



## The Energetic but Overstretched Arab 'Hegemon of the Gulf' Qatar in Times of Regional Upheavals

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In the course of the so-called Arab Spring, the Middle East experienced profound domestic changes which also affected the foreign policy outlook of regional and external actors. At first glance, our focus on the interaction between the Gulf states may not have an obvious connection to the establishment of a zone free of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and their delivery vehicles (DVs). Yet, the interactions between Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar do eventually have an effect on the political behavior of all the states in the Middle East. Therefore, it is only a logical next step to take a closer look at the foreign policy developments that have occurred in the course of the Arab Spring, in view of a conference on a WMD/DVs Free Zone.

This issue builds on our hegemony-related framework presented in POLICY BRIEF No. 42 which conceptualized three Middle Eastern powers with regional ambitions as (self-)perceived hegemons – Iran, Saudi Arabia (see POLICY BRIEFS Nos. 43 and 44, respectively) as well as Qatar. Inspired by the analytical tools developed within the notion of hegemony, we examine the continuity and changes of these three actors' status and foreign policies. Our framework seeks to understand the context, motivations, and results of the attempts of Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar to align their internal interest in securing regime survival with foreign policy goals as they consolidate or expand their mutually contested spheres of influence. In our view, the status of these three states as 'true hegemons' can be seriously questioned, and their policies in the interest of regime survival by attempting to gain regional primacy/supremacy are less than optimal. As a consequence, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar may be forced to

realize that less competitive and less risky ways exist to maintain and protect regime security via cooperative engagement.

### Qatar's Foreign Policy, the Arab Spring, and the WMD/DVs Free Zone

Although Qatar is one of the smallest Middle Eastern states, its influence should not be underestimated. Doha has not only established itself in the past as a mediator capable of attractive financial inducements, but starting in the 1990s, the Qatari foreign policy strategy moved beyond the focus on fostering peaceful relations within the region and also sought to gain international prestige through massive investments. However, in the course of the Arab Spring, Qatar left its reputation as a mediator behind and began favoring hard-power tools and active interventionism. Despite signs that the royal regime is eager to regain some of its earlier reputation, it remains to be seen how the lost trust will affect Qatar's ability and effectiveness in shaping foreign relations and fostering dialogue – especially with regard to a process towards regional disarmament which the Gulf monarchy is supporting.

In this POLICY BRIEF we follow our previous examinations of Iran and Saudi Arabia with an assessment of the patterns of regional conflict and accommodation among the three regional competitors and the major extra-regional powers. Before engaging in an analysis of the complex foreign policy structures Qatar has created and the underlying strategies as well as tools that are applied, this POLICY BRIEF will first of all take a look at the domestic setting of the country. This context will also be explored

### Abstract

*Based on the 'Middle East Regional Hegemony Approach' outlined in POLICY BRIEF No. 42, this issue examines Qatar's foreign policy shifts in the context of the Arab Spring. The small Gulf monarchy has evolved from a foreign policy based on utilizing soft-power tools such as mediation to one favoring hard-power instruments of active interventionism. This POLICY BRIEF assesses Doha's foreign policy according to four main principles: the core interest in regime survival and security, the use of soft power as a tool for boosting Qatar's standing in regional politics, the management of relations with regional competitors, and efforts to tighten security relations with its Western allies. This includes focusing on Doha's massive domestic and global investment strategy as well as the shift from soft-power to hard-power tools in the regional conflicts in Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria. We will show that although Doha's foreign policy strategies may at times seem to lack a clear concept, they are driven by a political vision that is clearly set to establish Qatar as a 'brand' and assert security interests through investment and prestige. We argue that Doha's security interests will be served best by returning to the former strategy of mediation and focusing on politics that foster cooperation between the regional partners. This would also serve Qatar's self-proclaimed ambitions to support the process towards a WMD/DVs Free Zone in the Middle East. ■*

*This POLICY BRIEF builds on the contributions of two ACADEMIC PEACE ORCHESTRA workshops held in Vienna on September 8-10, 2012, and in Istanbul on May 27-29, 2013, with participants from China, Egypt, France, Germany, Hungary, Iran, Israel, Lebanon, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Yemen. The Working Groups on the Arab Spring have been generously funded by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.*

*» Throughout the Arab Spring, when the strategy, under the new Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, shifted towards active interventionism, Qatar lost a great amount of its credibility. Lately there have been signs that the ruling elite is seeking to re-establish its image as a reliable mediator.«*

with regard to power structures and constellations as well as the economic and socio-demographic situation. These are considered important sources of the foreign policy implemented by the regime in Doha. Against this backdrop, the Qatari foreign policy culture will be analyzed regarding, in particular, the identity (self-conception, self-understanding) of the royal rulers, i.e. their motives/interests, basic principles, and objectives as well as the scope of and preference for their foreign policy instruments. Finally, the results of Qatar's foreign policy will be assessed in terms of successes and failures in the context of the Arab Spring, i.e. to what extent the groups and coalitions supported by Doha did gain power and prevailed.

### **The Domestic Setting: Consolidating the Base for Security and Regime Survival**

Both in territory (11,586 km<sup>2</sup>) and population (approx. 2.1 million), Qatar is one of the smallest states in the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> Yet economically and in terms of foreign policy, the country has been striving for a greater role in the region and on the international level. The Gulf monarchy gained independence in 1971 after having resisted a British proposal that Qatar merge with Bahrain and other Emirates. Qatar received security assurances from Riyadh limited to a period of the first 20 years of independence. Ever since, the ruling Al Thani family has orchestrated the country's rise to political stability as an independent actor. Due to significant oil reserves that were discovered in the 1930s, the country was able to develop its economy considerably. Natural gas production in the 1990s became an even greater enabling factor and helped the Gulf monarchy gain even more political influence.

Part of this agenda was Qatar's emerging role as a mediator in Middle Eastern conflicts, at least from 1995 until 2011. As part of this strategy to attract international attention, Qatari diplomats have been actively pursuing an engagement policy on the international level, mainly in the United Nations Security Council, and worked to appear as honest brokers and cooperative, trustworthy partners.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the Arab Spring, when the strategy shifted towards active interventionism, Qatar lost a great amount of its credibility. Lately there have been signs that the ruling elite is seeking to re-establish its image as a reliable mediator.

