

# Qatar's Global Activism: Pursuing Ambition in the Midst of Domestic and Regional Transitions

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## INTRODUCTION

A boom era from pearl diving ended early in the twentieth century for Qatar, giving way to economic collapse and widespread poverty. Therefore, the pursuit of a sustainable livelihood solidified Qataris' links to the Arabian Peninsula's interior through migration. During much of this period, the British administered Qatar's external relations (Al-Ghanim 1997: Chaps. 3 and 4). Following formal independence in 1971, the hydrocarbon boom amassed for Qatar considerable monetary riches. It was not until the mid-1990s, however, that this wealth was complemented by a new foreign policy path. This path can best be understood as "global activism" in the sense of seeking to expand worldwide ties and play a role in issues of global relevance. Since the 1990s, Qatar has been capitalizing on external opportunities to be present in world politics.

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Qatar's activism is driven by its leaders' ambitions to act in the world. This ambition has derived from a position of luxury, in the sense that these activist foreign policy choices were largely a series of un-coerced choices. Foreign policy could be generally understood in the discipline as having to do with facing external threats or securing alliances or resources. Qatar's actions, however, were neither about imminent military or economic security threats or laboring to protect sovereignty. Hence, Qatar's leadership concerns and understandings of national interest were not to achieve the "traditional" goals of foreign policy such as security or defense against external threats, or guarantee resources. Indeed, with noteworthy successes, Qatari foreign policy after the mid-1990s shows the ability of states to achieve ambitions through global activism during certain historical moments when they are unshackled from the constraints of traditional security concerns. These moments, however, tend to have their end points. For Qatar, the point where choice of foreign policy strategies needed revision came in 2014; its onset was attributable to the conflation of complexities in Arab Spring revolts, intra-Gulf politics, and Qatar's domestic societal reactions. Global activism could not be pursued without increased security costs; pursuing ambition required adjustments in strategies. This chapter provides insights into the embedded limitations of realizing ambition. It provides an analysis of what can happen when the contraction of the spaces in which a state is acting meets the outer parameters of its action; as such, the chapter thinks through the inherent paradoxes of becoming an influential player on the global stage. It also highlights what happens when a state becomes involved in volatile issues, and how its actions start having crucial defense and security implications.

In the following pages, I will describe how ambition was translated via global activism, and the strategies taken by Qatar to establish a presence. Then, I explain via a levels-of-analysis approach factors that can help us better understand the source of these ambitions as well as the choice of strategies in their pursuit. I will discuss the implications for Qatar of pursuing this type of foreign policy agenda, and how the various networks in which the country is engaged showcase the strengths and weaknesses of the foreign policy-making process and provide a glimpse at its goals. In particular, I explore the risks associated with pursuing an activist foreign policy agenda at times of substantial domestic and regional transitions.

## APPROACHES TO QATAR'S FOREIGN POLICY

It would be expected for an analysis of Qatar's foreign policy to start from a frame of size: that is, Qatar is worth investigating because it is a small state acting globally. In relative terms, Qatar is indeed smaller than many state actors with which it interacts, and meets traditional definitions of small size measured in land area, demographics, and military capabilities (East 1973: 557).<sup>1</sup> There is almost always at least a hint of structural-type logic that finds Qatar's expansive strategies puzzling: small states should have limited foreign policy goals if they exist in volatile regional orders because they are always going to face continuous and debilitating security challenges. Thus, when such states act outside their immediate neighborhood, like Qatar, they are often expected to face serious constraints and threats from larger actors—or “the system.” However, what is interesting about the literature on Qatar is not the reference to size per se, but explanations of a mediation the causes of its global and regional activism and ambition.

An often referenced motivation behind global activism is a variant of branding: that Qatar desires to be known worldwide which gives its leadership and society the pleasures of “owning” international prestige (Peterson 2006). Some analysts propose an interesting combination of foreign policy drivers for Qatar: they suggest that in addition to the pursuit of international prestige through its foreign policy activism, Qatar simultaneously acts in pursuit of survival (a rather substantially varied goal) necessitated by the country's size and regional environment (Kamrava 2011: 539–556). Thus, Qatar is analyzed as having pursued an expansive foreign policy as a means to guard against external turbulence and deflect potential aggressive tendencies, while simultaneously seeking greater exposure; such analysis highlights the necessity of foreign policy flexibility. A rather different approach highlights weaknesses, where malevolent intentions are seen to be mixed into Qatar's “un-strategized” foreign policies leading it to pursue a foreign policy “based on opportunism and promiscuity” (Khatib 2013: 431). Finally, many propose that Qatar's concern is to sustain foreign policies that achieve a sense of being distinct from other Gulf societies/states. The goal, therefore, is to forge a form of national distinctness vis-à-vis close regional neighbors with which Qatar has had a long and intimate connection, such as Saudi Arabia (Dorsey 2013).

In this chapter, I argue that the interesting story about Qatar's foreign policy is that "global activism" comes during times of external and domestic transitions, not so much because of size or leadership intentions *per se*. Qatari society for the past decade has been passing through steep demographic and ideational transformations, brought about mainly by the massive influx of foreign labor as well as an expansive state-building project; the country seems to be testing what is right for itself. On the external front, the Middle East is a region historically riddled with instability and that has become particularly volatile since 2011; Qatar remains engaged in various theaters there. Thus, with transformation dominating its external and domestic environments, Qatar appears to be a country that is brainstorming in the world, grabbing onto many different available opportunities to be globally present.

### AMBITION IN THE FORM OF "GLOBAL ACTIVISM"

Engagements in multiple theaters since the mid-1990s defined Qatar's "global activism": Qatar rose to international prominence with a foreign policy principally based on the mediation of Arab and African conflicts. Its considerable successes in this regard gained it crucial political legitimacy domestically and globally. This positive image was further consolidated through the hosting of various international sports events, culminating in the successful bid for the 2022 World Cup,<sup>2</sup> as well as increased financial investments in prime real estate worldwide (especially in Europe), the acquisition of renowned football clubs, and the expansion of airline services (Abdullah 2014: Chap. 7).

