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QATAR AND THE RECALIBRATION OF POWER IN THE GULF

Lina Khatib

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About the Author

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Khatib has published seven books, including *Image Politics in the Middle East: The Role of the Visual in Political Struggle* (I. B. Tauris, 2013), *Taking to the Streets: The Transformation of Arab Activism* (co-edited with Ellen Lust, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), and *The Hizbullah Phenomenon: Politics and Communication* (co-authored with Dina Matar and Atef Alshaer, Hurst/Oxford University Press, 2014). Her published journal articles include "Qatar's Foreign Policy: The Limits of Pragmatism," "Public Diplomacy 2.0," and "Hizbullah's Political Strategy."

Summary

Long a minor regional actor in the shadow of Saudi Arabia, Qatar wants to increase its influence. But Doha's expansionist foreign policy has been plagued by miscalculations, domestic challenges, and international pressure—all issues connected to Doha's relationship with Riyadh. As a result of these setbacks, Qatar's regional role has diminished, and for the foreseeable future, its external influence is likely to remain under the direction of Saudi Arabia.

Qatar's Strategic Miscalculations

- Qatar's desire to chart an independent path led it into confrontation with Saudi Arabia, particularly in Egypt and Syria. This has damaged both countries' external power and increased instability in the Middle East.
- In countries undergoing democratic transitions, Qatar initially supported the Muslim Brotherhood. Doha has long-standing ideological ties to the Brotherhood and believed the group was likely to dominate the new political landscape in transitioning countries.
- When the Brotherhood government in Egypt was overthrown in July 2013, Saudi Arabia backed the coup leader and now president, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Qatar continued to support the Brotherhood, prompting Riyadh to increase pressure on Doha to change course.
- Both Qatar and Saudi Arabia have sought to gain influence in Syria by supporting often-competing groups, including jihadists. This has divided the Syrian opposition and empowered jihadist groups that threaten regional stability.
- Confronting domestic challenges from Qatar's religious establishment, intellectuals, and local tribes, Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani has focused on internal affairs at the expense of foreign policy activities.

Recommendations for Qatar and Saudi Arabia

Prioritize strategic cooperation. Riyadh and Doha must learn from their mistakes and overcome their political rivalry. Their strategic cooperation will be critical to maintaining their political relevance.

Support a compromise between the Egyptian government and the Brotherhood. The government's crackdown on the Brotherhood following the

group's removal from power has resulted in the emergence of jihadist cells across Egypt, which is not in Qatar's or Saudi Arabia's security interests.

Cooperate to unify and empower the Syrian opposition. Saudi Arabia and Qatar should work with the United States and Turkey to help Syria's southern and northern fronts coordinate strategically.

Coordinate counterterrorism efforts more closely. The advance of the militant Islamic State in both Iraq and Syria presents an opportunity for Riyadh and Doha to work together to stabilize the region.

Solidify Qatari state institutions. Before he can aim for a more significant international political role, Emir Tamim has to address Qataris' concerns over where the country is going and how its political and economic policies can benefit citizens.

Introduction

Qatar has long pursued a foreign policy that is both expansionist and pragmatic. In a bid to claim a greater regional role, the tiny Gulf state has relied on picking winners, riding political trends, and engaging with multiple actors, even volatile ones like jihadist groups.¹ Its foreign policy activities have evolved from focusing on mediation between conflicting parties to direct funding and training of military groups.² But since the start of the Arab uprisings in 2011,³ Qatari foreign policy has been plagued by miscalculations, domestic challenges, and international pressure—all of which, to a significant degree, are connected to Qatar's relationship with its main regional rival, Saudi Arabia.⁴ As a result, Qatar's regional role has entered a new, diminished phase.

