

Introduction

Over the last two decades or so, Qatar has emerged as one of the most influential countries of the Persian Gulf region and the Middle East, a measure of influence that is quite incommensurate with its size, demography, and history. For a country established only in 1971 and with one of the smallest geographic and demographic sizes in the Middle East, Qatar became a surprising powerbroker throughout the late 1990s and the 2000s, using its financial muscle to project power and influence across the Middle East and North Africa among both state and non-state actors.

This influence, exercised through a hyperactive diplomacy, was facilitated by a confluence of four main developments. The first of these factors included inordinate financial wealth at the disposal of the state, a result of a second oil boom that started in the early 2000s and lasted up until 2008. Unlike the first boom of its kind in the early 1970s, during the second boom Qatar and other states in the region held on to the financial windfalls themselves and used their sovereign wealth funds as instruments of influence and prestige. This fed into a second development, namely the ability of the Qatari leadership to capitalize on emerging opportunities as they presented themselves. Qatar's leaders at the time, especially the ruling emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani (r. 1995-2013), was a true visionary, someone who believed that with the right resources and proper guidance, his country could turn into the Singapore of the Persian Gulf and thrive in a post-oil era. To that end, the Qatari state invested heavily in infrastructure, education, cultural endeavors, and the basics of a knowledge economy. This same vision applied also to the field of international relations, where the emir sought to place Qatar at the center of international cross-currents and a key player in regional and global affairs.

The third and fourth developments were outgrowths of fortuitous structural factors. Qatar's small size and political tradition lend themselves to a small ruling clique, and the Al Thani state has been particularly centralized. This centralization of decision-making, involving literally no more than a handful of individuals, gave the Qatari state tremendous agility in capitalizing on opportunities as they emerged, or, alternatively, on making opportunities happen when and as needed. This leadership agility and speedy decision-making was in turn reinforced with a remarkable degree of social cohesion in Qatari society that makes Qatar far more easily governable as compared to most if not all of its neighbors. Qatar does not have the sectarian divide of Bahrain, or the confederate governing structure of the United Arab Emirates, or a divided state with a parliament that causes the paralysis for which Kuwaiti politics is famous. Social cohesion and political agility and centralization, along with wealth and opportunity, went a long way toward enabling Qatar to emerge as a regional powerhouse in the late 1990s and the early 2000s.

With the eruption of the Arab uprisings in late 2010 and early 2011, the regional landscape changed, and Qatar's fortunes also began changing as well. The relatively swift collapse of the Qaddafi regime in Libya, in which Qatar played a direct and decisive role, led Qatari policymakers to believe that the apparent success of the Libyan campaign could be replicated in Syria. By the time the assumption proved false, around 2013, Qatar had already overcommitted its resources and reputation to the overthrow of Bashar Assad. It had also alienated its neighbor and frequent competitor Saudi Arabia to the point that the latter orchestrated a campaign to isolate Qatar from the Gulf Cooperation Council over its alleged support of the Muslim Brotherhood organization in Egypt and elsewhere. The differences were eventually patched up, and Qatar, now under the leadership of the much younger Sheikh Tamim Al-Thani, Hamad's son and heir apparent, decided to pursue a lower-profile and less confrontational foreign policy.

The articles in this volume shed light on the different facets of Qatar's foreign policy during the height of the country's era of hyperactive diplomacy. Each of the five articles, written by experts on the international politics of the Middle East

or Qatar, focus on a specific aspect of the country's foreign policy and international relations. The collection begins with the analysis of the different eras of Qatari foreign policy by David Roberts. Roberts traces the evolution of Qatari foreign policy from one content to bandwagon with Saudi Arabia to one of hyper-diplomacy and finally to what it is today, pointing to the dilemma of being stuck between path dependency on the one hand and the need to control the impulses of over-stretching and over-committing the country on the other.

Had it not been for the country's enormous wealth, of course, Qatar would not have been able to emerge as an influential and central player in regional affairs. Gawdat Bahgat focuses on the role of energy as a key driver of Qatari foreign policy, both as a source of wealth and a main consideration in a highly competitive global market. Bahgat examines both the role of revenues at a time when oil prices were at their peak, in the mid-2000s, and following their sharp decline in 2014. To be certain, the apparent retraction we are currently witnessing in the country's regional and global profile is partly, perhaps even largely, a product of the slump in the global oil and gas markets.

Two articles in the volume focus on Qatar's relations with the economic and security powerhouses. Inordinate wealth may be an important source of confidence in international politics, but even more important is a sense of security that enables leaders to take initiatives they would not otherwise take. Fred Lawson focuses on Qatar's special security relationship with the US, focusing on the "mutually beneficial form of bilateral hierarchy" that has practically turned Qatar into a "protectorate" of the United States. This has empowered the Qatari state with a certain amount of autonomy from regional constraints to pursue its agendas, so long as those agendas meet broadly with American priorities and objectives. One of these broader American objectives is closer relationship with the European Union. Rory Miller and Khalid al-Mansouri focus on Qatar's multi-dimensional engagement with the EU in areas such as technology transfer, sustainable diversification, human capital development, and investments.

The volume ends with Kristian Coates Ulrichsen's contribution, which draws our attention to the internal and external security dimensions of Qatari foreign policy, particularly insofar as the Syria file is concerned. Few expected the Syrian revolution, started in earnest in early 2011, to devolve into the bloody civil war that it is today. From the start, Qatar placed itself at the heart of the conflict, controversially supporting non-state actors of various coloring and persuasion, in the process at first competing and then cooperating with Saudi Arabia in the Syrian theater. Coates Ulrichsen's highlights the perils of over-stretch, highly personalized decision-making, and insufficient institutional capacity.

Together, the articles in this special issue of the journal paint a complex and nuanced picture of one of the most critical players in the international relations of the Middle East in central decades. From the mid-1990s onward, Qatar has been at the central of many of the dramas unfolding in the Middle East in general and the Persian Gulf region in particular. The small state has been an enigma for many, a maverick whose policies and posture have been incommensurate with its size and stature. This issue marks a useful step toward unpacking the riddle that is Qatar.

Mehran Kamrava