

Qatar's foreign policy: the limits of pragmatism

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One of the smallest Arab states, with an area of under 12,000 square kilometres and a native population of under a quarter of a million,¹ and yet the richest country in the world in terms of GDP per capita and the world's leading exporter of liquefied natural gas,² Qatar has risen in less than two decades to become one of the leading regional actors in the international relations of the Middle East. Qatar has been involved in so many conflicts in the region—mainly as a mediator and provider of humanitarian aid—that it has almost become expected that, whatever the conflict facing the region, the tiny emirate will find a role for itself within it.

This high profile for Qatar has been carved out through years of astute public diplomacy supporting an expansive foreign policy that has often seen the country hailed as the 'new Saudi Arabia'. Yet neither Qatari public diplomacy nor Qatari foreign policy is without challenges. While Qatar is often praised for its mediation in conflicts in the Middle East and elsewhere, its foreign policy does not appear to be based on a coherent political strategy. This lack of coherence has meant that despite perceived public diplomacy successes, such as the rise of the media network Al Jazeera or Qatar's winning the bid to host the football World Cup in 2022, Qatari public diplomacy, particularly during the Arab Spring, has come to suffer from a common ailment: the discrepancy between image and actions. The lack of a coherent strategy in its foreign policy makes Qatar susceptible to international and domestic sources of instability, in direct opposition to one of the main drivers behind Qatar's foreign policy, namely the maintenance of its own security and stability. The aim of this article is to offer a critique of Qatari foreign policy today through an assessment of its decisions and actions, and their implications.

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¹ See 'Qatar', *New York Times*, <http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/qatar/index.html>, accessed 8 Feb. 2013.

² Qatar possesses the third-largest gas reserves of any country. See Hugh Eakin, 'The strange power of Qatar', *New York Review of Books*, 27 Oct. 2011, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2011/oct/27/strange-power-qatar/?pagination=false>, accessed 8 Feb. 2013.

Drivers of foreign policy

Since the bloodless coup that brought the current Emir of Qatar, Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, to power in 1995,³ Qatar has been engaging in an ever-expanding foreign policy that has seen the country's regional and international profile rise exponentially. The key feature of Qatar's foreign policy is its role as a mediator and negotiator in a number of conflicts in the Middle East and elsewhere, for example in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Iraq, Israel and the occupied territories, Lebanon, Sudan and Yemen.⁴ In each of these situations, Qatar has prided itself on reaching out to warring factions to push them to reach political settlements or *rapprochements*, as well as providing humanitarian assistance. Decisions governing Qatar's engagement in such conflicts are highly centralized, the key decision-makers being the Emir, his heir apparent Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, and the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani. The restriction of much decision-making to this small circle has meant that foreign (and domestic) policy decisions can be made quickly, allowing Qatar to react promptly to emerging conflicts with offers of mediation.

While it can be argued that painting an image of the country as a benevolent mediator is a public diplomacy move by Qatar—since neutrality makes it easier to cultivate credibility among multiple audiences—there are more profound motivations behind Qatar's expansive approach to mediating conflict and, by extension, its foreign policy. The first motivation is the maintenance of its own security and stability. Qatar is located in the Arabian Peninsula, an area rife with political and military rivalries. By increasing its international profile, Qatar aims to protect itself from the perils of small-state anonymity and vulnerability⁵—perils of the kind from which Kuwait suffered in 1990.⁶ In addition, by engaging in mediation between conflicting factions such as the Houthis and the Yemeni government, or between Hezbollah and its allies on the one hand and the Lebanese March 14 bloc on the other, Qatar can be seen as attempting to contain those conflicts and prevent their spreading closer to home. This imperative becomes even more acute when one considers the role that Iran has been playing in those conflicts and in the Gulf specifically. Iran is Hezbollah's main supporter, and has established links with the Houthis in Yemen and a number of Shi'i movements in the Gulf. Qatar also shares the world's largest oilfield with Iran, and is acutely aware of Iran's own expansionist foreign policy goals in the region. By trying to mediate between Iran-backed non-state actors and their rivals, Qatar is attempting to counter Iranian influence in the Middle East generally, and more specifically in the Gulf, while maintaining cordial relations with Iran. Thus, in addition to general security

³ The current Emir of Qatar conducted the coup while his father was on holiday in Switzerland. They have since been reconciled.

⁴ Blake Hounshell, 'The Qatar bubble', *Foreign Policy*, May–June 2012, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/04/23/the_qatar_bubble?page=0, accessed 8 Feb. 2013.

⁵ Andrew F. Cooper and Bessma Momani, 'Qatar and expanded contours of small state diplomacy', *International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs* 46: 3, 2011, pp. 113–28.

⁶ David B. Roberts, 'Understanding Qatar's foreign policy objectives', *Mediterranean Politics* 17: 2, July 2012, pp. 233–9.

concerns, the role of Iran in the region can be seen as a distinct motivation behind Qatar's mediation of conflict in the Middle East.

