watching an amateur performance of Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night."

By last week, there was little sign of terrorist jitters in Doha. Security was noticeably lax compared to what it is in many Gulf States. The armed police patrols that are highly visible in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and in other Arab countries are not seen in Doha. After March 19, hotels in the capital installed electronic detectors, but there is otherwise very little noticeable security.

At a charity gala in Doha recently the ruling emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, his family and members of his government mingled freely with a couple of hundred Arab and Western guests. White robed members of the ruler's personal bodyguard stood around the room. But in these days of increased vigilance the relaxed atmosphere was a surprise to some observers.

Doha's apparent immunity has been something of a mystery to Middle East observers considering the range of possible motivations for making it a prime target for jihadist retribution.

Qatar has emerged as perhaps the leading U.S. ally in the Gulf. It was, and remains, indispensable for the U.S. military effort in both Afghanistan and Iraq (the March bomb attempt was on the second anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq). Al-Udeid Air Base, 20 miles from Doha is one of the key American bases in the Gulf.

Every official from the sheikh down has defended Qatar's diplomatic engagement with Israel. The Gulf state has had trade relations with the Israelis since 1996. Then last year, the Qatari foreign minister, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jabr al-Thani, had a highly publicized meeting his Israeli counterpart, Silvan Shalom. Earlier this year, the government in Doha astonished the Arab world by asking Israel to help Qatar secure one of the non-permanent seats on the U.N. Security Council.

Internally, the government's more relaxed approach to some of the rules that govern Islamic society, such as the treatment of women for whom the traditional face covering in public -- and

indeed traditional dress in general -- are purely optional in Qatar must anger Islamic fundamentalists. In a 2003 referendum Qataris approved a new constitution that provides for a partially elected national assembly and gives women the right to vote and to run for office.

Observers say Qatar's progressively more tolerant regime makes the authorities in nearby, more repressive Saudi Arabia nervous. In the words of one Western diplomat last week, "Qataris watch their larger neighbor closely and take action accordingly - usually in the opposite direction."

There is also the fact the Saudi authorities, after a decade of denial, are now confronting al-Qaida, the terrorist group, and cracking down on preachers regarded as too fiery. Some experts believe that as the offensive continues terrorists will flee across the border to Qatar and other neighboring countries.

So how does Qatar manage to escape the grim attention of al-Qaida, and how much longer is the "honeymoon" likely to last?

One persistent rumor, recently reported in the London Sunday Times and strongly denied last week by a Qatari official, is that Qatar has long bought its immunity by paying al-Qaida protection money. The Egyptian suicide bomber -- the theory goes -- was a signal that the terrorist organization was raising the price because of the high cost of Abu Mousab al-Zarqawi's Iraq operation.

There can be other forms of insurance besides money. Since 1996 Qatar's then interior minister, Sheikh Abdullah bin Khalifa al-Thani, a Saudi refugee and member of the ruling family, was said to have given shelter in Doha to Islamic terrorists and radical preachers from Chechnya, Algeria, Egypt and other Arab lands, among them Khaled Sheikh Mohammed, the man suspected of masterminding the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington. In February 2004, Chechen leader Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev was assassinated in Doha where he had been living. Moscow had tried in vain to secure his extradition. When he was killed, the Qataris arrested two alleged Russian agents and charged them with placing a bomb in Yandarbiyev's car.

Sheikh Abdullah was purged from his interior minister's post in the summer of 2004, but knowledgeable sources in Doha say members of his clique remain embedded among Qatari mid-level security officials. The current interior minister, Sheikh Abdullah bin Nasser bin-Khalifa al-Thani, is one of the emir's loyalists. While the old hands in the interior ministry are being weeded out, the Qatari government has set about improving its security apparatus. With Western help, parallel security institutions have been established, notably the State Security Agency and the Internal Security Forces, both of which report directly to the emir.

Qatar is also developing a coast guard to patrol its long coastline, and protective security for its vital hydrocarbon sector infrastructure. A major test to Qatar's ability to prevent terrorist attacks will come next year when Doha holds the Asian Games.

There is also the Al Jazeera factor. The Arab language all-news satellite television channel hated by the Bush administration as a vehicle for al-Qaida propaganda because it continues to receive and broadcast messages from terrorist leader Osama bin Laden, al-Zarqawi and other top terrorism figures was launched by the emir and has its headquarters in Doha. Some experts say many Arabs see Al Jazeera as sympathetic toward the jihad and this perception rules it out as a terrorist target so as not to create confusion.

But an Al Jazeera executive told United Press International al-Zarqawi complains that the network's approach is too pro-American.

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