The politics of the ruling family can be described as enforcing a path of very modest political liberalization on the domestic level and pursuing an interest-driven agenda in foreign policy. This agenda is mainly motivated by the drive to secure regime survival and to be perceived as a cooperative partner, especially among the regional states but also on the international level. In this calculation, economic factors play a vital role, especially when it comes to the prestige-oriented investment strategy including attracting foreign investment to Qatar as well as the ambition to invest abroad.

### **Qatar's Political System – Most Modest Reforms**

The Al Thani royal family has ruled the country since the early 19th century. The succession within the ruling family has not always been free of conflict. In 1995 Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani came to power in a bloodless coup and succeeded his father, Khalifa bin Hamad Al Thani, who had himself come to power in a palace coup d'état in 1972.<sup>3</sup> Hence, the pattern of succession throughout the twentieth century was by overthrows and enforced abdications occurring in 1949 and 1960. This pattern reinforces the exceptional nature of the 2013 succession, which was the first fully consensual transfer of power in Qatar for exactly 100 years. In Qatar the passing of power from Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani to the crown prince and his fourth son Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani in mid-2013 seemed to be well prepared and smooth.<sup>4</sup> This certainly constitutes an exception to the rule in the Arab world.

While the former ruler, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, had been known for liberalizing the economy, genuine political reform did not go beyond a number of symbolic measures. In 1999, universal suffrage was introduced in municipal elections, and in the following year, a Ruling Family Council was established.<sup>5</sup> In 2003 "an overwhelming 96.6 % of Qatari voters said 'yes' to a draft permanent constitution" which became effective in 2005, supposedly "transforming Qatar into a democracy."<sup>6</sup> The new constitution was accompanied by reforms in the educational sector, the judicial system, and, most importantly for the country's economic development, in labor laws.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the 2003 constitution called for a new, elected, and enlarged Advisory Council expanded from 35 to 45 members, 30 of whom would be elected. Despite the





various political promises, so far very few have been kept: Although elections for the Advisory Council had repeatedly been promised for 2013, they have yet to take place. Furthermore, this body merely looks like a step towards a democratic order, while it relates and resonates much more to the shura of the tribal societies in the regional context. Even though the Advisory Council is supposed to debate “economic, political and administrative matters referred to it by the Cabinet,”<sup>8</sup> it has no actual influence on the established decision-making structure which remains clearly dominated by the emir.

Hence, the ruling political elites in Qatar do not face serious challenges to their grip on power. So far, the Al Thani family has responded to any greater demands for political participation with promises instead of deeds, i.e. reinforcing the skeptics about Doha's rise, who argue that Qatari reform policy is more about style than substance. At the same time, the regime has pursued a strategy of containing public demands, especially with regard to the upheavals of the Arab Spring. Yet, there may be a chance that the new emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, will take measures towards greater political participation and the implementation of democratic elements. It remains to be seen whether old and new mechanisms of providing political legitimacy will continue to help secure the survival of the regime, such as the cult of personality involving leading members of the ruling families, the emphasis on tribal heritage and religion, the championing of environmental causes, and the development of a sense of national identity by creating a readily identifiable elite status for nationals ('national dress code').<sup>9</sup> From today's perspective it is not clear whether the new emir is setting new accents, as has been rumored with respect to Qatar's policy towards Syria, “following accusations of meddling by the Sunni-dominated state and quiet domestic concern about threats to the stability of one of the world's richest nations.”<sup>10</sup> Most certainly, interventionist elements have since 2011 become part of Doha's foreign policy and it remains uncertain whether Sheikh Tamim will continue this strategy.

### **Economic Stability through Continuous and Comprehensive Modernization**

The discovery of oil brought considerable wealth to the state of Qatar. Within a few decades, the country has developed into



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a major oil and natural gas exporter, as it owns the world's third largest proven natural gas reserves of over 900 trillion standard cubic feet in its North Field.<sup>11</sup> In 2006, the Gulf state became the largest producer of liquefied natural gas, supplying up to a third of worldwide demand by 2010. Due to this development in revenues, Qatar's gross domestic product of \$102,100 per capita has become the highest in the world.<sup>12</sup> With growth rates of an average 13 percent per year during the 2000s, Qatar has had one of the fastest growing economies in the world and the fastest in the region, with continuous fiscal surpluses.

Enabled by this economic wealth, Doha has been able to pursue an active investment strategy for further development within the country. To prevent an economic dependency on fossil fuels, the political elite implemented a diversification strategy, like Saudi Arabia, focusing on technological infrastructures by developing petrochemicals, metals, fertilizers, and plastic industries. Doha's modernization plans (unlike Riyadh's) have further progressed, encompassing the entire economy, including tourism, sports, financial, and real estate industries. Moreover, the creation of an investor-friendly environment has been a distinct goal which is also expressed in the Doha stock market that has been open since 1995.<sup>13</sup> Qatar is planning developments totalling up to \$130 billion

through 2019; it also plans to improve its power and potable water production capability. Also, Doha plans to invest in information technology as well as in the education sector, including research activities. The Qatar Investment Authority (QIA), initiated in 2005, and the globally operating Qatar Holding are the core of a number of the state's investment institutions.<sup>14</sup>

### Emerging Social (Demographic) Challenges

Qatar's demographics do not make it appear predestined for regional hegemony. Out of a tiny population of less than 2.1 million,<sup>15</sup> only 290,000 are Qatari citizens. The increasing gap between the considerable economic growth rate and the low birth rate among Qataris is likely to lead to a further increase in the share of expatriates. This demographic imbalance could pose an existential problem for the ruling elite once the strategy of co-opting expatriates as strictly temporary migrants, who continue to contribute to the survival of the monarchy, starts to unravel.<sup>16</sup>