The third motivation for Qatari mediation is a desire to expand its influence as a regional player, particularly *vis-à-vis* Saudi Arabia. The Saudi kingdom has traditionally played a leading role in conflicts across the region, for example during the Lebanese civil war. However, in recent years Saudi Arabian mediation has been vitiated by a perceived lack of neutrality, rendering the kingdom an active player as opposed to a neutral mediator. Saudi Arabia's close relationship with the March 14 political bloc in Lebanon, led by the Lebanese Saudi Saad Hariri, is a case in point. Qatar thus perceived a vacuum in Arab international relations which it has been attempting to fill. Its involvement in conflicts across the Middle East and beyond represents an effort to present itself as a viable alternative to Saudi Arabia and a potential new leader in the Middle East. This role was bolstered with Qatar's membership of the UN Security Council in 2006–2007, a period that saw the emirate increase its regional mediation and assistance activities. Yet Qatar has been careful not to overstep the boundaries of its own relationship with Saudi Arabia. Despite Qatar's perception of reduced Saudi influence in the Middle East (coupled with rising Iranian influence, which adds urgency to the perceived need for regional *Arab* leadership), the country remains careful not to go against the kingdom's own foreign and domestic policies. Thus, when the Bahraini uprising began in 2011, Qatar supported the Gulf Cooperation Council's mission—led by Saudi Arabia—to quell the rebellion,⁷ and when the Yemeni uprising that started the same year gained momentum, Qatar also supported the GCC initiative that moderated the trajectory of transition in Yemen, leading to a negotiated transition instead of a full overthrow of Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime. Although Qatar's relationship with Saudi Arabia over the years has been turbulent, a *rapprochement* was eventually reached in 2008, and has continued to become more firmly established, driven by Qatari *realpolitik* and the emirate's awareness of the limit of its own influence in the Gulf.⁸ Saudi Arabia remains the prevailing political power in the Arabian Peninsula, where Qatar does not yet have the opportunity or the capacity to play the number one leading role. And both countries share a concern about instability—and political transition—reaching their own territories, which pushes them more towards cooperation than confrontation.

Qatar's fourth motivation is appealing to and exercising leverage on the international community. The emirate has striven to establish itself as a recognized 'brand', defining itself as an international ally of the West.⁹ For example, the country is home to the forward headquarters of US Central Command and, until the 2008–2009 Israeli attack on Gaza, hosted the Gulf's only Israeli trade mission.¹⁰

⁷ Qatari military forces did not take part in the Peninsula Shield mission to Bahrain.

⁸ Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi, 'How Saudi Arabia and Qatar became friends again', *Foreign Policy*, 21 July 2011, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/07/21/how_saudi_arabia_and_qatar_became_friends_again?page=0, accessed 8 Feb. 2013.

⁹ Roberts, 'Understanding Qatar's foreign policy objectives'.

¹⁰ Qatar established trade relations with Israel in 1996, soon after the current Emir took power, and embarked on an expansionist foreign policy. This sparked wide criticism from other Arab states, which Qatar attempted to appease through aid and public diplomacy. Despite setbacks in Israeli–Qatari relations caused by developments

Qatar's presentation of itself as a key international ally has three benefits. First, it provides the country with security in a volatile region: the al-Udeid US Air Force base it hosts has 'the longest runway in the Middle East', while Camp as-Sayliyah is 'the U.S. military's largest pre-positioning base outside of the continental United States'.¹¹ Second, it furthers Qatar's aim of establishing itself as a modern, business-oriented state that is able to compete in the international economy.¹² Qatar's economic aims are underpinned by the need to guarantee gas exports and the simultaneous realization that long-term economic viability means moving beyond an oil-based economy. Third, international alliances divert attention away from Qatar's own political shortcomings. For example, despite the United States' strong rhetoric on the need for reform in the Arab world, Qatar (as well as Saudi Arabia) has managed to keep criticism of its own lack of democracy at bay owing to its position as a strategic, even indispensable, ally.

In addition to mediation, Qatar has also pursued an open-door policy towards various, often clashing, political actors in the region. It hosted Israel's trade office at the same time as providing a base for the Hamas leadership, and gave a home to Islamists such as Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi—who is close to the Muslim Brotherhood, a movement vocal in its criticism of Israel—while the Emir was conducting face-to-face meetings with Israeli leaders. Qatar can therefore be seen as creating friends and avoiding enmities by appealing to all sides at once while remaining within the lines of 'good neighbour' conventions in the Gulf, namely *vis-à-vis* Saudi Arabia—a classic example of political pragmatism. Its wide and varied network of 'guests' and 'partners' can also be seen as an example of political adaptation: Qatar seeks to identify emerging trends (and actors) and create a place for itself within those trends in order to maintain political currency.

Libya: a turning point?

Qatar's image as a detached mediator quickly changed with its involvement in the Libyan uprising of 2011. The emirate became the leading Arab country in the international action against the Gaddafi regime. Through monetary, military and logistical support, Qatar supplied Libya's rebels with weapons and equipment, provided them with infantry training, and helped them to continue the country's exports of refined petroleum products. Qatar acted as an interlocutor for the Arab League and Arab states that were pushing for international intervention in Libya, not only through formal diplomatic channels but also by means of

such as the second intifada of 2000, the Israeli trade office in Doha was only shut down after the attack on Gaza in 2008, when all its personnel were expelled. Since then, the Emir of Qatar has been trying to rekindle relations with Israel. The Emir remains the only Gulf leader who has met with Israeli leaders. See Uzi Rabi, 'Qatar's relations with Israel: challenging Arab and Gulf norms', *Middle East Journal* 63: 3, Summer 2009, pp. 443–59; Sam Dagher, Charles Levinson and Margaret Coker, 'Tiny kingdom's huge role in Libya draws concern', *Wall Street Journal*, 17 Oct. 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204002304576627000922764650.html>, accessed 8 Feb. 2013.

¹¹ David Roberts, 'Behind Qatar's intervention in Libya', *Foreign Affairs*, 28 Sept. 2011, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/68302/david-roberts/behind-qatars-intervention-in-libya?page=show>, accessed 8 Feb. 2013.

