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Qatar and the Arab Spring

Support for Islamists and New Anti-Syrian Policy

Guido Steinberg

The small but wealthy Gulf State of Qatar is striving to adopt a leading role in the Arab world, and has readjusted its foreign policy in the wake of the Arab Spring. In doing so it has tried to stick to its former strategy of maintaining good relations with all countries that could be important to Qatar's survival – primarily the US and Iran. At the same time Doha (which until 2011 had mostly counted on the authoritarian status quo in the region) hopes to profit from the recent upheavals in the Arab world by supporting the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist opposition groups. With regard to Syria, this policy is threatening to bring Qatar into conflict with its powerful neighbour Iran. While Qatar publicly declared its support for the opposition early last summer, Iran wants to save Bashar al-Assad's regime and thereby ensure the survival of its main ally in the Middle East. The Syrian crisis could risk destabilising Qatar's traditional balancing act between the US and its allies on the one hand and Iran and its allies on the other.

Since the start of the Arab Spring, Qatar has been one of the leading supporters of the protest movements in North Africa and the Middle East. It has played a major role in almost all the conflicts in the Arab world. Qatar's strategy first became evident in March 2011, when Doha urged the Arab League to support a Nato intervention in Libya. With regard to Syria, Doha hesitated at first but then, in early summer, sided with the protest movement and took the lead among the Arab League states that were imposing sanctions against the Bashar al-Assad regime. Qatar's clear positions on Libya and Syria signalled at least a partial move away from its previous policy, which had focused primarily on mediating between conflicting parties and maintaining good relations with all powers in the region.

Basic principles of foreign policy

Since the mid-1990s Qatar has been trying to increase its international profile and to raise interest among as many powerful countries as possible in Qatar and in the stability of the regime of the ruling Thani family. This policy is largely defined by Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, who has been emir of Qatar since 1995, and his prime minister and foreign minister Hamad bin

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Jassim Al Thani. Up until the 1990s, Qatar was considered to be under the patronage of its powerful neighbour, Saudi Arabia. Since Emir Hamad came to power, however, he has consistently emphasised his country's independence. This attitude is reflected, for example, in the founding of the satellite channel Al Jazeera. The broadcaster succeeded in securing Qatar international recognition. Overall, Qatar wanted to maintain good ties to the US, Iran, and its regional allies. It hoped that by mediating in conflicts in Sudan, Lebanon, Yemen and Palestine, it would be seen as a major player in the region.

USA

In view of its own military weakness, Qatar initially strove to develop close relations to the US in terms of security policy. In 1995 it signed a defence agreement with the Clinton Administration and spent the subsequent years fostering its military links to Washington. In 2003 the US military began operating the Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, its most important air base in the Middle East. Doha believes that the US presence is crucial in protecting it from its neighbours. At the same time, Qatar's leaders are caught in a dilemma. On the one hand, they fear that Iran is developing nuclear weapons and plans to adopt a more aggressive hegemonic policy within the Gulf region. On the other, they worry that the US or Israel might attack Iran's nuclear plants. Iran has already openly threatened Qatar with unspecified retaliation if either of those countries does target its atomic facilities. Qatar is particularly afraid that Iran could attack its gas infrastructure.

Iran

Qatar and Iran share the world's biggest gas field, which the Qataris call North Field, and the Iranians call South Pars. Both countries must therefore collaborate over the long term if they are to get the maximum benefit from the gas reserves. Continuing exploitation of the field will bring the gas wells closer and closer together, making border disputes more likely. The Iranian government is already concerned about Qatar's energy policy. Thanks to its superior technology, Qatar extracts far more gas from the shared field. While Iran's chronic financial woes mean it cannot find the money to cover the high initial investment costs for gas production, Qatar has become the world's biggest exporter of liquefied natural gas (LNG). Doha is continually working, with the help of the US, to improve the protection of its energy infrastructure. At the same time, it is at pains to avoid unnecessarily provoking Tehran and to maintain active dialogue with its neighbour.

Saudi Arabia

Qatar's leaders also believe that they must protect their country from Saudi Arabia. Riyadh has long considered Qatar as part of its own sphere of influence, and Doha suspects that the Saudis would not hesitate to annex Qatar if the opportunity presented itself. As long as there is a US military presence in Qatar, this is unlikely to happen. That said, the mistrust is not unfounded, as Saudi Arabia has repeatedly attempted to influence Qatari domestic policy – for instance by supporting pro-Saudi members of the royal family.