### Foreign Policy Culture/Identity (I): Motives/Interests, Basic Principles, and Objectives

Within the past decades, Doha has worked hard to establish the country's standing as an independent actor that is a reliable partner and eager to take responsibility within the region and on the international level. The focus in foreign policy on the promotion of international peace is emphasized in the Qatari constitution. Article 7 reads: "The foreign policy of the State is based on the principle of strengthening international peace and security by means of encouraging peaceful resolution of international disputes; and shall support the right of peoples to self-determination; and shall not interfere in the domestic affairs of states; and shall cooperate with peace-loving nations."<sup>17</sup> The regime has pursued an active campaign to establish its image as a mediator in numerous regional conflicts. Qatar's role as a global player has largely been shaped under the rule of Emir Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani (1995-2013) and its prime minister, Sheikh Hamad bin Jasssem bin Jabor Al Thani (2007-2013). The latter was also the foreign minister from 1992-2013, thus throughout the period of Qatar's rise to international prominence. Yet, the royal family's engagement has also been viewed critically due to Hamad's close ties to senior members of the

Muslim Brotherhood and the country's controversial engagement in Libya and Syria.

### Regime Survival and Security

Doha's emergence as a new, prominent, and determined player in the Middle East/Gulf is largely based on pragmatism. The regime is seeking to stay in power and secure itself against inner unrest such as the Arab Spring, and intrusion from outside the country. Hence, the Qatari foreign policy has been marked by a strategy that pragmatically legitimizes its quest for regional supremacy and international prestige as an independent player on a global scale. In this regard, Doha has developed mechanisms to skillfully fill power gaps and identify commercial and political opportunities. This implies being able to compete with actors in the region to pursue and assert national interests. Securing regime survival can be considered the overarching goal. This becomes apparent in the state's "quest for political influence across a Middle East in transition."<sup>18</sup> Both the strategy of economic diversification and the attempt to generate global attention are meant to contribute to regime security and international influence.

The highly visible and personalized policy style and the outstanding role of prestige projects underscore the impression of a carefully crafted protection strategy. All these activities serve as an insurance policy that favors strong and stable commercial, political, and military partners. This is well-expressed in the often quoted statement of Hamad bin Jasssem bin Jabor Al Thani, then Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, to a U.S. official: "We may have our own Katrina one day."<sup>19</sup> Shortly before, Doha had donated \$100 million in aid for the victims and damage caused by the hurricane. This statement has been related both to a defining experience of the past and to possible scenarios in the future that may touch upon the core of Qatar's security. Thus, the expression stands as a symbol for Qatar's multi-layered efforts to establish a network of allies, especially among the powerful Western states, as a means of gaining security guarantees against regional threats. These efforts for security date back to the 1990 invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein, which took the Qatari leadership by surprise and left a lasting impression on the ruling elite. Ever since, the foreign policy strategy has been focused on becoming not only part of a security network but also a respected actor.<sup>20</sup>

### Regional Soft-power Politics

An essential part of Doha's foreign policy is strengthening the country's position in the region. Qatar has sought to establish itself as a mediator through its involvement in various conflicts in North Africa and the Middle East (i.e. in Sudan, Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon). Often, the small Gulf state was the only regional actor willing to take responsibility and assume leadership in promoting peaceful solutions. Furthermore, the monarchy was able to utilize the advantage of being an honest broker with the cultural sensitivity necessary to bring opposing factions together – a quality which most Western actors are lacking in their mediation efforts, as are the traditional heavyweights in the Arab world, Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

Hence, Qatar often filled a vacuum in conflict resolution and was able to establish itself as a respected and trusted mediator due to its perceived impartiality. Seeking to spread ideas and enhance personal status or seeing mediation as a way to extend influence and gain value became decisive marks of Qatar's soft-power strategy. The news network Al Jazeera generated recognized media coverage that was often quoted by Western channels. Hence, Al Jazeera has become an essential part of the soft-power strategy of the regime.

### Emancipation from and Good Relations with Regional Powers

Qatar has undergone profound transformation processes of modernization and adaptation in the economic, technological, cultural, and educational areas, yet less in the political sphere. These developments have helped achieve one of the foreign policy goals of the country: to stay an independent actor that is free from outside influence. Being regionally independent is aimed foremost at emancipation from its neighbor Saudi Arabia.

Despite the positive image Qatar has acquired through its mediation efforts, the country's foreign activities have not always been received positively. In Egypt, Saudi Arabia criticized Qatar for supporting the Muslim Brotherhood, and in Tunisia, for its ties to the Ennahda party. Aside from these sympathies, its major Western ally, the United States, has not been too fond of Qatar's relations with Iran either. Concerning the Islamic Republic, the small Gulf state has pursued a two-fold strategy meandering between an open-door policy



and a critical stance. Qatar, for instance, switched sides against Tehran when it came to supporting rebels in the Syrian Civil War, thereby at times cooperating to a considerable extent with Saudi Arabia (see on this POLICY BRIEF NO. 43 by Lars Berger et al.). Yet, peaceful relations with Iran that can be managed under a cooperative setting are vital in maintaining access to the shared offshore natural gas field. This is becoming increasingly important, as American prices for natural gas are putting pressure on the royal leadership. In the future, Qatar will most probably have to compete with the U.S. and Australia in the fast-developing natural gas market. This will inevitably force the Gulf monarchy to steadily increase its gas production. This, however, would prove difficult, at least in the short-term, as in 2005 Qatar imposed a moratorium on new exploration in the North Field to better preserve it. While the moratorium was due to be re-assessed in 2015, it is now expected to remain in place until at least 2017, complicating any plans to increase natural gas production.<sup>21</sup>

### **Military Stability through Invitation and Security Imports**

Completing the list of principles of foreign policy, another major element of Qatar's security strategy is to create military stability by inviting powerful states to use its territory and build its security infrastructure. This has been expressed by the active demand towards Western states, especially the U.S., that they provide security assurances when openly asking to locate their military bases in the emirate. By providing the territory for a forward headquarters to the U.S. Central Command at Al Udeid Base, Qatar has opted, in terms of the country's security, for what is probably the most reliable insurance, if not an effective deterrent as well.