Throughout these years, Qatar hosted Al Jazeera (and its vocal/critical reports), and supported/engaged with the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafi parties, and Hamas while simultaneously being an American ally and opening formal channels with Israel (before closing them in protest of Israeli politics). These are significant commitments, especially because they tie Qatar to relations that are, or have the potential to be, inherently volatile and/or violent. At the same time, these commitments are not forced on Qatar. In other words, it could have afforded not to pursue such ties without any major implications for its national security. This construction of an international image and role was accompanied by a strengthening of regional ties with various Islamic parties, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas. Such wide-ranging, and at times contradictory, connections were critical in allowing Qatar to expand its

domestic, regional, and global ambitions at the onset of the Arab Spring contestations in 2011.

The uprisings in Egypt, Libya, and Syria, among others, and the regional turmoil these set off, did not dissuade Qatar from its “global activism”; rather, they created opportunities for Qatar to complement its previous mediation efforts with another “activist” foreign policy defined by the defense and support of revolutionary societal demands for freedom. Qatar’s backing for the uprisings has resulted, however, in increased tensions with its immediate neighbors, particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), over the potential domestic security implications of such partisanship. This has seen Qatar arrive at a critical juncture, where it is seeking to maintain its “global activism” of mediation and partisanship, while simultaneously ensuring stability and good-naturedness in its strategic relations with the Gulf region. Qatar’s involvements in the revolts since 2011 do not fit well with earlier markers of ambition; hence, as I elaborate later, after around four years of such interventions, the coming back of a mediation discourse and discernible retreat from Syria and Egypt confirm the primacy of the “old ways.”

### STRATEGIES TO ACHIEVE FIRST CLASS PLAYER STATUS

Three sets of strategies indicative of Qatar’s ambitions are discernible: (1) diplomatic mediation; (2) social and financial development; and (3) partisanship in the Arab Spring revolts.

#### *Diplomatic Mediation*

One “essential component” which reflects Doha’s activist foreign policy agenda is its peacemaking and conflict resolution mediation (Kamrava 2011: 542). In Africa, it mediated the Eritrea–Djibouti border conflict and the domestic conflict in Somalia. In the Sudan and Yemen, Qatari political figures were central in bringing combating parties together (Roberts 2012: 236). And after years of being the principal mediator, Qatar brought Palestinian elites together to settle acrimonious divisions in 2014. In addition to these efforts, Qatar demonstrated a significant dose of political pragmatism by opening public and high-profile channels with Israel. Though rife with disagreements, official Qatar–Israel relations nevertheless lasted for around a decade, the main declared goal from which was to help find a solution to the conflict with the Palestinians

and alleviate humanitarian conditions in Palestine.<sup>3</sup> Qatar suspended its ties with Israel in January 2009 in protest over Israeli operations against Gaza.<sup>4</sup> In Lebanon, Qatar's relations with local political factions, particularly Hezbollah, were progressively strengthened. In the aftermath of the 2006 Lebanon war, Qatar's then Emir Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani was the first state leader to visit Beirut's battered southern suburbs as well as southern Lebanon, where he was widely welcomed when donating more than quarter of a billion dollars which made famous the catch phrase "shoukran Qatar" (thank you Qatar). At that time, Qatar still had official ties with the state of Israel, which did not seem to bother many of its Lebanese interlocutors. That it was able to manage both sets of relations was indicative of Qatar's ability to successfully navigate complex foreign policy situations. Then in 2008, Qatar brought together rival Lebanese factions and oversaw the election of a president, in what came to be known as the Doha Agreement, one of a long list of deals struck outside Lebanon to ensure the functioning of the Lebanese sectarian political system. Qatar's many successful interventions in conflict settings gained it an increasingly positive reputation as a mediator (Abdullah 2014: 139; Kamrava 2011).

Parallel to these concrete mediation efforts, over the past decade, Qatar has also engaged in less overt mediation attempts, which more politically experienced regional states, especially Saudi Arabia, have not undertaken. For instance, it has met with Iranian representatives, with Qatar framing its regional policy as within the parameters to solve tensions with Iran, especially over the nuclear issue, and as part and parcel of Qatar's energy strategy, given the shared gas field between the two states (Fromherz 2012: 100). Qatar has also agreed to host Taliban members as part of its liaison role between Afghani groups and the USA. This role allowed Qatar to mediate a crucial prisoner exchange agreement between the USA and the Taliban in early 2014, whereby four senior Taliban members were released into Qatari custody in exchange for a captured American soldier.<sup>5</sup> Though these mediation efforts have had some security implications for Qatar, these have been minimal, and its involvement in these efforts have had less to do with security and more to do with projecting its ambitions as part of its drive to create a clear sense of national distinctness for itself. Direct threats from all such engagements, for the time being, are dampened by Qatar's alliance with the USA, and the cover of the latter's military umbrella made possible by Qatar's hosting the largest US military base in the region. Qatar has benefited from the US presence in the Gulf

for a whole range of reasons without having to acquiesce to American desires even if Qatar's actions (such as its support for Islamic groups) has, at times, frustrated the USA.

