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# **QATAR AND THE ARAB SPRING**

## **Policy Drivers and Regional Implications**

**Kristian Coates Ulrichsen**

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## About the Author

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Coates Ulrichsen has published extensively on the Gulf. His books include *Insecure Gulf: The End of Certainty and the Transition to the Post-Oil Era* (Columbia University Press, 2011) and two edited volumes, *The Transformation of the Gulf: Politics, Economics and the Global Order* (Routledge, 2012) and *The Political Economy of Arab Gulf States* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2012). His latest book is entitled *Qatar and the Arab Spring* (Hurst & Co., 2014).



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## Summary

During the Arab Spring, Qatar moved away from its traditional foreign policy role as diplomatic mediator to embrace change in the Middle East and North Africa and support transitioning states. Regional actors viewed Qatar's approach as overreaching, and skepticism of Doha's policy motivations increased. Qatar's new leadership, which came to power in June 2013, is adapting by reverting to a more pragmatic foreign policy and addressing the fallout from its support for Islamist movements in the region.

### Qatar's Rise and Regional Backlash

- Qatar's political stability, economic wealth, ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, and international reputation as a mediator gave it the confidence to take an interventionist role during the Arab Spring.
- The leadership backed ascendant Islamist political forces in transitioning countries and led the regional response to upheaval in Libya and Syria in the name of seeking Arab solutions to Arab problems.
- There was a mismatch between the Qatari leadership's intent and the state's diplomatic and bureaucratic capability: Qatar lacked the administrative and on-the-ground resources to leverage its influence into tangible results.
- The new emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, has faced growing pressure from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to reverse his predecessors' support of the Muslim Brotherhood and local affiliates in states undergoing transitions.

### Back to Basics

- Qatar's comparative advantage in mediation is its ability to serve as an intermediary for indirect negotiations and back-channel communications between sworn adversaries and to balance relationships with an array of mutually antagonistic foes.
- Any return to a policy of quiet backroom diplomacy will strengthen Qatar's credentials as an effective interlocutor among disputants that cannot easily engage in direct dialogue. Qatar can serve an important role as a back channel to moderate among groups that U.S. officials in particular may not be able to directly reach but whose participation in political processes is nevertheless constructive.

- Although Qatar is unlikely to fully recover its pre–Arab Spring reputation as a diplomatic mediator, U.S. and Qatari officials should examine how they can engage productively on a range of thorny issues, such as dialogue with Iran on nuclear issues, political stability in Afghanistan following the 2014 withdrawal of international troops, talks with Islamist groups in Syria and Egypt, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
- To regain its reputation for mediation and overcome its limited institutional capacity, Doha may need to take a step back and allow others to lead—something that the leadership may be loath to do.

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## Introduction

Qatar played a vital role during the frenetic opening months of the Arab Spring. It shaped the emerging narratives of protest through the Doha-based Al Jazeera media network. And it also mobilized Arab support, initially for the international intervention in Libya in March 2011 and later for the diplomatic isolation of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria. At a time of significant regional uncertainty, Qatar presented a compelling image as an outpost of stability and prosperity, even as the protests reached neighboring Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states.

Aside from boosting Qatar's image around the world, this stability imbued the country's leaders—then emir Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani and then prime minister Hamad bin Jassim al-Thani—with the confidence to back ascendant Islamist political forces in transitioning countries and to lead the regional response to upheaval in Libya and Syria in the name of seeking Arab solutions to Arab problems. Significantly, Qatar possessed the capability to put such words into action because it held the rotating presidency of the Arab League in 2011–2012 and felt more comfortable than neighboring states with the pace and direction of political change in countries affected by the Arab Spring.

These policies represented the capstone of a decade and a half of reformulating Qatari foreign policy. In the years prior to the Arab Spring, Qatar's leaders had nurtured a growing reputation as a nonstop mediator to carve out a niche for itself in regional diplomacy.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the farsighted decision in the early 1990s to build up Qatar's energy infrastructure to exploit the country's massive reserves of natural gas enabled Doha to accrue and project considerable forms of soft power. Long-term liquefied natural gas (LNG) contracts tied external partners' energy security needs to Qatar's domestic stability, while large accumulations of capital were invested both in Qatar and abroad in the form of prestige acquisitions and high-profile investments. LNG allowed Qatar to diversify its international relationships by making a range of countries stakeholders in Qatari stability. The convergence of these trends framed the rise of Qatar as a regional power with international reach in the 2000s and gave the country a realistic claim to the center of the new Middle East.

Qatar's initial success in shaping the regional response to the uprisings was not to last, however. With pace of change in the Arab world slowing, Qatar's new emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, faces a very different set of

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challenges than his predecessor, particularly after authoritarian control was reasserted in Egypt with the July 2013 ouster of the Muslim Brotherhood government. Against the backdrop of a sustained campaign by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to undermine Egypt's Brotherhood and its regional affiliates, Qatar's support for the Brotherhood came under intense scrutiny in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. Qatar's new government faces the difficult task of dialing back its predecessor's overt support for political Islamists while also recalibrating the nature of its engagement with regional and international partners.

Qatar's new elites maintain that little of substance has changed following the removal of the Brotherhood-backed government from power in Egypt. But their conduct on the international stage after June 2013 demonstrates a return to a more cautious approach to the region. Emir Tamim has sought to balance the maintenance of Qatar's autonomy in policymaking with the judicial deployment of confidence-boosting measures that have yet to fully assuage the concerns of its fellow GCC members.

While the new Qatari leadership under Emir Tamim has adjusted its tactics, the government continues to face significant regional backlash to its Arab Spring policies. To move beyond this Arab Spring legacy and regain a reputation for mediation and diplomacy, Qatar may well have to step back from the regional leadership that was characteristic of Doha's policies during and after the Arab Spring, and act instead as a facilitator of dialogue and quiet negotiation between parties that are unable to engage in direct communication. This presents new opportunities for U.S. cooperation with Qatar as the political transitions across the Middle East and North Africa enter a volatile and unpredictable new phase.

## Qatar's Rise in Context

Qatar's rise to a position of international significance is rooted in its possession of the world's third-largest reserves of liquefied natural gas and the use of policies designed to leverage those reserves. These policies were conceived and implemented during the rule of Emir Hamad (1995–2013) and his energetic foreign minister (and prime minister between 2007 and 2013), Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim. These two men emerged as the architects of a strategy of aggressive internationalization that put Qatar on the map as a dynamic regional actor. The measures also reflected a set of deeper trends underpinning Qatar's regional foreign and security policies. Chief among them were the challenges of ensuring stability in a volatile region and addressing the vulnerabilities of a small state surrounded by larger and more powerful neighbors.

## Qatar's Energy-Security Nexus

Qatar's spectacular rise to prominence was largely fueled by LNG reserves. It adopted an activist foreign policy and attempted to balance competing interests because of its need to preserve the security of this resource.

