



Emboldened yet vulnerable: the changing foreign policies of Qatar and Saudi Arabia

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»» The geopolitical profiles of the Gulf states – defined by large, if varying, hydrocarbon reserves and a key geographical position between West and East – have traditionally led external powers to adopt predominantly *realpolitik* approaches towards them. Furthermore, the geopolitical weight of the Gulf states has been bolstered over the last decade, as global economic power started shifting eastward and a surge in oil prices led to substantial increases in revenues. Flush with cash, Gulf sovereign wealth funds played an important stabilising investment role in troubled Western economies during the early stages of the financial and economic crisis.¹ As they have gained prominence in global affairs, Gulf policy-makers have become increasingly confident and determined to project their power both regionally and in the international arena.

Since the Arab spring, however, developments have converged to somewhat temper their bravado. Economically, uncertainty has derived from changes in energy geopolitics driven by the shale gas revolution, while the reverberations of the financial crisis in the Gulf states' own economies have somewhat deflated the economic effervescence of the early 2000s. Politically, regional dynamics are being upturned by the political uncertainty derived from the Arab uprisings and the potential nuclear agreement with Iran. Changes in the balance of power unleashed by the 2003 Iraq invasion have been reinforced, as Iran and Saudi Arabia compete for the dominant geopolitical role in a region characterised by weak states engulfed in civil conflicts. Shifting alliances, increased sectarianism, and the growing prominence of non-state actors (i.e. terrorist groups, religious factions, and militia, among others) are all contributing to an increasingly violent and unstable regional map.

Against this background, Qatar and Saudi Arabia's foreign policies have been emboldened, with both actors proactively attempting to shape events. Qatar saw in the Arab spring an opportunity to raise its profile as an international broker, partner to the big Western powers and champion of the Arab street. It abandoned its traditional role as neutral mediator and bet on an Islamist political future for the transition states (Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Tunisia). Saudi Arabia saw the uprisings as a challenge to regional stability but ultimately also as an opportunity to tip the scales against Iran. This led to a shift from its traditionally cautious and conciliatory foreign and regional policy towards a sharper affirmation of its interests. Both countries have used their political, economic, and cultural influence to play a more active role in the region – including in Libya, Egypt, and Syria – with mixed success. Disappointed with the actions, or lack thereof, of the West, their mantra has become 'it is time for Arabs to solve Arab problems'.

1. K. Coates Ulrichsen, 'Small States with a Big Role: Qatar and the United Arab Emirates in the Wake of the Arab Spring', *HH Sheikh Nasser al Mohammad al Sabah Publication Series* 3, October 2012.

However, Saudi and Qatari interventions in transition states have been far from consistent. Rather than siding with either the revolutionaries or the regimes across the board, intervention has been determined by pragmatic attempts to ensure their own regime survival, promote regional stability or expand their influence.² This has led at times, most notably in Egypt, to Qatar and Saudi Arabia being on opposite sides in a conflict. Although rivalry and animosity have always been part of relations among the Gulf states, especially between Saudi Arabia and the rest, there was generally an underlying sense of solidarity based on a shared pragmatic sense of preservation of their political regimes. The Arab spring, however, has acted as a prism further refracting already divergent foreign policies. The breach between Qatar and Saudi Arabia has been the most prominent and has been uncharacteristically public.

The geopolitical significance of the Gulf, along with the nature of the regimes, militates against democratic advances in the region. In addition, the impact of their policies on democratic governance has clearly been negative, in as much as they have pre-empted or suppressed any changes domestically; closed ranks in terms of security with the rest of the Gulf states to avoid the spread of revolution in their neighbourhood; and played politics in transition states.

The changing geopolitics of the energy-security bargain in the Gulf

»» Despite their obvious difference in size, Qatar and Saudi Arabia share certain characteristics intrinsic to a geopolitical profile particular to most Arab Gulf states. Both have large hydrocarbon reserves, which have defined their domestic profiles and the nature of their foreign policies. Their external relations are defined by an energy-for-security bargain, while domestic politics follow a socio-political pattern typical of rentier states (countries that obtain most of their revenue by exporting natural resources).

Significant oil and gas rents, if unevenly distributed across the Gulf states, have helped concentrate power in the hands of authoritarian ruling families, which have struck socio-political bargains with their citizens whereby material benefits are traded for political rights. The distributive nature of Gulf economies has allowed the rulers to link the welfare of their populations to their continued stronghold on power. Regimes have further consolidated their power through large government apparatuses that exert control and facilitate patronage.³

2. R. Alcaro, 'The West and the Gulf States at the Dawn of the New Millennium' in 'The Uneasy Balance. Potential and Challenges of the West's Relations with the Gulf States', *IAI Research Papers* 8, April 2013.

3. *Ibid.*

A small circle of decision-makers direct policy, and are able to mobilise all state resources quickly and comprehensively towards their objectives, unconstrained by accountability or governance issues.⁴ But the focus on personal diplomacy to the detriment of institutions often renders policies inefficient, even if decisions can be made quickly and resources mobilised rapidly, since disempowered bureaucrats are loath to make decisions or implement policy. Often informal advisors have a more direct connection to the rulers than bureaucrats do.⁵

Under such a scenario, regime survival becomes the defining characteristic of Gulf states' policies. State interest is conflated with regime security, and the focus of foreign policy is on the regime's dynastic interests. Measures to ensure the protection of the regime include: the instrumentalisation of family, ethnic and religious loyalties; the establishment of patronage networks; the creation of parallel militaries that counter-balance the regular military forces; and the establishment of all-powerful security agencies.⁶ Gulf regimes are often as fearful of domestic risks to their power as they are of external threats, and this can determine their alliance and foreign policy choices.⁷

There is a strong internal-external link to foreign policy, with domestic concerns often prioritised in policy choices: witness the Saudi and Emirati backlash against the Muslim Brotherhood and related support for President Sisi in Egypt, or the large financial help donated by the wealthier Gulf monarchies to help bolster the regimes in Bahrain and Oman. The Arab uprisings intensified and sharpened internal regime security concerns, leading Gulf rulers to respond with both domestic security crackdowns and more aggressive regional foreign policy initiatives.

External security ties with Western powers are a key strategy in support of the security of Gulf regimes. Despite being among the biggest arms buyers in the world (in terms of expenditures relative to GDP), Gulf monarchies are heavily dependent on external security guarantors to balance Iran. Their weapons purchases, rather than covering actual defence needs, are a means of cementing the commitment of outside powers to their security.⁸ Their armed forces are as focused on maintaining internal security and protecting the position of the royal family as they are on external defence.

2013 Arms expenditure (% of GDP)	
Oman	11,3
Saudi Arabia	9,3
UAE	4,7**
Bahrain	3,9
Kuwait	3,2
Qatar	1,5*
USA	3,8
UK	2,2
France	2,3

*last data available: 2010

**last data available: 2012

Information from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI):
http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/milex_database



4. K. Coates Ulrichsen, 'Europe and the Gulf: A Return to Normalcy?', *Opinions on the Mediterranean*, German Marshall Fund and Istituto Affari Internazionali, July 2013.
5. E. Woertz, 'Personalities vs. Institutions: Lessons of Qatar's Transition', *Opinión CIDOB* 199, June 2013.
6. S. Mabon, 'Kingdom in crisis? The Arab Spring and instability in Saudi Arabia', *Contemporary Security Policy* 33(3), 2012.
7. See also G. Gause, *Oil Monarchies*, (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1994).
8. C. Davidson, 'The Arab Sunset', *Foreign Affairs* 92(5), October 2013.