Tensions between the two countries began increasing in 1995, when the new emir tried to emancipate Qatar from its overly powerful patron and neighbour. Emir Hamad's most influential instrument in this regard was the satellite channel Al Jazeera. Set up with government funding and launched in 1996, it quickly became the most popular broadcaster in the Arab world. With its high level of journalistic professionalism and its relatively relaxed reporting guidelines which provided a forum for the whole spectrum of oppositional voices, Al Jazeera transformed Doha from a little-known city to a prominent political centre of the region. Almost every regime in the Arab world has attempted

(at least temporarily) to prevent Al Jazeera from reporting – either in the form of diplomatic protests, by closing local channel offices or harassing journalists working on the ground. Saudi Arabia in particular has often been extremely displeased about Al Jazeera broadcasting the views of Saudi-Arabian dissidents.

In response to the frequent protests, Qatar's leaders always stressed that Al Jazeera was independent of the government. However, this was not strictly true – as the channel's reporting on Saudi Arabia, for example, revealed. When Doha realised that the expected escalation of its conflict with Iran would make a rapprochement with Saudi Arabia necessary, Qatar's relationship with its neighbour began improving in 2008/2009. Suddenly, critics of the Saudi regime began finding it much harder to get any airtime on Al Jazeera. With the dawn of the Arab Spring, state control of the channel became increasingly evident. In its coverage of Bahrain and Syria, Al Jazeera toed the government line and reacted immediately to any change of policy. It appears that there was resistance to this within the channel, which led the government to increase its control during 2011. One of the measures it implemented was to replace Al Jazeera's long-serving (Palestinian) director with a member of the Qatari royal family.

The move in 2008/2009 to improve ties with Saudi Arabia is the biggest change that Qatar has made to its foreign policy in recent years. These ties provided the foundation for Qatar's active approach to the Arab Spring – its line was often, but not always, in harmony with Saudi Arabia. Due to the advanced age of the Saudi decision-makers, a slow decision-making process and problems in domestic policy, the Saudi government generally appeared less dynamic than Emir Hamad and his prime minister.

Qatar the mediator

With such powerful and aggressive neighbours, the Qatari government began pursuing a balancing policy from the mid-1990s onwards and increasingly served as a mediator in regional conflicts from around 2005. It seems that Qatar's main goal was to convince the West that it could be a valuable player in solving the region's numerous conflicts. It also probably wanted to defuse conflicts so as to protect stability in the region. In its efforts to mediate in Sudan, Lebanon and Yemen (all in 2008), Qatar proved itself as a mediator capable of making progress but unable to solve the conflicts or bring about lasting peace.

Qatar's most successful effort at mediation to date was in Lebanon in 2008. Saudi Arabia and Syria could not mediate because they were too clearly aligned with their respective Lebanese allies. This cleared the way for Qatari involvement. The result of Qatar's efforts (which was achieved in close consultation with Saudi Arabia, Syria and Iran, and with the help of generous financial aid to the parties involved in the conflict) was the Doha agreement of May 2008, in which the Lebanese factions agreed to form a national unity government.

To be able to intervene as a mediator (and also as a result of its efforts), Qatar developed good relations with all political camps in the region – at times even with Israel. In particular it was Qatar's close ties to Iran, Syria, Hamas and Hezbollah that provided good reason to intensify relations with Doha (cf. SWP-Aktuell 18/2009). The country has now become extremely important as a mediator in the region – even the Taliban announced plans to open an office in Qatar.

Supporter of Islamists

When the Arab Spring began, Qatar started supporting protest movements (with the exception of those happening in Gulf States), in particular Islamist forces connected to the Muslim Brotherhood. The Qatari government already showed remarkable foresight in this respect back in the 1990s, when it began offering refuge to Islamists from all over the world and gave them an

international forum through Al Jazeera. The lynchpin of this policy was and continues to be the Egyptian scholar Yusuf al-Qaradawi. His roots are in the Muslim Brotherhood, and during his exile in Doha in the 1990s he became the world's most famous and influential Muslim scholar. His success was greatly facilitated by Al Jazeera, where up until recently he had his own weekly programme called *Sharia and Life*. A community of exiled Muslim Brothers gradually formed around al-Qaradawi. During the Arab Spring, some of these individuals took on roles as leaders, financial backers, religious authorities and politicians. This, along with the financial and other support for Islamists, is likely to further boost Qatar's influence in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, the Palestinian territories, Syria and Yemen. During the Arab Spring, al-Qaradawi expressed his support for Doha's policies in Libya, Syria and Bahrain on a number of occasions.