¹² Roberts, 'Understanding Qatar's foreign policy objectives'.

public diplomacy through the Al Jazeera network. Following the fall of Gaddafi, Qatar continues to be involved in Libyan affairs economically, politically and militarily. In addition to its facilitation of Libyan oil exports, in April 2012 the Qatar National Bank invested in a 49 per cent stake in the Bank of Commerce and Development in Benghazi.¹³ Qatar has also participated in national reconciliation meetings in Libya, as well as reportedly continuing to support Libyan rebels even after the killing of Gaddafi. Analysts observe that Qatar's involvement in Libya since 2011 goes beyond its 'familiar' foreign policy tactics centred on mediation. What might explain this involvement, and how does it fit within Qatar's broader foreign policy? Closer observation reveals that the shift is not as dramatic as it may first appear. Two key issues drove the shift into intervention.

First, Qatar's active intervention in Libya was partly motivated by its goal of appealing to and exercising leverage on the international community. In March 2011, Qatar was the first Arab country to grant recognition to Libyan rebels and the National Transitional Council, and in April 2011, under the umbrella of the Arab League's demand for a no-fly zone, it sent six Mirage fighter aircraft in the NATO-led campaign (although they did not participate in strikes), and helped Libyan rebels set up a satellite TV station, Libya al Ahrar, broadcasting from Doha,¹⁴ while hosting the Libya Contact Group to coordinate rebel activities—spending a reported total of US\$2 billion on supporting the rebels.¹⁵ These bold actions earned Qatar international praise from key allies—the United States, France and Britain—and consolidated its reputation as a 'heavyweight' ally for the West.¹⁶

Second, intervention was part of the process of adaptation Qatar had to undertake to sustain its leading regional position. Qatar's role as 'neutral' mediator was established during a time when the Middle East was dominated by apparently durable authoritarian regimes. As soon as the rules changed with the Arab Spring, Qatar had to adapt its methods quickly to stay ahead of the political game. The origins of this adaptation were detectable in Qatari responses to the uprisings in Egypt and Syria: in both cases, Qatar was initially hesitant in declaring a position against the incumbent regimes, having reached a *rapprochement* with the Mubarak regime in late 2010 and established ties with the Assad regime.¹⁷ An additional reason for that initial hesitation lay in sensitivity to Saudi Arabia's stance towards

¹³ Camilla Hall, 'Qatari bank expands reach in Middle East', *Financial Times*, 5 Sept. 2012, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/6a0714f4-f741-11e1-8c9d-00144feabdco.html#axzz2AKFCod7V>, accessed 8 Feb. 2013.

¹⁴ Clifford Krauss, 'For Qatar, Libyan intervention may be a turning point', *New York Times*, 3 April 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/04/world/middleeast/04qatar.html?_r=1&context=1, accessed 8 Feb. 2013.

¹⁵ Said El-Shahat, 'Qatar wa'rabi' al-'arabi' [Qatar and the Arab Spring], *Al-youm al-sabe'*, 6 Aug. 2012, <http://www1.youm7.com/News.asp?NewsID=750106>, accessed 8 Feb. 2013.

¹⁶ David B. Roberts, 'Punching above its weight', *Foreign Policy*, 12 April 2011, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/04/12/punching_above_its_weight?page=0,0, accessed 8 Feb. 2013.

¹⁷ In December 2010, the Emir of Qatar went on a high-profile two-day visit to Cairo to strengthen economic and diplomatic ties between Egypt and Qatar after a period of lukewarm relations. Less than a year before the Syrian uprising, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and the Emir of Qatar met twice in two consecutive months to discuss defence and economic collaboration. See 'Qatari emir Hamad, Syria's Assad meet to discuss Arab ties', *Daily Star* (Lebanon), 21 May 2010, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/May/21/Qatari-emir-Hamad-Syrias-Assad-meet-to-discuss-Arab-ties.ashx#axzz2Ilo6LmGX>, accessed 8 Feb. 2013.

the Egyptian and Syrian regimes, as expressed in the kingdom's initial call for 'stability' in those countries rather than revolution.¹⁸ But as soon as Qatar realized that the uprisings in those countries were likely to topple the current leaders, its public stance (and with it, coverage on Al Jazeera) changed, allowing Qatar to maintain that crucial yet cautious one step ahead of Saudi Arabia.

Qatar's adaptation of its foreign policy methods offers the emirate a way to retain its position as a political maverick in the region. Its involvement in the Syrian conflict following the uprising of 2011 is a vivid illustration of Qatar's striving to maintain its political relevance. Not only has Qatar been actively involved in arming Syrian rebels such as the Free Syrian Army, it has also successfully brokered the creation of an umbrella organization unifying the different factions of the Syrian opposition—the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, formed in November 2012 in Doha after 18 months of calls by the international community for the Syrian opposition to unite. The creation of this coalition responds to all of Qatar's foreign policy drivers: regional leadership; international relevance; countering Iranian influence (given Iran's backing of the Assad regime); and staving off instability (or at least attempting to do so). The coalition's bringing together of Islamist as well as secular factions also falls comfortably within Qatar's open-door policy regarding multiple political actors. However, the Islamist dimension in Qatar's foreign policy carries its own set of motivations and complications.

Qatar and Islamism

Qatar follows the same Wahhabi branch of Islam as Saudi Arabia, although its interpretation and application of Wahhabism are more moderate than its neighbour's. Qatar has also engaged in a degree of liberalization not seen in the kingdom, for example regarding women's rights. But the two countries share a concern about radical Islamism, and both have set up programmes to reform Islamist extremists. Both have also supported various Islamist groups, the most prominent being the Muslim Brotherhood with its various branches. Here Qatar and Saudi Arabia differ. Saudi Arabia has traditionally seen the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist group with political ambitions, as a potential political challenger, and thus has been cautious in its dealings with the group.¹⁹ In Mubarak's Egypt, Saudi Arabia was firmly on the side of the Egyptian regime, which engaged in a number of measures to curtail the Brotherhood's political plans.²⁰ Despite this, it would be misleading to assume that Saudi Arabia and the Brotherhood were completely antagonistic: the kingdom has been one of the main funders of the Muslim Brotherhood for decades, and the Brotherhood's rise in post-revolution Egypt

¹⁸ Al Qassemi, 'How Saudi Arabia and Qatar became friends again'.

