



INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL SECURITY DYNAMICS OF QATARI POLICY TOWARD THE SYRIA UPRISING

Las dinámicas de seguridad internas y externas de la política de Catar frente al levantamiento sirio

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Qatar played a leading role in supporting the opposition to Bashar al-Assad since the beginning of the Syrian uprising in 2011. While Kuwait emerged as a key (unofficial) conduit for financial transfers from the Gulf States to Syria and backing from Saudi Arabia initially took the form of illicit flows of militants and weapons to groups of opposition fighters, Qatar from the start adopted a political approach to organizing the Syrian opposition, in addition to providing tens of millions of dollars to rebel groups. Qatari support increasingly controversial as it was perceived to be tied to groups linked to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. During 2012, Qatar and Saudi Arabia backed competing groups, contributing to the fragmentation of the opposition, before responsibility for the “Syria file” passed decisively from Doha to Riyadh in spring 2013. This signified a major setback to Qatar’s ambition to become a regional power and highlighted how Qatar’s Syria policy was undermined by the lack of institutional capacity to underpin highly-personalised decision-making processes.



Abstract

Qatar; Syria; Saudi Arabia; Syrian civil war; Syrian opposition; rebel groups; terrorism financing; foreign policy

Catar; Siria; Arabia Saudí; guerra civil siria; oposición siria; grupos rebeldes; financiación del terrorismo; política exterior



Key words

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Fechas

Catar jugó un papel fundamental en apoyar la oposición a Bashar al-Assad desde el comienzo del levantamiento sirio en 2011. Mientras que Kuwait emergió como un conducto clave (extraoficial) para las transferencias financieras de los estados del Golfo a Siria y como apoyo de Arabia Saudí, al inicio tomó forma de flujo ilícito de militantes y armas para grupos de combatientes de la oposición, Catar adoptó desde el inicio una posición política para organizar la organización siria, además de proveer decenas de millones de dólares a los grupos rebeldes. El apoyo catari, cada vez más controvertido, era percibido como relacionado con grupos unidos a la Hermandad Musulmana siria. A lo largo del 2012, Catar y Arabia Saudí apoyaron a grupos rivales, contribuyendo a la fragmentación de la oposición, antes de que la responsabilidad por el «archivo sirio» se traspasase de modo decisivo de Doha a Riyadh en primavera de 2013. Esto representó un duro revés a la ambición de Catar de convertirse en un poder regional y resaltó cómo la política sobre Siria de Catar estaba debilitada por la falta de capacidad institucional para sostener los procesos de toma de decisiones altamente personalizados.



Along with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, Qatar played a leading role in supporting the opposition to Bashar al-Assad after the Syrian uprising began in 2011. While Kuwait emerged as a key (unofficial) conduit for financial transfers from the Gulf States to Syria and backing from Saudi Arabia initially took the form of illicit flows of militants and weapons to groups of opposition fighters, Qatar from the start adopted a political approach to organising the Syrian opposition, in addition to providing tens of millions of dollars to rebel groups. Qatari support increasingly controversial as it was perceived to be tied to groups linked to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. During 2012, Qatar and Saudi Arabia backed competing groups, contributing to the fragmentation of the opposition, before responsibility for the “Syria file” passed decisively from Doha to Riyadh in spring 2013. This signified a major setback to Qatar’s ambition to become a regional power and highlighted how Qatar’s Syria policy was undermined by the lack of institutional capacity to underpin highly-personalised decision-making processes.

There are four parts to this essay. Part I examines the policy motivations and regional objectives of the key decision-makers in Doha before, during, and immediately after the sudden onset of the “Arab Spring” in early-2011. These include senior members of the Qatari ruling family, led by the Emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, and the Prime Minister, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani, who was also the Foreign Minister until both he and the Emir stepped down in June 2013, as well as technocratic experts upon whom they came to rely in the formulation of policy toward the evolving conflict in Syria. This leads into Part II, which provides an overview of the evolution of Qatari policy toward Syria between 2011 and mid-2013.