### *Social and Financial Development*

Complementing its diplomatic efforts, Qatar has also increased its visibility in the world through a range of development initiatives made possible largely with its massive financial capabilities; these include spending around three billion dollars in assistance to 100 countries in the past few years (Qatar, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2013).<sup>6</sup> It has given handsomely to international development initiatives in education, healthcare, and sanitation in impoverished environments, and provided aid to communities torn by militarized conflicts. In many important ways, development assistance or aid in post-conflict situations is a form of diplomatic mediation in the sense that helping combatants—and suffering populations—leads to new forms of positive relations. Moreover, Qatar hosted a World Trade Organization ministerial meeting in 2001 and a meeting of the Group of 77 in 2005. It was also elected to the Security Council in 2006–2007. Finally, Qatar has been investing in Western economies such as purchasing prime real estate and football teams, and in African states in agricultural projects. Such investments have generally helped build bridges between Qatar and other states, while having real material returns by improving Doha's food security and allowing it to accrue influence (Fromherz 2012: 11). The various forms of trade in water and investing in distant agricultural projects continue to face challenges, some of which come from the host communities, and will likely continue to demand negotiation skills and creative thinking on behalf of Qatari diplomats.<sup>7</sup>

### *Arab Spring Revolts: Qatar's Partisanship*

Intervention, or partisanship, was a door opened by the Arab Spring which changed the map of regional relations, and in which Qatar did not stay on the sidelines. Rather, it increasingly became *involved* in militarized conflicts, rather than *resolving* them. The first shift in this new direction occurred when Qatar sided with Libyan rebels against Qaddafi during the Libyan uprising, supplying them with military and financial support, the marker being the Qatari flag flowing on one of the palaces after the regime was overthrown (Abdullah 2014: Chap. 8). Qatar came out to support

revolutionaries in the Syrian uprising, which at some point in 2012 became more complicated with increasing reports of factionalism within the ranks of revolutionaries added to a political deadlock and inability to move ahead with any non-violent settlement. Support for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt before and since their ousting from power has been the most polarizing issue in Qatari foreign policy. Al Jazeera's vocalization of the plight of the Brotherhood continues to be a contentious issue, and draws the ire of various sitting Arab regimes which themselves have had to face organized opposition from Muslim Brotherhood-like organizations.

## EXPLAINING QATAR'S AMBITION-SEEKING STRATEGIES

### *The Primacy of Context: Qatari Strategies in Regional Environments*

The types of relations in two regional systems, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the Middle East, have influenced how Qatar acts on its ambitions. In particular, the rules which define the regional order themselves influence the choice of policy and/or the impact these policies eventually have.

#### *The GCC System: The Need for Consensus*

The GCC is of great consequence to Qatar with regard to its national security and sense of national identity, because of the depth of societal ties and the island's geographic vulnerabilities. Qatar's overall policies have been greatly influenced by this environment's definition of the range of policy options and Qatari willingness to conform to or violate relational rules. While geographic proximity is a main feature of the GCC system, its essence is that it is formed by states which agree that they share common social and cultural structures and institutions that distinguish them from others in their neighborhood such as Iran, Iraq, and Yemen. GCC features include an Arab-Khaleeji identity built on the centrality of monarchic orders; tribal social structures, where paternal lineage, for example, is the main means to citizenship; and commitments to Islam.<sup>8</sup>

Identity and cultural markers, however, are not static. Gulf societies are in transition, influenced by the whirlpool of capitalist modes of consumption and the "modernization" with which it is associated such as models of higher education, private residential apartment complexes, and



high-end clothing. Most importantly, Gulf societies are intimately covered in the international media almost daily (which for a conservative society is a pretty invasive situation to deal with). GCC rules, which in great part emanate from within member states, are stable and rather clear today, but surely are not constant.

As a system, in the GCC (unlike the broader Middle East), collective agreement exists on the contours of acceptable and unacceptable foreign policies of member states. GCC mechanisms to resolve conflict or moments of tension are mostly via personalized ties. Most importantly, while the theatrics of Westphalian sovereignty are observed, tribal and family ties are deeper in ordering domestic realms in the same way that they order inter-state relations. Respecting and guaranteeing the domestic control of regimes of their respective realms is a shared goal for GCC members, despite periodic disagreements and political rivalries. Qatar generally abides by collectively reached GCC rules; while it might not do so all the time, it does not violate the core rule of guarding regime sovereignty. Thus, Qatar acts in conformity with regional dictates on many issues, even when it tests the lengths to which its foreign policy could reach. An important common and unspoken understanding—indicators of which could often be gleaned in public statements—is that political dissidents, no matter how peaceful, cannot be provided refuge by other GCC members. This is a critical point: member states do not interfere unless there is a great chance of a threat on a regional level. Bahrain is one case where this is evident: intra-GCC rivalries largely dissipated with Bahrain's uprising in 2011, leading to concerted action to bring back the status quo ante. Qatar was part of an intervention in Bahrain led by Saudi Arabia. Hence, the GCC, despite internal disagreements, works within the red lines of societal security and regime stability. It would have been difficult, for example, to imagine Qatar not supporting the intervention of the Peninsula Shield Force to quell demonstrations in Bahrain in 2011 when they threatened the regime there. Unlike interventions in Syria or Libya, Qatar cannot afford a violation of the GCC core principles around regime stability, and it is attuned to the risks of domestic mobilization inside Gulf states.

In foreign policy, Qatar is distinct when it takes actions like being a recognized mediator; communicating with Iran, Israel, and the USA at the same time; supporting the Muslim Brotherhood, even when this policy seems to have backfired in the Arab Spring; as well as building universities and hosting an influential news channel like Al Jazeera. Domestic

and foreign policies are hence intricately tied: as long as Qatari rulers can manage whatever pan-Arab or other non-strictly national sentiment that might be stirred up in society, and given that society does not have large dividing lines, the ruling regime can be ambitious in foreign policy—as long as ties with the GCC are not severed. At the same time, Qatar’s policies are monitored by other GCC members, and the reverse is also true. While the Qataris have generally accepted their government’s policies, policy distinctness and non-conformity raise questions especially in societies with significant societal cleavages of a religious or class nature, for example, among Bahrainis or Saudi Arabians, about the specificity of a Gulf identity that requires regime stewardship and protection. In many ways, Qataris’ appreciate and seek to maintain their conflict-free internal cohesion.