The challenges confronting Qatar peaked in 2014, largely due to two factors: Qatar's involvement in Syria and its support for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.⁵ In Syria, Doha has attempted to topple the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, but it has not yet succeeded. Qatari-supported jihadist groups, namely Jabhat al-Nusra,⁶ have not only failed to tip the balance of power against the regime but have also come to be seen by the United States and Gulf countries as a potential source of instability across the Middle East. In Egypt, the military-backed government that took over following the coup against then president Mohamed Morsi in July 2013 has tightened its grip on members of Qatar's key Egyptian ally,⁷ the Muslim Brotherhood, sentencing hundreds of them to prison. Gulf countries followed in March 2014 by expressing concern over the Muslim Brotherhood as a threat to stability in the region and holding Qatar responsible for aiding the Brotherhood.⁸

In both cases, Qatar's foreign policy decisions and their repercussions have been tightly connected to its long-standing rivalry with Saudi Arabia over the two Gulf countries' degree of regional influence. Doha had long been a minor regional actor in the shadow of Riyadh. Qatar's desire to increase its political clout led it into confrontation with the Kingdom over the Syria and Egypt files. On Egypt, the disagreement was particularly acute, as Saudi Arabia regards the Muslim Brotherhood—a key ally for Qatar—to be one of its greatest political threats.

The confrontation with Saudi Arabia was coupled with a number of internal challenges for Qatar. These challenges raised concerns about Qatar's domestic stability as well as about its standing in the Gulf region, bringing to at least a

Qatari foreign policy has been plagued by miscalculations, domestic challenges, and international pressure since the start of the Arab uprisings in 2011.

temporary halt Doha's expansionist activities and refocusing the emir's attention on the domestic sphere.

As a result of those external and domestic pressures on Qatar, Saudi Arabia has been able to bring Doha back into its orbit. But although this is a loss for Qatar's regional ambitions, it is not a gain for Saudi Arabia. The Saudi-Qatari rivalry has damaged both Gulf countries' degree of external power and increased levels of instability in the Middle East. Looking ahead, Qatar's will and ability to overcome its rivalry with Saudi Arabia when addressing mutual challenges will be key to its regional influence. Doing so requires reexamining the factors that have led to the diminishment of Qatar's foreign policy independence.

The Muslim Brotherhood: A Lost Opportunity for Qatar

Qatar had seen in the Arab uprisings of 2011 political opportunities to assert itself as a regional player. But the trajectory of the Arab Spring tested Qatar's pragmatism. In part because of its long-standing ideological ties with the Muslim Brotherhood, which Doha calculated would guarantee the loyalty of its Islamist ally, Qatar threw its weight behind the Brotherhood in transitioning countries, namely Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, and Libya.

Doha's support for the Brotherhood also stemmed from Qatar's pragmatic trend of picking winners, that is, aligning itself with actors it believes will prevail politically or militarily in various countries. Qatar's desire to be a stakeholder in the new governments in transitioning countries drove it to wholeheartedly financially and politically support the group it perceived as having the best chance of getting to power and thus of safeguarding

Qatar's interests. Immediately following the outbreak of the Arab Spring, the Muslim Brotherhood appeared to be the political entity most likely to achieve success in the first democratic elections across transitioning countries because it was the most organized group among the myriad political movements that emerged in those states.

However, the opportunities presented by the Brotherhood failed to materialize. The Muslim Brotherhood proved to possess serious shortcomings in many countries.

The Brotherhood did not win the majority of seats in parliament in the Libyan elections. And as Libya descended into violence among a multitude of paramilitary groups, the country's mounting security challenges underscored that there is no single political entity that could hold power in the country, including Brotherhood-affiliated Islamists.

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In Yemen, the Brotherhood gained key cabinet positions. But it failed to maintain relationships with its political partners in the wake of the Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council initiative that transferred power from then president Ali Abdullah Saleh to his vice president, thereby ending the uprising and retaining Saudi oversight in the country.⁹

The Muslim Brotherhood did secure a majority of seats in the Egyptian and Tunisian parliaments, but its political influence in those countries rapidly declined. In Tunisia, the attempts by the leading Brotherhood-affiliated political party Ennahda to control key government positions backfired as the secular opposition pushed it toward a political compromise. In Egypt, the election of Brotherhood-backed Mohamed Morsi as president in 2012 marked the beginning of a year of attempts by the Muslim Brotherhood to monopolize power. Its efforts angered both the Egyptian military as well as secular activists, who began a series of protests against Morsi and the Brotherhood.