The US guarantees the security of both Saudi Arabia and Qatar. The US trains and equips Saudi defence forces, and in 2010 President Obama approved a \$60 billion-plus arms sale to Riyadh.⁹ Recently, concern over US commitment to Gulf security has spurred discussions in Saudi Arabia about diversifying its security arrangements. The combination of the US ‘pivot’ to Asia, Washington’s refusal to take military action in Syria and its ongoing nuclear negotiations with Iran, have all raised alarms in Riyadh. However, there are no real contenders to replace the US role, given Europe’s limited will and capacity for engagement in the region and China’s and Russia’s lack of appetite for a regional security role.¹⁰ At most, the Gulf states can diversify their suppliers of arms. Saudi Arabia reportedly bought ballistic missiles from China in 2007 in a deal that Saudi leaders are now eager to publicise.¹¹ The inclusion of long-range Chinese-made missiles in a recent Saudi military parade was likely a diplomatic signal to the United States and Iran, indicating its determination to counter Iran and its readiness to act independently of Washington.¹²

Qatar’s security is guaranteed by the United States via two critically important US bases in Qatar. Camp As Sayliyah is the largest US prepositioning base outside of continental America, and Al Udeid US Air Force base served as the command centre for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The United States has plans to expand its military presence in the region, sending the latest US anti-missile systems to at least four Gulf states, assumed to be Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).¹³ Despite efforts to diversify weapons purchases (in July 2012, *Der Spiegel* reported that Qatar was in the market for 200 German tanks at an estimated cost of \$2.5 billion),¹⁴ in 2014 Doha signed contracts worth close to \$10 billion with the US.¹⁵

Gulf states also use their energy production capacities to ensure their security. The security-energy nexus is clearest in the case of Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia ensures stable global energy markets through its energy production policies and in exchange, the US extends security guarantees against regional threats.¹⁶ Saudi Arabia has almost one-fifth of the world’s proven oil reserves, is the largest exporter of crude oil, and maintains the world’s largest crude oil production capacity (estimated at a little less than 12 million bbl/d at the end of 2012).¹⁷ Saudi Arabia maintains more than half of the world’s spare capacity, and acts as a crucial swing producer whenever supply crises erupt.

9. T. W. Lippman, ‘The Saudis Aren’t Going Anywhere’, *LobeLog.com*, September 2013.

10. F. Wehrey, ‘What to Make of Saudi Hand-Wringing’, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2013.

11. J. Lewis, ‘Why did SA buy Chinese missiles?’, *Foreign Policy*, January 2014.

12. S. Henderson, ‘Saudi Arabia’s Missile Messaging’, *The Washington Institute Policy Alert*, April 2014.

13. Davidson 2013, op. cit.

14. J. Gengler, ‘The Political Costs of Qatar’s Western Orientation’, *Middle East Policy*, XIX(4), Winter 2012.

15. A. Pape, ‘Qatar announces USD24 billion in defence orders’, *IHS Jane’s Defence Weekly*, 26 March 2014.

16. HRH Prince Turki Al Faisal, ‘Saudi Arabia’s New Foreign Policy Doctrine in the aftermath of the Arab Awakening’, Public lecture at the Belfer Center for Science & International Affairs, John F Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 25 April 2013.

17. See <http://www.eia.gov/countries/cab.cfm?fips=SA>

	2013 Crude oil Production (thousand barrels/day)	2012 Estimated Petroleum Net Exports (thousand barrels/day)	2013 Proved Reserves (Billion Barrels)
Saudi Arabia	9,684.66	8,864.68	268.35
Bahrain	48.00	4.66	0.12
Kuwait	2,650.00	2,413.79	104.00
Qatar	1,553.00	1,842.87	25.24
Oman	945.13	778.88	5.50
UAE	2,820.00	2,595.19	97.80
US	7,446.97	-6,578.71	30.53
Russia	10,048.75	7,201.49	80.00
World	76038,7		1,645.98

	2012 Natural Gas Production (Billion Cubic Feet)	2012 Natural Gas Net Export/Imports(-) (Billion Cubic Feet)	2013 Proved Reserves (Trillion Cubic Feet)
Saudi Arabia	3,584.93	0.00	290.81
Bahrain	481.43	0.00	3.25
Kuwait	547.91	-94.08	63.50
Qatar	5,523.25	4,266.71	885.29
Oman	1,034.58	319.14	30.00
UAE	1,853.95	-381.22	215.04
US	24,058.00	-1,519.00	308.44
Russia	21,685.27	6,248.61	1,688.00
World	118,866.87		6,809.26

Source: US Energy Information Administration

Qatar, with the world's third-largest reserves of natural gas, has used its energy ties to diversify away from a complete reliance on the US for its security. The former Emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, used energy policy to build new strategic relationships, enhance Doha's autonomy and provide Qatar with a diversified security framework. Qatar's Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) exports have made it a key energy provider for its clients, especially since LNG exports are based on long-term contracts.¹⁸ For example, faced with declining gas production in the North Sea since 2000, the UK has developed into a major client in recent years. In 2011, Qatar's LNG exports covered 52 per cent of gas consumption in the UK, up from only 11 per cent in 2009.¹⁹ It also sells large amounts of gas to key countries such as China, Japan and India, ensuring they have a stake in its stability.²⁰

Changing economic patterns and increasing energy demand from Asia have accelerated the eastern orientation of the Gulf states. In 2009, Saudi Arabia's oil exports to China exceeded



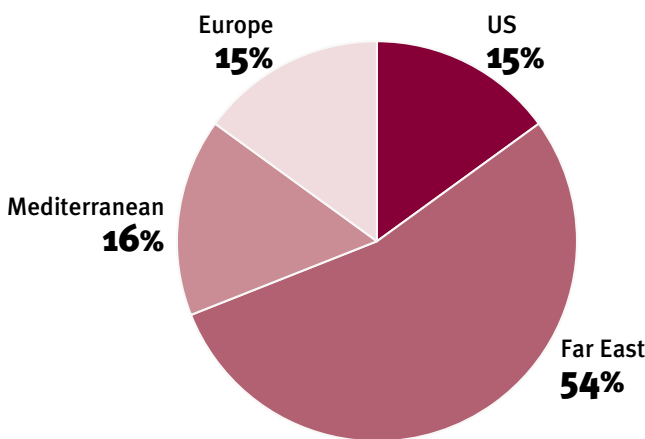
18. J. Krane and S. Wright, 'Qatar 'rises above' its region: Geopolitics and the rejection of the GCC gas market', *Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States* 35, London: The London School of Economics and Political Science, March 2014.

19. E. Woertz, 'Qatar and Europe's neglect of the Gulf region', *Notes Internacionals* 46, Barcelona: CIDOB, February 2012.

20. D. Roberts, 'Understanding Qatar's foreign policy objectives', *Mediterranean Politics* 17(2), July 2012.

for the first time exports to the United States. In the same year, Qatar signed a 25-year agreement with China that made it Beijing’s largest supplier of LNG.²¹ The expansion of LNG facilities in Australia and the shale gas revolution in the United States led Qatar to divert supplies intended for the US to Asian markets in 2011. It also concluded long-term bilateral LNG deals with South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan in 2011 and 2012.²² US production increases will not only have commercial implications but also geopolitical consequences. The downward pressure on oil and gas prices presents a risk to the fiscal sustainability of the Gulf states and diminishes their geopolitical leverage.²³ For all their efforts at diversification, the Saudi and Qatari economies remain dependent on hydrocarbon revenues. This makes them vulnerable to fluctuations in the world economy and in energy prices, and to the finite nature of fossil fuels. Rising domestic energy consumption exacerbates this dependency.

Saudi crude oil exports by destination (2012)



Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration, APEX

GCC Top Trading Partners 2012	Million €	% Share in World
European Union	133,794	12,8
Japan	132,601	12,7
India	119,379	11,5
China	117,827	11,3
USA	96,642	9,3
South Korea	90,835	8,7
Singapore	39,809	3,8
Thailand	27,578	2,6
Iran	25,016	2,4
Turkey	15,782	1,5

Source: http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/september/tradoc_113482.pdf

21. Ulrichsen October 2012, op. cit.
 22. K. Coates Ulrichsen, 'The GCC States and the Shifting Balance of Global power', *Occasional Paper 6*, Doha: Center for International and Regional Studies, Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar, 2010.
 23. R. D. Blackwill and M. L. O'Sullivan, 'America's Energy Edge. The Geopolitical Consequences of the Shale Revolution', *Foreign Affairs* 93(2), March/April 2014.