Qatar has spent more than \$120 billion on its LNG infrastructure, the majority of which it borrowed from banks and industry partners such as ExxonMobil.<sup>2</sup> Its first export of LNG cargo took place in 1995, and by 2006 Qatar had overtaken Indonesia to become the largest exporter of LNG in the world. In December 2010, production reached the government's developmental target of 77 million tons per year, by which time Qatar accounted for between 25 and 30 percent of global LNG exports.<sup>3</sup>

The combination of massive resource wealth and a tiny indigenous population gave Qatari officials considerable room to maneuver and freed the emirate from the socioeconomic pressures afflicting its larger neighbors in the region. Over time, it also translated into significant reserves of soft power and bolstered Qatar's international reputation.

The supply of gas to the United Kingdom and China best illustrates the extent to which Qatar has developed interdependencies with partners around the world. Dispatch of LNG cargoes by ship from Ras Laffan Industrial City in Qatar to the South Hook LNG terminal at Milford Haven in Wales commenced in March 2009, and by 2011 the United Kingdom had already become heavily reliant on Qatari gas imports to meet domestic energy demand.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Qatargas signed a twenty-five-year agreement in 2009 to provide 5 million tons of LNG a year to the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) and PetroChina. The value of this long-term link was made clear by CNOOC president Fu Chengyu, who noted how "China can guarantee a long-term reliable market for Qatar, while Qatar can be a stable supplier for [the] Chinese market."<sup>5</sup>

In addition to creating durable connections to industrialized and emerging economies alike, the emir and prime minister sought a careful equilibrium in regional and foreign relations. The legacy of the international community's mobilization in response to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 left a powerful imprint on the Qatari rulers, and indeed on the minds of all Gulf leaders. Although closer security ties with Washington initially meant a greater reliance on a single patron—the United States—for external security (most notably through the construction of the Al Udeid Air Base and the hosting of U.S. Central Command after 2003), the development of Qatar's LNG enabled a diversification of relations. Because of the importance of Qatari LNG to the energy security of countries around the world through long-term supply agreements, multiple outside actors could hold a direct stake in Qatari security and regional stability. Qatar's moves to have greater visibility in regional and

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international policymaking also came after a period of considerable friction and border tensions with Saudi Arabia in the early 1990s.<sup>6</sup>

### Carving a Regional Niche as a Mediator

Diplomatic mediation became a key component of Qatar's independent and innovative regional policy, setting Doha apart from its neighbors both in the Gulf and in the broader Middle East. Mediation was a prominent feature of Qatar's constitution adopted in April 2003, with article 7 specifically mandating that Qatari foreign policy be "based on the principle of strengthening international peace and security by means of encouraging peaceful resolution of international disputes."

Placing the principle of mediation at the core of Qatar's foreign policy objectives reflected both the idiosyncratic motivations of the Qatari leadership and its awareness that such a move offered the chance to make a bold statement of autonomy on the regional and international stage.<sup>7</sup> The emir outlined his government's rationale in September 2007, telling the United Nations General Assembly that "the major conflicts in the world have become too big for one single power to handle them on its own."<sup>8</sup> The three most high-profile instances

of Qatari mediation took place in Yemen (2008–2010), Lebanon (2008), and Darfur (2008–2010),<sup>9</sup> and Doha also worked to resolve disputes between Sudan and Chad (in 2009),<sup>10</sup> and between Djibouti and Eritrea (in 2010).<sup>11</sup>

During this period immediately prior to the Arab Spring, Qatari policymaking was characterized by the high-level personal engagement of the emir and the prime minister, a small circle of elite decisionmakers, and the commitment of significant financial resources to affect mediatory outcomes. The small and highly centralized elite decisionmaking structure in Doha made it easier for Qatari officials to draw together the various political

and economic resources available to them through government ministries and state-owned enterprises, which helped with the projection of leverage in regions where Qatar intervened. These factors combined to win the country a growing reputation as a can-do actor in regional politics and international affairs.

Yet, these advantages were offset by Qatari weaknesses, particularly a mismatch between leadership intent and diplomatic capacity. The country lacks a large professional diplomatic corps to translate initial engagement into the sustainable implementation of agreements.<sup>12</sup> Its diplomatic service is too small to follow up or monitor progress toward implementation once negotiations end. In the absence of a "day after" policy, Qatari mediation in resolving the political stalemate in Lebanon and the internal conflict in Darfur was more an exercise in bridging surface divisions than actually addressing deeper structural roots of conflict or tangibly contributing to peacebuilding and postconflict recovery.<sup>13</sup>

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### **A Small Actor With a Big Stage**

In addition to its LNG reserves and its emphasis on mediation, Qatar's rise as an increasingly powerful actor was facilitated by broader changes to the structure of the international system. In particular, accelerating globalization made it easier for small states to punch above their weight and project new forms of soft power.<sup>14</sup> The shifting nature of the concept of power in an intensely interconnected world enabled small states such as Qatar to project far greater influence abroad.

During the 2000s, the Gulf states as a group emerged as far more visible actors in the global system of power, politics, and policymaking. Using their energy resources and capital accumulation during the 2002–2008 oil-price boom as leverage, GCC states became more active in international issues. Their involvement ranged from deeper enmeshment in South-South networks to greater projection of sovereign wealth investments, and even to gradually shifting positions in the international debates about climate change. These links built upon and moved beyond the extraction and export of oil that had for decades bound the Gulf to the global economy.<sup>15</sup> For example, in the process of becoming world-leading centers of production for a variety of industries, from petrochemicals and aluminum to cement and construction projects,<sup>16</sup> the Gulf states developed more complex industrial ties with emerging and industrialized economies alike. These encompassed greater flows of foreign direct investment and technology transfers, as well as integration into global production and supply chains.<sup>17</sup>

The global financial and economic crisis that began in 2007 accelerated the underlying shift toward interdependence in the international economy. It also provided an opportunity for Qatar, in common with other resource-rich Gulf states (notably the UAE and Saudi Arabia), to increase its leverage in supranational institutions and layers of global governance. For its part, Qatar joined with Switzerland and Singapore in the World Economic Forum's Global Redesign Initiative, which was set up to channel the views of 28 small and medium-sized states into the G20 process.<sup>18</sup> Qatar hosted a Global Redesign Summit in Doha on May 30–31, 2010, and hosted one of the initiative's three supplementary hearings.<sup>19</sup>

After 2008, as Western countries enacted economic austerity measures, Qatari LNG expansion was peaking, with Qatar's gross domestic product (GDP) growing by up to 17 percent a year at its height. This remarkable growth gave Qatari policymakers great leeway in working to reshape the architecture of an international system in flux. In May 2009, then prime minister Hamad bin Jassim addressed these issues directly as he called for a profound reshaping of "the organizational frameworks of the dominant political system" in recognition of the emergence of a multipolar order in which "the West was not the sole player in the world."<sup>20</sup> The emir was blunter still in comments made

in March 2009, saying “China is coming, India is coming, and Russia is on its way, too . . . I don’t know if America and Europe will still be leading.”<sup>21</sup>

Through its approach to policymaking and the near-total autonomy granted to a small circle of elite decisionmakers unencumbered by domestic political constraints, Qatar took full advantage of the space that opened for an innovative new actor in regional and global affairs.