Parts III and IV of this article focus specifically on the internal and external security dimensions of Qatar’s activist approach toward the overlapping conflicts in Syria. Part III questions whether Qatari actions in Syria between 2011 and 2013 made the country less, rather than more, secure, as the Qatari leadership faced mounting regional and international pushback against its assertive regional policies. This scepticism peaked in 2013 but its impact continued into 2014 as officials in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) spearheaded a campaign to isolate Qatar within the six-member Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Part IV concludes with an assessment of the new threat of potential blowback posed to Qatar and other Gulf States by militant extremists from the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), in addition to

signs that Qatar and Saudi Arabia belatedly have started to coordinate policy toward the Syrian opposition in an attempt to confront this shared threat.

Qatari policy-making circles were drawn extremely tightly around a handful of the most senior members of the Al-Thani. Decisions frequently were taken “from above” and transmitted downward for implementation, rather than the other way around. For public sector officials in government ministries, instead of acting as the incubator of policy ideas, their role was to find ways to make declaratory policies work in practice. Continuing reliance on networks of powerful personalities hampered also the institutionalisation of the machinery of government in Qatar. The four main protagonists behind Qatar’s policy toward Syria were Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa and his Prime/Foreign Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim until they both stepped down on 25 June 2013, Heir Apparent (and, since 25 June 2013, Emir) Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, and Khalid bin Mohammed Al-Attiyah, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs until June 2013, when he succeeded Hamad bin Jassem as Foreign Minister. The first three are senior figures in the ruling Al-Thani family while the Al-Attiyah family is regarded as the most influential of the “non-royal” families in Qatar. A fifth figure of influence in shaping the early thinking of Emir Hamad was Azmi Bishara, a prominent Arab Israeli MP residing in exile in Qatar.

In Qatar, the general direction of policy throughout the period prior to and during the Arab Spring was set by the two most powerful men in the country – Emir Hamad and Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim – with the Heir Apparent, Sheikh Tamim, gradually assuming a greater role in the day-to-day running of domestic and regional affairs. Emir Hamad and Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim were the twin architects of Qatar’s policy of intensifying internationalisation in the aftermath of Emir Hamad’s seizure of power from his father in a bloodless palace coup in June 1995 (Kamrava, 2013). Curiously, in light of what subsequently transpired in Syria, prior to 2011, both men had developed closer ties with Bashar al-Assad based around growing Qatari commercial investments in Syria, cooperation over Qatar’s mediation efforts in Lebanon in 2008, and anger at Israel’s offensive in Gaza (Operation Cast Lead) in 2008-9 (Khalaf & Fielding-Smith, 2013).

While Emir Hamad was instrumental in overseeing Qatar’s rise to a position of international prominence during his eighteen-year rule, he was supported throughout by Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim, Qatar’s long-serving Foreign Minister (from 1992) and Prime Minister from 2007, when he replaced one of the Emir’s brothers, Sheikh Abdullah bin Khalifa Al Thani. Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim range of interests and portfolios were as impressive as they were numerous. In addition to his Prime Ministerial and Foreign Ministry roles, he served on the Ruling Family Council and the Supreme Council for the Investment of the Reserves of the State. In addition, he was the Vice-Chairman and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Qatar Investment Authority and Chairman of its real-estate arm (Qatari Diar), and its direct investment arm (Qatar Holding) (Gulbrandsen, 2010).

The Emir and Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim worked productively and in tandem for most of the 2000s. Toward the end of the decade, they were joined by a third influential participant in Qatari foreign policy formulation. This was Sheikh Tamim, the Heir Apparent from August 2003 until his accession as Emir on 25 June 2013 following Emir Hamad’s decision to hand over power. The fourth son of the Emir (and the second with the Emir’s favoured wife, Sheikha Mozah bint Nasser

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al-Missned), Sheikh Tamim became Heir Apparent on 5 August 2003 (Kechichian, 2008). As early as 2011, the *Gulf States Newsletter* cited one (unnamed) analyst as stating that “There has been a gradual transfer of power from the office of the prime minister/foreign minister to the office of the heir apparent. Of course, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim still has great power on the international scene, but is not so powerful domestically” (*Gulf States Newsletter*, 2011).