The similarities in their geopolitical profiles have not precluded differences in the foreign policies of Saudi Arabia and Qatar, mainly due to differences in their international footprint (size and clout). Saudi Arabia has traditionally followed a quiet and cautious balancing strategy, while Qatar has sought to raise its profile by trying to increase its value for regional and international actors through mediation efforts.

Qatar places its bets

»» Qatar's intervention in Libya signified a qualitative change in its foreign policy, moving away from a focus on diplomatic mediation towards a much more assertive and interventionist policy. After more than a decade of building a reputation for neutrality, Qatar decided to take sides. The shift in policy was driven by the changes brought about by the Arab spring. While its role as a 'neutral' mediator had been useful when the Middle East was dominated by apparently durable authoritarian regimes, the Arab uprisings saw Qatar adapt its policies in an attempt to stay ahead of the game. Although Qatar was initially hesitant to support the uprisings in Egypt and Syria, as soon as Doha realised that they might be successful in toppling the regimes it changed track.

As a small state in an unstable region, Qatar has sought to protect itself by expanding its influence as a regional player and increasing its international profile by making itself useful to more influential states.²⁴ Since the mid-1990s, Qatar has mediated in numerous conflicts (Darfur, Ethiopia-Eritrea, Lebanon, Somalia, Israel-Palestine, Yemen, Western Sahara, Afghanistan, and Indonesia); acted as interlocutor between different Islamist groups and the West; and balanced its relations with antagonistic sets of actors (Iran and the US, and Israel and Hamas). Doha has also expanded its network of embassies, and used its financial clout to project its influence within the region and gain Western allies.²⁵ In addition, by engaging in mediation between conflicting factions it has sought to contain those conflicts and prevent their spreading closer to home.

Qatar saw in the Arab spring an opportunity to consolidate its position as a Western ally, gain regional prominence, present itself as supportive of the 'people' in the face of oppression, and leverage its network of relations to place itself in a favourable position in anticipation of a regional future it saw as dominated by political Islam. Towards this end, it deployed all its financial and media resources and diplomatic power. It thus sought to replace previously tense relations (i.e. with Mubarak's Egypt and Gaddafi's Libya) with more favourable relationships with the new governments across the region.²⁶

24. L. Khatib, 'Qatar's foreign policy: the limits of pragmatism', *International Affairs* 89(2), February 2013.

25. D. Roberts, 'Qatar: domestic quietism, elite adventurism' in *What Does the Gulf Think About the Arab Awakening?*, *Gulf Analysis*, London: ECFR, April 2013.

26. D. Roberts, 'Qatar's Global Bargaining Chips' *Sada*, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 2013.

Far away from the Gulf, Libya provided the perfect opportunity. Qatar went further than most Arab countries in backing international intervention in Libya and aligning itself with the revolutionaries. Qatar contributed fighter jets and special forces, as well as financing, weapons and training. It was the first country to recognise the National Transitional Council as the legitimate representative of the Libyan people, and organised the first meeting of the International Contact Group on Libya. The Doha-based television network, *Al Jazeera*, strove to galvanise Arab public opinion in favour of the foreign intervention in Libya and Qatar's role.

After some initial hesitation, Qatar also vocally supported the protest movement in Egypt and lent financial support to the Muslim Brotherhood government. In January 2013, the then Qatari Prime Minister, Hamad Bin Jassim al-Thani, announced additional economic support for Egypt: a new \$2 billion deposit in the Central Bank and a \$500 million grant. This brought Qatari assistance to Egypt to \$1 billion in grants and \$4 billion in Central Bank deposits since August 2012, when the then Emir of Qatar paid his first of two visits to meet President Mohamed Morsi.²⁷ Besides the \$5 billion of pre-existing aid, Qatar provided \$3 billion more through the acquisition of bonds and a favourable gas-provision deal to help with power shortages in the summer.²⁸

Relations with Egypt started to sour a week after the military coup of 3 July 2013, when Qatar's state news agency issued a statement of regret from the foreign ministry after the Egyptian army killed 55 Morsi supporters on 8 July, also calling for restraint and dialogue. On 23 July, Qatar issued a call for Morsi's release. In retaliation to what it deemed as interference in its affairs, Egypt closed the Cairo offices of *Al Jazeera* and detained most of its journalists (on 24 June 2014 three of the journalists were sentenced to at least seven years in prison for conspiring with the Muslim Brotherhood). It also returned \$2 billion that Qatar had deposited with its Central Bank, after talks to convert the funds into three-year bonds broke down.²⁹ Despite Qatar's more recent conciliatory disposition (on 8 June 2014 the Emir congratulated Sisi on the occasion of his taking the oath as President of Egypt), relations continue to be hostile.

Qatar's support for Islamist groups in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Syria is more pragmatic than ideological. Qatar bet on Islamists playing an important role in regional politics. It expected its support eventually to translate into political influence and sought to position itself as interlocutor between the West and the new Arab governments.³⁰ Qatar expected political Islam to hold greater appeal among Arab populations than Western-oriented liberal political ideas, and it still might be proven right in the long term. Doha also believed the moderate form of Islamism represented by the Brotherhood was a safer bet than the more reactionary Salafi groups supported by Saudi Arabia. Its relationship with the Brotherhood, based on personal ties with expatriates, was used during the uprisings as a foreign policy instrument. But Qatar seems to have underestimated the depth of antagonism that its alignment with the Muslim Brotherhood would cause.³¹ Its Gulf neighbours, alarmed by the potential for Brotherhood elements encouraging calls for political reform in their own countries, have reacted decisively.

27. R. Lebaron, 'Aid or Arrests? Qatar and UAE Go Separate Ways on Muslim Brothers', Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, January 2013.

28. B. Sabry, 'As Qatar Supports Egypt, Many Egyptians Unexcited', *Al Monitor*, 17 April 2013.

29. 'Egypt returns \$2 billion to Qatar in sign of growing tensions', *Reuters*, 19 September 2013.

30. H. Ghaddar, 'Qatar Bets on Islamists', Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center, 7 February 2013.

31. D. Roberts, 'Qatar, the Ikhwan, and transnational relations in the Gulf', Project on Middle East Political Science, 18 March 2014.

In contrast, the lack of Brotherhood involvement in Qatari domestic affairs has enabled it to be more supportive of the movement. In an arrangement akin to the one between the Qatari government and *Al Jazeera*, the Islamists hosted by Qatar project their actions outward, refraining from focusing on domestic issues.³² The Muslim Brotherhood presence in Qatar originated as the result of the necessity to staff the country's various bureaucracies in the 1950s. But despite the prevalence of Muslim Brothers, as the most qualified at the time, Brotherhood ideology has not seeped into policy. Rather, the strict Hanbali school of Islam is prevalent in Qatar and the regime has limited the institutional opportunities available for religious scholars to exert influence domestically.³³

Qatar was also the first Arab country to withdraw its ambassador from Damascus, in July 2011. By January 2012, Qatar was proposing the intervention of Arab troops. Doha has spent more than \$3 billion supporting the rebels, far exceeding the contribution made by any other government.³⁴ Yet, at the beginning of the outbreak of violence, Qatar had made an attempt at mediation, banking on 10 years of solid relations and advising Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to embark on a process of political reform. Once it became apparent that the Syrian president would not acquiesce, Doha switched policies. As holder of the rotating presidency of the Arab League, it played an instrumental role in building up support for Arab pressure, as it had done in Libya. The League suspended Syria's membership in November 2011 and lobbying by Qatar led to the handing over of Syria's seat to the opposition.