### *Qatar and Saudi Arabia*

With regard to not severing GCC ties, it is the relationship with Saudi Arabia that Qatar often tries to adjust—not the overall regional order. In particular, in 1992, a militarized border altercation between Saudi Arabia and Qatar might have galvanized the latter’s search for foreign policy distinctness, which helps us better capture the timing of Qatar’s heightened activism. More ambition and a wider spectrum of external relations, in an important sense, dilute or eliminate traces of the idea that Qatar is a Saudi Arabian addendum; seeking distinctions from Saudi Arabia is not a newly found Qatari interest but dates back at least to the mid-twentieth century when the system of political loyalties and power structures was consolidating in Qatar. Over the years, competition (not really conflict) has played out in different ways: ambassadors are often withdrawn and reinstated in protest over one policy or another. Such moves are more about sovereign theatrics than deep-rooted and irreconcilable disagreements on regional security and regime stability. Withdrawing ambassadors or changing levels of diplomatic representation, for example, might mean little to the family and tribal, as well as personalized, essences of intra-GCC politics. Thus, no irreconcilable positions—at least thus far—have unfolded over core GCC rules. The often exhibited tensions between Qatar and Saudi Arabia emerge as the outcome of action on action: in many ways, Saudi Arabia acts toward Qatar in demonstration of its dominance in the GCC, and Saudi Arabia also needs to act, as a regional powerhouse, to signal to the USA, Iran, or Syria that it is not a sleeping giant. In a way, then, Saudi Arabian action is influenced by Doha’s action, regardless of whether this

is a result of an intended provocation or not. For example, it was reported that Qatar's involvement in Syria as a supporter of the anti-Assad Syrian rebels provoked Saudi Arabia to react by supporting its own factions in a bid to weaken Qatari influence in Syria (Oweis 2014).

Saudi Arabia, however, does not seem to have to legitimately fear Qatar's growing regional or global clout, as the rules ordering the GCC are rather clear *and accepted*, especially in terms of rallying around support for sitting regimes, which apply to Riyadh as they do to Doha. Saudi Arabia, being at the core of the GCC, given its historic regional status and ties with regional regimes and outside powers, can influence GCC member states' conformity; Qatar, on the other hand, cannot reach the sphere of influence that Saudi Arabia has. For example, plans for a Qatar–Kuwait gas pipeline were stalled in 2006 when Saudi Arabia did not approve them, and an anticipated bridge to connect Qatar to the UAE was not realized. The sphere of action for Qatar, therefore, cannot be only on a GCC level. Instead, Qatar invests in extra-regional influence, which more often than not appears as if to counter Saudi Arabia. This might sometimes be the case but not always.

Finally, with Qatar sharing active involvements outside of the GCC, such as in the Middle East, Africa, or Asia with other GCC members like Saudi Arabia and the UAE, it seems that despite their disputes and disagreements on external-GCC actions, priority is given to insulating the GCC system from negative externalities spilling over into the local scene. These states reorganize relations in the face of agreed upon sources of threat; Saudi Arabia's centrality to Qatari security, and the GCC state in general, is often emphasized.<sup>9</sup> Importantly, while a regional understanding is that domestic politics are the respective realms of regimes, collective actions are required to prevent spillovers.

*The Broader Middle East: Influences from a Fractured Regional Order*

As a system, the Middle East is defined primarily by geographic proximity and, since the mid-twentieth century, by a fragmented regional order. These realities have two implications: (1) rules on acceptable behaviors are generally not agreed upon by members, who thus do not agree on what forms of interventions to aid regional actors are permissible and what are not; and (2) regional security is volatile because of the absence of collective regional architectures for conflict resolution, while violence and military force in regional relations are used by actors to undermine each other. In such a regional order, desired effects of actions might be *often* undermined

because they are exposed to inordinate violations. For example, if the sovereignty of a member is violated, reactions to aid said state are individual not collective, and often invites intervention of extra-regional powers, like the USA, to provide military reprieve. This often has the side effect of alarming other regional actors. Moreover, regional audiences/targets of action are prone to carry out abrupt shifts in their own policies to guard their integrity in a region riddled with violent conflicts. Thus, goals for mediators or bridge-builders are often thwarted.

In this overall context, two rules developed over time in the Middle East regional order. One rule instructed member states and non-states alike to adopt assertive foreign policies in pursuit of national interests, rather than collaboration and coordination. Another rule promoted innovation in pursuit of national interests given the absence of collective agreement. These rules influence ambitious states like Qatar in two important ways: First, given that the nature and sources of constraints, threats, and opportunities abruptly change, strategies require constant calibration and adjustment vis-à-vis regional and extra-regional actors. Second, the militarized violence which laces this environment has been severely taxing on state sovereignty, and regimes have had to work hard to protect their independence from other actors—friends and foes alike.

In the 2000s, localized and contained conflicts furnished mediating opportunities. Opportunities in Lebanon (2008), Sudan (2008), and Yemen (around 2009) are the most celebrated cases of successful Qatari mediation. Thus, it was not Qatar's size that mattered, but the types of interventions the regional environment facilitated. The Qatari foreign policy elite's interest in a mediation role capitalized on regional openings, and their proactive approach earned Qatar significant political capital. But while the successful outcomes of political mediation are recognized, it should be noted that the process of reaching them was rife with conflict. For example, negotiating solutions to the various domestic Lebanese political crises between 2006 and 2009 frequently met with Syrian attempts to keep Saudi Arabia in the loop as a way to hedge their bets—which in effect meant curbing Qatari enthusiasm to lead on the Lebanese scene (Al Qassemi 2011).