Significantly, Sheikh Tamim additionally started to encroach upon Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim foreign policy domain. During the summer of 2011, Sheikh Tamim was active in hosting delegations of visiting Free Libyan officials as the anti-Gaddafi rebellion unfolded. He also travelled to Egypt in July 2011 to meet with the leadership of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) (*Gulf States Newsletter*, 2011). Subsequently, in January 2012, as the violent uprising in Syria escalated, Sheikh Tamim arranged a meeting between the Palestinian resistance organisation Hamas and Jordan. Unusually, in light of Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim’s previous dominance of such issues, it was Sheikh Tamim who accompanied Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal and a delegation of Hamas leaders to meet with King Abdullah in Amman in January 2012. The visit was seen as an opportunity to repair previously tense relations between the Hashemite Kingdom and Hamas, particularly as conditions in Syria deteriorated (Farrell, 2012).

Two additional policymakers who had a key influence on Qatari decision-making on Syria were not members of the ruling family. Khalid bin Mohammed Al-Attiyah rose rapidly in prominence in early-2013 as he emerged as Qatar’s point of contact within the Foreign Ministry with Syrian rebel groups and gradually took over the day-to-day running of the ministry from Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim. Along with Sheikh Tamim, Al-Attiyah played a key role in trying to repair simmering tensions between Qatar and Saudi Arabia over policy toward Syria in the spring of 2013 (and thereafter as Foreign Minister under Emir Tamim). Al-Attiyah has a close relationship with Emir Tamim and the former Emir, Hamad, borne in part out of residual loyalties stemming from the fact that his own father (Mohammed Al-Attiyah) was a mentor to the young Hamad as Heir Apparent in the 1980s and gave him crucial political backing when Hamad made his first power play against his own father, Emir Khalifa bin Hamad Al Thani, in 1989 (Gray, 2013). The significant influence on Qatar’s early policy toward Syria was Azmi Bishara, General Director of the Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies in Doha. A Palestinian intellectual, academic, and politician, Bishara was a member of Israel’s Knesset between 1996 and 2007, when he resigned his seat and went into exile in Doha after he was accused of providing Hezbollah with information on strategic locations in Israel during the July 2006 conflict in Lebanon. Bishara developed a close relationship with Emir Hamad and was instrumental first in deciding that the Assad regime was incapable of peaceful reform and subsequently in putting together the Syrian National Council/Coalition (Khalaf & Fielding-Smith, 2013).

The outbreak of the Arab Spring in late-December 2010 and early-January 2011 found Qatar in a fortuitous position. Flush with the success of the 2022 World Cup bid and with its international recognition soaring, the Qatari leadership seized on the opportunity to mark Qatar as distinct from the troubles afflicting the wider region. With little prospect of being affected by the contagious spread of the political and socio-economic unrest, there was much to gain for making a high-visibility stand against authoritarian misrule in North Africa, Syria, and Yemen. Moreover, the opportunity cost of doing so was low at first, as Qatari expressions of declaratory and material support for opposition movements elsewhere were unlikely to rebound domestically, while they also played into Qatari efforts to be taken seriously as a responsible participant on the regional and international stage (Coates Ulrichsen, 2014).

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Beginning in March 2011 in Libya, Qatar embarked upon a decisively new role in its efforts to exert leadership in the Arab world. The emphasis of Qatari policy underwent a ground-breaking shift away from diplomatic mediation and investment in post-conflict reconstruction and recovery toward an activist and even interventionist approach to the Arab Spring. During 2011 and 2012, the focus of the Emir and the Prime Minister was on assisting, if not facilitating, an armed intervention in two of the bloodiest theatres of upheaval, Libya and Syria. Qatar's role in the campaign to oust Libya's longstanding dictator, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, in 2011 indicated a new direction in Qatari regional and foreign policy with the unprecedented use of political, economic, and both direct and indirect military support (Barakat, 2012). The apparent success of this policy in toppling Gaddafi in August 2011 represented the zenith of Qatar's perceived power and influence in the Arab world. However, subsequent developments in Syria and across the region underlined how Qatari officials over-played their hand and over-estimated their ability to trigger far-reaching changes to regional structures.