Qatar's policy is driven by strong pragmatism and by Emir Hamad's sympathies for the Islamists. On the one hand, the basic principles of Qatar's foreign policy played a major role in its policies towards the countries mentioned; this was particularly clear in the case of Libya. There, Doha strove to position itself as an essential ally of the West in the Arab world by supporting and participating in the Nato-led intervention. On the other hand, Qatar's leaders provided targeted support to Islamists and Salafists. Libya again provides a good example of this, though the intention is clear in other countries too. Doha recognised that the Islamists would become the next big power in North African and Middle East politics, and so increased its efforts to close ranks with them. Speaking in an interview with Al Jazeera in September 2011, Emir Hamad expressed his convictions using Libya as an example: "What is it that turns people into extremists? Extremism is the result of tyrannical, dictatorial governments or leaders [descriptions that according to the emir clearly do not apply to Qatar's leadership, G.S.] who give their people no justice and no security. That is what turns people into extremists. However, if the people can participate in the political process, I am certain that you will see this extremism transform into a civil/civilised *(hayat madaniya)* life and a civilised society." What was interesting here was that Emir Hamad was not just talking about the Muslim Brotherhood, which even many Western observers consider to be "moderate" – he also expressly included Salafists and al-Qaeda.

There are also solid political motives for Emir Hamad's optimistic views on extremists' capacity for transformation. The Qatari monarchy has little in common with the fallen republican regimes in the Arab world. Doha appears to believe that the Muslim Brotherhood and many Salafists represent an interpretation of Islam that is compatible with the Wahhabism that most Qatari citizens follow. It also gives Doha the opportunity to distance itself from Saudi Arabia, whose relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood deteriorated sharply in the wake of 9/11. Qatar has every reason to hope that its relationship to countries under Islamist rule will be better than they were under the previous regimes, given the support that it is affording these upcoming powers.

Libya

Shortly after the uprising in Libya began, Doha made it clear that it wanted to take a leading role by urging the Arab League to impose a no-fly zone and to call for military intervention. This was subsequently authorised by UN Security Resolution 1973. In late March 2011, Qatar also became the first Arab country (and second overall, after France) to recognise Libya's National Transitional Council based in Benghazi.

Qatar sent six fighter jets to support the ensuing military action, making it one of only two Arab countries – the other was the United Arab Emirates – to actively participate in the Nato intervention. It also helped Libyan rebels by transporting oil out of the territories they controlled, and selling it on

their behalf. Al Jazeera dedicated hours of airtime every day to reports on the uprising. Yusuf al-Qaradawi repeatedly called for the Gaddafi regime to be overthrown and actively encouraged support for the rebels. Qatar also sent military aid – it collaborated with the US, the UK and France to supply the rebels with weapons and used its own military to train Libyan fighters. Moreover, Qatar is thought to have sent in special forces that were involved in the fighting. It is likely these forces were made up of (Pakistani) mercenaries in Qatari uniform. In any case, the Qatari armed forces, including members of the military leadership, were involved in every phase of the armed conflict in Libya.

Qatar directed most of the weapons and money to Islamist rebels, with just a small portion going to the National Transitional Council. In Benghazi the majority of the arms and funding went to militias connected to the Muslim Brotherhood, and in the western mountains to units of Abdelhakim Belhadj, a former jihadist who later became military commander of Tripoli.

Ali Sallabi, a Libyan member of the Brotherhood born in 1963, became the key go-between for the rebels and Doha. He had been living in exile in the Qatari capital since 1999 and had studied under al-Qaradawi. In 2007, Sallabi began acting as a mediator between the Gaddafi regime and the leaders of the jihadist Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), who at the time were being held in jail in Tripoli. The outcome was that the LIFG renounced armed conflict. During this time Sallabi developed close ties to Belhadj, the commander of the LIFG, and used this relationship during the 2011 uprising. Among the Islamists receiving Qatari aid, Belhadj and Sallabi's brother Ismail (the commander of a strong rebel group from Benghazi) became particularly powerful. During the conflict, representatives of the Transitional Council complained that Qatari support was skewed too much in favour of the Islamists.

Once the armed conflict ended, Doha increasingly became the target of criticism. Members of the Transitional Council who opposed the Islamists feared being forced out of power by Qatar's friends. The fact that Islamist militias have been armed by Qatar is making it more difficult for the Council to establish a state monopoly on violence.