## **Qatar and the Arab Spring**

After an initial period of caution in January 2011, Qatar’s leaders recognized the evolving contours of the political upheaval cascading across North Africa and the Middle East and pragmatically adjusted policy. Qatar was well positioned to assume an extraordinarily visible and interventionist role during the early stages of the upheaval in the region. Qatari officials’ decision to embrace the direction of change was unique among the states of the region, which resisted the popular pressures unleashed by the Arab Spring that they saw as inherently threatening.

Qatar’s policies reflected a careful evaluation of the state’s interests in the various countries experiencing unrest. Doha pursued direct and indirect intervention in Libya and Syria under the guise of seeking Arab solutions to Arab problems and mobilized economic assistance in Tunisia and Egypt. However, Doha limited itself to cautious coordination with GCC actions to restore political order in Bahrain and Yemen, recognizing Saudi Arabia’s greater influence in these countries and the potential threat that successful uprisings in the Gulf could pose to stability in its neighborhood.

### **Embracing the Direction of Change**

The Qatari response to the Arab Spring represented the continuation of deeper policy trends that predated 2011 such as the delicate balancing of divergent forces that had formed a hallmark of Qatar’s foreign policy. Doha positioned itself as the West’s ally in the Arab world in pushing for humanitarian intervention in Libya and political settlement in Yemen.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, it decided to back regional Islamists because of the Qatari government’s long-term practice of offering refuge to Islamists and political dissidents from across the Arab and Islamic worlds and the pragmatism in Qatari regional policy calculations. These factors converged in Qatar’s close—yet controversial—relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>23</sup>

Close ties had built up between Doha and the international Brotherhood movement even though Qatar subscribes officially to Salafism and adheres to the Hanbali School of Islamic Law, whose emphasis on political obedience of subjects to their ruler differs radically from the populist and activist nature of the Muslim Brotherhood. These ties began to develop when Muslim Brotherhood members fled persecution in Egypt in the 1950s and 1960s and in Syria in 1982;

many of them went to Qatar.<sup>24</sup> The subsequent development of ties with the Muslim Brotherhood distinguished Qatar from the stance of neighboring GCC states to which the Brotherhood fled. Qatar extended and diversified its ties with the regional branches of the movement while keeping a firm lid on any activities at home, while Kuwait and Bahrain sought to domesticate Muslim Brotherhood movements. The prominent Egyptian-born cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi, resident in Qatar since the early 1960s, and others were given a vocal platform on Al Jazeera after the channel's formation in 1996, but the Brotherhood exiles were accommodated in Doha on the tacit understanding that they would refrain from intervening in or commenting on local issues. This understanding established a clear distinction between the domestic and regional spheres of activity, underscoring which activities were and were not permissible.<sup>25</sup>

As a result of its outreach to Islamist figures, Qatar possessed connections to many of the opposition leaders who were poised to play leading roles in the revolutionary upheaval in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Yemen. Political Islamists had a greater organizing capacity than other opposition groups in these countries, which meant they were disproportionately able to take advantage of the electoral and participatory opportunities that unfolded. This gave Qatar two forms of leverage in states and regimes in transition following the Arab Spring unrest: individual connections through the Doha-based exiles who returned to their countries of origin and institutional influence as the Muslim Brotherhood emerged as a powerful player in the political transitions.

Beyond connections to the Brotherhood, the Qatari leadership also benefited from the relative freedom to maneuver it enjoyed domestically. What set Qatar apart in 2011 was the near-total absence of any sort of political demands, whether organized or informal, emanating from Qatari nationals. Even in the outwardly similar “extreme rentier” case of the UAE, pockets of relative poverty and deprivation existed among the national population that could (and did) generate socioeconomic discontent and political dissent.<sup>26</sup>

Almost uniquely in the Middle East and North Africa, the ratio of resources to citizens in Qatar was so favorable in 2011 that it ruled out any real prospect of local economic unrest or meaningful political discontent. With per capita levels of GDP among Qatari nationals at approximately \$440,000, the country's extreme wealth (for its citizens, at least) provided powerful insulation from the spread of Arab Spring unrest. It also led inevitably to a degree of political apathy and a stifling of democratic aspiration as few Qataris felt inclined to rock the boat by challenging the status quo. The results of an annual Arab Youth Survey found that the proportion of respondents who ranked democracy as important dropped by more than half from 68 percent in 2008 to just 33 percent in 2010.<sup>27</sup> Once again, there was a clear contrast even with neighboring states such as the UAE, where the proportion

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of respondents who stated that democracy was important increased substantially, from 58 percent in 2008 to 75 percent in 2011.<sup>28</sup>

When protests broke out in Tunisia in late December 2010, Qatar was thus in a fortuitous position. Flush with the success of winning the rights to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup and with its international recognition soaring as a result, the emirate and its leadership seized on the opportunity to definitively brand Qatar as distinct from the troubles afflicting the wider region. With little prospect of being affected by the contagious spread of the socioeconomic unrest across the region, there was much to gain from taking a highly visible stand against authoritarian misrule in North Africa and Syria. Moreover, the opportunity cost of doing so was low at first. Qatari expressions of declaratory and material support for opposition movements elsewhere were unlikely to have consequences domestically within Qatar, and such support also played into Qatari efforts to be taken seriously as a responsible actor on the regional and international stage.

Both the emir and Hamad bin Jassim vocally championed an approach that prioritized Arab solutions to Arab problems, especially during the run-up to the international intervention in Libya in March 2011. The prime minister took the lead in assembling the coalition of support for United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 1973 that authorized the establishment of a no-fly zone over Libya. He explained that “Qatar will participate in military action because we believe there must be Arab states undertaking this action, because the situation [in Libya] is intolerable.”<sup>29</sup> Together with the support of the UAE, Qatar’s backing of the resolution was important in allaying any regional suspicion of a new Western intervention in the Arab world and in securing Arab League support for the action.

### *Libya*

From the outset of the uprising against Muammar Qaddafi’s mercurial dictatorship in Libya, Qatar—along with France and the United Kingdom—was pivotal in mobilizing the international community to action. Crucially, Qatar rallied Arab support through the Arab League for the imposition of the no-fly zone. Hamad bin Jassim engineered Libya’s suspension from the Arab League and subsequently secured a unanimous vote of support in favor of the no-fly zone after a confrontational battle with Algeria.

The prime minister justified Qatar’s emboldened position as important not merely for humanitarian reasons but also “to encourage the hope that the Arab League can be a mechanism to prevent these things from happening.” Declaring that “the politicians of the Arabs should be more serious,” he asserted also that Arab League and UN support for the no-fly zone constituted “an example of how we can cooperate,” adding that “we told them

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[the Arab League], what is the alternative—to leave people subject to Gaddafi or to go to the UN.”<sup>30</sup>

Such declarations reinforced the Qatari leadership’s perception that the Libya crisis offered an opportunity for Qatar to align its support for the protection of human rights and democratic expression in a manner that resonated powerfully with the (Western-led) international community. The bloodshed unleashed by a flailing regime with few regional partners or international allies represented a safe target on which to make a high-visibility stand against tyranny and authoritarian misrule.<sup>31</sup> Qatar’s pledge of military involvement (followed by the UAE) was significant in watering down any regional suspicion that the intervention might constitute another example of Western military incursion into the affairs of an Arab state.