Qatar continued to support the Muslim Brotherhood regardless of these political mistakes—which Saudi Arabia saw as a step too far. Qatar’s seemingly unconditional support for the Brotherhood, especially in Egypt, led Saudi Arabia to undertake a number of punitive measures presented as warnings about Doha’s role as an agent of instability in the Gulf. Riyadh supported and funded the military-backed popular coup against Morsi,¹⁰ which removed the Muslim Brotherhood from power. It also put pressure on Qatar’s ruler at the time, Emir Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, to abdicate to his son Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani prior to the execution of the coup. (Handing over power after the coup would have weakened Qatar’s image and the standing of the new emir, which Saudi Arabia feared would expose the Gulf to further instability.)¹¹

Saudi pressure escalated to unprecedented levels in March 2014, when Riyadh led two other Gulf states, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, in withdrawing their ambassadors from Doha, causing public embarrassment for Qatar.¹² The Saudi government also designated the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist group and called on European countries to follow suit. And in August 2014, following the takeover by Qatar-supported Islamist brigades of Libya’s national airport in Tripoli, the United Arab Emirates conducted airstrikes against those militias.¹³ Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia sent a delegation to Qatar, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates to try to resolve tensions with Qatar with a view toward pushing Doha to accept “joint action” in the Gulf.¹⁴

Qatar’s firm backing of the Muslim Brotherhood caused some damage to its relationship with the United States as well. When the Brotherhood won the majority of parliamentary seats and then the presidency in Egypt, Qatar acted as the interlocutor between the group and the United States. Reassurances from Doha helped, in part, to ensure that Washington exhibited “patience” with the Brotherhood leadership’s political and human rights infringements, such as Morsi’s presidential decree in November 2012 that granted him almost

absolute power. Qatar relayed to the United States its confidence that the situation in Egypt could be brought under control and advised the United States to wait and avoid exercising diplomatic pressure on the Egyptian leadership.¹⁵ When the Brotherhood was ousted from power and those reassurances proved to be unachievable, Qatar lost some of its leverage with the United States.

Qatar now stands in a subordinate position to Saudi Arabia as a result of this loss. Following the election of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi as Egypt's president in May 2014 with the backing of Saudi Arabia, Qatar declared its support for the new Egyptian regime because of Saudi and American pressure to do so, its pragmatism, and its desire to salvage its regional position. Unlike Saudi Arabia, Qatar has not offered the Sisi administration financial support.

Saudi action has had a limiting impact on Qatar's regional clout. The current Saudi-backed Egyptian government is cracking down on the Muslim Brotherhood, leaving the Brothers with no prospect of regaining power in Egypt in the foreseeable future. This means that Qatar cannot recover its influence in Egypt in the medium term because Egypt is now firmly under Saudi patronage. Doha has responded to Riyadh's pressure by tempering its relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood, continuing to fund the organization in Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Tunisia but on a lower level than before.¹⁶

The summer 2014 negotiations that took place in Cairo concerning the crisis between Israel and Hamas vividly illustrate this new dynamic. Saudi Arabia chose to take a backseat to Egypt in the negotiations aimed at brokering a ceasefire in the conflict, limiting its role to declaring support for Cairo's hosting of indirect talks between Israelis and Palestinians. Qatar, which had traditionally prided itself on playing a leading role as a mediator in various conflicts in the Middle East, was summoned by Saudi Arabia to play a secondary role as an interlocutor with Hamas.

Saudi Arabia's assignment of this role to Qatar is an implicit response to Doha's ongoing relationship with Hamas, which is part of its wider long-term engagement with the Muslim Brotherhood. This relationship is likely to continue, especially because Qatar is established in using postconflict reconstruction as a public diplomacy tool and will be keen to contribute to the reconstruction of Gaza, as it did following the 2012 confrontation between Israel and Hamas in 2012.¹⁷ Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, seeks to redefine the Qatar-Hamas relationship so that it becomes a useful channel for the implementation of Saudi policy. The Kingdom's support of the ceasefire initiative presented by its ally Sisi is in turn an attempt to empower the new Egyptian regime, which would increase pressure on the Muslim Brotherhood and its allies Hamas and Qatar, placing them squarely in a role subordinate to Riyadh.¹⁸

In all transitioning countries in which Doha bet on the Muslim Brotherhood, Qatar's attempts to pick winners were too shortsighted. The Muslim Brotherhood declined almost as quickly as it rose to prominence.

Betting on the wrong player—and then sticking by the Brotherhood—has weakened Qatar’s political standing in the Middle East as a whole as well as vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia and the United States in particular.

