

Briefing: Qatar Foundation

March 27, 2018



Summary: *American schools should not be cooperating with the Qatar Foundation. QF is an arm of an autocratic regime. It embraces terrorist organizations and gives platforms to hateful extremists. Its strategic goal is to teach American schoolchildren the Qatari view of the Middle East, and to attack the legitimacy of the United States and Israel.*

On January 27, Qatar Foundation International (QFI) [sponsored](#) a continuing-education event for public-school teachers titled “Middle East 101” in Phoenix, Arizona. It featured Middle East scholars and was hosted by the Arizona Department of Education—which is not surprising, given that QFI has donated [over \\$450,000](#) to Arizona public schools. Unfortunately, while there was a good deal of interesting material, teachers also got a large helping of Islamist propaganda—designed to influence American schoolchildren and ultimately to advance Qatari foreign policy.

QFI program officer Craig Cangemi introduced QFI as a member organization of the Qatar Foundation (QF), which he blandly described as “a private, education-focused foundation in Doha, Qatar.” In fact, QF is a massive apparatus [directly managed](#) by Qatar’s ruling Al-Thani family, which conducts a [tremendous range](#) of state-development activities ranging from technology research to higher education.

Cangemi insisted that QFI, the American branch, sets its own policies, saying, “We are an autonomous organization... [W]e do not have any ties with Qatar: the government, the state, or really [the] Qatar Foundation.” This is patently false. The [CEO](#) and nominal founder of QFI is Sheikha Hind bint Hamad Al-Thani, the daughter of Qatar’s former emir. The [chairman of the board](#) of QFI is Sheikh Jassim bin Abdulaziz Al-Thani, another member of the royal family. As of 2012 (the most recent public records [available](#)), the treasurer of QFI was [Khalid Al Kuwari](#), a senior Qatari government official and a scion of the [powerful](#) Al-Kuwari clan. QFI is in fact a [key instrument](#) of Qatari state policy.

The main speaker was Barbara Petzen, a senior staff member at the Center for Strategic International Studies who once worked for the [Saudi-funded](#) Middle East Policy Council (MEPC), and has been [long accused](#) of anti-Israel [bias](#) in educational fora. During her presentation, she repeatedly argued that Islam, as such, had no relationship with Islamic terrorism, which she claimed was more immediately rooted in Muslim political grievances against the West for its support of Israel and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. (Petzen hit similar themes in a 2015 [presentation](#) for QFI.)

Petzen's whitewashed the role of [Islamism](#), a religious-political ideology with roots in 20th century totalitarianism that demands political supremacy as a religious value, and thus leads inevitably to political violence. She argued that Islamism as represented by Saudi Arabia and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is focused on governing society (albeit in a religiously severe fashion), and is therefore *opposed* to extremism, since "extremism, by definition, turns things over—is destabilizing... If you're in power, you don't want extremism because it destabilizes your control." (By this faulty definition, no ruling ideology can be "extremist." Indeed, ISIS would not be considered "extremist" once it set up its government.)

Similarly, when commenting on the June 2017 decision by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and [seven](#) other Muslim countries to [sever ties](#) with Qatar, Petzen downplayed the importance of Qatari regime's deep, systematic [support](#) for Islamism and [terrorism](#). Instead, she claimed the diplomatic crisis was motivated mainly by Qatar's close economic relations with Iran, a geostrategic competitor of Saudi Arabia. This ignores the fact that Qatar's neighbors fear [destabilization](#) by the Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters, and have abruptly reversed their own prior support of the Brotherhood in response.

Previously, Petzen worked for the [Saudi-funded](#) Middle East Policy Council (MEPC), which has produced a variety of anti-Israel material for K-12 students. In 2006, Jewish newspapers reported that Petzen had [promoted a book](#) for K-12 students titled the *Arab World Studies Notebook* that omits Israel from maps of the Middle East, encourages discussion of "Jewish lobbying," and claims that in 1948 "armed Jewish groups had driven much of the Palestinian population from their homes, thus capturing most of the Palestinians' land through acts of sheer terror and intimidation."