Qatar’s military and financial assistance proved critical to the success of the Libyan uprising, particularly in enabling the fledgling interim government, the National Transitional Council (NTC), to gather momentum. Aside from extending quick diplomatic recognition to the opposition, Qatari Mirage fighters took part in the NATO-led air strikes, and the Qatar-based Libya TV gave the rebels a voice to make their cause heard around the world. The creation of the station was intended to counteract the Qaddafi regime’s propaganda machine and demonstrated Doha’s keen appreciation of the media’s potential to influence narratives, perceptions, and events.<sup>32</sup> In addition, the small apex of senior decisionmakers in Doha enabled the state to pull together the different elements of its power to push through a multifaceted intervention in Libya. NTC chairman Mahmoud Jibril was largely based in Doha throughout the revolution, finding it easier to coordinate action from there than from the ostensible rebel stronghold of Benghazi. Nonmilitary forms of assistance were also crucial and included more than \$400 million in financial aid, supplies of water, heating gas, and essential goods, and help with selling and marketing Libyan oil from eastern ports under rebel control.<sup>33</sup>

Rather more murkily, Qatar developed close links with key Islamist militia commanders Abdel Hakim Belhadj, of the feared Tripoli Brigade, and the al-Sallabi brothers. Belhadj had been a leader of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group and had been rendered by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency to Libya in 2004 before being rehabilitated by the regime in 2007. Ali al-Sallabi lived in exile in Qatar prior to the 2011 revolution and arguably became Libya’s most influential cleric, while his brother Ismail became known as the leader of one of the best-supplied rebel militias, the Rafallah al-Sahati Companies. Qatar was widely suspected of arming and funding the group, whose sudden abundance of resources earned it the nickname of the “Ferrari 17 Brigade.”<sup>34</sup>

However, neither Qatar nor the UAE coordinated their military assistance to the Libyan opposition and in fact supported different rebel brigades on the ground. This complicated the task of unifying the anti-Qaddafi movement from its earliest phase and contributed to the subsequent splintering of the movement after it came to power in October 2011.<sup>35</sup> It also laid the seeds of the

rivalry between Qatar- and UAE-backed political and security networks that would erupt in the open in the summer of 2014.

Qatar's policy of attempting to identify and support the eventual winners in conflicts (who invariably hailed from Islamist groups) seemed to have paid off in August 2011. Indeed, Qatar's maroon and white flag flew alongside the free Libya flag above the captured ruins of Qaddafi's compound—a symbolic and revealing moment.

Yet, as the revolutionary euphoria of 2011 gave way to the difficult process of constructing and embedding institutional and accountable governing structures in 2012, it became clear that Qatar was failing to translate short-term gains into long-term influence. Local backlashes against Qatar's intentions, whether perceived or actual, materialized when the extent of Qatari involvement on the ground became more widely known. This was encapsulated in the July 2012 constituent assembly election when Belhadj's al-Watan (Homeland) Party won only one seat, with even Belhadj failing to win in his constituency in Tripoli. Although the party's failure reflected multiple factors, including the deliberate blurring of the Islamist-secularist divide by other parties and the weakness of Islamist sociopolitical networks that had not been allowed to form in Qaddafi's Libya, public concerns about the relationship with Qatar did play a role in determining their rejection of Belhadj's manifesto.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, even his party's colors had an impact; either by accident or design, al-Watan chose the colors of the Qatari flag, thereby reinforcing public skepticism of its and Qatar's objectives.

The same limitations that had held back the monitoring, evaluation, and implementation of Qatar's mediatory initiatives prior to 2011 also hindered Qatar's ability to follow through in post-Qaddafi Libya, even as potent new critiques of Qatari policy began to take shape. Qatar's failure to leverage its influence into tangible results in postconflict Libya reflected the lack of depth in Qatari professional diplomatic capabilities and the challenge of institutionalizing outcomes that had resulted from largely personalized decisionmaking processes. Moreover, while offers of Qatari and other regional and international sources of military and financial support broadly were welcomed during the struggle against the Qaddafi regime, in the feverish atmosphere that followed it became harder for such external actors to avoid the appearance of taking sides and picking winners when political spoils were handed out.<sup>37</sup>

### *Syria*

The uprising in Syria prompted Qatar's second intervention in the Arab Spring. However, a world of difference separated the cases of Libya and Syria as flashpoints in the unfolding regional upheaval. Whereas Qaddafi's regime was diplomatically isolated and politically (and physically) remote from major regional actors, Syria lay at the geopolitical heart of the Middle East. Syria's multicultural fabric and sectarian balance mixed with its cross-regional tribal links and political alliances to ensure that the civil unrest that started in March 2011 was

not contained within the country's borders. Syria became the battleground for proxy wars waged with increasing intensity and ferocity by groups linked to both sides of the regional Sunni-Shia divide.

Within this series of lethal and overlapping conflicts, it was fanciful to suppose that any one country could hope to influence, let alone control, developments on the ground. Yet, whether by accident or design, or simply because Doha was flush from its apparent success in helping to remove Qaddafi from power after forty-two years ruling Libya, this is precisely what the Qatari leadership attempted to do in late 2011 and throughout 2012.

The Arab League—usually known more for its ineffectiveness than for its spasms of decisive action—took the lead in early peacemaking initiatives. One reason for the Arab League's greater assertiveness during this formative period was that Qatar held its rotating presidency for an unprecedented second term in 2011–2012, after a February 2011 summit was postponed and a decision was made to return the presidency to Doha.<sup>38</sup> This unanticipated turn of events positioned Qatar to play an organizing role in the Arab response to the carnage in Syria over the course of Doha's second presidency through to spring 2012. However, neither the suspension of Syria from the Arab League and the imposition of political and economic sanctions in November 2011 nor the dispatch of an Arab League observer mission to Syria in January 2012 successfully halted the escalating spiral of violence. With the Arab League floundering, Emir Hamad became the first Arab leader to publicly support the deployment of foreign troops to Syria to try to stop the bloodshed, telling CBS News's *60 Minutes* program in January 2012 that “for such a situation to stop . . . some troops should go to stop the killing.”<sup>39</sup>

Qatar's vocal, flexible, and proactive role in the crisis failed to trigger an immediate or far-reaching impact as it had in Libya the year before. In part, this was due to emerging rivalries among regional actors over which forces to support in Syria, in addition to a lack of consensus within the Arab League itself over next steps. An inaugural meeting of a Friends of Syria group, an international coalition, held in February 2012 ended in disarray, with the Saudi delegation walking out in protest at the inability to agree on a common stance.<sup>40</sup>