¹⁹ Angus McDowall, 'Rise of Muslim Brotherhood frays Saudi-Egypt ties', Reuters, 1 May 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/05/01/us-saudi-egypt-brotherhood-idUSBRE8400ZM20120501>, accessed 8 Feb. 2013.

²⁰ Dan Murphy, 'Egypt cracks down on Muslim Brotherhood ahead of elections', *Christian Science Monitor*, 24 Nov. 2010, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2010/1124/Egypt-cracks-down-on-Muslim-Brotherhood-ahead-of-elections>, accessed 8 Feb. 2013.

has, contrary to initial speculation, brought it closer to Saudi Arabia, which so far seems to have good relations with the new President, Mohammed Morsi.²¹

Qatar, on the other hand, has been one of the key backers of the Brotherhood for decades, this relationship being more comfortable than that between the Brotherhood and Saudi Arabia. Qatar has used Al Jazeera to express public support for the Brotherhood, hosted its leaders in Doha, and given it financial support.²² For example, Qatar granted the Egyptian scholar Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi an important public platform in the form of his own popular religious show on Al Jazeera, and he acted as one of the vocal supporters of the Arab revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria that have been championed by Qatar.²³ From the 1990s onwards, Qatar also hosted a number of Libyan Islamists, mainly from the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG).²⁴ Among these was Ali al-Sallabi, who had been jailed in Libya on charges related to attempts to assassinate Gaddafi. Al-Sallabi moved to Qatar in 1999, after which he accepted a reconciliation with Gaddafi led by Qatar and went back to Libya to start an Islamist de-radicalization programme. Ali al-Sallabi and his younger brother Ismail ended up playing prominent roles after the 17 February Revolution, the first as a politician and the second as a rebel leader.²⁵ Another former LIFG leader supported by Qatar is Abdul Hakim Belhaj, who became the commander of the Tripoli Military Council during the 17 February revolution. In August 2011, Qatar arranged a meeting between Belhaj and NATO officials—a meeting considered controversial because the LIFG was designated as a terrorist organization by the United States in 2004, even though Belhaj had renounced his past activities.²⁶ The cases of al-Sallabi and Belhaj illustrate the long-term, mutually beneficial and personal relationships between Qatar and certain Islamists, aimed at cultivating their loyalty to the emirate.²⁷ As with Qatar's involvement in state-level activities, its relationship with Islamists can be seen as a tool supporting its foreign policy goals of fending off instability and maintaining regional leadership.

However, the Libyan case is complicated, because not only has Qatar supported Islamists by supplying rebels with weapons to fight Gaddafi, the emirate has reportedly continued to send weapons to Libya since the fall of Gaddafi, sparking concern

²¹ Robert Dreyfuss, 'Saudi Arabia and the Brotherhood: what the "New York Times" missed', *The Nation*, 13 July 2012, <http://www.thenation.com/blog/168871/saudi-arabia-and-brotherhood-what-new-york-times-missed#>, accessed 8 Feb. 2013.

²² Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi, 'Morsi's win is Al Jazeera's loss', *Al-Monitor*, 1 July 2012, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2012/al-monitor/morsys-win-is-al-jazeeras-loss.html>, accessed 8 Feb. 2013; Sultan Al Qassemi, 'Breaking the Arab news', *Foreign Policy*, 2 Aug. 2012, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/08/02/breaking_the_arab_news?page=0,1, accessed 8 Feb. 2013.

²³ Guido Steinberg, 'Qatar and the Arab Spring: support for Islamists and new anti-Syrian policy', *SWP Comments*, no. 7, Feb. 2012, http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2012Co7_sbg.pdf, accessed 8 Feb. 2013.

²⁴ The LIFG had tried to oust Gaddafi before he defeated it, and has since 2011 rebranded itself as the Libyan Islamic Movement for Change.

²⁵ Dagher et al., 'Tiny kingdom's huge role in Libya'.

²⁶ Roberts, 'Behind Qatar's intervention in Libya'.

²⁷ On the personal nature of relationships with Islamists close to the Muslim Brotherhood, see Ahmed Azem, 'Qatar's ties with the Muslim Brotherhood affect entire region', *The National*, 18 May 2012, <http://www.thenational.ae/thenationalconversation/comment/qatars-ties-with-the-muslim-brotherhood-affect-entire-region>, accessed 8 Feb. 2013.

within Libya's interim government about the impact of this on the country's stability.²⁸ In November 2011, Libya's United Nations envoy, Mohammed Abdel Rahman Shalgam, told Reuters: 'There are facts on the ground, they [Qatar] give money to some parties, the Islamist parties. They give money and weapons and they try to meddle in issues that do not concern them and we reject that.'²⁹ In January 2012, *Time* magazine claimed that Qatar also appeared to be interfering in internal Libyan government affairs, namely with regard to national security.³⁰

The official Qatari explanation of the country's relationship with radical or formerly radical Islamists was aired in an interview by the Emir of Qatar with Al Jazeera on 7 September 2011, in which he is reported to have said that 'he believed radical Islamists whose views were forged under tyrannical governments could embrace participatory politics if the promise of real democracy and justice of this year's Arab revolts is fulfilled. If so, the Qatari ruler said, "I believe you will see this extremism transform into civilian life and civil society."³¹ While this statement falls in line with Qatar's parameters of engagement with Islamists over the past decade, it offers only a partial view of Qatari motivations.

