

Fromherz, Allen James: *Qatar. A Modern History*. London: I.B. Tauris 2012. ISBN: 978-1-84885-167-2; XI, 204 S.

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Within a few decades, Qatar has developed from an almost unknown, barren peninsula into one of the richest countries in the world. While these changes are stunning for outside observers, they do not seem to have infringed upon the basic foundations of Qatar's society. Why has this rapid modernization not eradicated traditional identities in Qatar as it did in the West in the age of industrialization? As a historian, Allen Fromherz (Georgia State University) looks for the answer in the country's past, where he finds a continuity, linking the past to the present, which can be easily overlooked if researchers only focus on the economy or formal institutions. In „Qatar: A Modern History“ he sets out to identify this continuity, tying in with Jill Crystal's „Oil and Politics in the Gulf“¹, which has so far been the most comprehensive study of Qatar's recent past in Western scholarship. Fromherz' book updates, deepens and extends her work and questions the official „sanitized and controlled heritage“ (p. 14), which the Al Thani have increasingly propagated to justify their rule. His first rather short five chapters, accordingly, are dedicated to Qatar's state-building between „emergence“ and „creation“.

As a small peninsula between large and powerful neighbors (Saudi Arabia and the Ottoman Empire), Qatar's „mild geographical isolation“ (p. 39) was both an asset and a risk. Its location at the sea made it interesting to Great Britain whose main aim was to curtail what it considered „piracy“ on its route to India. In this situation, the Al Thani had the right instinct to meet the British preference for clear power relations and one responsible negotiator on the spot, but they were neither the oldest family nor in a ruling position. They acted as spokesmen only. Nevertheless, they proved to be able to contain piracy satisfactorily and to uphold their position as intermediary: Both in 1868 and 1916, it was a member of the Al Thani who signed the Agreements with Great Britain.

With a shrewd foreign policy between allegiance to the Ottomans and the British, the Al Thani secured their independence, fighting at times against Bahrain and the Ottomans. They encountered the Saudi threat by a proactive conversion to Wahhabism, which, however, has never played such an important role for political legitimization in Qatar as it does in Saudi Arabia.

Danger to the Al Thani Emirs also came from within their family. The British granted the ruler the monopoly over arms, but did not secure the succession and „preferred to deal with whatever Emir would eventually emerge“ (p. 73). Furthermore, Al Thani power was concentrated on what was to become Doha, while the tribes in Wakra, for instance, paid their tribute to local sheikhs. Ironically, it was the economic crisis due to the decline in pearl trade which eventually resulted in more power for the Al Thani clan: Before income from oil production (starting in 1949) would finally pour in, many Qataris, among them potential competitors to the „merchant prince“ left the country. The new income source, however, caused new rifts within this extremely fractionalized family. Members demanded allowances from the ruler who scarcely distinguished state money from his personal income. It was only Sheikh Khalifa, having deposed his cousin Ahmad in a bloodless coup in 1972, who formally restricted his own income and undertook cautious steps towards modernization and industrialization. Doing this, he oversaw everything personally, which limited the outreach of his projects and left Qatar vulnerable to the oil price decline in the 1980s. In 1995, Khalifa was overthrown by his son Hamad to whom Fromherz dedicates the remaining three chapters of his book.

Under Sheikh Hamad Qatar pushed on the international scene, not only as a gas producer, but also as an international mediator in Lebanon, Libya or Iraq, as well as between Hamas, Fatah and Israel. The tiny emirate showed an astonishing independence by allowing Israel to maintain an interest office in Doha (until 2009).

While Qatar seems too small to pursue

¹ Jill Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf. Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar*, Cambridge 1995.

hegemonic interests, Fromherz argues that Qatar may also have to take sides in some conflicts, especially between Iran and the USA, whom Qatar needs for its security. Also Saudi Arabia views Qatar's new role in the region suspiciously. Relations with Bahrain, on the other hand side, have improved after an international settlement in 2001. They had for a long time been overshadowed by Bahraini claims on Qatari territory and the Zubara conflict.

Hamad's reign also started with plans for internal reform and liberalization. One result has been the foundation of the popular TV-channel al-Jazeera, which often stirs up attention with controversial debates. Criticizing Al Thani rule, however, is off-limits. As in other Gulf states, civil society is sponsored and firmly controlled from above.

From the perspective of Western political science, a lot seems to hamper democratization in Qatar: A stable rentier income as well as Islamic and Arabic culture seem to be unfavorable circumstances and indeed, very little has changed in Qatar. Apart from municipal elections in 1998, elections for parliament have time and again been rescheduled. It even seems that the only effective constitutional reform concentrated power more firmly in the hand of Sheikh Hamad: The family council has been marginalized in the choice of the heir apparent and Hamad could choose his son Tamim (born in 1980).

Looking at formal institutions, Hamad's rule may appear unrestricted and absolute. „Far from it“, is Fromherz' diagnosis. Restrictions come from the traditional asabiyya structures of Qatari society: „[...] the Emir is not so much an absolute monarch as an elected first among equals, a mediator between different power bases and interests, rather than a king.“ (p. 128) Hence, Hamad's power is restricted by his own family and the major tribes, who are carefully assigned important government posts. While Qatar's government may invest a lot into the prosperity of the country and may play a prominent international role, the question of stability of the Al Thani monarchy cannot be answered without this „social consensus“ for authoritarianism (p. 129).

In a region which has almost exclusively

been regarded through the lens of the rentier state, Fromherz' reference to French thinkers (especially Émile Durkheim) and modern anthropology provides a fresh and promising perspective. Furthermore, Fromherz offers very useful in depths discussions of the 1868 and 1916 treaties as well as insightful overviews of the major tribes and families in Qatar. However, his focus on history and continuity, combined with a certain determinacy not to let rentier wealth dominate his research, may also underrate the role of oil and gas. Fromherz only shortly alludes to the suspicion that rentier income could have facilitated the continuity of traditional affiliations of Qatari society, but unfortunately, he does not explore this issue any further.

Moreover, this book is not so much based on hitherto unused historical sources as the book cover seems to promise. Sources are mostly the internet, Wikileaks, newspapers and few edited sources. Only one reference quotes a publication in Arabic. While the book is rich in personal experiences of the author, no interviews are mentioned in the references and at times, a few more notes would have been interesting for the reader. Nevertheless, the merits of this book certainly outweigh these defaults.

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