Syria: Another Qatari Miscalculation

Syria also proved to be a miscalculation for Doha. Qatar initially became involved with issues related to Syria by following in Saudi Arabia’s footsteps. The Kingdom changed its stance from rapprochement with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to seeking the fall of the regime in the summer of 2011, a few months after the start of the Syrian revolution, leading Qatar to also abandon its attempt to come to bridge divides with Assad. But Doha was quick to seek an independent path on the issue.¹⁹

Like Saudi Arabia, Qatar bet on the replacement of Assad’s regime with an opposition that would be sympathetic to its own interests, and each country sought to nurture its own set of Syrian allies to guarantee that eventuality. While there was a degree of coordination between the two Gulf countries on the Syria file, ultimately rivalry prevailed, which has had negative consequences on the Syrian revolution. Indeed, the rivalry has led to the widening of political divisions among the opposition.

Since the beginning of the uprising against the Assad regime, the Syrian opposition has been composed of different, competing groups. Driven by the desire to bolster its role as a mediator and to guarantee an ally in the post-Assad Syrian political system, Qatar hosted the August 2011 creation of the Syrian National Council (SNC), an umbrella opposition body. As it did in other countries in transition, Qatar chose to support the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood as a key member of the SNC. This proved to be another miscalculation for Doha.

Qatar demonstrated an inadequate understanding of Syrian social dynamics by choosing to support the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in its bid for power. In Syria, unlike in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood was relatively weak on the ground prior to the 2011 uprising. In Egypt, the Brotherhood had significant popular support partly because of its decades-long provision of social services in the absence of a state system in impoverished areas. This did not apply in Syria, where the Brotherhood had little influence across the country and limited support among the population before the uprising against Assad. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood was also weak because former Syrian president Hafez al-Assad cracked down on the group in the 1980s, an effort that peaked in the 1982 massacre in Hama in which thousands of Brotherhood members and supporters were killed.²⁰

Betting on the wrong player—and then sticking by the Brotherhood—has weakened Qatar’s political standing in the Middle East as a whole as well as vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia and the United States in particular.

Qatar continued its endeavors to unify the Syrian opposition while seeking to have leverage over it, which led it to later support and host the 2013 creation of the larger Syrian National Coalition of Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, of which the SNC became a member. The case of the National Coalition demonstrates Qatar's love-hate relationship with Saudi Arabia, showing that the rivalry between the two is not black and white.

Qatar initially cooperated with Saudi Arabia on the creation of the coalition, with Doha hosting its inaugural conference. But soon after the coalition's creation, Saudi Arabia sought greater control of the body. The Kingdom achieved that aim following the election of Ahmed al-Jarba—who is seen as a key Saudi supporter—as the National Coalition's president. And in June 2014 al-Jarba was replaced with Hadi al-Bahra, another pro-Saudi figure.

Yet Saudi influence over the body has never been total; different members of the coalition have different foreign patrons, with some being pro-Saudi and others being pro-Qatari. This polarization has reduced trust within the National Coalition itself, leading to internal friction among the top leadership. This has in turn led certain members of the coalition to seek to implement their own individual agendas in Syria outside of the realm of the umbrella body.²¹ That has only further reduced the National Coalition's effectiveness and credibility in the eyes of many Syrians on the ground.

In the run-up to the Geneva II conference in February 2014 that was meant to push for a resolution of the Syrian conflict, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood withdrew from the SNC because it disagreed with the SNC's participation in the conference under the umbrella of the National Coalition. By withdrawing, the Brotherhood was also taking a stand against Saudi Arabia, which was the main actor pushing the National Coalition to participate in the talks. Although some members of the Brotherhood eventually rejoined the SNC, since Geneva II, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has seen its political role decline due to tensions within the group, particularly between the leadership and frustrated Muslim Brotherhood youth who are eager to strike out on their own path.²² This has further weakened Qatar's ability to influence developments in Syria.