Qatar's support for Islamists, particularly in Libya, can be traced to a number of factors. First, support is a form of outreach and engagement that can avoid enmities through cooptation. As outlined above, Qatar has had a long-term relationship with various Islamist groups and individuals, some of whom occupy a central position in engagement (such as the Muslim Brotherhood) and others with whom engagement is more tangential. This may explain the alleged links between Qatar and radical Islamists in contexts like Mali.³² While there is no evidence to date of Qatari state support for Islamists in Mali,³³ it is plausible that Qatari individuals may be involved in funding such groups in an effort to exert influence and deflect potential instability closer to home.

Second, support to Libyan rebels may be strategically useful regarding the conflict in Syria, as Libyan rebels have been reportedly providing assistance on the ground to their counterparts within the Syrian opposition.³⁴ In November 2012 it was revealed that Libya had been the Syrian opposition's main source of finance,

²⁸ Steven Sotloff, 'Why the Libyans have fallen out of love with Qatar', *Time*, 2 Jan. 2012, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2103409,00.html#ixzz2BSnzRUOr>, accessed 8 Feb. 2013.

²⁹ Souhail Karam, 'Libya U.N. envoy says Qatar arming Islamists', Reuters, 18 Nov. 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/11/18/us-libya-qatar-idUSTRE7AH15R20111118>, accessed 8 Feb. 2013.

³⁰ Sotloff, 'Why the Libyans have fallen out of love with Qatar'. Sotloff writes: 'Some Qatari officials have indeed exerted influence in Libyan politics. During deliberations to choose a new Cabinet in September, a senior Qatari official was seen huddled with the outgoing Defense Minister, allegedly trying to guide appointments to sensitive security positions.'

³¹ Dagher et al., 'Tiny kingdom's huge role in Libya'.

³² 'Nord-Mali: le Qatar accusé de financer les groupes islamistes de l'Azawad', *Jeune Afrique*, 6 June 2012, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/ARTJAWEB20120606170458/algerie-mali-islamistes-terrorisemenord-mali-le-qatar-accuse-de-financer-les-groupes-islamistes-de-l-azawad.html>, accessed 8 Feb. 2013. See also 'France launches unprecedented campaign against Qatar role in Mali', *Middle East Online*, 4 Feb. 2013, <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=56782>, accessed 11 Feb. 2013.

³³ Qatari Prime Minister Hamad bin Jassim publicly denied the existence of such support in January 2013. See 'PM denies meddling in Mali', *The Peninsula*, 30 Jan. 2013, <http://thepeninsulaqatar.com/qatar/223824-pm-denies-meddling-in-mali-.html>, accessed 11 Feb. 2013.

³⁴ Christopher M. Blanchard, 'Qatar: background and US relations', Congressional Research Service paper, 6 June 2012, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL31718.pdf>, accessed 8 Feb. 2013.

providing half of the Syrian National Council's budget, with Qatar being the next largest source of funds.³⁵ With the Muslim Brotherhood playing a prominent role within the Syrian National Council (SNC), the strength of Qatar's support for the SNC is no surprise. However, Qatar's hosting of the unity summit for the Syrian opposition in Doha in November 2012 was not warmly welcomed by the SNC, which saw it as a measure that would decrease its own influence.³⁶ In this context, the Qatari-led unity summit is an example of Qatar's carefulness to avoid being seen as too one-sided in its associations (including regarding Islamists), while also allowing it to showcase its position as the region's prime mediator and power broker.

Finally, as argued above, Qatar has always striven to adapt to political trends, and the Arab Spring has seen Islamists becoming more influential across the region. Qatari military and monetary support for those groups translates into political influence. Thus, while Qatar may be capitalizing on its existing warm relationships with various Islamist groups, its support for Islamists can also be seen as a reactive measure to a change in the political status quo across the Middle East. This particular factor highlights a key shortcoming of Qatari foreign policy: it remains largely iterative, rather than being based on long-term political foresight.

Qatar's public diplomacy revisited

It has been widely acknowledged that Qatar pursues a sophisticated public diplomacy effort—aimed at both Arab and international audiences—that supports its foreign policy. The key pillars in this effort are Qatar's engagement in high-profile cultural and educational endeavours; humanitarian aid; and Al Jazeera. All three pillars have been largely successful in winning hearts and minds, yet each (particularly the latter two) carries specific challenges.

Since the 1990s, Qatar has been stepping up the scope and level of its foreign aid, reaching impoverished people in conflict zones in places as diverse as Lebanon, Gaza and Mali. In each of those places, Qatar has set up charities, engaged in reconstruction programmes and announced plans for investment. After the 2006 attack by Israel on Lebanon, banners proclaiming 'Thank you, Qatar' as well as the Qatari flag could be seen across a number of villages in the south where Qatar had pledged to rebuild mosques and infrastructure destroyed in the war. The Emir of Qatar's visit to Gaza in 2012 marked the first such visit by an Arab head of state to the Hamas-controlled area, and carried with it plans for investment as well as renewed hopes for reconciliation between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority. Those two cases mark an astute move by Qatar to appeal to citizens across sectarian and political divides. In doing so, Qatar has been able to place itself as a friend of the downtrodden Arab citizen, particularly with respect to the

³⁵ 'Libya helps bankroll Syrian opposition movement', *Washington Post*, 5 Nov. 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/libya-helps-bankroll-syrian-opposition-movement/2012/11/05/98cd728a-2764-11e2-b2a0-ae18d6159439_story.html, accessed 8 Feb. 2013.

³⁶ Regan Doherty and Rania El Gamal, 'Syrian opposition group demands central role at unity talks', Reuters, 6 Nov. 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/11/06/us-syria-crisis-qatar-talks-idUSBRE8A50NF20121106>, accessed 8 Feb. 2013.

ongoing conflict with Israel. However, the limits of Qatar's humanitarian interventions and foreign aid quickly became apparent following persistent instability in Lebanon and a renewed Israeli attack on Gaza in late 2012, just weeks after the Emir's visit. In view of these developments, Qatar's impact in those regions can be seen as enjoying only a temporary, rather than a long-term, boost.