II

The uprising in Syria prompted Qatar's second intervention in the Arab Spring following the campaign to topple Libya's longstanding leader, Muammar Gaddafi, between March and October 2011. However, a world of difference separated the cases of Libya and Syria as flashpoints in the unfolding regional upheaval. Whereas Gaddafi's regime was diplomatically isolated and politically (and physically) remote from major regional actors, Syria lay at the geopolitical heart of the Middle East. The multicultural fabric and sectarian balance within Syria combined with its cross-regional tribal links and political alliances to ensure that the civil unrest that started in March 2011 was not contained purely within the country. Syria became the battleground for proxy wars waged with increasing intensity and ferocity by groups linked to both sides of the primary Sunni-Shiite divide. Within this series of lethal and overlapping conflicts it was fanciful to suppose that any one country could hope to influence, let alone control, developments on the ground. Yet whether by accident or design, or simply flush from their apparent success in Libya, this is precisely what the Qatari leadership attempted to do in late-2011 and throughout 2012. Moreover, when Qatar's early attempts to rally regional and international support for intervening in the worsening conflict in Syria were not successful, Qatari policy became more unilateralist and unpredictable. With Qatar unable to mobilise the international community as it had over Libya and with regional scepticism of Qatar's foreign policy motives soaring, the activist foreign policy espoused so strongly in 2011 showed signs of wearing thin by the end of 2012, months before the formal shift in leadership occurred in Doha in June 2013 (Coates Ulrichsen, 2014).

Shortly after the outbreak of mass demonstrations in Syria in March 2011, both the Emir and the Prime Minister of Qatar attempted to use their personal influence to persuade Assad to negotiate a political solution and refrain from violent repression of the protest groups. Similar overtures were made from the Emir's daughter, Al-Mayassa bint Hamad Al-Thani to President Assad's wife, Asma, but all proved futile (Al Qassemi, 2011). In January 2012, Emir Hamad called for armed intervention in the Syrian uprising. As with his earlier "leading from the front" over Libya, the Emir became the first Arab leader to publicly support the dispatching of foreign troops to Syria to try to stop the bloodshed, telling CBS News's *60 Minutes* programme that "for such a situation to stop [...] some troops should go to stop the killing". He added that Qatari policy toward the Arab Spring uprisings was to side with "the people of those countries

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[...] asking for justice and dignity [...] I think this is a healthy influence. I think all the world should support this” (Al Jazeera Online, 2012). However, Qatar’s vocal, flexible and proactive role in the crisis failed to trigger an immediate or far-reaching impact as it had in Libya the year before. In the face of evidence that the Qatari star was wearing thin, policy pronouncements from Doha became more strident and desperate. In October 2012, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim accused the Syrian government of genocide after the failure of (yet another) four-day ceasefire attempt. The Qatar News Agency quoted Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim as stating explosively that:

What is happening in Syria is not a civil war but a genocide, a war of extermination with a license to kill by the Syrian government and the international community [...]. Everything that is happening now is a waste of time and just buying time to kill the Syrian people and to destroy the Syrian infrastructure. (CNN, 2012)

During 2012, with the numbers of deaths in Syria multiplying to more than 60,000 by the year’s end, allegations gained ground that Qatar, along with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, was channelling financial aid and small arms to opposition fighters and groups. In September 2012, *Time Magazine* conducted an in-depth investigative report into the matter. It found that Qatari and Saudi funding and weaponry was finding its way to competing factions within the Free Syrian Army. Whereas Qatar was reported to have developed close links with the Muslim Brotherhood of Syria (in line with Qatari support for the organisation and its offshoots in North Africa), other Gulf networks were alleged to have favoured Salafi groups said to form part of broader Islamist networks of fighters in Syria. The report concluded that Qatar and Saudi Arabia were engaged in “a game of conflicting favourites that is getting in the way of creating a unified rebel force to topple the Assad regime” (Abouzeid, 2012).