Following this failure, the fragile unity of the Arab League faltered. Such ineffectiveness came as a significant blow both to the Arab League and to Qatar, given Doha's highly visible commitment to keeping the problem under Arab control during its leadership.<sup>41</sup> As a result, the March 2012 Arab League summit in Baghdad was characterized by tension, division, and a resultant weak stance on Syria, as then Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki pleaded for external actors not to intervene. Qatar made clear its distaste for the reluctance of countries such as Iraq and Lebanon to act decisively and began to take a progressively harder line on Syria, publicly imploring the international community to support and arm the opposition to the Syrian government.<sup>42</sup>

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In the face of mounting evidence that the Qatari star was fading, Doha's policy pronouncements became more strident and desperate. In October 2012, Hamad bin Jassim accused the Syrian government of genocide after the failure of (yet another) four-day ceasefire attempt. The Qatar News Agency quoted him as stating explosively that "what is happening in Syria is not a civil war but a genocide, a war of extermination with a license to kill by the Syrian government and the international community."<sup>43</sup> Yet, as responsibility for Syria devolved to the United Nations and its special envoys, Qatar, along with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, increasingly began to identify and "pick winners" among the myriad rebel groups operating in Syria. In Qatar's case, these forces were aligned closely with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, which caused mounting tensions with Saudi Arabia.

Developments over the course of the spring of 2013 illustrated the extent to which the Qatari moment was in eclipse, not only in Syria but across the Middle East. In the maelstrom created by the clash between the entrenched power of the old order and the myriad new groups that emerged in transition states, it became manifestly clear that no single actor could control the pace or direction of events. The protracted and complex political struggles that characterized the post-Arab Spring landscape laid bare the limitations of Qatari capabilities.

Meanwhile, growing tensions with Saudi Arabia and the UAE reflected widening differences in policy approaches toward the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>44</sup> And Qatar was feeling pressure from U.S. officials to ensure that none of the weaponry Doha was sending to Syria ended up in the hands of the Nusra Front or other extremist jihadi groups.

The combination of rising regional and international pressure on Qatar culminated in the informal transfer of Gulf states' responsibility for the Syria file from Doha to Riyadh in April 2013. Tortuous negotiations were then held in Istanbul in May 2013 to expand the Syrian National Council, an umbrella opposition group, with particular emphasis placed on including a liberal bloc headed by Michel Kilo and backed by Western and Arab governments. These additions reflected a Saudi-led attempt to dilute the influence of the (Qatar-backed) Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in the council by broadening its membership and composition.<sup>45</sup>

### *Tunisia and Egypt*

Qatar also provided significant economic support to the transitioning regimes in Tunisia and Egypt. Qatari largesse poured into these countries as they emerged from the Arab Spring.

Commercial relations between Qatar and Tunisia boomed following the January 2011 revolution and subsequent election of a government headed by the Islamist party Ennahda. Especially noteworthy was an announcement in May 2012 of Qatari plans to construct a refinery on Tunisia's Gulf of Gabes coast at La Skhira with an output of 120,000 barrels per day. The \$2 billion

project would allow Tunisia to refine oil from neighboring Libya and develop its potential as an export hub for refined products, massively expanding capacity beyond the aging 35,000 barrels/day Bizerte refinery. The development formed part of a wider Qatari effort to kickstart Tunisia's ailing economy. In 2012 Qatar also provided balance-of-payments support for Tunisia's central bank to overcome a deteriorating external balance problem, and Qatar Petroleum International provided support for vocational training in Tunisia's hydrocarbons sector.<sup>46</sup>

The scale of Qatar's investments in Egypt, particularly during the year-long presidency of the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi, attracted far greater regional skepticism of Doha's objectives than its involvement in Tunisia. Its efforts included a series of joint ventures and acquisitions in the Egyptian financial sector; more than \$8 billion in aid designed to prop up the ailing Egyptian economy; and a favorable gas-provision deal to alleviate power shortages during the summer heat.<sup>47</sup> Most remarkably, on a visit to Cairo in September 2012, Hamad bin Jassim announced that Qatar would invest a total of \$18 billion in Egypt over five years. Commenting that there would be "no limits" to Qatar's support, Qatar's prime minister stated that \$8 billion would be invested in an integrated power plant, natural gas, and iron steel project in Port Said, while the remaining \$10 billion would finance the construction of a tourism marina complex on the Mediterranean coastline.<sup>48</sup>

It is unclear how much money Qatar provided Egypt (if any) prior to the toppling of the Morsi government in July 2013. But Qatar did subsequently honor an agreement to supply five shipments of LNG to cover shortfalls in domestic power generation in Egypt, although a separate long-term gas accord agreed to in principle between Egypt and Qatar in the spring of 2013 did not survive the change of regime in Cairo.<sup>49</sup>

### **Regional Caution**

When it came to addressing major political upheaval on the Arabian Peninsula, Qatar's approach to the Arab Spring was far more cautious. This caution reflected a pragmatic analysis of the costs and benefits of taking action in such a sensitive arena. Qatar also recognized the fact that both Bahrain and Yemen fell squarely within Saudi Arabia's sphere of influence, with Riyadh projecting varying levels of political and economic leverage. There was far less space for Qatar to act, meaning that policies toward both countries needed to be packaged firmly within GCC-wide approaches. For all of Doha's bombastic approach to Syria and North Africa, policy toward the Arab Spring ultimately was formulated with Qatar's national interest firmly in mind.

Five days before Qatar (and the UAE) spearheaded Arab League support for the humanitarian intervention in eastern Libya on March 19, 2011, Saudi Arabia led a GCC force into Bahrain to assist in the restoration of law and order following the uprising in February 2011 that threatened briefly to push

the ruling family to make significant political concessions in response to opposition calls for reform. Qatar was directly involved in the effort as a member state of the GCC. Although the vast majority of the Peninsula Shield Force that entered Bahrain was composed of members of the Saudi Arabian National Guard and policemen from the UAE, it contained a small number of Qatari troops in addition to a naval contingent from Kuwait.

This show of force demonstrated the way in which the concept of intervention assumed different meanings in diverging contexts. Rather than extolling the mass demonstrations for greater political representation in Bahrain as he had done in Libya, Hamad bin Jassim struck a very different tone, saying, “We believe that in order for dialogue to succeed, we have to defuse this tension through the withdrawal of all from the street.”<sup>50</sup> A senior Qatari military official subsequently told the Qatar News Agency that “the duty of the Qatari force participating in the Peninsula Shield Force is to contribute in restoring order and security,” adding that “as a Qatari force we are receiving our orders from the head of the joint Peninsula Shield Force,” led by Saudi Arabia.<sup>51</sup>

Qatar’s approach, firmly under the collective GCC mantle, was very different from the unilateralism that characterized its policies elsewhere. That is in large part because the uprisings in North Africa did not present a material or ideological threat to Qatari interests in the same way that a revolt against a fellow ruling family just 25 miles off Qatar’s western shore did. Any far-reaching concessions to political reform by the Bahraini governing elite, arguably the weakest link in the chain of Gulf monarchies, threatened to embolden opposition movements in other GCC states and upset the delicate sectarian balance of Sunni-Shia interests. Qatar’s room for maneuver was further limited by the paramount importance that Saudi Arabia placed on maintaining stability in Bahrain as part of a struggle with Iran for regional supremacy. The Saudis had exercised considerable political and economic influence over its small offshore neighbor long before the Arab Spring.<sup>52</sup>