The National Coalition has also suffered from rivalries within Saudi Arabia, namely those resulting from the competing visions among Saudi princes regarding the Syria file. Prince Bandar bin Sultan, formerly Saudi Arabia's intelligence chief, took a hardline stance toward the Syrian conflict, believing that supporting jihadists would be the best way to topple Assad's regime. Foreign Minister Saud bin Faisal bin Abdulaziz al-Saud, meanwhile, was more focused on establishing a political alternative to Assad, which led to the creation of the National Coalition. Following the election of al-Jarba, seen as loyal to Saud al-Faisal's camp, as president of the National Coalition, Prince Bandar created the Islamic Front in Syria—an umbrella organization hosting

Syria's various Islamist opposition groups. His aim was to see the Islamic Front become an alternative to the National Coalition.

Despite Qatar's reservations about the National Coalition—having first collaborated on founding the group only for it to be taken over by Riyadh—Doha, with its usual pragmatism, ultimately did not want the umbrella body to fail. Qatar saw in the National Coalition the opposition's best bet for international recognition. And Doha calculated that it would be in its favor in the long run to stay on good terms with the National Coalition—at least as long as the body continued to garner international backing. Qatar therefore sent its foreign minister to Turkey to talk to the Islamic Front leaders and convince them not to challenge the National Coalition. In this case, Qatar correctly calculated that no international actor would back the Islamic Front because it harbored Islamist extremist groups.²³

However, the National Coalition has been weakened by a number of factors—opposition members lack political maturity, it has no viable military strategy, the strength of the Syrian regime and its army is far greater than the opposition's capabilities, the coalition lacks credibility among Syrians inside Syria, and international support for the Syrian opposition is inadequate. The Saudi-Qatari rivalry has played a part in undercutting the National Coalition as well. The National Coalition's political weakness has exposed the failings of both Saudi and Qatari foreign policies as well as of their say in the international community.

Another opposition entity that has suffered from the Saudi-Qatari rivalry is the Free Syrian Army. Doha has hosted the leadership of the FSA, which is composed of soldiers and officers who have defected from Syria's state army, and the FSA became the military arm of the National Coalition following the latter's launch. However, Saudi Arabia has persistently attempted to exert greater influence over the FSA, as illustrated by the change in FSA leadership that took place in February 2014 in which a pro-Qatari leader (Salim Idris) was replaced with a pro-Saudi one (Abdul-Ilah al-Bashir). The change in FSA leadership was arranged by the pro-Saudi National Coalition leaders, and it was an attempt to widen support for the National Coalition and increase its legitimacy within Syria: al-Bashir was meant to appeal to those on the ground in Syria because he came from the same background, having fought with the FSA inside Syria. In the end, the leadership change did little more than make the National Coalition and the FSA look like toys in the hands of Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

The FSA's problems did not stop there. Neither Qatar nor Saudi Arabia had the capacity to offer the FSA much beyond financial and moral support. Coupled with its lack of adequate support from the broader international community, the Free Syrian Army has suffered great losses in its battles with the Syrian regime as well as with the self-styled Islamic State (until June 2014

known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria or ISIS).²⁴ Cash without strategy has not yielded military results in the Syrian conflict, which, coupled with the lack of political results, has further hurt Qatar's and Saudi Arabia's credibility. In addition, the Free Syrian Army's scope of influence has been largely limited to the southern front supported by Saudi Arabia. Until recently, the southern front had almost no coordination with the northern front supported by Qatar and Turkey, which contributed to the weakening of the opposition in the face of the centralized Syrian regime.

In an attempt to exert military pressure on the Assad regime, each Gulf country has cultivated its own network of jihadist clients in Syria. Saudi Prince Bandar in particular spearheaded the funding of a number of groups, such as Jaysh al-Islam, many of which later came together under the umbrella of the Islamic Front.²⁵ Meanwhile, Qatari-supported groups affiliated with al-Qaeda, like Jabhat al-Nusra, found a haven in Syria. But this use of jihadists began to

backfire. Instead of focusing their efforts on the Syrian regime, Qatari- and Saudi-backed jihadist groups have been engaged on two other fronts: fighting the Islamic State and fighting each other.²⁶

To make matters more complicated, nonstate actors within Qatar and Saudi Arabia, some of them princes with an eye on power, have been funding their own militant groups in Syria, even if those groups do not

act in line with Qatari or Saudi foreign policies. The Islamic State itself has received nonstate funding from the Gulf and elsewhere, although it does not rely on this funding as a core source of income. The funding offered by private actors in the Gulf is driven by their personal interests and political ambitions, as they use the jihadist groups they support as a bargaining tool to put pressure on their governments. The diversity of foreign patrons and their agendas and methods have contributed to clashes among Syria-based jihadist groups answering to those different patrons. The clashes have translated into an absence of a coherent military strategy among Qatari- and Saudi-backed jihadist rebel groups to fight both Assad and the Islamic State.