In Mali, the Qatari Red Crescent has recently been active in supporting refugees and coordinating humanitarian interventions otherwise rejected by Islamists in the north, who oppose engagement with the International Red Cross.³⁷ As the president of the Mali Red Cross, Abdourahmane Cissé, said in August 2012: 'It has been very difficult to access populations in the north, but with the intervention of the Qatar Red Crescent, we are able to do more.'³⁸ Qatar's acceptance by Islamist groups not only stems from its being a Muslim country but may also be traced to the establishment by Qatar and other Gulf countries of Islamic charities in northern Mali and the Sahel as far back as the 1980s, earning it credibility on the ground.³⁹ Yet Qatari humanitarian aid to Mali has sparked rumours, spearheaded by Algeria—reportedly unhappy with Qatar's support of most Arab Spring revolutions⁴⁰—that Qatar is using humanitarian missions as an excuse to send weapons to armed groups in northern Mali, prompting the Qatari Red Crescent Society to issue a statement denying this allegation in June 2012.⁴¹ This statement signals a degree of discomfort within Qatar about being seen as too close to Islamists: while influencing Islamists is desirable, being seen as 'in bed' with them works against Qatar's aims of achieving wider political sway.

The establishment of Al Jazeera in 1996 has been a crucial factor in the trajectory of rising Qatari foreign influence. As is well documented, Al Jazeera is the Arab world's first 24-hour news network. It gained popularity shortly after its birth because it was seen as the only Arab alternative to global channels such as the American CNN. It later capitalized on this success with its intensive coverage of the second Palestinian intifada in 2000, and by being the first to air video messages by Osama bin Laden after the attacks of 11 September 2001. But Al Jazeera's groundbreaking features were its declared 'independence' in a media landscape saturated by state media, and its unashamed criticism of Arab leaders across a number of countries. In an Arab world used to a preponderance of state-owned television channels that were mere propaganda outlets for leaders, Al Jazeera presented a new dynamic of engagement with the region's politicians that involved actual criticism of their actions and stances. Although this decision on the part of Al Jazeera led

³⁷ 'Maktab midani lil-hilal al-qatari bishamal mali' [Field office for Qatari Crescent in northern Mali], *Al-Arab*, 2 Feb. 2012, <http://www.alarab.qa/details.php?issueId=1664&artid=196503>, accessed 8 Feb. 2013.

³⁸ Regan Doherty, 'Qatar Red Crescent to send relief aid to Mali's rebel-held north', Reuters, 2 Aug. 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/08/02/us-mali-qatar-idUSBRE87112T20120802>, accessed 8 Feb. 2013.

³⁹ 'RE: Canard Enchaîné, Qatar in northern Mali and Algeria', *The Moor Next Door*, 10 June 2012, <http://themoornextdoor.wordpress.com/2012/06/10/re-canard-enchaîne-qatar-in-northern-mali-and-algeria/>, accessed 8 Feb. 2013.

⁴⁰ Kristian 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, Durham University, no. 3, Oct. 2012, <http://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/alsabah/SmallStateswithaBigRole.pdf>, accessed 8 Feb. 2013.

⁴¹ AFP, 'Qatar aid workers deny backing Mali rebels', *The Peninsula*, 20 June 2012, <http://www.thepeninsulaqatar.com/qatar/199443-qatar-aid-workers-deny-backing-mali-rebels-.html>, accessed 8 Feb. 2013.

to the closure of its offices in a number of Arab countries, it ultimately won it the hearts and minds of Arab audiences. In this, Al Jazeera became an example of successful public diplomacy, reaching out directly to individual citizens and speaking their language.⁴² In 2006 Al Jazeera set up an English version of the channel to make contact with a global audience, becoming the first pan-Arab channel to compete directly with western broadcasters such as CNN and the BBC.

Al Jazeera was also the public platform through which Qatar presented itself as a challenger to Saudi Arabia. After the Saudi-owned channel Al Arabiya was launched in 2003, its rivalry with Al Jazeera and their mutual criticisms of their respective backers became a major feature of analysis of the Arab media landscape.⁴³ Although this rivalry eventually ended after Qatar and Saudi Arabia reached an off-air *rapprochement* (and despite this outcome's leading to questioning of the true degree of Al Jazeera's 'independence'), its main benefit was to paint an image of Qatar as almost on a par with Saudi Arabia in terms of influence and importance, an image on which Qatari foreign policy has been capitalizing.

The story of Al Jazeera is not just one of change in the Arab media landscape. It is also a story of the ambition of a small Gulf state to use this global platform to magnify its size and importance. The early success of Al Jazeera set a template for Qatari public diplomacy, its guiding principle to bid for the world's attention. Following Al Jazeera, Qatar has been engaging in increasingly ambitious plans to attract the world's gaze to itself, from luring some of the United States' and UK's leading universities and think-tanks to establish branches on its land, to bidding for—and winning—hosting of the 2022 World Cup, to leading charitable and educational programmes across the Arab world. The Emir's wife, Sheikha Mozah, is widely seen as the visionary behind these initiatives. Unusually for the wife of a Gulf leader, Sheikha Mozah enjoys a high public profile and is internationally recognizable both for initiatives like the Qatar Foundation—which funds educational initiatives in Qatar and abroad—and for her fashion sense. She often appears alongside the Emir in public engagements, for example during their historic visit to Gaza in 2012. Although it is not certain how much autonomy Sheikha Mozah enjoys in the context of the endeavours with which she is associated, her polished image and her active international agenda have themselves transformed her into a key pillar of Qatar's public diplomacy.