With a lack of consensus both within the Syrian opposition and among the international community over the shape that any political settlement may take, Qatari involvement in the country is (and will remain) vulnerable to reputational risk. Michael Stephens of the Qatar-based branch of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) think-tank warned in September 2012, “Syria has the potential to discredit Qatar in a big way [...] Qatar thinks it’s Libya all over again. But at this point, they cannot just insert themselves into the diplomatic process and appear free of an agenda” (quoted in Dickinson, 2012). Writing again several months later, in February 2013, Stephens suggested that local and regional suspicion of Qatari motivations and policy objectives were compounded by Doha’s shortcomings in public diplomacy and institutional depth:

When the rumours get so large that answers are demanded they are met with walls of silence, not because Qatar has anything to hide, but because that is the culture of governance here ... regional leadership needs more than a TV station and five people at the top of the government making all the decisions. It is impossible with the number of world problems in which Qatar is involving itself for five people to possess the information necessary to deal with them adequately ... In short, Qatar’s culture of silence is beginning to backfire badly. (Stephens, 2013)

This notwithstanding, Qatari leaders continued in their efforts to resolve the Syrian crisis. In November 2012, a meeting of Syrian opposition leaders convened in Doha to try and iron out their many differences and competing agendas. As was the pattern with Qatar’s pre-2011 mediatory initiatives, delegates met at two of Doha’s glitziest hotels – the Sheraton and the Ritz – in an atmosphere far removed from the violence and suffering of the people they claimed to represent. After four days of intense negotiations, the delegates agreed to establish an umbrella

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organisation, the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, to unite the multiple ethno-sectarian- and regional-based opposition factions under one body, and establish political coordination over the disparate military wings (MacFarquhar & Droubi, 2012).

Although Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim joined US secretary of state Hillary Clinton in welcoming the outcome of the Doha meeting, it was not at all clear how the new group would be any more effective than the already existing Syrian National Council (SNC). The *Wall Street Journal* summed up the difficult task facing the new coalition: “It faces a challenge in controlling the sprawling patchwork of rebel militias and councils fighting regime forces and, in some parts of the country, already governing rebel-held areas” (Malas, 2012). Moreover, the tensions that had plagued the opposition for months remained close to the surface even as the conference proceeded, with the Qatar-supported Muslim Brotherhood of Syria drawing particular ire from other delegates. The head of the Revolutionary Council in the town of Idlib stated that the “haphazard financing coming from abroad was demoralising, especially because it was distributed on a political basis”, adding caustically that the SNC had appointed a member of the Muslim Brotherhood in his 60s as the “youth envoy” for Idlib: “The guy had not been there for 32 years [...] If you dropped him at the edge of town, I doubt he could find his old house” (MacFarquhar, 2012).

The new coalition failed to establish any great credentials as a political power broker or a central hub for coordinating military or financial aid to the Syrian opposition. Its inability to do so did further harm to Qatar’s attempts to reach a multilateral solution to the crisis, and increased the likelihood of unregulated and destabilising flows of unilateral support by Gulf governments to selected groups of rebels. Moreover, it added to the growing chorus of critics of Qatari policy-making that pointed to Doha’s lack of institutional depth in following-through and implementing its regional initiatives. It might have been thought axiomatic that a country of such socio-ethnic and geopolitical complexity as Syria was beyond the “management” of any external actor, but this caution was not readily apparent as the Qatari leadership advocated a policy of intervention in 2011 and 2012. The result, as the conflict entered into its third year in 2013, was a weakening of regional and international resolve on Syria that was to begin with powerless to alleviate or end the human suffering (Coates Ulrichsen, 2013).

Subsequent events during the spring and summer of 2013 provided further evidence of both the fragmentation of international policy toward Syria as well as the waning of Qatar’s regional influence. Over the course of the spring, primary responsibility for leading the Gulf states’ engagement with the Syrian opposition was passed from Qatar to Saudi Arabia (Karouny, 2013). Tortuous negotiations were held in Istanbul in May to expand the sixty-three-seat Syrian National Council by adding an additional forty-three seats, with particular emphasis placed on including a liberal bloc headed by Michel Kilo and backed by Western and Arab governments. This was widely seen as a Saudi-led attempt to dilute the influence of the (Qatar-backed) Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Council by broadening its membership and composition. However, the coalition’s Qatar-backed secretary-general, Mustafa al-Sabbagh, resisted the mooted expansion. An initial proposal to award twenty-two seats to Kilo’s grouping was blocked by the Islamist-dominated council, which instead offered the liberals a mere five seats before settling on a compromise of fourteen. This laid bare the divisions within the Council and their respective external connections, as al-Sabbagh had been appointed the political head of the opposition at the Doha meeting in November 2012 that created the coalition (Hassan, 2013).