With no indigenous military production capability, the emirate (like the Saudi Kingdom) has been an importer of its security, mostly from the United States. The U.S. military presence also compensates for Doha's small military (11,800 active soldiers) with "limited capability," although its equipment is regarded as "relatively modern" and its forces "well-trained and motivated."<sup>22</sup> The American presence by invitation is ambivalent though, as Qatar fears being surprised by a conflict or being dragged into one involuntarily. Hence, the Doha-Washington relationship is a major pillar of the state's strategy for survival and security.

Yet, this bond is frequently put to the test: As Qatar's policy towards Syria shows, the Gulf state is not afraid of risking tensions with its international allies.

Moreover, the Gulf monarchy is investing in its internal security system as well. As announced at the Doha International Maritime Defence Exhibition, Qatar is going to complete contracts worth \$23 billion in equipment. Among the purchases will be helicopters, guided missiles, and other weapons.<sup>23</sup> Already in summer 2014 the country was reported to have closed arms deals with the United States worth \$11 billion.<sup>24</sup> Although, according to analysts, the Gulf monarchy is currently not capable of projecting military power beyond its state borders, the investments should definitely be considered an attempt to boost the military's reach for the coming years.

### **Foreign Policy Culture/Identity (II) – The 'Tool Box' with Old Elements and New Priorities**

Further exploring Qatar's foreign policy, we have identified major tools and strategies that are serving the principles assessed above. From the late 1980s on, the Gulf monarchy's wider foreign policy has been a form of diplomacy designed to place the country on the map, carve out a unique niche for the state, make international friends, and gain influence. First, Qatar has been actively demanding security assurances as a tool to secure the country's and the regime's survival. Hence, it is apparent that the interest in survival prevails as a primary driving force of foreign policy. Furthermore, the regime has been actively pursuing a strategy of creating mutual interdependencies and enhancing its visibility on the international level with prestigious projects, foremost through active diplomacy and its investment strategy. Most importantly, in strengthening its role as a cooperative, trustworthy partner, Qatar was acting as an honest broker promoting its image as an impartial mediator in regional conflicts, at least until 2011. However, in the course of the Arab Spring, this role has been undergoing changes. Especially with regard to the Libyan case, Qatar's strategy has turned from traditional mediation to active interventionism.

### **Stabilization through Continued Investments Abroad**

The internal efforts mentioned above to stabilize Qatar's security through its quest

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for supremacy in the Middle East/Gulf are complemented by regional and international strategies. Gaining international prestige is one element of the investment efforts. The royal family is thus explicitly investing in prestigious projects, as these are an area of soft power and influence in the cultural, sports-related, and educational spheres. Reflecting medium- and long-term thinking and interests, the Qatari investment strategy is firmly institutionalized and enormously well funded. The Gulf monarchy's state investment institutions have been purchasing stakes in internationally well-known brands such as Porsche and Harrods. In 2011, the QIA was the second largest buyer of European real estate. Among the biggest recent investments have been, for instance, the London Olympic athletes' village and a mall on the Champs-Élysées in Paris. Qatar also holds a 70 percent controlling stake in Football Club Paris-St. Germain.

Yet, the most prestigious example of attracting foreign investments is that Doha is determined to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup: the investment is estimated to amount to at least \$100 billion. However, the objective of prestige will be undercut if the ruling elite will not end the unbearable, inhumane conditions, especially for the construction workers from abroad. In any case, in the human rights question, which came up in the international media, the emirate is accused for treating its foreign workers with slave-like conditions. In this regard the successful bid to host the World Cup had an unintended impact and also shows a lack of long-term thinking: While Qatar envisaged the World Cup as contributing to the 'branding' of the country, it failed to foresee how it would also bring Qatar into the global spotlight and expose domestic conditions. Meanwhile, the emir admitted mistakes were made and promised progress on the issue of working conditions.<sup>25</sup> This may end up harming one of the ruling elite's basic motives – gaining international recognition – and in addition, especially Qatar's foreign investment strategies.

Qatar Holding has not only made key investments in European countries but also in China. During the 2008 financial crisis, the small Gulf state offered considerable help in providing funds for struggling Western financial institutions as well as the European Union and the U.S. government.<sup>26</sup> In this regard, Qatar Holding has also acquired shares in the banking sector, including Deutsche Bank, Barclays, Credit Suisse, the

Bank of America, and the Agricultural Bank of China.<sup>27</sup> Qatar Investment Authority also announced plans for a \$10 billion joint investment fund with China's CITIC group in November 2014.<sup>28</sup> Financial engagement in Asia is supposed to convert partners in commerce and banking to guarantors of security over the medium- and long-term.

Although it is fair to assume that the investment portfolio of Qatar Holding has continuously been increased and will be in the future as well, it remains questionable whether and to what extent these investments have been increased because of the Arab Spring. For instance, the \$18 billion in investment pledges to Egypt in September 2012 never materialized, and after the July 2013 coup, Qatari entities were specifically targeted in a widespread backlash against the country. In any case, they can be seen as an element of the strategy to secure regime survival and to boost the country's image. For example, since this military mission in Libya has clearly damaged Qatar's standing, the royal regime is currently under immense pressure to re-establish itself as a trustworthy partner. Again, the Gulf monarchy is using its wealth in this regard: one example has been Doha's generous offer of \$1 billion for the rebuilding of Gaza in October 2014.<sup>29</sup>

### Traditional Mediation Efforts

From the middle of the 1990s on, Qatar has engaged in numerous mediation efforts (see also POLICY BRIEF No. 4 by István Balogh et al.). Some have been successful while others have failed, but Qatar often offered its assistance as a mediator, especially in extremely complicated conflicts. These efforts marked a turn in Qatar's foreign policy which was introduced by the leadership of Emir Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani. Mediation was one of a range of innovative, externally-focused, and progressive policies. Their aim was not only to bring about peaceful settlements but also to expand and solidify the reputation of the state of Qatar as a regional power in its own right. The culture of soft-power instruments comprising mediation, dialogue, and international conferences developed in this era became Qatar's foreign policy 'brand' and the central mechanism in the country's regional peace strategy prior to 2011.<sup>30</sup>