The onset of the Arab Spring in a polarized Middle East brought greater tensions to the region. The Arab Spring has tested Qatari foreign policy, challenging Qatar to find a way to maintain a diverse set of alliances with actors that are fairly hostile to each other (such as Saudi Arabia and

the UAE on the one hand and the Muslim Brotherhood on the other). The unhinging of domestic political processes across many states created a whole series of domestic uncertainties for revolutionaries as well as for sitting regimes. On a backdrop of a regional order riddled with rivalries, crises, and wars, opportunities for mediation were overshadowed (not replaced) by newly developing pressures to take sides in ongoing contestations, and these pressures have been placed on Qatar, France, the USA, and others. After 2011, the Middle East's regional relations have posed challenges because they are unstable. It is in this environment that Qatar's foreign policy elite has been facing challenges.

As an illustration of this tumultuous environment, the initial thrust against Qaddafi was supported by the Arab League and the UN. Thus, Qatar's push for military intervention in Libya was almost unanimously sanctioned and the environment was permissive of such a policy. It is when revolts escalated that Qatar faced grave difficulties. Libya soon collapsed into a civil war and so did Syria, and in the meantime, Egypt lingered for a few months in a state of disarray. This was to be expected since involvement in a military engagement rather than just its mediation—anywhere—is always going to be more complicated. In expanding its activist foreign policy from mediator to involved participant, Qatar became entangled in politics and its consequences.

In effect, it was not a matter of Qatar being small or having the resources to engage, but that this engagement was subject to region-wide political and social forces over which it had little control. Egypt and Syria are domains where many states have a difficult time fully comprehending what domestic societies and groups want. During the Arab Spring, therefore, Qatar fell back on what it knew—or better yet—who it knew. It supported Islamic movements in Syria and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt because elites in Doha have a long history of positive relations with such movements. Mostly through supporting groups with an Islamic agenda, Qatar seemed to be trying to cement its credentials as a distinct Islamic authority.<sup>10</sup> However, by end of 2014, Qatar's highly contentious foreign policies vis-à-vis Egypt in particular, which had raised the ire of many GCC members and led to the withdrawal of ambassadors as well as a series of attacks on Qatar as a harbor of terrorism, came to an end. Instead, Qatar's policy-making circle pursued an active process of reconciliation and policy adjustment, including closing an Egypt-exclusive Al Jazeera program and the mellowing its diplomatic discourses vis-à-vis Egypt.

*Societal Preferences and Qatar's Global Activism*

Qatar provides an interesting example of the relationship between regime type and foreign policy activism. The foreign policies of global south states have most often been understood as an outcome of the “postcolonial” condition in which countries were transitioning to statehood under the pressures of territorial conflicts or irredentism, aggravated by compromised institutions, domestic fragmentation, and contested regime legitimacy (Neuman 1998). Leaders in such states have consequently often been defined as being unaccountable to society and naturally inclined to authoritarian governance. While many global south states do indeed face such challenges, not all of them have been caught in a debilitating trap. Moreover, it is inaccurate to assume that “authoritarian leaders act without constraint” (Kaarbo et al. 2012: 17). Though this may not necessarily be obvious, leaders in any political system are subject to various forms of constraints from organized factions, private interests, and competing contenders for power. So, while leaders in Qatar could not be forced from positions of authority through elections, they should still be understood as accountable to society through alternative local institutions such as tribal confederations and rival leading families, as well as through broadly accepted societal interests and values that impose distinct constraints on acceptable governance (Weeks 2008).

Qatar's political system has avenues for social coalitions to organize for political gain outside electoral competition and mechanisms otherwise assumed as necessary for the proceedings of Western democracies (Weeks 2008: 61). For example, the constitution (approved in 2013) stipulated the creation of a Majlis al-Shura (consultative council) with largely advisory powers. While Qatar is not a showcase for liberal democracy, and abuses of individual freedoms are occasionally reported, it does not have a central political party bureau that dishes out propaganda, nor a police force that uses open and systemic violence to oppress segments of the population. Effective local institutional mechanisms for popular legitimation and political confirmation and for relaying voice include the family, tribe, and personalized ties. Moreover, with a small and rather homogeneous society, the absence of massive distances between various sectors, such as elites and the mass public, means that information that is necessary for a smooth running of state affairs and to maintain overall domestic stability travels rather easily (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003). Given that Qatari society does not have large class, ethnic, or religious cleavages, political

agents rallying against the regime might have a difficult time mobilizing support from disenfranchised groups. What this also means, however, is that the regime cannot insulate itself from the interests, grievances, and requests of organized societal actors such as family leaders.

The rather small size of Qatar's native population and its high degree of homogeneity have brought society close to the ruling regime and reduced friction in the process of state-building and institutional development. Moreover, given the high degree of societal homogeneity and societal structures in the form of religious and cultural norms and collective bonds, the values that are associated with Qatar's political system prevent the regime from acting—on foreign policy issues as it does on domestic ones—in ways that would be alien to broad societal interests and values. With such social support, the small size of the foreign policy-making elite minimizes internal fractures, and makes it easier to act externally. Moreover, it is very likely that differences over non-essential policies or minor differences in positions between the leadership and the public at large do not warrant a revolutionary type of counter-regime organization (Bas 2012: 806).

Qatar's ambition in engaging in an "activist foreign policy" is also socially sanctioned in that foreign policy seems to be consistent with society's sense of self as understood by its decision makers. There is broad support for Qatar's longstanding mediation efforts and for its new involvement with Arab revolutionary actors in Syria, Libya, and Egypt. Qatari society's support for this type of foreign policy is grounded in the fact that this foreign policy is domestically understood as an attempt to forge a nationally distinct sense of self and to help out societies under oppression, a project that Qataris agree with. The area in which society is rather involved pertains to the GCC where Qataris do see distinctions, yet where Qataris' sense of belonging and security are most connected. Hence, Qatar's search for a de-escalation of political friction with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, especially after 2012, was primarily driven by domestic Qatari society's signaling of the need for calming tensions.