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Along with Turkey (the other major regional backer of the Muslim Brotherhood), Qatar had then orchestrated the selection of Ghassan Hitto, a naturalised US citizen and long-time resident of Texas, to head an interim government in March 2013. This produced a further backlash as Saudi anger at his appointment prompted them to get directly involved in opposition politics in Syria, while several figures suspended their membership of the opposition coalition in protest, meaning that Hitto was unable to form a provisional administration (Draitser, 2013). As the political and military stalemate continued, Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood faction was increasingly seen as a major cause of the persistent divisions within the Syrian opposition; a lengthy investigation by the *Financial Times*, entitled "How Qatar Seized Control of the Syrian Revolution", found that opinions on Qatar among the Syrian opposition had polarised and in many cases become extremely critical and negative. One rebel commander interviewed by the report's authors stated simply that "after two years it is time for everyone involved in Syria to review their actions and engage in self-correction" (Khalaf & Fielding-Smith 2013).

A combination of rising Syrian, regional, and international pressure on Qatar culminated in the "transfer" of responsibility for the "Syria file" from Doha to Riyadh in April 2013. Qatar's policy of "picking winners" among Islamist groups linked with the Muslim Brotherhood had come in for intense scrutiny and criticism in the wake of the crisis in Mali in early-2013 while tensions with Saudi Arabia and the UAE also grew as the differences in policy approaches toward the Muslim Brotherhood widened (Gulf States Newsletter, 2013). Furthermore, Emir Hamad's high profile visit with President Obama at the White House in April was overshadowed by pressure from US officials on Qatar to ensure that none of the weaponry Qatar was sending to Syria ended up in the hands of Jabhat al-Nusra or other extremist jihadi groups. Signs of friction in the Qatari-US relationship also appeared as Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim declared himself exasperated with the lack of action by the international community: "You know, we put a lot of red lines. Scud, he [Assad] used Scud. Chemicals, he used chemicals. And there is evidence. But he used them in pockets, small pockets. He wants to try your reaction. No reaction? He will escalate" (Kelemen, 2013).

During the spring of 2013, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim's minister of state for foreign affairs, Khalid al-Attiah, became more prominent in Qatar's foreign policy-making and played a key role in trying to repair Qatari-Saudi tensions and align approaches to Syria, prefiguring his subsequent replacement of Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim M as foreign minister in June. Shortly after the 26 June 2013 handover of leadership in Qatar, a transition of power also occurred among the SNC as it replaced Mustafa al-Sabbagh and Ghassan Hitto with Ahmad Jarba on 6 July. A tribal figure from the powerful Shammar tribe –which extended from Syria into Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Iraq (with Saudi king Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud himself descended from the Shammar through his mother) – Jarba enjoyed close connections with Saudi Arabia, and his victory was seen as reinforcing Saudi influence over the fractious opposition coalition (Oweis & Solomon, 2013).

III

The evolution of the conflict in Syria between 2011 and 2013 illustrated the constraints that gradually became more visible in Qatar's activist foreign policy, as well as the mounting regional backlash against perceived Qatari policy motivations and objectives. On one level, Syria illustrated the inability of Qatari (as well as other states') funding and support to deliver tangible

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results on the ground. It also highlighted the fact that only by working with other, larger external powers, such as Russia or Iran, could any individual external actor hope to generate the capacity to meaningfully alter the balance of power within Syria. But therein lies the difficulty for Qatar: having picked “winners” that failed to deliver in Syria, there was no apparent Plan B to fall back on. Thus, as Blake Hounshell aptly observed as early as the summer of 2012, “If Libya represented the apotheosis of Qatari power, Syria represents its limits” (Hounshell, 2012).