By September 2012, claims had surfaced that Qatar and Saudi Arabia were funding competing factions and creating separate military alliances and structures. While Qatar reportedly developed close links with the Muslim Brotherhood of Syria, the Saudis supported secular factions and Salafi groups. This led to accusations that they were undermining the creation a unified rebel force. Facing increasing hostility from Saudi Arabia and Western actors who resented its support for radical groups, Qatar eventually yielded to Saudi Arabia the role as the main Arab power guiding the Syrian opposition abroad and funding and arming rebel groups inside Syria. Qatar seemed to have miscalculated, expecting Western partners eventually to intervene militarily on the side of the opposition, as they had done in Libya.

Qatar's Syria policy illustrates the tight balancing act that the emirate must manage in order to weigh its competing interests. Although it is pitted against Iran in Syria, Qatar's longstanding position has been not to alienate Tehran, with which it shares its largest gas field. Thus, while it funds Syrian opposition groups, it is also seeking to revive contacts with Hezbollah and maintain cordial relations with Tehran.³⁵ In December 2013 Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad visited Qatar and Qatari Foreign Minister Khalid bin Mohammad Al-Attiyah has since stated that 'Iran can play a vital role' in Syria.³⁶

A similar balancing act is conducted between the US and Iran. Qatar tries to strike a balance that antagonises neither side. So, for example, while it houses US bases and



32. A. Azem 'Qatar's ties with the Muslim Brotherhood affect entire region', *The National*, 18 May 2012.

33. Roberts March 2014, op. cit.

34. 'Qatar and Syria', *Financial Times*, 19 May 2013.

35. A. Hammond, 'Qatar's leadership transition: like father, like son', *Policy Brief*, London: ECFR, February 2014.

36. A. Parasiliti, 'Qatar's foreign minister: Iran has 'crucial role' in Syria', *Al Monitor*, 22 January 2014.

depends on US guarantees, Qatar would not allow Washington to launch a strike against Iran from its Qatari territory. It has also reached out to Iran on numerous occasions, for example inviting President Ahmadinejad to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) summit in Doha in 2007.³⁷ Qatar was quick to welcome the interim agreement signed in November 2013 between the US and Iran. Its relations with Israel and the Palestinians also reflect this dynamic. While Qatar allowed Israel to open a trade mission in Doha in 1996, it also maintained close relations with the Palestinian camp. Israel's Minister of Foreign Affairs Tzipi Livni visited Doha in 2008 but after the Gaza war at the end of 2008 Doha closed down the Israeli trade mission. In February 2012, Qatar hosted a meeting between the leader of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, and Hamas leader Khalid Mishaal, and in October of the same year the then Emir became the first head of state to visit the Gaza Strip since Hamas took full control there, and pledged \$400 million for construction projects.

Qatar's foreign policy: determined but ineffective?

Qatar's foreign policy has been qualified as hyperactive but ineffective.³⁸ A core group of decision-makers, with significant resources at their disposal, direct policy unhindered by the constraints that accrue in more participatory political systems.³⁹ But for all the decisive action, the follow up is lacking. Qatar and its population are too small for its external action to be effective. The limited foreign policy infrastructure allows for quick decision-making but hinders implementation, and highlights the lack of adequate professional capacity to follow through.⁴⁰ Government employees do not take decisions, both because they are powerless and because in any case they would not want to be held accountable. Qatar's actions in Syria, for example, end up being *ad hoc* donations of arms and money, which lack effective strategising or accountability.⁴¹

Qatar's foreign policy is made possible to an extent by its financial strength, which allows it to make large investments, fund mediation efforts and distribute foreign aid. National resources can be mobilised to back policy directives. With an estimated \$85 billion of assets, its sovereign wealth fund, the Qatar Investments Authority, has undertaken multibillion-dollar investments in European companies such as Barclays, Porsche, and the London Stock Exchange.⁴² Since the 1990s, Qatar has also increased foreign aid, often directed towards conflict zones such as Lebanon, Gaza or Mali.

In fact, its foreign and investment policies have often been two sides of the same coin. Until a year ago, Hamad Bin Jassim al-Thani directed both policies, combining his roles as prime minister and foreign minister with his leadership of the Qatar Investment Authority. This made possible a comprehensive approach to diplomatic mediation and foreign policy-making predicated on heavy Qatari investment in targeted countries. The most notable example of this was the \$7.5 billion in loans and grants extended to the

37. Woertz February 2012, op. cit.

38. Interview with an analyst in Doha, October 2012.

39. Ulrichsen October 2012, op. cit.

40. Khatib 2013, op. cit.

41. Interview with an analyst in Doha, October 2012.

42. Woertz February 2012, op. cit.

Muslim Brotherhood-led government in Egypt following its election in June 2012. Prime Minister al-Thani used a visit to Cairo in September 2012 to state that there would be ‘no limits’ to Qatar’s support for Egypt as he announced plans to invest \$18 billion over five years.⁴³ Similarly, the special relationship that emerged between Qatar and France under Sarkozy, overturning the traditional policy of alliance with Saudi Arabia, intermingled politics and finance. Qatar made large investments in France in diverse sectors, the two countries collaborated to obtain the release of Bulgarian nurses imprisoned in Libya and French policy in Lebanon supposedly became more open toward Hezbollah and Syria.⁴⁴

However, the new Emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, who took over from his father in June 2013, has appointed a new head of the country’s sovereign wealth fund, seemingly separating politics from finance.⁴⁵ The change might help counter accusations that Qatar attempts to buy influence in transition states through its apparent combination of diplomacy and investment.⁴⁶ There has been a lot of speculation about potential policy changes under the new Emir, most notably about how he would likely focus on domestic issues and tone down Qatar’s foreign policy hyper-activity. While he has ceded ground to Saudi Arabia in Syria, and has adopted a conciliatory tone in the face of increasing hostility from Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt, he has not so far backed down on any major policy positions, such as support for the Muslim Brotherhood.

The other arm of Qatari foreign policy was, at least until recently, *Al Jazeera*, a powerful mechanism for soft power projection. When it was launched in 1996, it transformed the Arab media landscape, becoming the main opinion maker in the Middle East. Despite regime claims that *Al Jazeera* is editorially independent, its reporting has generally followed the foreign policy agenda of Qatar and its focus has never been directed domestically.⁴⁷ As such, it was key in galvanising opinion during the uprisings in Syria, Libya, and Egypt. Its reporting from Cairo’s Tahrir Square became iconic.⁴⁸ Since then, *Al Jazeera* has suffered a backlash derived from its perceived bias in favour of the Muslim Brotherhood. In fact, Emir Tamim is said to be supporting the establishment of a new news channel (including a news website and TV channel) based in London, which will supposedly balance *Al Jazeera*’s perceived Islamist slant.⁴⁹

The withdrawal of Saudi, Emirati and Bahraini ambassadors from Qatar on 5 March 2014 is the most vivid example of the backlash against Qatari policies. The joint statement announcing the withdrawal stated that Qatar had failed to ‘implement a November 2013 agreement not to back anyone threatening the security and stability of the GCC whether as groups or individuals – via direct security work or through political influence, and not to support hostile media’. The implications were that Qatar had become a threat to domestic stability that could no longer be tolerated by its neighbours.⁵⁰ The rift was linked to Qatar’s

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43. K. Coates Ulrichsen, ‘Foreign policy implications of the new emir’s succession in Qatar’, *Policy Brief*, Oslo: Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre, August 2013.

44. S. Nadir, ‘Emir Replaces Head of Qatar Investment Authority’, *Al Monitor*, 12 July 2013.

45. C. Hall, S. Kerr and E. Hammond, ‘New Qatar emir shakes up sovereign wealth fund’, *Financial Times*, 2 July 2013.

46. Ulrichsen August 2013, op. cit.

47. Woertz February 2012, op. cit.

48. Ulrichsen October 2012, op. cit.

49. J. Vela, ‘Qatar to launch Al Jazeera counterweight’, *The National*, 4 May 2014.

50. M. Al-Rasheed, ‘Saudi-Qatar tensions divide GCC’, *Al Monitor*, 6 March 2014.

position on the Arab uprisings, including *Al Jazeera's* coverage, its political and economic support for the new governments and its hosting of Arab opposition figures. The UAE in particular was angered by Qatar's growing relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood.⁵¹ The diplomatic crisis represented a rare escalation of behind-the-scenes negotiation into a public row.