The strengths of the emirate included the top-level engagement by the former emir and his prime minister who deliberately employed considerable financial resources

to affect the results of their mediation efforts. One of the downsides of the highly personalized mediation style was the lack of a large professional diplomatic corps that would be able to turn the initial efforts into sustainable results in terms of resolution and post-conflict recovery. Compared to Saudi Arabia, this is a clear disadvantage for Qatar. Yet, the Gulf monarchy was able to compete with Egypt and Saudi Arabia concerning their interest in expanding influence through mediation activities – the reason being that all three countries have been active in the same conflict areas (i.e. Israel/Palestine, Sudan, Yemen, Lebanon) with different outcomes prior to the Arab Spring.<sup>31</sup>

Although Qatar's close relations with the countries most affected by the Arab Spring – like Egypt – had not been particularly warm prior to the upheavals, it is fair to assess that Doha's diplomats were carrying on relations with the state leaders. Shortly before the outbreak of the demonstrations, Egyptian diplomats had outspokenly welcomed Qatar's mediation efforts in the conflict with Israel and their role as a partner for cooperation following a friendly visit by Qatari officials to Mubarak. Concerning Syria, Doha had maintained good relations with the Assad regime, massively investing (up to a reported \$12 billion) in the country, mainly in real estate.<sup>32</sup>

### The New Foreign Policy Profile – Towards Active Interventionism

With the Arab Spring, Qatar took sides and as a consequence entirely lost the air of neutrality that it had carefully and mostly successfully cultivated since the late 1980s. Engaging as a mediator and being accepted by both sides was a key attribute of its foreign policy. Mediating between adversarial parties has been difficult enough for Qatar. But the conflicted settings in which Doha traditionally mediated were still of a manageable size compared to the extremely complex and unpredictable transformation processes and the violence unfolding in the events of the Arab Spring, culminating in the Civil War in Syria. The new course in foreign policy is characterized by a strong emphasis on interventionism. This sudden change was only possible due to the close circle of decision-makers in the royal family, the emir-centered power structure, and the lack of bureaucracy as well as the lack of public constraints. With the mission in Libya, Qatar's mediation policy, that had



reached its peak in the early months of the Arab Spring, suddenly changed track.<sup>33</sup>

#### *The Libyan Military Mission*

Libya was, in fact, the turning point for setting new priorities in foreign policy by not only providing financial assistance in the military area, but by having its six fighter jets fly with Western coalition partners. Much more importantly, Doha took the lead on the Libyan crisis, providing the Arab and European states political cover for military intervention. Again, it took the opportunity and provided leadership, as stated by the Qatari Air Force Chief of Staff: "Certain countries like Saudi Arabia and Egypt haven't taken leadership for the last three years. So we wanted to step up and express ourselves, and see if others will follow [...]."<sup>34</sup>

However, Qatar's engagement was not well-received by the other Gulf States: the Al Thani family made itself vulnerable to the "accusation of double-standards" because it pursued its new policy towards Libya while the Gulf Cooperation Council was militarily intervening in Bahrain to help the royal Sunni al-Khalifa family in Manama to restore order by crushing protests. Reports at the time suggested that Qatar sent a small military contingent as part of a token contribution to the Peninsula Shield Force. Furthermore, the reputation of Doha "was dented by accusations that al-Jazeera English bowed to pressure not to rebroadcast [...] its award-winning documentary about the Bahrain uprising."<sup>35</sup>

Qatar and the United Arab Emirates were successfully mobilizing Arab support for ousting Muḥammad al-Qaḍḍāfi. Although this entailed risk, the strategy paid off: "Following the dramatic taking of Tripoli in August 2011, the sight of the Qatari flag flying alongside the free Libya Flag in Gaddāfi's Bab al-Azīziya compound was rich in symbolism. During the six-month uprising, the visibility of the UAE and Qatar's role played into their ambitious global branding strategies."<sup>36</sup> At best, the situation and the prospects can be described as uncertain with respect to Doha's assumed economic interest in assisting Libya to manage its oil and gas resources as well as in related sectors such as transportation. Already in 2011, the Qatar Investment Authority is said to have made \$1 billion in investments in that country. Yet, the developments in Libya have not been for the better, as militia groups have

shut off the water to Tripoli, forced power cuts, and hampered oil production amidst a situation with no administration, no institution, and no capability to run a state. In addition, there was also the huge weapon arsenal of the Gaddāfi government, "far bigger than the Libyan Army ever needed, [it is] now in private hands. Every household has a gun."<sup>37</sup> Since then, domestic developments can best be described as "Libya falling apart as fractures widen,"<sup>38</sup> which is a synonym for an almost failed state with a long civil war looming.

#### *Qatar's Role in Tunisia and Egypt*

In *Tunisia* the resignation of Prime Minister Ali Laarayedh and the dissolution of his coalition government represent an admission of defeat for the Islamist party Ennahda, which was financed by the emirate. In December 2014, Mohamed Beji Caïd Essebsi, the leader of the secular, anti-Islamist party Nidaa Tounes, became president. In October 2014, his party had won 85 seats in the 217-seat parliament. Ennahda paid the political price for having been unable to manage security and revive the economy. In January 2015, Habib Essid was nominated as prime minister by Nidaa Tounes and asked to form a new government. Against this backdrop, it seems that the Qatari influence in Tunisian politics is limited at best.

