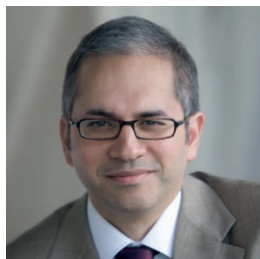


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A little democracy could go a long way

The Middle East is freezing out Qatar. A science academy could help — and would set an important precedent for the region, says **Ehsan Masood**.

Last month, the tiny oil-rich nation of Qatar filed a complaint with the World Trade Organization that its neighbours have been unfairly blocking its ability to trade goods, services and intellectual property. The countries are now in the midst of a 60-day consultation process that will probably go on to a formal dispute settlement. Amid this turmoil, the scientific community could offer a surprising source of influence and, for Qatari researchers, relief.

There are science academies in almost every region of the world. Some, such as the US National Academy of Sciences, established in 1863, are giants boasting a long history and tradition. Others, like the Academy of Sciences of Afghanistan, established in 1978, are minnows yet to make a mark. Academies enable scientists to publicly recognize the leaders in their fields, but they have a broader purpose, too. They nurture young talent, publish research, help to resolve controversies and represent their members to policymakers. Academies are far from perfect, as the under-representation of women and minorities confirms. But they are essential to science and society.

And yet you won't find a single academy among the wealthy nations of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), a regional alliance. Some parts of the GCC — such as Abu Dhabi, which aspires to build one of the world's first zero-carbon, and Qatar, with a network of high-technology national laboratories — employ many scientists. But these scientists are forbidden from setting up academies.

The Gulf's ruling monarchies fear that if scientists are permitted to establish independent organizations, then groups representing women, minority religions, lawyers, teachers and students will also ask to create institutions, publish journals, hold elections and present themselves to governments.

The problem for younger scientists, especially, is that their ambitions are held back because no organization looks after their interests. Nor is there a formal mechanism for redress when laws or regulations thwart research and innovation. For example, staff at national innovation agencies think that changes to laws governing business ownership would encourage more technology start-ups (with wider benefits for science, society and the economy). Currently, every GCC member state demands that a majority of any company be owned by a citizen of that state. This makes it hard to create start-ups, because so many potential tech entrepreneurs — students and researchers — are from other countries. A science academy, or similar, could take up such concerns and lobby ruling families on behalf of researchers.

Qatar's rulers could be the first to allow science academies, albeit for reasons that, even a few months ago, would have been hard to predict. Since June, the GCC states, along with Egypt, have closed their air,

land and sea borders with Qatar. These countries claim that Qatar has been backing opposition groups, either directly, by funding them, or indirectly through its sponsorship of Al Jazeera TV — the nearest that the region has to an independent broadcaster. This is the biggest political crisis in the Middle East since the Arab Spring revolutions.

Qatar's leaders insist that everything is under control. In reality, everything has changed — and scientists are caught in the turmoil. International research partnerships must find new routes into and out of Qatar when scientists want to transport equipment or meet colleagues. GCC embassies in the Qatari capital, Doha, are refusing to renew passports, in effect expelling people from the country. Perhaps most heartbreaking is the effect on families of researchers if one partner is from Egypt or is a non-Qatari GCC national who has been ordered home by their government.

And because the children of Qatari women who are married to non-Qatari men do not have Qatari nationality, they too can face deportation.

With an influential, independent science academy, Qatar could capture researchers' concerns and put these to the government. A Qatari academy would also be able to call on the help of sister academies, and of international federations such as the World Academy of Sciences and the Inter-Academy Partnership, both based in Trieste, Italy.

Qatar's science leaders already have strong links to Western organizations such as the American Association for the Advancement of Science, based in Washington DC, and the Royal Society in London. Elias Zerhouni, a former director of the US National Institutes of Health, led a team that advised the Qatari government on its research priorities. These Western groups

should, collectively, urge Doha to make the leap.

Qatar is an absolute monarchy, with an indigenous population of just 300,000, so political power is distributed among a small number of families — who are likely to prefer an academy in which members are endorsed, if not appointed, through Qatari royals. But such a body would not be a genuine science academy. And it would be ineligible for membership of the major global academy networks.

The nation's leaders fear that a science academy might shelter seeds of what could become a larger democratic revolution, and they are not wrong. But they should be able to see that a little more democracy, especially in a form that strengthens science and innovation, will help to preserve the long-term security of their tiny nation: moral arguments to protect a democracy against dictatorship are still compelling.

Who knows, where one nation leads, others may in time follow. ■

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