Al Jazeera's story, however, is not without its setbacks. The channel's broadcasting of 'scoop' videos by Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden after the September 11 attacks and its firm stance against the invasion of Iraq in 2003 led to sharp criticism—and, some speculate, possible attack—by the United States. Yet Al Jazeera has proved to be quite resilient in the face of criticism, not only through bargaining with American diplomats, as the WikiLeaks cables revealed,⁴⁴ but

⁴² Lina Khatib, 'Public diplomacy in the Middle East: dynamics of success and failure', in Ali Fisher and Scott Lucas, eds, *Trials of engagement: the future of US public diplomacy* (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff, 2011).

⁴³ Mamoun Fandy, *(Un)Civil war of words: media and politics in the Arab world* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2007).

⁴⁴ Anthony Shadid, 'Qatar wields an outsize influence in Arab politics', *New York Times*, 14 Nov. 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/15/world/middleeast/qatar-presses-decisive-shift-in-arab-politics.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0, accessed 8 Feb. 2013.

also through pursuing its own line independently of other Qatari initiatives. For example, while Al Jazeera was openly criticizing the American invasion of Iraq, Qatar was playing host to the US Central Command. Thus Qatar managed to appease Arab public opinion through Al Jazeera while engaging in the kind of pragmatic foreign policy that maintained its good relations with its western allies. Qatar proved to be a shrewd political player, able to gain friends on both diplomatic and popular—public levels by reaching out to different constituencies using tools tailor-made for each audience.

However, the Arab Spring has presented a tough challenge for Al Jazeera's credibility. After an initial surge in popularity due to the channel's intensive coverage of the Egyptian revolution, the channel was faced with the conundrum of the Bahraini uprising that coincided with the Libyan one. While Al Jazeera fully embraced the Libyan uprising as a legitimate rebellion, its lukewarm stance towards the Bahraini case appeared contradictory to its image as a supposed champion of Arab freedom. It also revealed the limits of the channel's self-promoted 'independence' from the Qatari state.⁴⁵ This situation was exacerbated with the resignation of the Director-General of Al Jazeera, Waddah Khanfar, in September 2011, and his replacement with a Qatari from the royal family, Sheikh Ahmed bin Jassim bin Mohammed Al Thani.⁴⁶

The Arab Spring coverage and Khanfar's resignation both point to a discrepancy between Qatar's image and its actions, which poses a fundamental challenge to the credibility of public diplomacy measures. At the same time, Al Jazeera's enthusiastic embrace of the Syrian uprising against the Assad regime led the channel on occasion to broadcast inaccurate reports and unverified or fake footage.⁴⁷ This served to damage rather than help the Syrian opposition in its struggle for international recognition. In this sense, Al Jazeera as a Qatari public diplomacy tool began to lose its lustre. The challenges to Qatar's public diplomacy also stem from its being firmly connected with the country's foreign policy. While, normally, the narrower the gap between public diplomacy and foreign policy, the more credible the public diplomacy message, in the case of Qatar the lack of a gap between the two has not countered challenges, and that is because the country's foreign policy itself—with its heavy reliance on pragmatism and adaptation—appears to be lacking a coherent strategy.

The limits of pragmatism

An examination of Qatari foreign policy reveals the delicate balance that Qatar is trying to maintain between internal and regional (Gulf) stability and a claim to broader political influence. Qatar's foreign policy is far-reaching; however, it

⁴⁵ Lina Khatib, *Image politics in the Middle East: the role of the visual in political struggle* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013).

⁴⁶ Amira Huweidi, 'Does the resignation of Al Jazeera Director-General signal a change in state policies?', *Middle East Monitor*, 26 Sept. 2011, <http://www.middleeastmonitor.com/articles/middle-east/2858-does-the-resignation-of-al-jazeera-director-general-signal-a-change-in-state-policies>, accessed 8 Feb. 2012; Al Qassemi, 'Morsi's win is Al Jazeera's loss'.

⁴⁷ Al Qassemi, 'Breaking the Arab news'.

appears not to be based on a cohesive political strategy but rather to be reactive, playing catch-up with political trends instead of setting them. Qatar still has some way to go before being in a position to mount a credible challenge to Saudi Arabia's influence in the region—despite the latter's declining influence over the past decade.

Qatar's preferred foreign policy method is mediation, a clever tactic that avoids taking sides and thus maintains its position of 'neutrality' and status as 'everyone's friend', which can be translated into wider influence. However, although Qatari mediation has been typically hailed as a success, a closer look reveals that its effects are limited to the short term. Mediation between the Yemeni government and the Houthis in 2007 did not result in a lasting truce between the two sides. In Lebanon, the Doha Accords of 2008 may have halted street violence but did nothing to prevent the country from slipping back into greater instability and tensions between rival political coalitions. The mediation between the Taliban and western officials that began in 2010 is yet to yield results, despite Qatar's offer to open an office for the Taliban in Doha.⁴⁸ The Hamas–Fatah talks that Qatar helped broker in February 2012 and Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa's visit to Gaza in October 2012 may aid the formation of a Palestinian unity government, but it remains to be seen whether this will lead to long-term change.⁴⁹ In short, much of Qatar's outreach has been occupied in brokering temporary measures that have served to boost the country's image and standing among other Arab countries and its western allies, but have not always succeeded in changing the political status quo. One reason for this is the centralization of foreign policy decision-making in the hands of, at best, four people.⁵⁰ While centralization allows quick reactions, the lack of departmental deliberations, coupled with a limited foreign policy infrastructure, highlight a gap between decisions and implementation, and a lack of adequate professional capacity for follow-up on mediation efforts. In addition, Qatari mediation before the Arab Spring was conducted in an environment that was comparatively stable. It is much more difficult for Qatar to play this role within the unpredictable context of democratic transition.