Syria

When protests broke out in Syria, Qatar adopted an altogether more cautious policy than it had with Libya. However, its initial hesitation was soon replaced by efforts to overthrow the Assad regime and to help the Muslim-Brotherhood-dominated opposition take power.

During the first few months of the uprising in Syria, there was no clear reaction from Qatar. Up until then, Doha had maintained good relations to Damascus. The Qatari government had played a crucial role in helping Syria overcome its isolation in the Arab world after being accused of murdering the Lebanese prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri in February 2005. The Doha Agreement on Lebanon of May 2008 confirmed this development. At the same time, Qatar had invested billions in the Syrian economy, particularly in the property sector. Doha felt that good relations with Syria were a top priority because they could be beneficial to Qatar's ties to Iran, Syria's most important ally.

This was why it hesitated to take a stand against Syria's leaders when the protests began in March 2011. Even Al Jazeera paid little attention to the early days of the uprising. It was only al-Qaradawi who repeatedly criticised the way the Assad regime responded to protestors. When Emir Hamad refused Syria's demand that Qatar should call on al-Qaradawi to rein in his opinions, the public dispute between the countries intensified. The Syrian state media began criticising the Qatari government, and Al Jazeera's reporting on the protests became increasingly detailed and aggressive. In July 2011 Qatar became the first Gulf State to close its embassy in

Damascus, after it was attacked by Assad supporters.

In the months that followed, Qatar became the driving force behind the anti-Syrian movement. Just as it had with Libya, Doha used the Arab League, whose rotating presidency lies with Qatar until March 2012, as its main instrument in implementing its policy on Syria. The Qatari prime minister Hamad bin Jassim was head of the Arab League's committee on Syria, which also included the foreign ministers of Oman, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Algeria. In a startling move, the League suspended Syria's membership in November 2011 and announced shortly afterwards that it would be imposing economic sanctions.

However, Qatar and its allies – mainly Saudi Arabia and Egypt – were still holding back on putting an end to Assad's regime once and for all. This was probably the result of concerns about Iran's reaction and how that might aggravate existing Sunni-Shiite tensions in the region. Another reason for Doha's hesitancy is likely to have been the fear of civil war breaking out in Syria and of the impact that would have on neighbouring countries. This became all too clear when the Arab League presented a peace plan in November 2011. The proposal called for an end to the violence, for the army to withdraw from the cities, for the government and the opposition to enter into dialogue, and for an observer mission to be deployed to verify the measures. In mid-December the Syrian government agreed to allow observers into the country but ignored the other terms of the agreement. Although the violence in Syria increased during the first two months of the mission's presence, the Arab League could not bring itself to remove the observers. But the Gulf States, under the leadership of Saudi Arabia, did order their observers to leave. Qatar even went a step further in mid-January 2012, when it called on Arab states to take military action and for the Syria issue to be referred to the UN Security Council – initially without success.

Although there are some reports of arms being supplied to the Free Syrian Army, these have currently not been confirmed. In light of Emir Hamad's call for Arab military intervention, however, it is probably only a matter of time before Qatar begins arming the rebel forces – if it hasn't already started doing so in secret.

Stability in the Gulf

While Qatar supports the opposition movements in North Africa, Syria and Yemen, it is committed to ensuring stability at home and in the neighbouring Gulf countries. Since the spring of 2011 it has been moving closer to Saudi Arabia and its allies in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), in an effort to protect itself from the fallout of the Arab Spring. Qatar, like many countries, is extremely concerned about the unrest in neighbouring Bahrain. Although Qatar has no opposition groups of its own to speak of, the leaders in Doha believe that Iran is helping to fan the flames of the protests there. Doha fears that if power changes hands in Bahrain, it will have incalculable consequences for the stability of the surrounding region. Qatar has recently announced domestic-policy reforms, but these are likely to be mostly cosmetic and designed to quickly curb potential criticism of the blatant contradiction between its support for opposition movements abroad and its authoritarian policies at home.

Bahrain and the Gulf Cooperation Council

The events in Bahrain came as a shock to the Qatari government, as they did to many other countries. Although Doha let Saudi Arabia take the lead on the issue, it did support the Gulf Cooperation Council's decision to intervene and reflected this by sending in a symbolic military contingent. However, like the Saudis and Emiratis, who made up the majority of the deployed troops, Qatari soldiers played no role in suppressing the protests. This job was left to Bahrain's security forces. The GCC forces

were tasked with protecting buildings and infrastructure. Doha's decision to publicly side with the Bahraini regime is in flagrant contradiction of the support it offers rebels and protest movements in countries not on its doorstep. The different approach is primarily motivated by Qatar's fears for the future of its own regime.