In *Egypt*, Qatar, in contrast to the Saudi Kingdom, had openly supported the upheavals against and the ouster of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. Doha reportedly assisted the Morsi government with about \$8 billion.<sup>39</sup> However, only a little over a year after his election in 2012, the Egyptian military forced President Mohamed Morsi from power. After a lengthy period of tension in Egypt-Qatar relations the ties had warmed up quickly in 2010, and there were plans for large-scale investments in Mubarak's Egypt. The man who facilitated such an improvement – Egypt's Trade Minister Rachid Mohamed Rachid – fled to Qatar after the 2011 revolution and now advises the ruling family on investments. In 2014 it was reported that he was given Qatari citizenship even as Egypt has placed him on a list of officials wanted for corruption and embezzlement. Yet, the relations between the two states remain complicated: After having given refuge to several Muslim Brotherhood leaders most wanted in Egypt, Doha finally asked the leading figures and clerics to leave the country.<sup>40</sup> Egypt had successfully put pressure on the Qatar

»With the mission in Libya, Qatar's mediation policy, that had reached its peak in the early months of the Arab Spring, suddenly changed track.«

government by becoming the fourth Arab state to recall its ambassador from Qatar over the country's support for Islamists around the region, including the Muslim Brotherhood. Again, all in all, the originally hoped-for influence of Doha in Egypt has not materialized.

### *The Syrian Civil War*

Shortly before stepping down, the Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani admitted in his opening speech at the 13th Doha Forum in late May 2013 the “failure of all Arab and international initiatives to push the Syrian regime to listen to the voice of reason.”<sup>41</sup> Concerning the resources, the scope and the emphasis of the instruments in its tool box, the Qatari government has provided reportedly at least \$1 billion up to possibly \$3 billion for Syrian rebels, with the objective of developing networks of loyalty among rebels and setting the stage for influence in a post-Assad era. The Qataris used various routes to supply different kinds of weapons to appropriate rebel groups that reportedly were identified in part by Doha's own Special Forces. Qatar's covert activities to support the rebels in Syria had begun at the same time that it was stepping up its backing for opposition fighters to oust Gaddafi. The emirate's ability to act in a global gray arms market was enhanced by the purchase of C-17 military long-range cargo planes from Boeing in 2008. Initially, Qatar worked through Turkish intelligence to identify insurgent groups; when Saudi Arabia became part of the covert effort, Doha used Lebanese mediators. Exiled members of the Muslim Brotherhood helped the Gulf state to identify appropriate Syrian insurgents. By early 2012, with a focus on light weapons, the emirate was purchasing arms in Libya and in Eastern Europe which were flown to Turkey. From there they were transferred to Syria. According to SIPRI, more than 70 cargo flights from Qatar landed in Turkey.<sup>42</sup>

At the same time, the Qataris may have opened another line of influence: They started supplying heat-seeking man-portable defense systems (MANPADS) to Syrian rebel factions against U.S. warnings in 2012. Online videos show Syrian rebels with that category of weapon, including the Chinese-produced FN-6 type supplied by Doha, and occasionally using them in battle. Islamists in northern Syria have, at least temporarily, become the most capable section of the opposition, in part with the help of Doha-delivered arms.<sup>43</sup>

However, Qatar's assistance went beyond the support of rebel groups and includes political opposition factions as well. The Syrian National Council (SNC), the first opposition umbrella group in exile, quickly received funding after it had been established with Turkish assistance. Its best organized group, the Muslim Brotherhood, was also controversial among extra-regional actors. Doha reportedly could “also emerge with multiple points of influence through Islamists and loyal brigades.” In this complex and fractured conflict, however, it “has created already many enemies inside Syria, and not just among pro-regime supporters. [...] Qataris are more likely to find that they are neither thanked – nor even wanted – there.” The U.S. in particular put pressure on Qatar to help set up a broader coalition, now called the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, which was announced in Doha in November 2012. The reasons presented with respect to Riyadh and its limited influence apply to Doha as well: U.S.-Russian bilateralism unfolded dynamics that Assad cleverly used for his own survival.

Concerning concrete operations, claims of “Qatari dominance of the opposition persisted,” even after the new and more extensive umbrella alliance was formed. Although the Muslim Brotherhood was no longer the major element, the Secretary General of the Syrian National Council, who oversees the budget to which the Qataris are the biggest donors, has brought in a new bloc of more than a dozen members who can, at least for a certain time, be seen as “loyal to Qatar.” Both the Secretary General and Doha's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs later denied a close or special relationship between the SNC and Doha.

Later, Qatar was accused of actively financing the struggle of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to establish a ‘caliphate’ in the two countries. It is likely that any such funding is run through intermediaries/proxies in Turkey or perhaps in Kuwait. Qataris had sent donations through the latter owing to the lax controls on money laundering and financial transfers in Kuwait but there have been reports that the Kuwaiti government has belatedly started to tighten up with the creation of a new Financial Intelligence Unit to monitor such flows, especially to Syria and to Iraq. Thus, it is more likely that any such financial flows out of Qatar go through Turkey, as

the Qatari government does exercise strict oversight over any direct transfer to Syria. Most flows are also likely to be private in nature in the sense that they involve individuals acting in a private capacity (no matter what their public position may be).<sup>44</sup>

### **Assessing Foreign Policy with regard to the Arab Spring**

The Arab Spring has left its mark on Qatar's self-understanding and its foreign policy. The fundamental change of Qatar's self-conception and its foreign policy in the course of the Arab Spring sacrificed its neutrality and impartiality as mediator in the Middle East/Gulf. While the investment strategy signals continuity, Doha's security politics have been viewed ambivalently, especially regarding the role of the Gulf monarchy shifting from an honest broker to an actor pursuing active interventionism. In the security-related area, the impact of the Arab Spring is most visible with respect to two new priorities:

- First, since the dramatic developments that began to unfold in early 2011, Doha has increasingly provided financial support to selected Islamist groups opposing non-monarchical dictators in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt. Qatar's financial assistance was also slated for the established Islamist-led governments in Tunisia and Egypt.
- Second, in the wake of the above-mentioned foreign policy shift, delivering hard power in terms of arms supplies and selectively providing leadership in military interventions has come to the fore in transitioning countries in the region.

### **Qatar's Foreign Relations under Pressure**

Presently, the future of Qatar as a mediator looks precarious as anything more than an ad hoc facilitator. Since Qatar's deep association with the Muslim Brotherhood has even further skewed perception of the state, the Gulf monarchy has gone from persona con grata to a persona non grata. Aside from small instances such as Qatar securing the release of Lebanese citizens captured in Syria in autumn 2013, which from afar seems little more than an example of cheque-book diplomacy, Doha will have to struggle to credibly offer its services.