While working at MEPC, Petzen also designed a Middle East studies website named [TeachMidEast](#), which [recommends](#) students read the extremist publication *Electronic Intifada* for more information about Palestine, describing it only as an "independent news publication." In fact, *Electronic Intifada* has been [strongly criticized](#) for the [anti-Semitism](#) of its writers. One of its journalists warned that Jews are due a second "Holocaust" unless they "distance themselves from the Zionist monster before it's too late to do so."

So why would QFI choose such a presenter to educate American teachers? What exactly is QFI and its parent organization, the Qatar Foundation?

History of QFI

QFI [describes itself](#) as "a U.S.-based member of the Qatar Foundation (QF)," a theoretically non-governmental foundation in Qatar with a [tremendous variety](#) of state-development activities ranging from technology research to higher education. The founding of QF in 1995 is [politely attributed](#) to Sheikha Moza bint Nasser Al-Thani, the second wife of Qatar's previous emir and the mother of the current emir, along with her husband the deceased emir. (Sheikha Moza is

the [chair](#) of QF and directs its activities.) QFI itself was established in 2007 with the [help](#) of the US-Qatar Business Council, which was founded under the aegis of the previous emir.

U.S. Government Partnerships

QF and QFI have both established dozens of partnerships with American government departments, public schools, and universities. Primarily, QFI claims to be in the business of teaching Arabic and awards grants to American teachers and schools for that purpose. But QFI also engages directly with students. It has taken high-school [students from all across America](#) – mostly from schools that are recipients of large QFI grants – on “exchange” trips to Qatar.

Over the last eight years, QFI has [distributed](#) over \$30 million to American public schools, including \$465,000 to the Tucson Unified School District in Arizona. QFI currently [claims](#) to be supporting 28 schools in 10 states “reaching over 2500 students.” In 2011, the Department of Education [announced](#) a joint project with QFI named “Connect All Schools,” which pledged to introduce “global issues curricula” into U.S. schools.

Several publicly-funded universities are funded by QF, and some have established campuses in Doha. Some of this largesse is in the form of research grants. Virginia Commonwealth University’s branch in Doha, for example, [received](#) \$880,000 from QF in 2013 to design aerogels. Other partnerships are geared more towards Qatar’s ideological exports. Portland State University, for instance, has a long history of collaboration with QF and [helped design](#) a curriculum for QFI that is currently being promoted in American schools.

Qatar spends more than \$400 million annually on hosting branch campuses of six US universities. That total includes a \$76.2 million payment to [Texas A&M University at Qatar](#) for the operation of an engineering campus at Doha’s Education City complex; an estimated \$121.7 million to [Weill Cornell Medicine-Qatar](#), an outpost of Cornell University’s medical school; an estimated \$60.3 million to [Carnegie Mellon University Qatar’s](#) business and computer science campus; \$59.5 million for [Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service in Qatar](#); \$45.3 million for [Northwestern University in Qatar’s](#) communication and journalism outpost; and \$41.8 million annually to [Virginia Commonwealth University’s](#) fine arts campus.

These grants and partnerships are lucrative. But what exactly are QF and QFI teaching so many American college students and schoolchildren?

QFI Curriculum

QFI does not simply offer money to teachers wanting to provide Arabic lessons to their students, but seeks to shape American education about the Middle East through lessons plans and curricula. There are troubling themes, however, within the material that QFI sponsors in

American schools.

Arab Culture

In collaboration with Portland State University, QFI has designed a five-unit high school curriculum named “[Arab Culture Through Literature and Film](#).” [One of the lessons](#) encourages students to read articles produced by a now-defunct organization called ME Analysis. The website for ME Analysis is no longer available, but [one of the recommended articles](#), uncovered through an Archive service, includes an [image produced](#) by Middle East Monitor (MEMO) showing bloodstained Israeli arrows laying siege to the Gaza Strip.

MEMO is a prominent [Hamis-linked](#) publication whose editor, Daud Abdullah, was condemned by the British government after he [became](#) a signatory to the Istanbul Declaration, a document that called for attacks on British troops and Jewish communities. On its social media, ME Analysis [posts](#) anti-Semitic cartoons by the notoriously anti-Semitic cartoonist Carlos Latuff, as well as [cartoons](#) blaming conflict in the Middle East on the Western press and [maps](#) claiming Jews have taken Palestinian land. One anti-Israel social media post [laments](#) that the “Israeli lobby gets its way.”