Broadly similar parameters were seen in Yemen. Like Bahrain, Yemen held special geostrategic and political interest for Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom maintained a close interest in Yemen’s domestic affairs, both to prevent a strong rival from emerging on the Arabian Peninsula and to ensure the projection and maintenance of Saudi influence. During Crown Prince Sultan bin Abdulaziz al-Saud’s five-decade-long tenure as minister of defense (1962–2011), he exercised a dominating influence on Saudi-Yemeni relations, which were characterized as much by informal and personal contacts as by formal interstate interactions.<sup>53</sup> Saudi financial flows to key political elites in Yemen were ephemeral and unpredictable at best, closely identified with Sultan’s personalized contacts and never properly institutionalized.<sup>54</sup> Both in Yemen and in Bahrain, the pre-existing levels of Saudi influence constrained Qatar’s ability to formulate and implement policies that differed significantly from Riyadh’s approach.

Mass demonstrations against the thirty-three-year rule of Ali Abdullah Saleh erupted in the capital, Sanaa, in February 2011 and spread rapidly to

cities and towns across Yemen. Hundreds of thousands of protesters demanded that Saleh step down immediately, their resolve emboldened by elite defections as the political, tribal, and military circles that surrounded Saleh fragmented.<sup>55</sup>

In a rare act of collective action, the GCC proposed a political transition that would ease Saleh out of power in an elite-led and top-down process. Notably, however, the GCC plan had no position for the grassroots pro-democracy movement that had so unexpectedly emerged to challenge and upend the status quo in Yemen. Instead, it remained wedded to supporting established political actors as GCC leaders sought to bring under control the mobilized populace and guide the transition to the post-Saleh era.<sup>56</sup>

Qatari diplomacy was subsumed within the framework of the GCC's collective mediation role in Yemen following the February uprising, although the task was made more difficult by Saleh's outbursts against Al Jazeera and the Qatari leadership.<sup>57</sup> This multilateral approach to Yemen was not new for Qatar. After the failure of its attempts to mediate during the Houthi rebellion in northern Yemen in 2007–2008, Doha fell back on multilateral regional initiatives for dealing with the country. As part of the Friends of Yemen process that started in 2010 following regional and international concern about terrorism originating in Yemen, Qatari and GCC officials worked closely with Western governments to try to stabilize Yemen and prod Saleh toward political reforms. Qatar also provided Yemen with critical supplies of LNG to avert crippling energy shortages, and Silatech, a Qatari foundation linked to Emir Hamad's wife, pioneered six vocational education and training programs designed to address chronic levels of youth unemployment in Yemen.<sup>58</sup> Yet, the overall thrust of Qatari policy on Yemen was channeled through the collective effort of the GCC, consistent with Qatari policy toward Bahrain in the same period.

## Regional Backlash and Qatar's Options

As the initial tumult of the Arab Spring has given way to renewed authoritarianism and greater social polarization across the Middle East, Qatar's policies have run into strong headwinds. The adoption of an activist regional approach has undermined Qatar's reputation for relative impartiality that underpinned its pre-2011 mediation initiatives, and Doha's record of picking winners has backfired badly by angering local populations and key regional partners in the GCC. Qatar's old and new leadership is now caught in the crossfire of regional blowback and is attempting, against considerable regional skepticism, to once again adopt the pragmatic approach to foreign policy that it veered away from in 2011.

### Policy Consequences Facing Qatar

Qatar's decision to turn toward an activist policy after 2011 significantly damaged its status as a mediator par excellence. Regional skepticism about Doha's actions spread quickly.

Persistent rumors of Qatari involvement in the Islamist takeover of northern Mali in 2012 demonstrated the extent of the skepticism. A military coup in March 2012 overthrew the Malian government, after which rebels seized control of the north of Mali and proclaimed an independent state. The rebels were from the Tuareg ethnic group, and many had fought for Qaddafi in the Libyan armed forces in 2011. The rebels, called the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), rapidly gained in strength and in late March seized the three largest cities in northern Mali. However, splits between the MNLA and the militant Islamist group Ansar Dine weakened the rebel movement and resulted in the loss of control of the region to Ansar Dine and another fundamentalist organization, the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa.

As conditions in northern Mali worsened throughout 2012, attention began to focus on the activities of a small team from the Qatari Red Crescent. Their activities were unremarkable, with one member of the team noting that they had gone to the city of Gao in rebel-held territory simply “to evaluate the humanitarian needs of the region in terms of water and electricity access.”<sup>59</sup>

Yet, because the Qatari Red Crescent was the only humanitarian organization granted access to the north by the Islamist separatists, suspicion of the group’s work soon met with wider concerns about Qatar’s policy of backing armed Islamist groups in Libya and Syria. The most vocal and sustained criticism of Qatar in northern Mali came from Algeria, whose relations with Qatar had deteriorated sharply since 2011, and France, where the departure of Nicholas Sarkozy from power led to a sudden chill in ties under his successor, François Hollande. One French allegation suggested that Qatari Special Forces were training rebels linked to Ansar Dine, in a manner reminiscent of their role in strengthening Abdel Hakim Belhadj’s Tripoli Brigade in Libya. This information was said to have originated in a report from the French Directorate of Military Intelligence, although no supporting evidence was provided.<sup>60</sup>

The assumption that Qatar was linked to Ansar Dine was a widespread one. An article on Fareed Zakaria’s CNN Global Public Square blog noted as early as August 2012 that “Ansar Dine is believed to be financially backed by Qatar” without going into further detail.<sup>61</sup> Following the launch of French-led military operations against the Islamist rebels in northern Mali in January 2013, then leader of France’s ruling Socialist Party, Harlem Désir, slammed Qatar for “a form of indulgence,” adding:

There is an attitude that is not cooperative and that can be considered as a form of leniency toward the terrorist groups who occupied northern Mali. This attitude coming from Qatar is not normal. We need a policy clarification from Qatar who has always denied any role in funding terrorist groups. On the diplomatic level, Qatar should adopt a much stronger, and firmer position toward these groups who threaten the security of the Sahel region.<sup>62</sup>

Comments such as these underscore the very different environment of latent suspicion bordering on outright hostility that Qatari policymakers now face. In the case of Mali, the allegations that Qatari interests (whether state-backed or private) were funding or arming rebel groups remain unsubstantiated. But what matters is that there is a significant constituency, both in the region and beyond, that believes it might be true.