Three major consequences arose from the Qatari approach to the Arab Spring that had internal policy implications on the new Emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, after he assumed power in June 2013. The first consequence is that Qatar’s move from an emphasis on diplomatic mediation prior to 2011 toward a more activist, interventionist regional policy has undermined, perhaps even shattered, the country’s reputation as an impartial and honest broker. For at least the foreseeable future, Qatar’s new leaders will find it difficult to revert to their role as diplomatic mediators that propelled the country to international attention in the late-2000s (Barakat, 2012). As instances of regional and international pushback against Qatari policy multiply, so too does the risk that Qatari actions will be misunderstood or misrepresented in ways that actively damage the state-branding strategy that had proved so successful in placing Qatar firmly on the global map. The unproven accusations levelled at Qatar’s alleged links with armed Islamist groups in northern Mali in 2012–13 constitute a potent case in point, as do the tensions these caused in Qatar’s relationship with France and Algeria (Lazar, 2012). Qatar also found itself in the full glare of a suspicious and highly negative media spotlight in 2014 as elements of the British and American media focused relentlessly on allegations of Qatari support for armed Islamist groups and on the migrant labour issue in connection with the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

This intersects with the second implication of Qatar’s Arab Spring policy, which is that Doha’s record of picking winners backfired badly and endangered key regional relationships with other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. In the transition states of Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, and particularly in the Syrian civil war, the perception that Qatar has thrown its weight behind the Muslim Brotherhood and affiliated Islamist organisations generated extreme friction both among other local groups and fellow GCC states. It propelled Qatar onto a collision course with its Gulf neighbours, chiefly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, with both expressing extreme disquiet at the empowerment of the Muslim Brotherhood across the region (Stephens, 2014). For months prior to Qatar’s leadership transition in June 2013 and the removal of President Muhammed Morsi’s Muslim Brotherhood-led government in Egypt a week later, Qatari actions were no longer seen through the benign lens of 2011 but rather were viewed with great suspicion by public and political opinion in recipient states. In the months since the events of June and July 2013 that marked effectively the crushing of the Arab Spring, Qatar was marginalised in regional policy-making as neighbouring Gulf States moved quickly to extend large-scale political and financial support to the military-led transitional government in Cairo (Hamed, 2014).

The third consequence is that with Qatar assuming such a prominent role in championing the uprisings against authoritarian rule in North Africa and in Syria, attention inevitably began to focus on the lack of political freedoms within Qatar and its GCC neighbors. Incidents of repression – such as the sentencing of a Qatari poet to life imprisonment for criticising the Qatari leadership – fuelled accusations that Qatar was following a set of double standards toward the Arab Spring. Meanwhile, greater scrutiny of domestic issues, such as the condition of migrant

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labourers in the context of Qatari preparations for the 2022 FIFA World Cup, revealed a seamer side to Qatari policies that arguably “comes with the territory” of seeking a greater global role. As with the other two dimensions of Qatari policy mentioned above, these inflict significant damage on Qatar’s state-branding and international image. Finally, instances such as the lack of any substantive follow-up to (and eventual abandonment of) the Emir’s announcement in October 2011 of parliamentary elections by 2013 reinforced the views of sceptics that Qatari policy may be more about style than actual substance (Coates Ulrichsen, 2014).

Together, these factors suggest that Qatar’s activist response to the interventions in Libya and Syria achieved the opposite of what was intended. Although in the heady days of spring 2011 it appeared that almost anything might be possible, Qatar’s old and new leadership are caught in the crossfire of regional blowback as the Arab Spring gives way to a messy and uncertain period of political and economic turmoil across the region. The challenge for Qatar under Emir Tamim is to ensure the smooth operation of these trajectories, which may well be easier said than done. Indeed, upon taking power, Emir Tamim sought to reassure sceptical regional allies and international partners that Qatar was “not affiliated with one trend against the other”. However, the March 2014 decision by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain to withdraw their Ambassadors from Doha in the name of “security and stability”, and to accuse Qatar of breaching a GCC security agreement signed in Riyadh in November 2013 stipulating “non-interference” in the “internal affairs of any of the other GCC countries” reflected the deep and continuing anger felt in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi (in particular) over Qatar’s Arab Spring policies and perceived alignment with Muslim Brotherhood forces in Syria and Libya (Stephens, 2014).