Qatar has expressed its desire to contain the discord and avoid escalation. Doha has stated its belief that the ambassadors' withdrawal was driven by 'a difference in positions on issues out of the GCC', reiterated its commitment to the six-member group, and added that it would not reciprocate and withdraw its ambassadors. At the same time, it cannot simply capitulate.⁵² The new Emir probably feels that he cannot give in to Saudi Arabia, for if he does he will be placing Qatar in a subordinate position for the foreseeable future. Instead, he is holding his ground and waiting for the inevitable round of succession in Riyadh, after which he will likely be in a stronger position. In addition, Qatar is not completely isolated within the GCC. Oman and Kuwait, if not overtly supportive, have resisted joining the GCC's more antagonistic members. Emir Tamim seems to have forged a personal bond with the Emir of Kuwait, who has been attempting to resolve Saudi-Qatari tensions.

Some analysts have even speculated over the emergence of an Omani, Qatari, Turkish- and Iranian axis to counter the Saudi, Bahraini and Emirati alignment. Foreign Minister Khalid bin Mohamed Al Attiyah has stated: 'The independence of Qatar's foreign policy is simply non-negotiable'. He said Qatar did not share the 'axis mentality' prevailing in the Middle East in which parties choose to join one or another camp.⁵³ While *Al Jazeera* may have toned down its rhetoric, this has not been accompanied by a major shift away from Islamist groups. Support for the Brotherhood is a legacy policy from the former Emir, which would be difficult to reverse after so many years of hosting Brotherhood expatriates. But the regime may also be playing a long game in the belief that the old order is in fact over and that eventually the Brotherhood will be an important part of the new order.

Qatar's policies and image have taken a beating. Its Islamist bets have not worked out, its neighbours have turned against it, there has been a backlash against it in the transition states, and its main public diplomacy channel has been discredited. Most recently, allegations of bribery and inhumane labour conditions in relation to Qatar's hosting of the 2022 football World Cup have further tainted its image. Domestically, it is under pressure to reign in government spending. Nevertheless, Qatar quietly labours on, as seen in the recent prisoner exchange deal it brokered between the US and the Taliban. Adopting a conciliatory tone in the face of confrontation from Egypt, the UAE or Saudi Arabia, the new Emir has stood his ground and not allowed himself to be bullied into changing his policies. In true Gulf fashion, the four parties to the conflict signed a vague reconciliation document on 17 April, which leaves unclear any precise commitments and allows them to save face.

51. M. Stephens, 'Change brings challenges for Qatar Emir Tamim', *BBC News*, 23 June 2013.

52. 'Recalling GCC Ambassadors from Doha: A Background and Future Predictions', Doha: Policy Analysis Unit, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 10 March 2014.

53. 'No foreign policy change: FM', *The Peninsula*, 11 March 2014.

Saudi Arabia: assertiveness driven by vulnerability

» In an effort to uphold the internal security of the Kingdom and maintain regional stability, Saudi Arabia had traditionally conducted a consensual, cautious foreign policy that avoided open confrontation and favoured accommodation. Its dependence on external security guarantees led it to rely on policies of balance and manoeuvre to maintain security. The uncertainty and polarisation derived from the 2011 Arab uprisings brought Saudi Arabia out of its comfort zone. The tone and substance of Saudi external policy have changed substantially, becoming much more assertive and at times even publicly confrontational. While numerous Saudi commentators would have us believe that the change is derived from growing self-confidence, the most likely explanation is that the new-found forcefulness is driven by a sense of vulnerability.

As early as May 2011 articles by Saudi commentators (academics, princes, and ambassadors) started to appear that stated that ‘a tectonic shift has occurred in the US-Saudi relationship because of the US’ unreliability vis-à-vis Iran’ and that Saudi Arabia would have to take security matters into its own hands rather than continuing to rely on the US.⁵⁴ Articles followed a standard pattern, first enumerating Saudi strengths and contributions (i.e. guardian of stability in energy markets, economic engine of the Arab world, cradle of Islam)⁵⁵ and then arguing that Saudi Arabia was in the throes of a complete policy overhaul that would see it ‘take a far more proactive and assertive role in maintaining stability and security in the Middle East and North Africa’, develop a new national security framework, and take up its rightful role as regional leader. As part of the change, Saudi Arabia would increase its support for the Syrian rebels and provide backing for Lebanon and Jordan. It was time for Arab powers to take care of business in their neighbourhood, and this would include greater unity and a collective security framework.⁵⁶

The groundwork for Saudi Arabia’s sense of insecurity was laid prior to the 2011 uprisings, starting with the US invasion of Iraq and the consequent upending of the regional balance of power. Over the last decade, Saudi’s lack of influence in the Levant, most notably in Syria and Iraq, or in Gaza (such as in 2009), was palpable and offered a stark contrast to Iran’s manoeuvrings in Iraq, its alliance with Syria, and its support for Hamas and Hezbollah. In response to what it saw as Iranian attempts to achieve regional hegemony, Saudi Arabia attempted to bolster alliances with friendly states, Jordan and Egypt most notably, in an effort to craft a ‘Sunni axis’ to counter the perceived ‘Shia arc’.⁵⁷ By 2011 Riyadh was literally surrounded by instability, with uprisings in Bahrain to the east, Yemen to the south, Syria to the west and on-going instability in Iraq to the north contributing to Saudi fears of over-spill, particularly taking into account the sectarian dimension and the restive Shia minority population in its Eastern Province. Most recently, the increasing production of shale gas in the US, and the consequent reduced dependence on Gulf

54. N. Obaid, ‘Amid the Arab Spring, a U.S.-Saudi split’, *The Washington Post*, 15 May 2011.

55. N. Obaid, ‘What West gets wrong about Saudi Arabia’, *CNN World*, 22 November 2013.

56. N. Obaid, ‘Saudi Arabia Shifts to More Activist Foreign Policy Doctrine’, *Al Monitor*, 17 October 2013; M. bin Nawaf bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, ‘Saudi Arabia Will Go It Alone’, *New York Times*, 17 December 2013; Wehrey October 2013, op. cit.

57. M. Benli Altunisik, ‘Bitter Frenemies’, *Foreign Affairs* 91(3), May/June 2012.

oil, as well as the US rebalancing to Asia, have deepened Saudi fears that its special relationship with the US, based on an exchange of oil for security, would irretrievably change.

The shift in policy since 2011 has been noticeable. Saudi Arabia's traditional soft power tools of diplomacy, use of certain media outlets, financial incentives, and religious credentials have been overshadowed by the actual use of force in Bahrain and supply of funds and weapons to rebel groups in Syria. Saudi Arabia has also been outwardly more confrontational in the international arena, for example in the regional GCC theatre with the withdrawal of its ambassador from Qatar (although this is not the first time that this has happened, the spat with Qatar has been unexpectedly public). A further symptom of Saudi Arabia's anxiety has been its uncharacteristically, if not unprecedented, vocal criticism of the US, especially regarding Washington's failure to act in Syria. It has also signalled its disapproval of the advanced negotiations with Iran, which it sees as Western acquiescence to Iranian regional hegemony.⁵⁸ But not only has it registered its displeasure at US policies, it has also shown its willingness to undercut them by offering to make up for any US possible withholding of military aid (mainly funding) to the government in Egypt after the coup.⁵⁹

The US has attempted to reassure Saudi Arabia regarding a US-Iranian rapprochement by backing its efforts for regional leadership through greater integration of Gulf military capabilities in the framework of the GCC. So far, however, the other Gulf states have been reluctant regarding the implementation of an integrated, anti-missile defence system. Talks of GCC military cooperation are ongoing but actual progress has stalled. Each state has national procurement policies, with no coordination to promote interoperability or economies of scale.⁶⁰ In fact, Saudi attempts to bolster its regional leadership have been erratic and their results unimpressive. Efforts to achieve greater unity and institutionalisation of the GCC, and to include Jordan and Morocco, have both faltered.