In a world where perceptions often shape policy formulation, this negative association of Qatar with destabilizing actors is very damaging. Qatar extended humanitarian assistance and sent packages of food and medicine to conflict-afflicted regions in northern Mali, but even these actions became subject to misinterpretation and rumor. In a post-Arab Spring world, it will be difficult for Qatar to resume its pre-2011 mediation or postconflict reconstruction activities without facing intense levels of scrutiny.<sup>63</sup>

### **Reorientation of Foreign Policy**

The dispute over the Muslim Brotherhood highlighted the Gulf states' sharply different approaches toward the Arab Spring. Qatar's relations with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, in particular, diverged sharply. The outspoken chief of the Dubai police force, General Dhahi Khalfan, led the charge against the Brotherhood in the UAE. In March 2012 he claimed that the Brotherhood was planning to "take over" the Gulf monarchies, saying, "My sources say the next step is to make Gulf governments figurehead bodies only without actual ruling. The start will be in Kuwait in 2013 and in other Gulf states in 2016."<sup>64</sup> Later in 2012, amid a rapid escalation of political demonstrations in Kuwait in October, the UAE foreign minister, Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan, denounced the Brotherhood as "an organization which encroaches upon the sovereignty and integrity of nations" and called upon fellow ruling families in the Gulf to join forces against the group.<sup>65</sup>

As the Brotherhood made electoral gains in Tunisia and Egypt, attitudes toward the group in other GCC capitals hardened. During 2012, these divergent attitudes also appeared in Syria, as Saudi Arabia and Qatar backed rival groups of Syrian rebel fighters. The battle waged by Doha and Riyadh for influence among regional Islamists undermined the search for a unified GCC stance on major internal and external security issues. Relations between the individual GCC states came under sustained pressure, as officials from Saudi Arabia and the UAE discretely (and sometimes openly) raised concerns about Qatar's advocacy of the Muslim Brotherhood abroad and the potential for domestic blowback in the Gulf.<sup>66</sup>

These tensions forced Qatar to reconsider its policies. When Sheikh Tamim succeeded his father as emir of Qatar in June 2013, he immediately began recalibrating the style of Qatari foreign policy. In his inaugural speech as emir, Tamim indicated that Qatar would continue to pursue its regional policy objectives,

albeit in a lower-key and less confrontational manner than under Hamad bin Jassim. He did not make any mention of Syria but did emphasize Qatar's role in the GCC. This portended the mending of damaged GCC relationships—particularly with Saudi Arabia—and built upon a Saudi-Qatari decision in spring 2013 to shift regional leadership on Syria from Doha to Riyadh.

Tamim also attempted to reassure skeptical regional allies and international partners that Qatar was “not affiliated with one trend against the other,” adding that “we reject dividing Arab societies on a sectarian or doctrinal basis.” This was a signal that, while Doha intended to maintain its autonomy in foreign policy making, it would seek to take a more cooperative and multilateral approach that is less overtly ideological than in the past.<sup>67</sup>

The new emir subsequently used his first major speech on international affairs—at the annual meeting of the UN General Assembly in New York in September 2013—to lay out the future of Qatar's regional policies. Tamim argued that “the State of Qatar aims to be a hub for dialogue and discussion among different parties to conflict and not be a party in these conflicts” and also called for structural reform of the UN Security Council to better deal with conflict situations.<sup>68</sup> Three months later, Hamad bin Jassim's successor as foreign minister, Khalid bin Mohammed al-Attiyah, used a foreign policy speech in London to reaffirm that Qatar will remain active in regional mediation and international diplomacy, albeit by taking a more coordinated approach with partners in and beyond the Middle East. His speech also made special mention of “Qatar's silent but effective work in the release of numerous hostages” as an important role Doha could fulfill.<sup>69</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of Tamim's accession, Qatar mediated in conflicts in Egypt and Syria. Both efforts were small in scale compared with those before 2011, but they nonetheless represented an attempt to reestablish Qatar as a go-to mediator. In early August 2013, the foreign ministers of Qatar and the UAE joined with senior U.S. Senators John McCain and Lindsay Graham to seek a negotiated settlement to the escalating confrontation between the Egyptian military and members of the Muslim Brotherhood. The trilateral U.S.-led attempt to mediate a solution to Egypt's worsening political crisis provided evidence of the new Qatari approach to regional policy. Although the initiative was unsuccessful, the attempt to leverage Qatari influence in a coordinated and multilateral approach with regional and international partners differed significantly from the pursuit of largely unilateral objectives associated with the former Qatari leadership.<sup>70</sup> In October, Qatar was again involved in a multilateral effort alongside Lebanese, Turkish, Syrian, and Palestinian interlocutors negotiating a complex three-way prisoner exchange agreement in Syria. Symbolically, the two Turkish pilots freed as part of the deal were returned to Turkey aboard a Qatar Airways plane at the successful conclusion of the months-long mediation process.<sup>71</sup>

Simultaneously, Tamim and the new Qatari government began to take a series of steps to reduce tensions with neighbors. Notably, the emir's first

foreign visit was to Saudi Arabia on August 2, 2013, and he met with King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz al-Saud in Jeddah.<sup>72</sup> Later that month, Qatar became the first GCC state to ratify the contentious GCC internal security pact agreed to by the six member states in Riyadh in 2012.<sup>73</sup> In September, the new Qatari government removed allies of Hamad bin Jassim from key positions, particularly within his stronghold at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>74</sup>

Tamim's appointment of Sheikh Abdullah bin Nasser al-Thani as prime minister suggested a general reorientation toward domestic policy. Like his predecessor as premier, Hamad bin Jassim, Sheikh Abdullah was entrusted with a second position; however, he was given the Ministry of Interior rather than the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

A focus on domestic policy makes sense for Qatar's government because high spending and changing energy markets present immediate short- and medium-term challenges. In addition, the government must address the continuing high levels of inward migration, the soaring cost of living in Doha, and the additional strain that preparations for the FIFA 2022 World Cup will place on the country's already-overstretched healthcare system, water supply, and transportation network.<sup>75</sup>

But this does not mean that all is well on the foreign policy front. Developments in Egypt in the weeks and months after the July 2013 coup against then president Mohamed Morsi indicated the scale of the challenge facing Qatar's new leadership as it tries to rehabilitate the country's image. The Muslim Brotherhood government in Cairo was ousted just a week after the change of emir in Doha, which required the new leader to immediately distance himself from the contentious policies of his predecessor. The emir's message of congratulations to the interim Egyptian government did not mention the deposed Muslim Brotherhood-backed Egyptian president—an attempt to salvage Qatari prestige in the wake of a radical shift in regional power relations. Instead, the new emir praised the military for “defending Egypt and its national interests” and insisted that Qatar had always supported the Egyptian people rather than any particular group.<sup>76</sup> However, after having backed Morsi's government with generous financial assistance, Qatar was excluded from contributing to the \$12 billion aid packages that Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE quickly extended to the military-dominated interim government.<sup>77</sup>

The speed with which Qatar's GCC neighbors backed the restoration of military rule in Egypt with direct budgetary support, shipments of fuel products, and large amounts of bilateral aid spoke volumes. Having largely succeeded in containing the political upheaval at home, the conservative Gulf states rapidly deployed their financial largesse and political support in Egypt. With the toppling of the Muslim Brotherhood government in Cairo effectively signaling the end of the Arab Spring—at least in its initial phase—Saudi and Emirati officials moved quickly to seize the regional initiative away from Qatar.<sup>78</sup>