ME Analysis is clearly an unsuitable resource for American high-school children. But is this just an unintentional oversight by QFI? Perhaps its other offered curricula are more balanced.

“My Voice-My School”

In partnership with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), which is in charge of Palestinian refugees, QFI is [promoting](#) a program called “My Voice-My School” in which American classrooms are paired with Palestinian schools in Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria. Communicating over Skype, the American students are meant to learn the importance of “education advocacy” (“particularly in the context of the Syria crisis”), and over the course of the program are expected to create and execute advocacy projects of their own.

While this appears to be a worthy program, it raises questions. If the focus is on the Syria crisis, why are Americans matched to Palestinian schools exclusively? Why not Syrians or ethnic Kurds?

Al Masdar

Al Masdar, QFI’s flagship [curriculum project](#), offers lesson plans and resources about countries throughout the Middle East. Unsurprisingly, the most flattering collection is about Qatar. One resource offered is even titled “[Express Your Loyalty to Qatar](#).” No lesson plan is particularly critical of Qatar, whereas other countries discussed in Al Masdar’s resources are open to criticism.

Other lesson plans contain various anti-Semitic and anti-American material, particularly several lessons produced by the [Zinn Education Project](#), which claims to promote a revisionist “people’s history.”

One of the ZEP lesson plans hosted on QFI’s website - titled “[Greed as a Weapon: Teaching the Other Iraq War](#)” – examines the “greed” of the corporations ostensibly responsible for the Iraq war in the wake of the Bush administration’s “lies” about 9/11. The author, Adam Sanchez, writes: “The violence perpetrated by the United States was not just from guns and bombs, but also from the neoliberal economic policies that allowed international corporations to feast on Iraq’s economy.”

The lesson plan “[Whose ‘Terrorism?’](#)” questions the [definition of terrorism](#) by creating scenarios for students to discuss, such as if “Israeli soldiers taunting and shooting children in Palestinian refugee camps, with the assistance of U.S. military aid” should be considered terrorists. After using this lesson plan, the author reported that one of his students stated “I also realized how many terrorism acts the U.S. has committed.”

Al Masdar also [hosts a number](#) of anti-Israel lesson plans. One, titled “[Primer on Palestine, Israel, and the Israeli-Arab Conflict](#),” praises the PLO as a moderate force resisting Israeli brutality. It asserts that “Torture of Palestinian prisoners [by Israel] has been a common practice since at least 1971.” The lesson plan describes the first Intifada as peaceful civil disobedience, but adds that in response “Israel tried to smash the *intifada* with ‘force, power and beatings.’ Army commanders instructed troops to break the bones of demonstrators. From 1987 to 1991, Israeli forces killed over 1,000 Palestinians, including over 200 under the age of 16.” There is no mention of Palestinian terror against Israeli civilians during the first intifada.

Why are the curricula of QFI so biased? Why is it teaching American schoolchildren to show “loyalty” to Qatar, while inculcating distrust of the United States and its policies? The answer lies in who is behind QFI, and whose agenda it serves.

Who is in charge of QFI?

The [CEO](#) and nominal founder of QFI is Sheikha Hind bint Hamad Al-Thani, daughter of the previous emir of Qatar and of Sheikha Moza. Sheikha Hind and her father are the nominal founders of *Al-Jazeera*, and she played a [key role](#) in his regime, directing the Emir’s Office starting in 2009. The [chairman of the board](#) is Sheikh Jassim bin Abdulaziz Al-Thani, another member of the royal family. As of 2012 (the most recent public records [available](#)), the treasurer of QFI is [Khalid Al Kuwari](#), a senior Qatari government official and a scion of the [powerful](#) Al-Kuwari clan. QFI is hardly a side project of Qatar; it is in fact a [key instrument](#) of state policy.

It seems QFI’s American staff was selected to further that policy. Its executive director, Maggie Salem, makes no secret of her animosity towards Israel. She has [tweeted](#) her [support](#) for

Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS)—a movement that aims to [pressure](#) Israel into making dangerous concessions by isolating the country economically and culturally.



