

# Qatar, region's bad boy

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Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt severed political and diplomatic relations with Qatar in June 2017 because of its direct and sometimes tacit support of terrorists and radical groups throughout the Middle East. The Anti-Terror Quartet was supported by numerous peace-loving states, which reaffirmed their pledge to the global war on terror. The Trump administration also confirmed on many occasions its maintenance of regional peace and security, through its commitment to the elimination of radicalism, not limited to its clear policy against Iran and the controversial nucle-

The invasion of Dibal is a recent episode that violates the basic norms of international law. Qatar detained Dutch civilians for being construction workers and continues to mistreat foreign labourers.

ar deal, in addition to its pressure on the Qatari regime to relinquish its immoral ambition.

However, one must comprehend that the Qatari problem is rooted deep in the waters of the Gulf. Qatar had a serious maritime dispute with its neighbour Bahrain, when it annexed the historical capital of Zubarah (north-



Qatar is accused of supporting many terror organisations including Hezbollah in Lebanon

west of the Qatar peninsula) in 1937, in what could be considered back then an act of aggression under international law. Qatar forcefully displaced the indigenous people of Zubarah, where the Arab tribes loyal to the King of Bahrain were forced to flee after a massacre of the locals — an episode that would have been considered by today's modern human rights regime a serious human rights violation that would have required the intervention of the international community. However, this is just considered to be

“history” to many, and perhaps only a story to tell generations to come about the hostility of the Qatari regime.

After both Bahrain and Qatar became members of the UN in 1971, and were founding members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) with Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the UAE and Oman, Qatar launched a military attack on Dibal — a small shoal a few miles off the coast of Bahrain — in 1986. The Qatari military kidnapped a number of Dutch workers who were installing a coastal securi-

# Referendums losing integrity

*Social media advertising makes it hard to know who is influencing voters*



JOCHEN BITTNER

Irish voters have decided to legalise abortion during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy. The debate itself contained few new arguments; instead it circled around a question most other European countries have asked themselves over the past 40 years: What is the proper balance between the mother's right to self-determination and the unborn child's right to life?

But there's another question, less about the substance of the issue and more about the campaign around it: In an era of global social media and well-funded foreign activists, what does it mean for a country to hold a vote at all? And if a democracy is no longer insulated from foreign influence, what integrity can any referendum claim?

Forget hacking and illegal vote-buying. What happened in Ireland is more transparent,

but also, for that reason, more troubling.

The vote, Ireland's fifth referendum in five years, was aimed at repealing the Eighth Amendment, which bans abortion except in cases where the mother's life is in danger. For such a small country, the vote has attracted enormous global attention, perhaps because Ireland remains a bastion of Catholicism in Europe.

But Ireland is also a place that should be relatively safe from outside influence. Given its long history in the shadow of Britain, the country has long held its sovereignty and self-determination especially dear. Also, as a relatively small country, voters are used to personally knowing their political representatives, who spend a lot of time campaigning door to door.

Ireland also has rules and laws in place to check undue influence: The Broadcast Authority of Ireland ensures balanced reporting on radio and television, and many of the country's major newspapers and magazines have followed. What's more, it is illegal to take money from abroad for political purposes:

The government has ordered Amnesty International Ireland to return 137,000 euros (about \$160,000) donated by George Soros, the American billionaire, allegedly to promote the repeal of the Eighth Amendment.

None of these safeguards, however, can protect Ireland when it comes to social media. And, in fact, Ireland's experience is demonstrating just how vulnerable voters are to online influence.

Abortion is, of course, an issue that is far from unique to Ireland; it is part of a larger cultural struggle, being fought around the world, over the conviction that liberalism has gone too far. For anyone in the world anxious to defend — or destroy — that status quo, the next battleground is Ireland. No wonder many Irish feel as comfortable in this referendum campaign as a fly under a magnifying glass.

“Democracy for sale in social media's Wild West,” wrote The Business Post on May 6, highlighting the latest findings of the Transparent Referendum Initiative, a group established to monitor social media advertising before the vote. The group studied



A 'yes' campaign supporter is jubilant over the referendum victory in Ireland.

hundreds of Facebook users and the sorts of referendum-related ads that appeared in their feeds. Supporters of Dublin's Gaelic football club were targeted by anti-abortion ads, while those

who identify as customers of the city's Brown Thomas department store would get pro-abortion ads.

In many cases, those ads traced back to foreign activist

groups, like Live Action and the Radiance Foundation, both American organisations.

Or consider that Save 8th, the most prominent organisation against repealing