Domestically, several projects emphasize national uniqueness and affirm the globally oriented ambition displayed in foreign policy. These include several museums set up to preserve and showcase Qatari, Arab, Islamic, and Gulf history and culture; investments in institutions of higher education; investments in medical centers; and last but not least, the massive investments in hosting international sports events, the World Cup 2022 being only one of several planned events. Such projects attempt to

both define and reflect “a forward-looking” set of national values. Thus, like Qatar’s foreign policy engagements, domestic projects, while helping Qatari society locate for itself a place in the world, are transitional at their core. Of course, these are not always rosy ventures, but are dotted with reports of labor abuse, wrong doing, or lack of legal transparency. Government reactions to such emerging “issues” might furnish a lesson in understanding Qatari foreign policy. State institutions and regulations are trying to deal with a growing population, a booming construction in national infrastructure, and a growing need for expatriate labor of all collar colors and professions. In the process, institutional reactions and standard operating procedures are often developed onsite, rather than as an outcome of meticulous strategic planning.

As mentioned earlier, Qatar wishes to forge a distinct identity in the GCC, and especially distinct from Saudi Arabia. Domestic projects of a global nature affirm this desire. The most significant is Qatar’s support for the Muslim Brotherhood, a group that does not have a hospitable reception in other GCC regimes. Doha’s official ties with the Muslim Brotherhood started with the process of state-building in roughly the 1950s, when Qatari officials requested assistance in building education programs. These ties acquired a foreign policy dimension when Qatar developed the interest and means to act globally around the 1990s. Distinctions within GCC states soon became visible on the issue of support for Islamic groups. These are groups that adopt an agenda that opposes what they brand as oppressive power; thus, the fear of domestic ideological mobilization in the Gulf.

Supporting the Muslim Brotherhood infuses Qatar with an ideational variance from the Saudi Arabian-dominant interpretation of Wahhabi ideas (which Qatari and Saudi Arabian society share) without severing ties. Moreover, as a movement which transcends state authority, Muslim Brotherhood ideology also frames Qatar as a committed donor to globally active Islamic groups, something uncommon among GCC states. At the same time, such a relationship comes at fairly low political cost for Doha given that the Brotherhood does not organize in clubs and associations in Qatar in ways that would translate into domestic political pressures (Roberts 2012). In that sense, Qatari leaders’ sense of uniqueness is historic.

As already mentioned, the Arab Spring provided the opportunity to expand its support for Islamic parties, but when Qatar’s involvements caused tensions with GCC countries, they caused problems for Qataris



who felt that these inter-state Gulf rivalries might escalate. Qatar's leadership had to take action, and it did. Qatar then retreated to its old mediator role. Thus, societal values, especially those shared by others in the Gulf, have great implications for what regimes can do. Foreign policy repositioning—and a return to mediation—has allowed Qatar to rectify problems with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states that are still central for Qataris. Qatar and the GCC reconciled in late 2014, with the ambassadors of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, who had been recalled earlier, returning to Doha. Qatar's decision makers have since been seeking to minimize frictions in foreign policy, especially vis-à-vis GCC states.

### *Economic Considerations*

Monetary income, mostly from the sale of gas, allows Qatar to be globally active. As discussed earlier, material capacities over the long run are likely to have influenced the formation of ambitious foreign policy preferences and goals in the first place. Material capacities to act come from hydrocarbon rent, which is an important dimension in at least three ways.

In one way, rents have allowed the regime to solidify its sources of domestic support with money spent on social services. More importantly, however, has been the manner in which these rents are being spent and for what purposes. Two important realities accompanied Qatar's boom in hydrocarbon rents. First, hydrocarbon rents were introduced into a rather unified social fabric. Second, institution-building was slow and started in earnest in the 1990s (Al-Muhannadi and Al-Hayti 2009: Chap. 2). The intersection of these factors cemented the position of the political leadership. The fact that over the past few decades, Qataris have become a minority in a Qatar being built by expatriates contributes to societal cohesion, where emphasis on similarities rather than differences becomes central in domestic relations. But it is not only a matter of society being cohesive that matters for Qatar's relations with the world. Since the 1990s, Qatar's society is seeing purposive investments by its ruling regime to generate distinct discourses and symbols. As noted earlier, these anchor Qatar as part and parcel of its Islamic and Arab environments, but also highlight its "forward looking" and modern society with global attachments.

Domestic spending of rents on national projects has been central in the building of Qatar's national image, and a sense of its being distinct. Some of the moves financed by the ruling regime to preserve and showcase national values and symbols and strengthen society's sense of distinctness

are construction of museums of both modern art and a wide host of traditional artifacts; expansion in the education sector; and especially funding of universities and institutes of higher education and knowledge generation,<sup>11</sup> and refurbishing traditional souqs (markets) and building new ones in the image of times gone by. Significant sums of money are allocated to social projects, infrastructure, and a wide range of social subsidies. In that sense, national distinction comes in the form of society being taken care of; rent allocation has reached most social strata, albeit with inequalities. However, the reliance on hydrocarbon rents to finance national development to the detriment of productive sectoral diversity increases national vulnerability and constrains independence, as is the case with similar economies (al-Yousef 2011: Section 3). As amply noted in Qatar's National Vision 2030, the state remains concerned with sustaining "acceptable" living standards for nationals. Official documents note significant increased domestic spending since at least the past decade and propose a continuing trend; despite concerns for decline in revenues from hydrocarbons, a shift is expected in the sources of national income whereby other activities contribute (such as tourism).<sup>12</sup> With a citizen population of around 280,000 (by non-official estimates)<sup>13</sup> and a GDP in 2014 of around 210 billion USD, the state has been able to provide a wide range of subsidies and other financial support packages to Qataris<sup>14</sup>; it is likely to continue to do so given the political importance of such services and the perceived success of the experience in national political management approaches to economic policy (Ibrahim and Harrigan 2012).

