

# GulfWire

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## Perspectives



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### Qatar's 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference on Free Trade and Democracy: Context and Perspective

By John Duke Anthony

#### Editor's Note:

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### Qatar's 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference on Free Trade and Democracy: Context and Perspective

By John Duke Anthony

[Washington, April 2, 2004] That Qatar has rapidly emerged as the Arab countries' leading, and will soon also become the world's premier, producer of gas-to-liquids is a matter of no small moment.

Any polity that plays any role in driving any portion of any industry's economic engine in any corner of the planet is noteworthy -- any day of the week.

The fact that Qatar has arrived to such an international niche is not the result of happenstance. That it has reached this point so quickly is the more remarkable because it is not synonymous with the restoration of a status held earlier. Indeed, it was never previously so.

Neither can anyone claim to have predicted as recently as a decade ago that Qatar this coming Monday will host in Doha, the country's capital, the Annual International Conference on Free Trade and Democracy for the fourth year in succession.

#### **AT MIDPOINT IN THE GULF**

In so doing, this small peninsula country in the middle of the Gulf will not only garner substantial media attention. The substance of its proceedings will also attract close scrutiny among democratization and free enterprise watchers worldwide.

Not least among the reasons will be the implications of the Conference's scope and focus. Barring the unforeseen, the Conference's results are likely to further the extent to which not just Qataris but the citizens of other Arab countries and the Islamic world will be able to increase their involvement in public affairs.

Such an event in many parts of the world might not seem out of the ordinary. However, in this case,

consider the fact that less than a quarter of a century ago Qatar was a little known destination on the map.

Indeed, for the longest time, few if any diplomats and business representatives took notice of whatever Qatar was doing or not doing in the way of commercial and political development. For years on end, it was the one Gulf country that international travelers were most likely to strike from their itinerary whenever they received orders from home to cut short their visit to the region.

### **EQUIDISTANT BETWEEN EAST AND WEST**

Nowadays, in dramatic contrast, anyone en route East or West who bypasses Qatar in early April, or in most other months, will almost certainly have missed visiting a country engaged in one or more outsized roles of international organization leadership.

In the past half decade alone, Qatar has held the chairmanship of not only the 57-nation Organization of the Islamic Conference, the dozen-member Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, and the six-state Gulf Cooperation Council. It has also chaired the more than 140-member state World Trade Organization's (WTO)'s 4th Ministerial Conference, which launched the Doha Round of the WTO's Multilateral Trade Negotiations.

To be sure, numerous countries the world over have opted to spearhead this or that international venture or event at one time or another.

Even larger numbers have been willing to preside over efforts of inter-state organizations to preserve the achievements of the members' citizens and, where possible, add to their accomplishments.

But not all among those that have been willing to play such a role have been chosen by their fellow members. In this regard, as in others, Qatar is unique.

Among developing and more established countries these days, the number of exceptional path-breaking and risk-taking heads of state and commanders-in-chief is not exactly in surplus.

### **REGIONAL CIRCUMSTANCES**

Few leaders of any developing countries in recent years have assumed equivalent burdens of international responsibility. What is more, one is hard pressed to name other countries that have done so in regional circumstances as fraught with danger and uncertainty as those that Qataris and the citizens of their fellow GCC member-states have confronted.

This coming week, Qatar is scheduled to roll out the welcome mat once again. It does so in the midst of a period that remains freighted with ponderous issues pertaining to the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf countries' near term future. This alone lends considerable significance to an event whose proceedings will be examined and evaluated by many.

What Qatar will do is host several days of discussion and debate among world-renowned economists, business leaders, and political as well as social scientists.

Given all that has happened in the immediate region since last year's conference, the Qataris and their conference co-sponsors could hardly have devised a more timely challenge for the featured presenters and commentators.

### **TWO-FOLD MISSION**

The presenters and other invitees have accepted a two-fold mission. They are expected to address not only issues related to trade, investment, and economic growth, on one hand, and democratic principles and processes, on the other. They are also being tasked, wherever they deem it relevant, to

demonstrate the interconnectivity among these and other factors and forces.

A major objective will be to illustrate how these phenomena are applicable and in many ways directly linked, in the first instance, to the burgeoning quest for socio-economic modernization and development. In the second, it will be to indicate how these phenomena are connected to the goal of advancing simultaneously the march of human progress and freedom in the realms of political systems and representative governance.

Considered by the host, co-sponsors, and participants alike to be a work in progress, Qatar's Fourth International Conference on Free Trade and Democracy aims to increase international knowledge about the dynamics and prospects of an abiding quest in the modern era.

**\* Dr. John Duke Anthony, Publisher of *GulfWire*, is President and CEO of the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations.** In addition to founding and heading the National Council since its inception in 1983, he has been a consultant to the U.S. Departments of Defense and State for more than three decades. The author of four books and more than 200 articles, essays, and chapters in other published works on the Arab countries, the Middle East, and the Islamic world, he has testified before Congressional committees and appeared on most mainstream American, British, and Arab television networks. Dr. Anthony is the only American to have attended each of the heads of state summits of the Gulf Cooperation Council since the GCC's establishment in 1981. He is also one of only two Americans to have served as an observer in all three of Yemen's parliamentary and presidential elections (1993, 1997, and 2003). In 1999, he was knighted by King Muhammad VI, who bestowed upon him the Order of Quissam Alouite, Morocco's highest honor for excellence.

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