

Nov 04, 2016 by Philip Seib

Qatar's Well-Funded Public Diplomacy ^[1]

DOHA --- Money is a wonderful thing. Qatar has plenty of it and is putting it to use in its expanded public diplomacy. With wealth rather than weaponry, Qatar is becoming a new kind of superpower.

The tiny state's latest triumph is being named the site of the 2022 World Cup. In the run-up to that event, Qatar plans to build air-conditioned stadiums, a 25-mile bridge to Bahrain, a new city, Lusail, which will be home to 300,000 residents, plus a new array of luxury hotels and other amenities. During the coming decade, Qatar expects to see its population double to more than three million.

Qatar will be able to use the World Cup to become better known to people around the world, a task that has previously been dependent largely on the Al Jazeera television news channels that were born in Qatar, with the generous financial backing of the emir, in 1996. This television empire is expanding, with Al Jazeera Turkish, Al Jazeera Swahili, and Al Jazeera Balkans soon to join its list of channels, and Al Jazeera English has recently received permission from the Indian government to broadcast in that crucial market. Al Jazeera's channels serve as Qatar's virtual ambassadors to much of the world, providing an invaluable public diplomacy presence.

In purely business terms, none of these outward-looking ventures will generate profits, at least not immediately, but Qatar – with its vast reserves of natural gas and oil – can afford the outlays needed to raise its global profile and prestige. In its conventional diplomacy, it has hosted peace talks for Lebanon, Sudan, and others, and it is home to important debates and conferences about the world economy and other grand issues. Saudi Arabia, Qatar's rival for Middle East leadership, must look on with envy as its little neighbor sets aside the provincialism that has limited Arab influence for generations and instead embraces a pragmatic worldview that balances commitment to ethnic and religious traditions with the business and political realities of being a major international player.

Qatar's ascendance, like that of nearby Abu Dhabi, represents a change in the contemporary world order. Small but enormously wealthy states are using their resources to become centers of culture and education as well as finance, and they seem intent on proving that in this new century spending money to enhance intellectual capital is a viable means of wielding global influence.

That is the message implicit in Qatar's rise. The rest of the world is taking note, and that is another sign that Qatar's public diplomacy is proving successful.