Salem also serves on the board of UNRWA-USA, a non-profit organization that supports the work of UNRWA, and has used the oft-repeated [Apartheid](#) canard against Israel. She has even [promoted](#) the work of Mondoweiss, a [far-left](#) anti-Israel news blog whose founder, Phil Weiss, once [wrote](#), “I can justly be accused of being a conspiracy theorist because I believe in the Israel lobby theory ... certainly my theory has an explanation of the rise and influence of the neocons. They don't have a class interest but an ideological-religious one.”

Salem’s Twitter advocacy extends to pushing pro-Qatar positions. She recently [tweeted](#) that “Qatari rulers have determinedly pushed their traditional society toward globalization and westernization.” She has also [attacked](#) other Middle Eastern states for illiberalism and uses Qatar as a foil, writing, “UAE, KSA, Egypt, Bahrain criminalize views diff from govts’. Qatar imperfect yet improving.” Salem has [repeated](#) this motif, often including Israel in her list of sinful countries: “Israel, KSA, UAE, Bahrain, Egypt – all on the wrong side of history. Qatar? Imperfect yet heading toward more openness not less.” Salem even [criticizes](#) New York University for maintaining educational ties with Abu Dhabi.

Even more alarming, however, is the overt extremism of QFI’s Qatari parent organization, QF.

The Qatar Foundation and Qatari Support for Extremism

A detailed report by the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) lays out the Qatar Foundation’s [support](#) for Islamism, and particularly its patronage of Sheikh Yousef Al-Qaradawi, the spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood. Al-Qaradawi has repeatedly endorsed suicide bombings, terrorist attacks against the United States, and the total extermination of the Jews; he is barred from entering the U.S. due to terrorism concerns. Indeed, Al-Qaradawi claims “If it hadn’t been for the Emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa, Allah preserve him, I would have been on the list of terrorists. The Americans were determined to put me on this list, but the Emir stood fast courageously, pitting his determination against theirs, [and as a result] I stayed off the list.” (This is of course the same Sheikh Hamad who established the Qatar Foundation.)

QF's support for Islamism goes deeper. QF schools and mosques often host the most [virulently radical](#) Islamist preachers, including one who referred to the 9/11 attacks as a "comedy film," another who said that Jews bake Passover matza with human blood ("believing that this brings them close to their false god"), and a third who accused the Shia of "poisoning" and "sorcery." A [featured lecturer](#) of the QF-backed Qatar Faculty of Islamic Studies was Mohamed El-Moctar El-Shinqiti, presently a [professor](#) at the QF's flagship Hamad bin Khalifa University. El-Shinqiti was once an imam at a West Texas mosque at which he [openly encouraged](#) young people to engage in terror attacks against Israel and Egypt. The dean of the College of Islamic Studies (CIS) is Emad al-Din Shahin, a member of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood whose prominence led Egypt's military regime to [sentence](#) him to death in absentia.

Other CIS faculty are connected to the International Institute for Islamic Thought (IIIT), the Muslim Brotherhood's American [think tank](#). These included [Louay Safi](#), [former](#) IIIT executive director and research director, and [Jasser Auda](#), who is also on the [faculty](#) of IIIT's Fairfax Institute. Other faculty seem closely aligned with the IIIT's [long-term goal](#) of the "Islamization of knowledge," including [one professor](#) working under Auda who has written about "Revelation as a source of engineering sciences" (!).

QF-backed schools in Doha enforce a rigid ideological program. An American educator who worked at a QF educational institution in Doha told the Middle East Forum that faculty were not allowed to purchase maps showing Israel, the entire territory of which was instead labeled "Palestine." Moreover, even tangentially mentioning the existence of Israel or the Holocaust in class would provoke severe reprisals from the Qatari Ministry of Education. The official government policy was "Israel doesn't exist." As the educator put it, "They're teaching their populace... the nonexistence of Israel."

As if hateful rhetoric and propaganda were not enough, QF openly partners with terrorist organizations and terror-financing charities, among them:

Charitable Society for Social Welfare

The UN has [reported](#) that the Qatar Foundation funds the Charitable Society for Social Welfare (CSSW), which was [founded](#) by the designated Al Qaeda operative Abdul Majeed Al-Zindani, and once employed the terrorist cleric Anwar Al Awlaki to run one of its American branches. Federal prosecutors in a New York terrorism-financing case have described CSSW as "a front organization" that was "used to support al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden."