As the Islamic State grew in stature and wealth, it came to surpass Qatar-backed Jabhat al-Nusra as the most eminent jihadist group in Syria, leading some Jabhat al-Nusra brigades to join the Islamic State. The decline of Jabhat al-Nusra has been a severe blow to Qatar's gamble in Syria.²⁷

As the Syrian conflict has progressed, Qatar has faced evolving repercussions from its foreign policy. Jihadists from around the world, including from the Gulf, have joined militant Islamist groups in Syria, raising international and regional concerns about the domestic instability that could emerge in Gulf countries when these jihadists returned home from Syria. This concern led the United States to pressure Doha to halt its support for jihadists. Saudi Arabia,

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again under U.S. pressure but also driven by its own concerns about Gulf jihadists, who it came to see as a potential security threat across the Middle East, reshuffled its own leadership in response to security concerns arising from the trajectory of the Syrian conflict. The more moderate former interior minister Mohamed bin Nayef bin Abdulaziz al-Saud, who had handled Saudi Arabia's counterterrorism programs, took over the Syria file from hardline Prince Bandar. Saudi Arabia also pressured Qatar to cooperate with it more closely to support the moderate Syrian opposition within Syria, namely the Free Syrian Army.²⁸ In August 2014, international concern about Syrian-based jihadists led to the passing of a United Nations Security Council resolution against the channeling of funding to both the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra.

Qatar has begun to run out of options in Syria. International pressure coupled with the decline of Jabhat al-Nusra and Doha's Syrian political clients have put the country in a critical position. Qatar tried to resort once more to its trademark method of mediation to maintain its political currency, brokering deals with Jabhat al-Nusra to first release kidnapped Lebanese in 2013 and then release Syrian nuns who had been taken hostage in 2014. However, international praise for Qatar in those cases has been lukewarm because the efforts were overshadowed by larger security concerns about the Syrian conflict, such as its regional spillover with the advance of the Islamic State into Iraq.

Qatari Foreign Policy and Domestic Challenges

Qatar's foreign policy travails have taken place against a complex backdrop of domestic challenges. The pressure on Qatari foreign policy generated by the trajectory of developments in Egypt and Syria, particularly Riyadh's loss of patience with Doha, have exacerbated Qatar's domestic concerns. This has in turn refocused Emir Tamim's energies on internal affairs at the expense of foreign policy activities. A key domestic challenge that has increased as a result of Qatar's foreign policy activities and their international repercussions is Tamim's vulnerability in the face of local challengers.

Tamim inherited a state without strong state institutions: Decisionmaking in Doha follows a top-down model, directed by the emir and involving only him and his inner circle and family. There is no independent civil society to hold the government accountable and no parliament to vote on foreign or domestic policy decisions. The cabinet is handpicked by the emir, composed of either court loyalists or members of tribes that the emir seeks to appease.²⁹

Once in power, Tamim chose not to pursue serious institutionalization of state policymaking, a decision that was to a large degree due to his lack of trust in local Qatari players. Tamim ascended to power while facing challenges from

the religious establishment, supporters of his parents, and local princes with an eye on power.

The Council of Ulama in Qatar, which is the highest religious authority in the country, is Wahhabi with loyalty to Saudi Arabia. Its role has been curtailed since Tamim's father, Emir Hamad, took power in the 1990s. But the pressure that Saudi Arabia put on Qatar as a result of Doha's Egypt and Syria policies has translated into further potential for the council to reassert itself vis-à-vis Emir Tamim.³⁰