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IV

This final section examines the potential threat of blowback to Qatar (along with other GCC states) from the spiralling jihadi radicalism of groups such as the self-styled Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (IS). In late-2014, a spate of attacks in Saudi Arabia and one in Abu Dhabi suggested that the threat posed by IS to the GCC states would arise primarily from “lone wolf” operations. However, the uncovering of networks of IS-linked cells in Saudi Arabia and the flow of Gulf nationals to the IS battlefield in Iraq and Syria, as well as the suicide attacks on Shia mosques in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in May and June 2015 indicate that IS also poses a hard security threat to Gulf security. Although the direct threat from IS militancy is less pronounced in Qatar, owing to the absence of comparable sectarian tension between domestic Sunni and Shia communities, the suspected ties between high-profile individuals in Qatar to radical groups in Syria have thrust the country into the international spotlight and done damage to “Brand Qatar” (Dickinson, 2014).

After 2011, the Qatari government set up formal mechanisms for individuals and entities wishing to provide funding for Syrian opposition and rebel groups. All charitable donations were meant to be funnelled through official organisations such as Qatar Charity and the Qatar Red Crescent, or via secure donations on the websites of major Qatari companies such as Qatar Petroleum and others. These formalised structures meant also that there were fewer private or unregulated channels for sending money to Syria as, for example, in Kuwait, where lax financing and money laundering laws meant charitable and private fund-raising was far less subject to official controls (Westall & Harby, 2013).

However, the foregoing does not mean that there have been no unregulated Qatari flows; money collected privately in Qatar often was sent to Kuwait for onward transfer to recipients in Syria through third-party intermediaries in Turkey or Iran (owing to the tightening of regulations in all Gulf States on direct financial transfers to Syria). Further, despite government efforts to channel all giving to “official” charities such as Qatar Charity and the Qatari Red Crescent or via secure donations on the websites of major state-owned enterprises such as Qatar Petroleum, allegations persisted that other, less-regulated charities acted as fund-raisers for extremist groups in Syria and North Africa (one such charity, Madid Ahl Al Sham was in fact cited by Jabhat al-Nusra in August 2013 as one of the preferred conduits for donations intended to the group). A further blow to the international “image” of Qatari charities came in December 2013, when US Treasury Department officials named Abdulrahman al-Nuaimi, a former president of the Qatar Football Association and a founding member of the government-backed Sheikh Eid bin Muhammad Al-Thani Charitable Foundation, as a major financier of Al-Qaeda and its regional affiliates. Al-Nuaimi had for many years advised the Qatari ruling family on its charitable giving, but stood accused of pursuing a dual role, promoting humanitarian causes and civil rights on the one hand while simultaneously supporting extremist groups and acting as an interlocutor between Al-Qaeda and Qatar-based donors on the other hand (Weinberg, 2014).

Other major concerns about Qatar’s financial support of the Syrian opposition focused on the lack of adequate oversight over the amounts of money being transferred and an absence of sufficient information with regard to the flow of money once inside Syria. Simply put, the lack of basic monitoring data meant that Qatari officials could not easily compute how much in total has been transferred to Syria, with some reports putting the figure in excess of US\$3 billion, or even say how much money went to which groups. Moreover, the paucity of official information or statistics evaluating or measuring Qatar’s involvement in Syria tied into the broader shortcomings in Qatari public diplomacy (explaining and justifying why actions have been taken and for what purpose) and the lack of transparency and accountability with regard to making information on state policy publicly available.

Hence, while Qatar may not share the same direct threat from IS as several of its Gulf neighbours, the fallout from Qatar’s policies toward Syria may yet cause difficulties going forward. In addition to the damage done to Qatar’s international standing from media investigations into such ties, Qatar’s carefully constructed image as a hub for the lucrative global “MICE” (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, Exhibitions) circuit could be vulnerable to any upsurge in IS-linked attacks on Western targets either in Qatar or around the Gulf, as in Abu Dhabi in December 2014. There is also the risk arising from “lone wolf” or larger-scale terror incidents in neighbouring states, such as the 2015 mosque bombings in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, particularly if Qatar is seen, by significant elements of the mainstream media, as having somehow contributed to the rise of such groups. In an era in which the rise of radical organisations such as IS have blurred the distinction between the internal and external spheres of security policy as never before, such reputational risk could constitute the major legacy of Qatar’s ambitious yet flawed approach to the Syrian conflict.

While Qatar may not share the same direct threat from IS as several of its Gulf neighbours, the fallout from Qatar’s policies toward Syria may yet cause difficulties going forward

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