While the course of securing regime survival through economic interdependence may work, the element of generating worldwide prestige started backfiring in 2013 and may even hurt Doha's investment policies. In line with our endeavor, we will focus our assessment on Qatar's mediation efforts prior to the Arab Spring and the newly implemented, predominantly hard-power activities in the aftermath of the uprisings. This approach allows us to address Qatari policies with regard to both, elements of continuity and of change.

#### *Wider Middle East*

When comparing the self-set objectives of the Qataris in the 1990s and early 2000s with the situation in late 2014/early 2015, the record tilts towards partial failure rather than to success in extending its spheres of influence. Overall, the military intervention in *Libya* can thus not be counted as a success of Qatar's foreign policy in conflict resolution. Analytically, the mission marks a turn in the Gulf monarchy's foreign policy – from soft-power mediation to hard power interventionism. A development in *Tunisia* that would include a stable position for Ennahda as a political party would certainly be a success for the supporting state of Qatar. But at the time of writing political developments are clearly in favor of the anti-Islamist party Nidaa Tounes, which won both the parliamentary and the presidential elections in 2014. Again, it seems that Qatari influence in Tunisian politics is limited at best.

In *Egypt*, Qatar's enormous financial and diplomatic support of the Muslim Brotherhood can be deemed a failure, too. Morsi's end and fate as a detainee was certainly a setback for the emirate which worked together with Turkey in assisting the Islamist government. The focused aid could in retrospect only be interpreted as a success, if, as a Qatari official stated, it "had been to the Egyptian people, not any individual figure or party."<sup>45</sup> In *Syria*, it is currently far from clear whether Qatar's interest in influencing the situation on the ground to reach its main objective of toppling Assad will become reality. The failure (so far) of Qatari policy cannot be seen in isolation, since it is not clear at this point whether Doha has to pay a price for risking tensions with its major security guarantor, the United States. As an end of the Syrian Civil War is not yet in sight, perhaps pragmatic Qatar with its new emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, recognizes the virtue of soft diplomacy in

the form of the Geneva II Conference as the most promising element of an exit strategy. As to *Saudi Arabia*, there are strong indications that Doha's emancipation efforts have to be considered as limited (see POLICY BRIEF No. 44 by Lars Berger et al.).

In sum, Qatar has lost its regional reputation as a peaceful, impartial mediator with its political turn towards active interventionism, i.e. demonstrating leadership and providing arms in addition to financial support. Qatar's motives and interests to intervene are manifold. For some observers, after having become the supporter of North African revolts bringing Islamist-led governments onto the political stage, Doha's engagement in the Syrian Civil War was also the culmination of an opportunistic foreign policy.<sup>46</sup> Others point to the international inaction in the case of the bloodshed in Syria where Qatar took the lead in helping fill an international void.

However, there have been signs that the new emir works towards to gradually rebuilding Qatar's credibility as a regional actor. This has involved the resumption of Qatari mediation albeit in a far more low-key (and multilateral) manner than before, for example by securing the release of Lebanese citizens captured in Syria in autumn 2013. The new foreign minister, Khalid bin Mohammed Al Attiyah, has also focused on re-establishing Qatar's credentials as a facilitator of indirect negotiations between antagonists who cannot engage in direct dialogue – a good example being the negotiations between the United States and the Taliban for the release of Bowe Bergdahl in May 2014 and the Qatari mediation with ISIS to negotiate the release of American hostage Peter Theo Curtis in August that year.

Aside from these rather small instances, Qatar will have to make enormous efforts to regain its former credibility in conflict resolution. In this respect, the emir stated in early 2015 that "bullets and bombs alone will not win the war on terror. Addressing the root causes of terrorism will require a deeper, longer-term, and more strategic approach to the problem. It will require political leaders to have the courage to negotiate pluralistic, inclusive, power-sharing solutions to regional disputes."<sup>47</sup>

#### *International Level*

Regarding our focus on regime survival in Qatar, for which U.S. protection is

*» The Arab Spring has left its mark on Qatar's self-understanding and its foreign policy. The fundamental change of Qatar's self-conception and its foreign policy in the course of the Arab Spring sacrificed its neutrality and impartiality as mediator in the Middle East/ Gulf. While the investment strategy signals continuity, Doha's security politics have been viewed ambivalently, especially regarding the role of the Gulf monarchy shifting from an honest broker to an actor pursuing active interventionism.«*

considered to be vital, it is striking to see how risk-taking the government in Doha has been. This involves two issues: First, its alleged (but officially denied) provision of supplies to the extremist Jabhat al-Nusra group, which the United States had added to its list of global terrorist organizations at the end of 2012, led to tensions with Washington. What is more, those controversial deliveries sparked the U.S. administration to take a more active role to set limits to Doha's activities. The consultations in two operation rooms in Turkey and Jordan with representatives from nearly a dozen countries to oversee weapon deliveries seemed to have been quite effective: They may have reduced or even stopped supplies to that group of extremists. Also concerning the supplying of MANPADS to Syrian rebel groups, the Barack Obama administration was critical because the weapons could fall into the hands of terrorist groups in part affiliated with al-Qaeda. Qatar's policy of weapon deliveries reflects the overall Qatari-American relationship: Although it is one of asymmetrical interdependence clearly in favor of the United States, Washington may have only limited influence over Doha's foreign policy decisions. Nevertheless, there are indications that the bilateral relationship is improving. For instance, the emir praised

the Camp David summit to which President Obama had invited in February 2015 as "good and fruitful. All issues pertaining to the region were discussed and many things were agreed upon."<sup>48</sup>

With regard to the envisaged WMD/DVs Free Zone in the Middle East, Qatar has expressed its support. On April 30, 2013, at the second Preparatory Committee for the 2015 NPT Review Conference, for instance, Qatar's diplomats demanded that the Helsinki Conference be held before the upcoming NPT Review Conference in spring 2015. Doha also "called for the establishment of verification mechanisms to measure progress on convening the conference on a WMDFZ in the Middle East."<sup>49</sup> Unfortunately, the New York conference ended without a consensus. This implies that all zonal-related efforts on the official level are stalled, at least temporarily.