In late 2011, King Abdullah proposed the greater integration of GCC members into a Gulf Union. But at a specially convened mid-year GCC summit to discuss union plans in May 2012 the decision was postponed given the lack of enthusiasm on the part of the rest of the GCC states (only two of which were represented by their rulers at the summit). This public embarrassment for the Saudis was followed by a rare public spat between Saudi Arabia and Oman over the issue of a Gulf Union at the December 2013 summit. Omani Foreign Minister Yusuf bin Alawi said Oman 'will simply withdraw' from the body if the five other GCC members – Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar – decide to form a union.⁶¹ In fact, so far, GCC members have been unable to agree on a common currency, or on a common market, or on common tariffs and trade policies toward the outside world. Consensus among the Gulf states about Iran, the Arab uprisings, and the regional order has been elusive. Competition and cross-cutting policies have been the norm, including Qatari-Emirati competition during Libya's revolution, Qatari-Saudi rivalry in Syria, and Kuwait's abstention from contributing forces to the Gulf's Peninsula Shield (a small joint GCC military force) deployed to Bahrain.⁶²

For all the media bluster, the Saudi narrative has been far from consistent and somewhat schizophrenic. After assiduously seeking a seat at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), its reasons for rejecting it (lack of progress on the Israel/Palestine issue, failure to rid the region of

58. R. Khalaf, 'Saudi Arabia: A kingdom on guard', *Financial Times*, 26 March 2014.

59. 'Rethinking Relationships – US, KSA, Egypt, Syria, Russia: A Conversation with Chas Freeman', SUSRIS, 29 August 2013.

60. Alcaro 2013, op. cit.

61. 'GCC to form unified military command', *Al Arabiya News*, 11 December 2013.

62. Alcaro 2013, op. cit.

nuclear weapons, failure to apply ‘deterrent sanctions’ against Syria, the ‘manner, mechanisms, and double standards’ in the UNSC which prevent it from acting effectively) seemed unconvincing. This episode led to speculation that it was probably a case of realising that the additional exposure would prove uncomfortable for a country unaccustomed to having its policies publicly aired. In any case, Saudi Arabia sought to portray its position as taking a stand against the unfairness and double standards of the international community. While all the articles that appeared in the media, penned by authors apparently close to the ruler, were critical of US policy in the Middle East, especially as regards Syria and Iran, on 25 November the Saudi government issued a low-key statement of support of the Geneva agreement. And for all its talk of independence from the US, Saudi Arabia is likely to follow in the broad wake of US policy even if it attempts some form of hedging with other actors. There exists a perception that Saudi Arabia is following an ‘ad hoc, shoot-from-the-hip policy that has no strategic vision’.⁶³

Saudi Arabia’s efforts to counter Iran

Regional geopolitical dynamics have come to be defined by competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran for the dominant geopolitical role, as played out in third states through military, financial, and ideological support.⁶⁴ Saudi actions in Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon can be seen within the context of countering Iranian influence in the region.

Instability in Egypt clearly rattled Saudi Arabia. The Saudis see in Egypt a key state in balancing Iranian influence. Egypt’s important regional role as a bulwark against Iranian influence in Syria and Iraq saw Saudi Arabia lend support to the post-uprising regime despite its opposition to the toppling of Mubarak. While the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) was in power, Saudi Arabia transferred \$1.5 billion to Egypt as direct budget support as well as pledging \$430 million in project aid and a \$750 million line of credit to import petroleum products.⁶⁵ However, unease over the Muslim Brotherhood’s rule allegedly led Saudi Arabia to support the military coup against Morsi.

Support for the military government after the coup was immediate and was accompanied by blunt warnings from King Abdullah (clearly directed towards Qatar) that Arab leaders should support Sisi and refrain from sowing discord. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait quickly pledged \$12 billion in support of Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi.⁶⁶ Egypt has since concluded a UAE- and Saudi Arabia-financed arms deal with Russia worth \$2 billion.⁶⁷ Saudi Arabia plans to grant Egypt \$5 billion to support the economy after the presidential elections, in addition to the \$2 billion that was sent at the beginning of 2014.⁶⁸ Most recently, Saudi Arabia called for an international effort to raise funds for Egypt, and on 20 June 2014, King Abdullah was the first foreign head of state to visit Cairo and congratulate President Sisi on his inauguration.

Saudi preoccupation with Syria is also a function of its concern over Iran’s rising clout. For Saudi Arabia, the conflict in Syria is about gaining influence over a key state in the region. Since



63. T. W. Lippman, ‘Saudi Arabia’s Ad Hoc Foreign Policy’, *Inter Press Service*, 20 December 2013.

64. G. Gause, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

65. S. al-Qassemi, ‘Nayef’s demise: Relief for the Brothers?’, *Egypt Independent*, 25 June 2012.

66. J. M. Dorsey, ‘The Struggle for Egypt: Saudi Arabia’s Regional Role’, *RSIS Commentaries*, Singapore: RSIS, 16 July 2013.

67. ‘KSA, UAE to finance Russian arms deal with Egypt’, *Egypt Independent*, 7 February 2014.

68. ‘Saudi Arabia to offer new aid package to Egypt’, *Egypt Independent*, 30 January 2014.

2006, Iran has been getting closer to the Assad regime. Saudi Arabia believes that a friendly regime in Syria will give it influence over Iraq and bolster its standing in Lebanon. This would allow Saudi Arabia to consolidate its influence in the Levant, and re-establish a more favourable regional balance of power.⁶⁹

The Syrian uprising offered the Saudis an opportunity to undermine Iran and regain an ally.⁷⁰ After some initial hesitation, and despite its distaste for citizen uprisings and political instability, Saudi Arabia has become the most vocal advocate of the arming of the Syrian opposition and the ouster of Assad. The US also willingly outsourced Western support for the rebels to Saudi Arabia (and initially Qatar). Saudi Arabia pushed for sanctions against the Syrian regime, withdrew its ambassador, and by the end of February 2012, it was clear that it was arming certain rebel factions (at one point even sponsoring the creation of a Salafi umbrella grouping, the so-called Army of Islam), despite a lack of international consensus.⁷¹ Eventually, Saudi Arabia prevailed over Qatar to impose itself as the main outside force supporting the Syrian rebels and the political opposition. Saudi Arabia has been especially critical of US policy towards Syria, feeling marginalised by the US-Russian agreement to destroy Syria's chemical weapons, and abandoned to bear the brunt of supporting the opposition. Obama visited Saudi Arabia in March 2014, as did Secretary of State Kerry in June 2014, in an attempt to mend fences, and the two countries were said to be taking steps to coordinate their policies in Syria more closely. However, the US seems hesitant about providing anti-aircraft missiles to the Syrian rebels, one of the main Saudi requests.

Saudi Arabia's efforts to roll back Iranian influence have extended to Lebanon, with indications of Saudi attempts to reconcile rival Lebanese forces. At the end of 2013, Saudi Arabia announced a military aid package of \$3 billion (nearly twice Lebanon's \$1.7 billion annual defence budget) earmarked to buy French arms. Riyadh, despite its animosity towards both Hezbollah and the 2013 killings by bombs of representatives of both sides of the Shia/Sunni divide, seems keen not to appear as biased toward the pro-Saudi Sunni group in its domestic political competition with the Shiite and Christian blocs. For example, the Saudi government did not condition the military aid gift on disarming Hezbollah. The Saudi ambassador to Lebanon, Awad al-Asiri, has said that what is required is a 'government that satisfies everyone'.⁷² The Saudis may also be trying to capitalise on what they perceive as Hezbollah's loss of legitimacy following its intervention in Syria.