Following the departure of Hamad, differences have emerged between Tamim and his mother Mozah bint Nasser al-Missned regarding her influence on Qatari external relations. There are also tensions between Tamim and the director of the media network Al Jazeera, who is related to Tamim on both his mother's and father's sides. Coupled with Al Jazeera's association with the Muslim Brotherhood and its reputation as a mouthpiece for the Syrian revolution, which have hurt its credibility, those tensions led Tamim to launch a new media conglomerate under the name Al-Araby al-Jadeed, headed by the emir's closest adviser, Azmi Bishara. Al-Araby al-Jadeed is meant to become a rival to Al Jazeera and the major outlet for the Qatari state's views. In blessing the launch of this new outlet, Tamim is seeking to establish a voice that is independent from that of his parents.³¹ But Hamad has not been completely sidelined, although he has left the country. Before abdicating, Hamad set the Qatar National Vision 2030, which remains the guiding document for Qatar's economic and social development.³²

Tamim also faces challenges from Qatari tribes who see his ascension as an opportunity to take over Qatar—especially the Murra tribe, which attempted to overthrow his father in 1996.³³ This perception of Tamim by the Murra and other tribes is shared by a number of princes who also see a potential opportunity to gain political influence. Some of those princes are also responsible for funding jihadist groups in Syria outside of the realm of the Qatari state. Just as was the case with Hamad, Tamim has responded to challenges from local tribes and princes by appointing a significant number of their members to the civil service and to ministerial positions. The ministries in particular were reshuffled to this end in early 2014.³⁴

Concerns about Tamim's and the al-Thani regime's durability are keeping state institutions weak as institution building is overtaken by clientelism. State institutions that would allow power to devolve into the hands of policymakers other than the emir and his close circle are unlikely to be empowered given fears of a political coup. This weakens Qatar's ability to follow up on foreign policy initiatives taken by the emir, or to come up with long-term strategies to implement them.³⁵

An additional domestic concern for Tamim is the Qatari population's perception of their country's foreign and economic policies. Little is known about what Qatari citizens think about their government and state policies because

of the lack of public survey results, media freedom, or an independent civil society in the country. However, there is concern among Qataris about their government's expansive foreign and economic policies and about Qatar's negative perception among other Gulf citizens. These trends were revealed in the results of a confidential survey conducted by the Qatari state among youth to measure their attitudes toward the Qatar National Vision 2030. The results demonstrated that almost half of those surveyed did not agree with the vision and the other half did not know the vision existed.³⁶

Qatari citizens have also privately expressed disapproval of Qatar's foreign and economic policies in light of mounting Saudi pressure and international attention to their country's human rights violations and governance problems. Reports of violations and alleged corruption related to the World Cup 2022, which is supposed to be hosted by Qatar,³⁷ have been of particular concern. In addition, U.S. pressure on Qatar to stop funding jihadists in Syria and Gulf countries' push for Doha to downgrade its relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood have also raised eyebrows. As a result of these developments, Qatari intellectuals have begun to question their leader and their country's attempt to bolster its regional standing, seeing in them little that would actually benefit Qatari citizens.³⁸

Tamim has been alarmed by this domestic disapproval, as he does not want to lose his core constituents. In response, he has shifted his primary focus from foreign to internal affairs, channeling his energies toward cultivating his legitimacy domestically. The result has been diminished foreign policy involvement.

There is concern among Qataris about their government's expansive foreign and economic policies and about Qatar's negative perception among other Gulf citizens.

Lessons for Qatar and Saudi Arabia

Despite Qatar's attempts at increasing its regional influence and the internal contradictions within Saudi Arabia, Riyadh remains the strongest political player in the Gulf. The Kingdom has prevailed over Qatar in Egypt and Syria. Because of the centrality of this relationship, solutions necessarily address both countries.

In Egypt, Qatar has reacted to the decline of its ally the Muslim Brotherhood pragmatically by announcing its endorsement of the Sisi regime despite Doha's ongoing—and now low-key—support for the Brotherhood. But the long-term relationship between Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood is built on complex ideological, political, and economic ties that cannot be easily unraveled. Saudi Arabia must therefore recognize that Qatar is unable to completely abandon its major client and must instead try to push for a compromise as opposed to an all-out attack on the Muslim Brotherhood. Saudi Arabia's harsh line against the Brotherhood also has negative implications for Riyadh itself. Saudi backing of the Sisi government's crackdown on the Brotherhood is increasing popular anger and empowering Islamist extremism, as demonstrated by ongoing

terrorist attacks in the Sinai and the emergence of a number of jihadist cells across Egypt. These trends are not in Saudi Arabia's security interests.