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## Conclusions and Recommendations

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Within the past few decades, Qatar has undergone massive changes, especially in terms of economic development and diversification. However, the political system has – despite numerous promises – hardly

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We would like to thank Dr. Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, Rice University, Houston, TX, for his competent advice and friendly assistance.

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changed. Yet, for some time the political elite had managed to establish the small Gulf state not only as an independent actor, but also as one who was respected for its efforts to foster peaceful relations through mediation in the region and as a responsible and reliable diplomatic partner on the international level. Yet, Qatar's peaceful mediation strategy came to a halt with the military intervention in the Libyan case in 2011. This is understood to mark a turn from a foreign policy driven by soft power to one favoring hard-power politics. Building on the hegemony-related framework, this POLICY BRIEF sought to explore Qatar's role as a state with hegemonic ambitions in the region. This was done with a focus on the foreign policy of the country and special emphasis on the policy changes that came about in the course of the Arab Spring.

In our view, Qatar's foreign policy is based on four major principles. Regime survival is the first, overarching, and main principle of foreign policy. This encompasses not only the territorial integrity of the country, but also its internal political stability and the economic strategy which expresses itself in the struggle for security as well as regional supremacy and international prestige.

Secondly, it is apparent that regional power politics play a vital role. The country has been applying soft power mainly in terms of its mediation politics and has undergone a change towards hard-power politics in terms of interventionism starting in Libya in 2011. This line of strategy is mainly aimed at gaining prestige regionally as well as internationally. The third principle, in our view, concerns the regime's efforts to be regionally and globally recognized as a cooperative player and reliable partner to its allies, which can be trusted in solidarity and is generous. This further encompasses clear ambitions to emancipate itself from Saudi Arabia, which has traditionally been a competitor and at times even a threat to the country's sovereignty. So far, those ambitions were realized only to a limited extent. Furthermore, this point includes assuring support in financial terms in exchange for expected solidarity in times of crisis. Closely related to this issue, the fourth principle is that Qatar has been actively implementing security ties with its Western allies. The United States has been providing security assurances to the small Gulf monarchy and was invited to set up a major military base on Qatari soil. This offer not only gives Qatar a security assurance but probably also an effective deterrent.

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In the course of the Arab Spring, the Qatari leaders portrayed themselves as the spearhead of comprehensive reforms moving towards more civil political participation in calling for the gradual implementation of change in the Arab world. Despite its mediation successes in the past, Qatar has been criticized for its questionable role in supporting Islamist groups in Egypt, Lebanon, and for its interference in the Syrian Civil War. Moreover, the ties to Iran have been carefully observed, especially by the U.S., Qatar's most important Western ally and solid pillar when it comes to the overarching goal of regime survival and security. Acting as the avant-garde in supporting rebel groups against the ousting of non-monarchical leaders can therefore also be interpreted as taking attention away from its own autocratic regime at home. Additionally, the Gulf monarchy's engagement in Libya has seriously weakened the position of the ruling elite as honest brokers and impartial mediators. These ambiguous sides of the foreign policy may have cost Qatar a significant part of its reputation. It remains to be seen to what extent and by what means the regime can regain the trust lost in this mission. Furthermore, concerning the Gulf monarchy's quest for prestige regionally and internationally, the leadership

will have to resolve the labor issues regarding the 2022 FIFA World Cup in order to prevent this prestigious project from further harming Qatar's image.

As for Qatar, like Saudi Arabia and Iran, our assessment is that the country's ambitions for regional hegemony by expanding its sphere of influence and international prestige are clear. However, the Gulf monarchy's status as a 'true-hegemon' must be seriously doubted in light of its apparent overstretching in terms of the implementation of military hard-power politics. Yet, the country has proven repeatedly that it is not only capable but also willing to take on an active and often leading role when it comes to sensitive regional policy issues. Even after having lost trust and reputation as a reliable, impartial mediator, Qatar is trying hard to make up for its interventionist activities: The generous offer to sponsor the rebuilding of Gaza is but one example of such efforts. We recommend that Qatar returns to its peaceful, non-violent tools of mediation and conflict resolution that have been so fruitful in the past. By doing this, the Gulf monarchy could induce change in the Middle East and foster cooperative efforts also towards regional disarmament. ■

### About the ACADEMIC PEACE ORCHESTRA MIDDLE EAST (APOME)

The ORCHESTRA is the follow-up project of the "Multilateral Study Group on the Establishment of a Missile Free Zone in the Middle East". The ACADEMIC PEACE ORCHESTRA MIDDLE EAST is a classical Track II initiative: it consists of some 100 experts – mainly from the Middle East/Gulf, one of the most conflict-ridden areas of the world. The ORCHESTRA is meeting regularly in working groups (CHAMBER ORCHESTRA UNITS) on specific topics in the context of a workshop cycle from 2011-2014. The main goal of this initiative is to shape the prospective Middle East Conference on the establishment of a zone free of weapons of mass destruction and their delivery vehicles agreed upon by the international community in May 2010. For this reason, these experts develop ideas, concepts, and background information in a series of POLICY BRIEFS which are the results of intense discussions within the CHAMBER ORCHESTRA UNITS. In this framework, the broader normative Cooperative Security Concept will be further developed, embedded, and institutionalized in the region. At the same time, the ORCHESTRA meetings serve as venues for confidence building among the experts. The networking activities of PRIF's Project Group are documented by the ATLAS on Track II research activities in or about the Middle East/Gulf region.

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The views presented by the authors do not necessarily represent those of the project coordinator, editors, sponsors, or PRIF.  
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Layout: Anke Maria Meyer

The Academic Peace Orchestra Middle East wishes to thank its generous sponsors, the Foreign Ministry of Norway, the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, and the Protestant Church of Hesse and Nassau.