Two years on from the outbreak of the Qatar crisis, the blockade has provided Doha with an opportunity to rebrand itself and focus on its development goals and diversification plans as written in its National Vision 2030. Drawing on off the record conversations in London and Doha in April 2019, this analysis offers a unique perspective on the government’s handling of the crisis, and on the sustainability and challenges of the roadmap and wider vision.

Economy on upwards trajectory but can growth be maintained?

In July 2017 Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE, Yemen and Egypt simultaneously cut diplomatic ties with Qatar, insisting that it adhere to 13 demands, including cutting support for terrorist groups, severing ties with Iran and closing the Al Jazeera media channel. The ensuing crisis has had a dramatic political, economic and social impact on Qatari society; the country’s access to ports, airspace and border trade were severed, banking ties were cut, and its citizens expelled from the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.

By far the wealthiest of the Gulf economies in per capita terms, Qatar has been able to thus far weather the storm by drawing upon the strong leadership of Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani and a strident nationalistic response from the population, and by relying on its economic resources and soft power. In 2018, growth recovered from 1.6% to 2.1% and is set to increase to 3.4% by 2021. The government is also expected to maintain a budget surplus for 2019. The blockade has not seriously destabilized the economy, but it has brought to life the realities of the country’s physical constraints alongside long-term sustainability challenges.

While interviewees saw Qatar channelling the crisis for positive means, post World Cup 2022 and localisation issues were flagged as long-term challenges for the government that should be addressed with greater transparency.

Perspectives on role of QNV2030 in Qatar's development

Qatar’s National Vision 2030 (QNV2030), released in 2008, seeks to ambitiously transform the
economy by working towards an advanced educational and health system; increasing Qatari participation in the labour force; pursuing an effective social protection system; and forging a significant role in the international community. It also calls for sound economic management; responsible exploitation of oil and gas resources; economic diversification; and environmental protection.

Since the outbreak of the crisis, many observers have called into question the viability of the QNV2030, questioning whether the country, with its small population and massive gas reserves, needs to adhere to a vision alongside the ambitious development goals.

In conversations interviewees repeatedly suggested the reverse - that the crisis has created a greater need for the vision. In general, the QNV2030 was described as “providing a new sense of purpose and identity for Qataris” by one official in the private sector. Many government officials stated that the crisis was a “blessing” that had created a rally around the flag effect, also providing more connectivity between the government and the people, closer bonds between Qataris and their foreign workers, and greater overall commitment to the vision. The 2022 World Cup was also repeatedly identified as a driver of the roadmap.

Interestingly, some interviewees indicated that the crisis has fuelled government commitment to the QNV2030, without which the roadmap would not have been implemented with the same speed and adherence. Additionally, Qatar’s strident commitment to achieving its objectives were seen as part of the effort to distinguish the country from its neighbours.

Will commitment to the roadmap lessen after 2022?

The QNV2030 is believed by many to be critical to prepare Qatar for the 2022 World Cup. However, these individuals worried that after the World Cup, with less pressure and momentum to deliver, dedication to the vision might be tested. While the crisis is ongoing, the government is more motivated to deliver a successful World Cup, but without adequate future planning, infrastructure investment would be left without purpose and could be seen as wasted expenditure.

A number of interviewees suggested that as long as the crisis endures, the government would remain committed to the vision. In this context, some suggested that the government was using the crisis for its own purposes, implying that an end to the blockade would raise additional political and economic
challenges. Others called the sustainability of the vision into question after the World Cup. This cohort feared that without post 2022 planning, infrastructure investment would be perceived as a loss.

Generations divided over future direction of the workforce

A large focus on the vision is directed towards empowering Qatari through workforce localization. There was a belief that the vision is more popular among the younger generation, who as future stakeholders see the value of diversification and change.

It is believed that the younger generation is more willing to work in the private sector and is slowly altering their professional working habits as well as increasing their productivity as a part of a wider call for personal sacrifice.

The older generation remains more sceptical, fearing that the vision will lead to domestic political challenges that could upset the socio-cultural balance. This generational distinction was referenced a number of times in conversations, as interviewees insisted that generational change was needed for Qatarization to take place in an effective way.

Respondents repeatedly highlighted demographic challenges as the principal issue that required a long-term government strategy and greater transparency.

Addressing Qatar’s demographic constraints would be beneficial for attracting and retaining a professional labour force needed for achieving its knowledge-based economic development goals. Government acknowledgement that demographic constraints will ultimately limit Qatar’s localization plans was also highlighted. Increasing awareness on these issues could further advance discussion on the controversial issue of naturalization laws and residency plans for foreign nationals. A number of respondents suggested addressing naturalization in a novel way would distinguish Qatar from its neighbours and elevate the Qatari brand.

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