Popular content with living standards endows decision makers with a high level of support to act globally to showcase Qatar's modernity and distinctness, and hydrocarbon rents facilitate such action. For example, massive hydrocarbon rents provide a critical factor that has allowed Qatar the means to finance its multiple-pronged strategies that have made it a distinct actor. These include support for certain Islamic groups, building social projects under the banner of Islamic assistance, delivering aid to victims of the Arab-Israeli conflict such as in the aftermath of militarized exchanges, and support for Hamas as well as Hezbollah's audiences at varied times. In sum, in the process of national development and institutional expansion, Qatari society has enjoyed high degrees of stability and affluence, thus adding to the credit obtained by the rulers in matters related to defining the national interest and acting externally through the pursuit of select strategies. Domestic stability and appropriate public sector spending have granted the ruling regime an almost free hand in foreign policy.

Hydrocarbon rents have also been pivotal in realizing Qatar's ambitions through the national sovereign wealth fund operating under the Qatar Investment Authority (QIA) established in 2005. The growth of this fund helped generate Qatar's ambitions in global activism in the first place.<sup>15</sup> Global visibility for Qatar was meteoric in keeping with the global starvation for cash, especially during the financial crunch around 2008. Therefore, from a feasibility and market-driven logic, Qatar's money has been invested globally to earn the state greater assets and returns. Political interest cannot be divorced from financial behavior, however, and this reality has been the main reason why Qatar's global investments are often treated with suspicion regardless of what the Qatari government intends to do with these assets. With Qatar maintaining a desire to be a champion of global south development and humanitarianism, the QIA is bound to become more involved than it currently is in Southern markets and in projects with varied returns. The Middle East and North Africa are prime locations for such expansion as is Asia in general, especially given the capital hungry sectors in China and India and other markets in the global south (See, e.g., *Financial Times* 2014).

### *Leadership*

The vision of Emir Hamad was the driver which set Qatar on a globally active foreign policy path after 1995 (when he succeeded to the position). The goals and strategies to meet this "meta ambition" were drawn up via personal involvement and with the aid of a small circle of mixed-gender elites. The composition of Qatar's decision-making circle has remained rather stable since the mid-1990s, the time when state actions started showing indications of global ambitions. Important figures have included the former and current emirs, the various foreign ministers, and former Emir Hamad's wife Moza bint Nasser Al Misnad, Qatar's foreign policy elite has shown an ambition to be personally present on the global scene, including brokering political deals in Africa and the Middle East, as well as sitting on boards of recognized commercial brands.<sup>16</sup>

The desire to position Qatar as a globally relevant actor has inevitably led it to adopt a Western model of development, a choice that has, and will continue to, considerably open up the country to outside influences of all sorts. For example, such influences impact education by bringing in Western schools and universities along with their curricula and pedagogy; gender awareness, especially women's empowerment; aviation and

transport, because being a global player necessitated having a modern state-of-the-art airport; and sports, with the hosting and bidding for high-profile global mega events and regional competitions. Qatar's ascension cannot be attributed to a leadership composed of "Western-styled liberals" with an ideological commitment to the teleology of "modernization" ideals (such as the ones promoted in the mid-twentieth century). Rather, its leadership can best be termed progressive, one that understands what catapulting the country globally implies in terms of the influx of predominantly Western ideas.

En route to becoming a globally central state and a bridge between the East and West,<sup>17</sup> Qatar's leadership has had to learn balancing skills. As has already been described, on the one hand there are commitments to actions that will allow Qatar to be a first-class player, such as carving out the niche of being a trusted mediator. On the other hand, there is a need to preserve the deep and meaningful ties to conservative Islamic values. Thus, Qatar's foreign policies have strived to attend to Islamic and Arab causes in which the country has a great stake. Balancing is important because Qatar's involvement in Islamic and Arab causes is not simply strategic and can never be so because the Qatari society is Arab and Islamic. On the other hand, Qatar's involvement with the West seems significantly *more* strategic in the sense that they do not want to be part of the "Western world."

### *Bureaucratic Issues*

In thinking about bureaucratic influences on foreign policy decisions in Qatar, we can distinguish between execution and planning. At the planning level, a very small circle of elites manages goal formulation. This circle generally includes the head of state, prime minister, and foreign minister, and they are aided with input by a select group of advisors, usually from QIA. Former foreign minister and central political authority, Hamad bin Jassem, explained that state policy (in this instance regarding QIA investments) derives from the recommendations of the Emir and the Crown Prince.<sup>18</sup> The personal confidence and interests of the small group of top decision makers are critical in guiding state actions.

In execution, we can distinguish two processes pertaining to different levels of issue importance. High-profile diplomacy and related foreign policy decisions are formulated and often spearheaded "on the ground" by the Emir or Foreign Minister. The most obvious cases of such personal leadership include the mediation efforts in regional conflicts and

in regard to GCC-related politics. On the other hand, foreign ministry administrators, ambassadors, and financial elites execute policy. In broad terms, having a small circle of decision makers does not necessarily mean insulation from society, as explored previously. For example, the Emir goes out to visit the heads of families and tribes and regional dignitaries in commemoration of the National Day—a practice that is seen to consolidate the respect the Emir has for social values and customs while at the same time listening to their input. A similar practice exists to procure feedback from the heads of central state departments. Nevertheless, it would be difficult to argue that Qatar's foreign policy-making process is subject to similar turf-protecting parochial and rent-seeking interests that are often associated with the bureaucratic level of analysis.