Qatar Charity

QF has a [long](#) history of [logistical](#) and [financial](#) partnerships with the Qatar Charity, an enormous aid organization also based in Doha. [According to federal prosecutors](#), in 1993, Osama bin Laden named the Qatar Charity as one of several groups used to fund Al-Qaeda's overseas operations. In 1995, after a failed attempt by Al-Qaeda operatives to assassinate President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, Bin Laden complained that because funds from Qatar Charity (then operating under the name Qatar Charitable Society) had been used in that operation, he was concerned that Al-Qaeda's ability to use charities to fund operations might

be compromised. The Qatar Charity is also [accused](#) of funding Chechen Islamists and the Bangladeshi jihadist organization Jamatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB). In 2008, Israel [banned](#) Qatar Charity because of its links to Hamas.

Hamas

Qatari Minister Khalid Al-Attiyah has claimed that “80 percent of Qatar's aid to Gaza since the cease fire” is delivered by QF.

In 2012, Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh was [hosted by the Qatar Foundation](#) and met with its senior staff. Haya Al-Nassr, QF’s Director of the Communication Directorate, awarded Haniyeh with a “victory shield” featuring the Dome of the Rock. Haniyeh [signed](#) QF’s “VIP book” and [said](#) “We look forward to cooperating with the Qatar Foundation.”



Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh with senior QF official Haya Al-Nassr

Qatar’s Extremist Foreign Policy

This is all of a piece with the Qatari regime’s deep, systematic [support](#) for Islamism and [terrorism](#) as a strategic tool to expand its influence globally. The regime has used all the tools at its disposal—its media empire *Al-Jazeera*, its network of charities, its heavy investments in Islamist-guided education—to radicalize and deceive people around the globe, including in the United States. Qatar’s double-dealing has become so dangerous that its neighbors fear destabilization by the Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters. In June 2017, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and [seven](#) other Muslim countries [severed ties](#) with Qatar and halted flights and sea-based shipping over Qatar’s pervasive support for the Muslim Brotherhood, terrorist groups, and Islamism generally.

QFI, the American branch of QF, has not shied away from overt pro-Qatar [advocacy](#) in the past and has become even more blatant following the recent diplomatic crisis. In July, QFI and Al Jazeera jointly produced a [propaganda video](#) condemning the so-called “blockade” of Qatar. In November 2017, QFI organized a [panel discussion](#) claiming that that the Gulf states’ isolation of Qatar was due to “fake news,” a claim that Executive Director Salem explicitly [endorsed](#) on Twitter. For QFI to belittle the very real alarm that other Muslim states feel about Qatar’s support for extremism is telling.

Avoiding Transparency

Originally QFI was organized as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, yet on February 2, 2012, the nonprofit was voluntarily [terminated](#); over half a million dollars of assets were transferred to the Qatar

Foundation (which was described in IRS filings as “a related party”). The organization continued, however, as [QFI LLC](#), a private entity that is subject to far fewer disclosure rules than a nonprofit. Moreover, the Qatar Foundation itself was singled out in a 2015 U.S.-Qatar [bilateral agreement](#) over the implementation of the Foreign Account Tax Compliance Act (FATCA), designed to hinder money laundering and tax evasion; the Foundation was specifically exempted from the disclosure requirements of FATCA. Why? What are the Qatar Foundation and QFI trying to hide?

Conclusion

The Qatar Foundation International presents itself as a beneficent charity working to spread knowledge of different cultures through language. In fact, it is an agent of Qatari foreign policy, whose twofold mission is to persuade American schoolchildren to oppose their own government and support the Qatari agenda, and to spread the dangerous virus of Islamism to American Muslim communities.

Learning new languages and understanding foreign cultures is a worthy exercise that can broaden one’s mind and create new professional opportunities. This is particularly true of learning Arabic, as the United States has been deeply involved in the Middle East for many years and has a great need for skilled professionals who speak Arabic well. But QFI’s largesse should be seen for what it is: an influence operation by a hostile, autocratic foreign power.

There are many free Arabic-language resources available to dedicated teachers, and more coming soon (the popular free language app Duolingo.com is planning to offer Arabic for the first time in [March](#)). These alternatives are vastly preferable to working with QFI. Students who wish to learn Arabic should not be subjected to Islamist indoctrination. American schools, universities and public bodies should reject QFI and its money.