The question of the US presence in the region is also a matter of bitter contention between Iran and Saudi Arabia. While Iran would like to rid the region of the US's military presence, Saudi Arabia needs external support as a check against Iran.⁷³ Saudi Arabia oscillates between feelings of entrapment and abandonment in its relations with the US. When the US was more belligerent toward Iran, the Saudis worried that they would be the victims of a US attack on Iran. Now that the negotiations between the US and Iran seem to be advancing, the Saudis worry that their interests will be neglected, and that a grand bargain will be struck at their expense.⁷⁴ While Saudi Arabia has been a shrill critic of the interim nuclear agreement between the West and Iran, at the GCC summit in December 2013 it signed off on a statement from the group endorsing that deal.⁷⁵

69. H. Hassan, 'Syria: the view from the Gulf states', London: ECFR, 13 June 2013.

70. M. Al-Rasheed, 'Saudi Arabia Pushes US Toward Military Strike in Syria', *Al Monitor*, 2 September 2013.

71. Al-Rasheed September 2013, op. cit.

72. J. Aziz, 'What Are Saudi Arabia's Intentions in Lebanon?', *Al Monitor*, 17 April 2013.

73. F. Wehrey, 'Ominous Divide: Shiite Iran v Sunni Gulf', Washington: United States Institute of Peace, 18 February 2014.

74. G. Gause 'Tensions in the Saudi-American Relationship', *Brookings Foreign Policy Essay*, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 27 April 2014.

75. Lippman December 2013, op. cit.

Despite the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, their relations have not always been so confrontational. At times of regional crisis, tension between them tends to increase but during times of relative regional peace relations have improved, for example, during the late 1990s. In the 2000s, they maintained more normal diplomatic relations despite continuing to compete for influence in the region. At several points, they have cooperated on areas of shared interest, such as over Lebanon in the aftermath of the 2006 war.⁷⁶ While there is potential for improved relations, given Iranian President Rouhani's overtures and the Saudi response, the political vacuums in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq militate against rapprochement, as they invite regional intervention from the two rivals.⁷⁷ Thus, any entente will depend largely on the political will of the leaders or on a cost-benefit analysis that tilts the balance towards more cooperative, moderate regional policies. The June 2014 incursion by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) in Iraq, which represents a grave menace for both states, might just be such an instance, acting as a catalyst for improved relations towards the restoration of regional stability. Riyadh, however, caught between Iran and Iraq's Maliki on the one side and ISIS on the other, is loath to encourage Iranian intervention in Iraq. In fact, Saudi Arabia has warned against Western or regional intervention in Iraq and has stated that the issue, as a product of domestic sectarian divisions, should be dealt with by Iraqis themselves.⁷⁸ In the meantime, the Saudis have deployed 30,000 soldiers to their border with Iraq to try to contain any spill-over.

Impact on domestic and regional democratic governance

»» The impact of Qatari and Saudi policies on prospects for democratic governance in the region is generally negative, despite Qatar's best efforts to present itself as supporter of the revolutions and defender of the people's aspirations.

Domestically, they have preempted any potential calls for reform through economic handouts and, in the case of Saudi Arabia, increasingly repressive measures. In September 2011, Qatar announced salary increases of 60 per cent and 120 per cent for public sector workers and Qatari Armed Forces officers, respectively. Although there was no domestic pressure for reform, Qatar decided to follow the policies of its neighbours to this effect. At the time it also declared that the long-held promise of holding elections to the parliament would be met in the second half of 2013, a promise once again indefinitely postponed at the time of the Emir's abdication in favour of his son. The domestic situation in Qatar is unique in the sense that Qatari nationals represent only around 250,000 people, of a population close to 1.7 million in 2011. Thus, the fault lines of any debates about government reforms centre on differences between nationals and expatriates and on what Qatari citizens consider as pervasive Western influence in cultural

76. F. Aman and A. Scotten 'Rouhani Win Could Reduce Iran-Saudi Tensions', *Al Monitor*, 21 June 2013.

77. Wehrey October 2013, op. cit.

78. M. bin Nawaf Al Saud, 'Saudi Arabia: 'This is Iraq's problem and they must sort it out themselves'', *The Telegraph*, 19 June 2014.

and political issues. For example, in January 2012, Qatar University had to reverse its English-language instruction policy instituted in 2005, over complaints that it discriminated against nationals. Concern over obtrusive Western influence is what leads to government criticism as opposed to misgivings about the lack of political rights.⁷⁹ In this sense, the regime has its work cut out for it. As long as it tones down its 'pro-Westerness' and is sensitive to the concerns over the funds it spends in its exploits abroad it will likely avoid any criticism or calls for reform.

In Saudi Arabia, King Abdullah pledged \$130 billion towards job creation, salary increases, and development projects. The uprisings were of special concern to Saudi Arabia because of the narrow link between internal and external Saudi dynamics. This is one of the reasons why Saudi Arabia was so quick to step-in to support the military government in Egypt. The military regime is clearly an option preferable to rule by the Muslim Brotherhood, as the regime presents no domestic threat in terms of encouraging Islamist aspirations within Saudi Arabia. The Saudi regime is extremely fearful of awakening political sentiments through transnational ideological platforms such as political Islam. After the coup, a number of Saudi religious figures issued a statement of condemnation of the coup, in direct contradiction of the official Saudi position, in which they emphasised the legitimacy of President Mohamed Morsi as an elected leader.

This is also why the Saudi government's domestic response has been so blunt. The regime is determined to control any unwanted domestic influence derived from its policies abroad. The Saudi regime relies on loyal Salafi clerics for social order and political control, but there is a diverse Islamist field within the country with the potential for mobilisation towards demands for a greater political voice and more government accountability. Regime concerns were realised with the issuance of two petitions in early 2011 calling for more political rights and the release of prisoners arrested on terrorism charges.⁸⁰ The human rights situation in Saudi Arabia has deteriorated in recent months, with dozens of cases where activists are sentenced to long prison terms and are handed travel bans. The regime has shut down several NGOs and their members have been sentenced to lengthy prison terms, often after unfair trials. Repression has been especially acute in the country's Eastern Province, home to a large part of Saudi Arabia's Shia population.

In a sign of growing insecurity, Saudi Arabia has departed from its typical modus operandi of either co-optation or punishment of movement leaders so as to cast a wide net against all sympathisers.⁸¹ The December 2013 terrorism law in Saudi Arabia was put in place in an attempt to clamp down through sheer repression on any potential dissent. Months later, the Muslim Brotherhood was included in a list of terrorist organisations banned within the Kingdom. Participating in hostilities outside the Kingdom or belonging to radical religious groups inside is a criminal penalty punishable with between 3-20 years in prison. Belonging to one of the banned groups (al-Qaeda, Jabhat an-Nusra, ISIS, Hezbollah of Saudi Arabia, Houthis, Ansar Allah, and the Muslim Brotherhood) is considered a crime, as is associating with them at home or abroad, or supporting their causes via media or social media. Participation in protests, demonstrations and even in petitions is forbidden.⁸²

But such a harsh crackdown could backfire. Repressing Islamist groups that have renounced violence could encourage radical splinter groups. Also, the more moderate Islamists have in

79. Gengler 2012, op. cit.

80. K. Diwan 'Saudi Arabia Brings the Fight Back Home', Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, 18 March 2014.