Instances of pushback against Qatar multiplied, whether in direct retribution for Doha's actions in Egypt or merely as part of a more general reluctance

to give Qatar's new policies the benefit of the doubt. In March 2014, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain withdrew their ambassadors from Doha in the name of "security and stability" and accused Qatar of breaching a further GCC security agreement signed in Riyadh in November 2013 and targeted directly at Qatar that stipulated "noninterference" in the "internal affairs of any of the other GCC countries." Those decisions were the most serious and visible manifestation of the tensions bubbling underneath the surface of Gulf politics.<sup>79</sup> The decision reflected the deep and continuing anger felt in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi over Qatar's Arab Spring policies. This is the legacy facing Emir Tamim and his new foreign policy team as they seek to rebuild damaged regional relationships and regain the trust and confidence of GCC partners.<sup>80</sup>

Certainly, both the November 2013 security agreement and the simmering Saudi, Bahraini, and Emirati anger with Doha were grounded in evidence that Qatar continued to give some form of assistance to members of the Muslim Brotherhood even after the coup. In early November 2013, the *Washington Post* reported that a Muslim Brotherhood leadership in exile was "starting to take shape here among the shimmering high-rises of Doha." Moreover, the *Washington Post* alleged that several of the Brotherhood exiles were, in fact, being accommodated at Al Jazeera's expense in Doha hotels, adding that "it is in those suites and hotel lobbies that the future of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and, more broadly, the strategy and ideology of political Islam in the country may well be charted."<sup>81</sup>

At a hastily arranged trilateral meeting between the leaders of Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait in Riyadh later that month, Gulf media reports indicated that Tamim was "told to change Qatar's ways and bring the country in line with the rest of the GCC with regards to regional issues." Revealingly, the reports further suggested that Tamim had signed a pledge of compliance and requested six months in which to do so, citing the need to clear away "obstacles from remnants of the previous regime."<sup>82</sup>

An April 2014 declaration by the Omani foreign minister suggested that the GCC rift had been resolved internally and that Qatar would deport up to fifteen Gulf nationals allegedly affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. In addition, Al Jazeera would become less aggressive in its coverage of regional events and stop referring to the July 2013 military takeover in Egypt as a coup.<sup>83</sup> However, tensions continued to recur, as did Saudi and (particularly) Emirati suggestions that Qatar was not abiding by the terms of the Riyadh security agreement.

Yet, any hopes regional officials may have harbored that Qatar's new leaders might issue some sort of mea culpa or initiate a governmental debate on policy toward the Brotherhood will prove misplaced. In keeping with the closed nature of policymaking in Doha (as elsewhere in the Gulf), decisions will be taken without public fanfare and actions will be left to speak louder than words. This may trigger further tension with Qatar's neighbors should they feel that Doha could or should be doing more to publicly reorient its policies in a changed regional environment.

## Conclusion

In the early days of the Arab Spring, Qatar exerted unprecedented regional leadership and began to emerge as an innovative new actor on the international stage. Uniquely among states in the Arab world, officials in Doha viewed the unfolding upheaval in North Africa and the Levant as an opportunity to be seized rather than a challenge to be feared.

During the Arab Spring, Qatari policy shifted away from the honest-broker mediation that had characterized its pre-2011 approach, becoming more interventionist and associated with picking winners in transition states in North Africa and the Levant. Particularly in Egypt and Syria, Qatar's perceived support for the Muslim Brotherhood became increasingly controversial among local and regional actors who viewed the group's ideology and objectives with deep suspicion. Its approach caused tensions with fellow Gulf GCC states Saudi Arabia and the UAE in particular.

Qatar's Arab Spring interventions also greatly undermined the country's reputation for impartiality. The resulting skepticism of Qatari motivations further eroded the reserves of soft power that had propelled Qatar's rise as a regional power with international reach before 2011. By the time Emir Tamim took over in a carefully managed handover of power in June 2013, few of Qatar's regional neighbors were prepared to give the country the benefit of the doubt in Syria, Egypt, or elsewhere.

Despite a tumultuous early 2014, as a challenging first year for the new leadership drew to an end, two developments indicated a return of Qatar's role as interlocutor in facilitating indirect communication between estranged parties. Both instances suggested that Qatari officials were going back to basics and prioritizing a quieter, lower-key approach to mediation that was a far cry from the fanfare of their predecessors' high-profile forays into the regional arena.

The first was Qatar's involvement in arranging a prisoner exchange deal that saw five Taliban prisoners released into Qatari custody in return for the release of U.S. Army Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl. Qatar had long put itself forward as a possible intermediary between the Afghan government and the Taliban, although an attempt to facilitate dialogue in June 2013 was ultimately short-lived and unsuccessful. The breakthrough in late May 2014 occurred after months of painstaking preparation that, in the words of U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, "exemplifies how vital our partnership with Qatar is and will remain."<sup>84</sup> U.S. President Barack Obama and Taliban head Mullah Omar both issued statements publicly thanking Emir Tamim for his assistance in brokering the deal. Qatar's comparative advantage in mediation is its ability to serve as an intermediary for indirect negotiations and back-channel communications between sworn adversaries and to balance relationships with a wide array of mutually antagonistic foes.

Similar patterns are evident in the other noteworthy development—Qatar's search for a mediated solution to violence in Gaza. Doha has been active in

regional attempts to secure a ceasefire between Israel, with whom it has maintained discrete trade links, and Hamas, whose leader Khaled Meshal has long been based in Doha. During the Gaza conflict that broke out in July 2014, Tamim and al-Attiyah engaged actively in shuttle diplomacy. Visitors to Qatar included UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, who is thought to have met with Hamas leader Meshal while in Doha, while al-Attiyah held extensive triangular consultations with Davutoğlu and Kerry in Paris. Additionally, it is instructive that at one point, Secretary Kerry telephoned al-Attiyah to ask Doha to use its influence to intercede with Hamas.<sup>85</sup> This illustrates how Qatar can play a positive role by conveying messages between Hamas and the international community and facilitating confidence-building measures among all disputant parties.

It may take years for Qatar to fully restore a degree of trust among regional partners, but the path is open for Qatari officials to begin rebuilding a reputation as an intermediary that is able to bridge divides. As events across much of

the Arab world become more unpredictable and volatile, U.S. policymakers in particular can work with Qatar to maintain options for back-channel communications and even track-two diplomacy to reduce tension and uncertainty as and when opportunities permit.

Should Qatar seek to regain (and best leverage) its reputation for mediation in a way that overcomes its limited institutional capacity, officials in Doha may need to take a step back and allow others to lead, something that they may be loath to do. Given that the mediation successes under the former leadership were accompanied by media

fanfare and formed part of the potent state-branding efforts to position Qatar on the international stage, a more discrete role may not be palatable, even though it offers a more sustainable path over the longer term. But the low-key approach that characterized the Bowe Bergdahl and Gaza cases may signal that Qatari leaders have, at the very least, absorbed the lessons of the Arab Spring, and recalibrated policy accordingly.

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