### ASSESSMENT OF STRATEGIES IN ACHIEVING GOALS

What is interesting about Qatar's foreign policies is not so much how ambitious this small state is but rather the deep contradictions in foreign policy that are the outcome of the myriad involvements of Qatar. Qatar's foreign policy has remained ambitious despite the contradictions that a "good offices" or interventionist actor tends to sustain. While some policies in the region seem to have backfired, especially in Egypt and in Syria, it does not seem likely, for example, that Qatar is prepared to write off its investment in actors or locations that are receptive to its interests. In many ways Qatar is still very new to the game of influence, and it still has significant unexploited capacity to continue involving itself on the world stage and learning from mistakes and successes. What matters for Qatar, especially today, is its ability to maintain its primary security, which for the moment seems to be assured by the USA and solid GCC ties. Serious internal challenges to the Qatari decision makers (such as intra-regime factionalism) have not surfaced. Qatar's foreign policy-making structure does minimize input in general, especially from experienced staff, and is conducive to power turnover and idiosyncrasies. Such a system privileges personal reputation, which has been the case especially in mediation efforts. The fact that receiving theaters welcomed Qatar's efforts, and that mediation processes were not all simultaneous, has allowed Qatar's leadership to dedicate time to see the mediation process to fruition, most prominently reflected in signed agreements between conflicting parties. Something like the Arab Spring, however, is bound to produce more turbulence and stress to such a foreign policy process.

What Qatar has been doing is trying to craft or develop a role for itself, and what we see in the various foreign policy moves that might seem inconsistent are actually a series of trials and errors until the Qataris themselves develop some stability in their interaction with the world. In that sense, these external policies are rational and internally (and historically) consistent. So far, the direct costs to Qatar from different sets of foreign policy engagements have been bearable. The extent to which foreign policy contradictions can be sustained depends on regional relations (which are in high flux) and Qatari decision makers' perceptions of capacity and national interests.

## NOTES

1. Many in Foreign Policy Analysis challenge the limiting of the scope of the foreign policies of small states because of their size. See the special issue on small states by Alan Chong and Matthias Maass (2010), in particular the introduction.
2. Reports of illegal activities in the process of bidding surfaced in 2014 and are yet to be arbitrated by concerned bodies.
3. Interview with Qatar's former Minister of Foreign Affairs Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani, *Al Jazeera* (March 28, 2012): see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=seiABoeLxDo> (Last accessed on September 10, 2015).
4. Al Jazeera: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2009/01/2009116151135307776.html> (Last accessed on September 10, 2015).
5. See <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2014/05/31/317680946/captors-release-u-s-soldier-taken-hostage-in-2009> (Last accessed on September 10, 2015).
6. Qatar has also provided funding to help transitions in conflict zones, including some \$500 million to Sudan's Darfur. See, for example, <http://elaph.com/Web/Economics/2014/4/899535.html> (Last accessed on September 10, 2015).
7. Challenges and options have developed in tandem; see <http://www.meed.com/supplements/2013/africa/gcc-investors-eye-african-farmland/3176877.article> (Last accessed on September 10, 2015).
8. On the importance of the regional environment, and relations with GCC states, especially Saudi Arabia, see the already-cited interview with Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani, 2012.
9. Interview with Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani, 2012.
10. It remained opaque who Qatar supported exactly and what these actors did, which opened the state to criticism. Even less clear, however, has been the role of the national government in providing funding to whom, versus

- the role of private Qatari citizens. As an indication of its need to control the money flow, the Qatari government issued laws in September 2014 to regulate donations to charities.
11. Education and knowledge generation take center stage in the national discourse on sustainable development and strategic planning, with the aim to transform Qatar into a knowledge society with regionally distinct institutions of higher learning holding internationally recognized standards and accreditations. See Qatar's National Vision 2030 (Qatar: General Secretariat for Development Planning): [http://www.gsdp.gov.qa/portal/page/portal/gsdp\\_en/qatar\\_national\\_vision/qnv\\_2030\\_document](http://www.gsdp.gov.qa/portal/page/portal/gsdp_en/qatar_national_vision/qnv_2030_document) (Last accessed on September 10, 2015).
  12. See Qatar's Ministry of Development Planning and Statistics. 2013. *Qatar Economic Outlook 2013–2014: Available at: [http://www.gsdp.gov.qa/portal/page/portal/gsdp\\_en/knowledge\\_center/Tab2/QatarEconomicOutlook2013-2014.pdf](http://www.gsdp.gov.qa/portal/page/portal/gsdp_en/knowledge_center/Tab2/QatarEconomicOutlook2013-2014.pdf)* (Last accessed on September 10, 2015).
  13. See an interesting 2014 report which breaks down population by nationality at: <http://www.bqdoqa.com/2013/12/population-qatar> (Last accessed on September 10, 2015).
  14. World Bank estimates <http://data.worldbank.org/country/qatar> (Last accessed on September 10, 2015).
  15. In 2000 a council was created to manage and invest national resources, especially hydrocarbon rents. The Qatar Investment Authority was created in 2005, and a year after that transactions commenced (see their official site at: <http://www.qia.qa/AboutUs/Pages/OurHistory.aspx>). In the years to come, many subsidiaries, such as Qatar Holding or Qatari Diar, were created to manage projects domestically and globally. These dates are noteworthy since they come a few decades after independence, yet fit with the general reality that development spending and strategic planning occurred mostly since the 1990s.
  16. Examples are Moza bint Nasser Al Misnad (a supporter of global access to education for the marginal, especially children); Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani (central in mediation and conflict resolution activities in Africa during his tenure; also under his leadership Qatar acquired the landmark Harrods); and Nasser Ghanim Al-Khelaifi (Chairman and CEO of the football club Paris Saint-Germain Football Club, which is owned by Qatar Sports Investments).
  17. This is often reflected in the mediation efforts detailed above, in sports, the arts, education, and in inviting the Doha Round.
  18. Interviewed April 22, 2013: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W2gJDztc82U> (Last accessed on September 10, 2015).

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