81. Khalaf 2014, op. cit.

82. Diwan 2014, op. cit.

the past supported the regime in the face of jihadist elements, such as those returning from Afghanistan. In targeting these moderate groups, the regime could be significantly reducing its base of support, at a time when a similar blowback from jihadists within the ranks of ISIS is a very real possibility. It is also likely to complicate the Kingdom's relations with the many other countries where Brotherhood-affiliated organisations are significant political players, such as Jordan, Bahrain, and Kuwait.⁸³

The diplomatic boycott of Qatar should be interpreted within this framework. Qatar's danger derived not simply from its support for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, but also from the translation of this support into the Gulf milieu. By harbouring dissident individuals that question Egypt's legitimacy as well as the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, it undermines Saudi interests. Similarly, the conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran has a domestic component related to different models of government, competition for Islamic legitimacy, and sectarianism. While Iran's system grants religious authorities a key role in politics and allows people to participate in governance through elections, the Saudi regime has depoliticised its clerics and rejects the principles of democracy.⁸⁴

Despite Qatari and Saudi efforts to portray themselves as buffers against the spread of sectarian strife and civil war brought about by sudden political change, the Arab spring has seen an increase in civic activism, especially through social media. While calls for democracy *per se* are unusual, there have been demands driven by economic concerns (such as low wages and unemployment in Saudi Arabia) and calls for greater accountability in governance. The Eastern Province in Saudi Arabia, in particular, has experienced sustained protests since 2011. Although sectarian grievances have often been the driving force behind the protests, they have also raised issues of concern shared by a large segment of the population such as the question of political prisoners or the lack of power of elected municipal representatives.

In the Gulf neighbourhood, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have also focused on countering any spread of the revolutions. Within the Gulf, concern over protests in Bahrain and Oman led the rest of the GCC states to commit to a \$20 billion economic package to help the two countries. Saudi Arabia took the lead with respect to more forceful action in Bahrain through the deployment of Peninsula Shield forces. It was important that public protests be crushed and that the uprising did not spread through the Gulf, especially within the Shiite population. Qatar sent a small number of troops to Bahrain, and the prime minister at the time called for a stop to the street protests, despite this call's apparent contradiction of Qatar's support of uprisings in Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria. In Yemen, concerns over security and stability led Saudi Arabia to spearhead a GCC initiative to ease out its former ally President Ali Abdullah Saleh in a transition of power that produced a minimum of change in the balance of power. Attempts to close ranks with other monarchies by inviting Jordan and Morocco to become members of the GCC, while failed, signal the potential for an authoritarian monarchical axis. Likewise, Saudi Arabia's calls for greater unity among the six GCC states were intended as a closing of ranks, not only to counter Iran but also to discourage any pressure for reform derived from the Arab uprisings.

In the transition states of Libya, Yemen, and Syria (and in Egypt in the case of Qatar), despite siding with the revolutionaries, the underlying logic of Gulf behaviour has been to influence the

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⁸³ C. Murphy, 'The Saudi-Brotherhood divide', *Al Monitor*, 21 April 2014.

⁸⁴ Wehrey February 2014, op. cit.

direction of the transitions and shift the balance of power in the region, not to further democratic aspirations. The expediency of Gulf interventions is likely to undermine any potential democratic dividend. In Syria, the fight against Assad has meant that both Qatar and Saudi Arabia have supported radical Islamists that stand opposed to any democratic form of governance. Likewise, economic aid to transition states is often used as an instrument of political manipulation and its effects on the transitions are unlikely to be towards the furthering of democracy.⁸⁵ In Egypt, this sense of pragmatism has seen Saudi Arabia align with an authoritarian military government reminiscent of Nasserite tendencies, a partnership unlikely to endure.

Saudi policies have exacerbated sectarian tensions both domestically and regionally. This instrumentalisation of a sectarian logic serves the double purpose of countering and splintering any expressions of dissent in the domestic arena, and of rallying the population against the Iranian bogeyman in the region. Domestically, the spill-over of regional sectarian tensions, exacerbated by Sunni clerics and state-owned media, has disrupted cooperation between Sunni and Shia activists in the Kingdom, to the benefit of the monarchy.⁸⁶ The regime has attempted to attribute any opposition to ‘foreign’ elements driven by sectarian agendas. It has followed a deliberate strategy of mobilising Sunni support against the Shia opposition by inculcating the fear of supposed Iranian backing.⁸⁷ Saudi Arabia portrayed the 2011 uprising in Bahrain as a sectarian battle driven by Iranian-backed Shia. Saudi Arabia also applied this framework to the conflict in Syria, characterising it as a battle between the majority Sunni population and an alignment of Shia elements, as represented by Iran, Hezbollah, and the Alawis.⁸⁸ Such policies, however, run the risk of backfiring. Although Saudi regime support for ISIS cannot be proven, even indirectly, its policies might already be providing blowback as the group advances in Iraq.

Qatar has traditionally avoided promoting a sectarian agenda in its regional policies. Yet, it has recently supported GCC policies such as the boycott of the Shia-led government in Iraq and the intervention in support of the Bahraini regime. In Syria, Qatar has supported groups with sectarian agendas, in an attempt to topple the regime and gain influence in a post-Assad order.⁸⁹

Conclusion

➤➤ Qatar and Saudi Arabia have embraced a bolder rhetoric and foreign policy since 2011. They have attempted to use political, economic, and cultural levers to shape the contours of a shifting neighbourhood, and have been willing to stand up to external actors in the process. Three years on, however, with little to show for their efforts and a security situation spiralling out of control, they are likely to tone down their aggressiveness and revert

85. S. Colombo, ‘The GCC in the Mediterranean in Light of the Arab Spring’, *Mediterranean Paper Series*, The German Marshall Fund of the United States and the Istituto Affari Internazionali, December 2012.

86. F. Wehrey, ‘The Eastern Province: A Bellwether for the Kingdom’, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 2013.

87. K. Coates Ulrichsen, ‘Human security in the Gulf: Concept or reality?’, Project on Middle East Political Science, 21 March 2014.

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to positions closer to their previous policy stances. Qatar is on track to revive its traditional brokerage role, perhaps eventually brokering a peace deal between the Taliban and the US, stepping back from the frontline in Syria, and attempting to mend fences with its Gulf neighbours and Egypt, all while sticking to its policies in support of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Saudi Arabia continues its efforts to drum up international support for Egypt and Syria, while bearing the brunt of the financial burden. For all its tough talk, it is likely to continue to lean on US security efforts, even if it attempts some form of hedging with other actors. There will likely be a functional decoupling of their relationship, with the US continuing to hold sway militarily while other powers gain commercial and economic primacy. Saudi Arabia's relations with the US will likely become more transactional and *ad hoc* rather than representing a broad alliance.⁹⁰ The open breach between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, barring out-of-line statements or policies emanating from Qatar, will probably be allowed to dissipate, since it is not in either country's interest to further fracture the region at a time when they should be collaborating to try to contain spiralling insecurity. The virulence of current events in Iraq, due to the ISIS insurgency, could potentially act as a trigger for some form of détente with Iran, at least on certain files.

The implications for democratic governance in the region are not encouraging. After three tumultuous years, a reversal to the status quo ante is likely – that is an unspoken bias towards stability on the part of the US and the European Union (EU) that will encourage greater alignment with Gulf states' positions. However, the increasing violence and sectarianism and the presence of non-state actors will make a return to stability, as provided by authoritarian regimes, all the more difficult. A growing appreciation of shared interests between the West and the Gulf, including countering radicalisation in Syria and Iraq, curtailng Iran's nuclear ambitions, and confronting terrorism, will likely see external actors defer to the Gulf states rather than criticise their anti-democratic policies domestically and regionally (in Egypt or Bahrain, for example).⁹¹ Support for greater public and political accountability across the Gulf is unlikely as geopolitical, commercial, and financial priorities prevail.

The dynamic of the balance of power between Europe and the Gulf has shifted decisively toward the latter, as seen most recently in the cancellation of a meeting scheduled for 23 June between GCC foreign ministers and their EU counterparts, allegedly in protest at European statements on the human rights situation in Bahrain. The shift in the balance of power has been accelerated by the growing threat of terrorism and the collapse of security in the region.⁹² The EU has lost influence following the Arab spring while the Gulf regimes have been confirmed as the region's great political survivors, at least for now.

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