Few things scare the Qatari government more than the idea of the Shiite majority seizing power in Bahrain. Within this crisis, it has become very clear that Qatar's leaders, just like their counterparts in Riyadh, Kuwait, Manama and Abu Dhabi, view the Arab Shiites as a potential fifth column for Iran.

Domestic stability

Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani is an authoritarian ruler. Although the prime minister and foreign minister Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani plays a major role in decisions concerning foreign policy, the Emir always has the last word. Emir Hamad is highly respected in his home country as he is seen as the initiator of the gas sector's expansion and modernisation since the 1990s, and for the extraordinary prosperity that the country enjoys as a result. The $77,000 per capita income in Qatar is the highest in the world. The some 250,000 citizens of the emirate also enjoy numerous state benefits.

Ever since the merchant sector lost its last vestiges of power in the 1950s, there have been no potential contenders to the power of Qatar's ruling family. Unlike in Saudi Arabia, religious scholars have little political influence in Qatar – this is also true of its small Shiite minority. This is why there was no uprising in Qatar in 2011. A few activists did protest online in the spring, though, voicing criticism of the Emir and his pro-West foreign policy.

The only real potential threat to Emir Hamad exists among his own relatives. There are several thousand members of the Al Thani family. Measured against the population, this makes it the Arab world's largest ruling family; even in absolute terms it is one of the biggest. The family has been plagued by fierce infighting – not one of the five royal successions in the 20th century (1913, 1949, 1960, 1972 and 1995) passed off without heated conflict. The current emir came to power in 1995, when he overthrew his father Khalifa in a bloodless coup.

The Saudi government has tried on several occasions to influence the line of royal succession in Qatar. It is even rumoured to have been behind a 1996 attempt to overthrow the new emir and put his father back on the throne. There are still numerous supporters of Riyadh in the Qatari ruling family today, who are strongly critical of the emir's policy of distancing the country from Saudi Arabia. Hamad's son, former crown prince Jassim (born in 1978), is said to be among those supporters. His stance meant that he was forced to renounce his claim to the throne in 2003, in favour of his younger brother Tamim (born in 1980). The conservative Wahhabi members of the family are also critical of the emir's pro-West policies and the rapid modernisation of the country.

These differences of opinion are particularly important in light of speculation about the emir's health – there are rumours in Qatar that he is seriously ill. The Saudi government is said to already be considering how it could support a pro-Saudi candidate (i.e. not the current crown prince) if conflict breaks out over who will succeed to the throne.

Meanwhile, Emir Hamad has initiated a series of political reforms. In October 2011 he announced the country would hold elections to the Consultative Council. Currently, all 45 members of this body are appointed by the emir. The reform means that 30 of them will be elected starting in 2013. The move has widely been seen as a further attempt by the emir to boost the credibility of Qatar's policy on the Arab Spring. However, the elections will not bring about any significant change to Qatar's authoritarian political system, let alone a democratisation.

Still an important partner

Qatar can only assert its limited claim to leadership because Egypt is greatly weakened and Saudi Arabia tolerates Qatar's activities. That said, Qatar will continue to play a major role in the coming years because the domestic problems in Egypt and Saudi Arabia will persist for the time being. This makes Qatar a key partner for anyone wanting to shape Middle East policy – and that includes German and European leaders.

However, the events of the Arab Spring have also highlighted the limits of Qatar's potential. The most noticeable issue is the obvious contradiction between the desire to ensure stability among its immediate neighbours and its commitment to supporting protest movements that are happening at a safe distance. Over the next few years, this is likely to have a tangible impact on Qatar's soft power. This applies particularly to Al Jazeera, which has revealed itself to the whole world as a political instrument of the Qatari leadership.

The country's decision to openly take sides in numerous conflicts and to support Salafists and the Muslim Brotherhood will also affect Qatar's position. On the one hand, Qatar stands to benefit from Islamist organisations seizing power in Arab countries. On the other, this means that Qatar cannot possibly present itself as a non-partisan mediator in the future. In recent months many opponents of Islamists in Libya, Tunisia and Egypt have also become opponents of Qatar.

Even more problematic, however, is the fact that Qatar is calling for a military solution to Syria. This is exacerbating the conflicting interests that Qatar and Iran have in Syria. If the Syrian situation escalates, it seems likely that Iran will step up its already forceful efforts to support Bashar al-Assad, which would increase disputes between Iran and Qatar. Given the relative strength of the two countries, this is an extremely risky policy.

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