In Syria, the situation is more complicated. Both Qatar and Saudi Arabia are hostage to the ailing Syrian opposition groups they have created or supported. As those groups have declined in the face of the rise of the Islamic State and the power of the Syrian regime, Qatari and Saudi influence in Syria has decreased, leaving both Gulf countries less empowered. The military losses incurred by the Free Syrian Army and Jabhat al-Nusra, the political losses of

Both Qatar and Saudi Arabia are hostage to the ailing Syrian opposition groups they have created or supported.

the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, and pressure from the United States to stop the flow of funds to jihadists have all pushed Qatar to modify its foreign policy toward Syria. Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, has also revised its Syria policy in light of similar challenges.

Qatar and Saudi Arabia are now coordinating with the United States and Turkey to try to unify and empower the Syrian opposition militarily. This cooperation is a significant step for the Free Syrian Army, and if it progresses efficiently, it would allow Syria's southern and northern fronts to coordinate strategically for the first time since the start of the conflict. International strategic cooperation is the only way to counter both the Assad regime and the Islamic State.

Neither Saudi Arabia nor Qatar can single-handedly control the jihadists funded by its nonstate actors. Both countries worry about the potential domestic backlash as a result of a complete crackdown on nonstate funders of jihadist groups. Qatar's new, young emir is particularly concerned about taking steps that might result in domestic instability and that would jeopardize his position. International coordination would strengthen both countries' counterterrorism agendas and harmonize efforts to eradicate the Islamic State.

The advance of the Islamic State into Iraq and its sparking of military intervention by the United States as well as of greater cooperation by Turkey is an opportunity that both Qatar and Saudi Arabia can capitalize on to coordinate more closely—and therefore more effectively—on counterterrorism. This also gives Qatar an opportunity to reclaim some of its regional clout, although not to the extent that would allow it to step outside Saudi Arabia's shadow. The threat presented by the Islamic State's advance has given Saudi Arabia and its archrival Iran a shared security concern, as Iran cannot tolerate a Sunni jihadist group taking over next door and Saudi Arabia is worried about internal instability caused by the flow of Sunni jihadism into the Kingdom. Hints of a potential coordination between the two countries began to emerge as they opened backchannel talks to address mutual security concerns. Qatar has always enjoyed cordial relations with Iran and can use this relationship to support multinational efforts to counter the growth of the Islamic State. However, Iranian-Saudi rapprochement means less room for Qatar to strike a path independent from Saudi Arabia's.

But for Qatar's foreign policy activities to be viable, domestic buy-in from the Qatari population is necessary. One of Doha's major shortcomings is that the ruling family has underestimated the impact of foreign policy on the domestic sphere. Qatar's emirs, including the current ruler, have conducted the country's foreign policy while largely disregarding the link between external actions and the internal environment. Meanwhile, at home, the population has grown skeptical about the country's international and regional reputation. The emir needs to address the concerns of his own citizens regarding where Qatar is going and how its political and economic policies can benefit its citizens while reflecting on foreign policy steps Qatar should take next.

Qatar should also engage with other Gulf countries carefully because in the Gulf, regional stability still trumps individual political ambitions. Qatar must find creative ways to resurrect its political standing, tarnished by its perception as an agent of instability in the Gulf, while maintaining cordial relations with its neighbors. Engaging in domestic political reforms that would give Qatari citizens a greater voice would be a positive way for Qatar's ruler to bolster his credibility and, by extension, his country's foreign policy decisions in the face of external and regional challenges. This requires acceptance that Qatar's foreign policy cannot recover its momentum without a solid, institutionalized state infrastructure.

Qatar has suffered from the rivalry with Saudi Arabia, but both countries must recognize that this rivalry has had a negative effect not only on the trajectory of the Arab uprisings, particularly in Syria but also on Qatar's and Saudi Arabia's own degrees of influence in the Middle East.³⁹ Saudi Arabia and Qatar must learn from their past and current mistakes, letting strategic cooperation overcome political rivalry. Such cooperation will be key to maintaining their political relevance. As such, how they choose to engage in Egypt and Syria in the near term is crucial for the future of their foreign policies. But Qatar's external influence is likely to remain under the watchful eye of Saudi Arabia in the foreseeable future.

Saudi Arabia and Qatar must learn from their past and current mistakes, letting strategic cooperation overcome political rivalry.

Notes

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