The Arab Spring also catalysed a change in dynamics, leading Qatar to abandon mediation in favour of more direct action. Yet Qatar remains careful not to act unilaterally, without pan-Arab support, or to cross the line of what is acceptable to Saudi Arabia. Qatar's taking sides in the Arab Spring is not a departure from the country's preferred path but an example of its political pragmatism and adaptation of methods to suit the political context. Nevertheless, even this adaptation is not without risks. These risks have a domestic and an external dimension.

Domestically, political adaptation highlights the informal dimension of political decision-making in Qatar. All domestic policies, like their foreign counterparts, are top-down decisions made primarily by the Emir and the prime minister.

⁴⁸ Eakin, 'The strange power of Qatar'.

⁴⁹ Robert Tuttle and Nicole Gaouette, 'Emir turns Qatari riches into power behind Middle East', *Bloomberg Businessweek*, 5 Nov. 2011, <http://www.businessweek.com/news/2012-11-04/emir-turns-qatari-riches-into-power-behind-middle-east#p2>, accessed 8 Feb. 2013.

⁵⁰ If Sheikha Mozah is included in addition to the Emir, his heir and the prime minister.

While this kind of informal politics may have served Qatar well until now, with the Arab world beginning to see demands for real political institutions, Qatar is likely to find its credibility challenged if it fails to engage in serious domestic reforms. Shortly after the start of the Arab Spring, between 14 March 2011 and 6 February 2012, 60 Qatari citizens held regular dialogue meetings during which political and economic reform in the emirate was discussed and proposed. The pamphlet resulting from these meetings, entitled *Qataris for reform*, highlights key concerns, such as the lack of public consultation on domestic and foreign policy, lack of access to information on public affairs, and the lack of boundaries between the private and the public, with policy recommendations for the Qatari state to address those shortcomings.⁵¹ Such growing domestic pressure is slowly starting to attract international attention as well.⁵²

Qatar also performs poorly on the political rights and civil liberties fronts, with a classification as 'not free' on the Freedom in the World 2011 index,⁵³ and a ranking of 138 out of 167 on the Democracy Index 2011.⁵⁴ The year 2013 began with an increasing international focus on the sentence of life imprisonment handed out to the Qatari poet Mohammed al-Ajami the previous year on charges of 'inciting to overthrow the ruling system' and 'insulting the emir' because he recited a poem in which he criticized Arab rulers who 'import all the West has to offer' except 'law and freedom'; regional and international attention to the case pointed out the contradiction between the sentence and the polished image Qatar tries to project outwards.⁵⁵

Despite Qatar's championing of democracy in the Arab world, the country remains without an independent legislature or political parties, and it does not have independent civil society organizations. In October 2011, at the peak of Qatar's involvement in the Arab Spring, the Emir promised that elections would take place for the first time in the second half of 2013 (a promise first made, but without a set date for implementation, in 2003),⁵⁶ but until then the country remains run under a 'largely unaccountable system of governance'.⁵⁷ Some observers see the promise of elections—and the lack of follow-up to date—as a public diplomacy measure, attributing it to Qatar's interest in appearing 'forward thinking',⁵⁸ an attempt to head off criticism about its support of oppositions abroad but not within, rather than to a serious commitment to reform. Meanwhile, Qatar has followed the trend of other Gulf countries in trying to distract their citizens from

⁵¹ The full pamphlet is available from the website of Dr Ali al Kuwari, <http://dr-alkuwari.net/sites/akak/files/qatarisforreform-translation.pdf>, accessed 8 Feb. 2013.

⁵² See e.g. Tim Franks, 'Sporting events shine spotlight on Qatar's human rights', BBC News, 25 Jan. 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-21202067>, accessed 8 Feb. 2013.

⁵³ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2011*, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2011/qatar>, accessed 8 Feb. 2013.

⁵⁴ Bahrain lagged only six places behind, at 144. See Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2011*, http://pages.eiu.com/rs/eiu2/images/EIU_Democracy_Index_Dec2011.pdf, accessed 11 Feb. 2013.

⁵⁵ Franks, 'Sporting events shine spotlight on Qatar's human rights'.

⁵⁶ David B. Roberts, 'The Arab world's unlikely leader: embracing Qatar's expanding role in the region', POMED Policy Brief, 13 Mar. 2012, http://pomed.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/POMED-Policy-Brief_Roberts.pdf, accessed 8 Feb. 2013.

⁵⁷ Eakin, 'The strange power of Qatar'.

⁵⁸ Roberts, 'The Arab world's unlikely leader'.

thoughts of political change by handing out money: in September 2011, the first year of the Arab Spring, the government announced significant salary increases for its public sector workers.⁵⁹ The investment that Qatar is making in domestic education is also likely to be indirectly responsible for change in the long term, as a new generation of educated, globalized Qataris emerges, who are unlikely to be satisfied with an informal system of governance. The lack of long-term planning for Qatar's political future can only increase the chances of future domestic political upheaval. Domestic contradictions, coupled with scepticism about Al Jazeera's editorial line, may also have a negative impact on the credibility of Qatari public diplomacy.

On the external front, while reaching out to many different groups and interests can serve to assert Qatar's position as a leading regional actor, maintain the loyalty of supported groups, moderate extremism and keep insecurity at bay, it has also meant that the country risks overextending its network of co-opted and supported political clients. Already its desire to influence multiple players, especially emerging leaders, has led to further engagement with potentially volatile parties like some Islamist rebels in Libya and in Syria. The possibility that Qatari individuals may be involved in relationships with radical Islamists may also work against official state policy in the long term. The tendency to 'pick winners', particularly among Islamists, may increase international scepticism towards Qatar's motives. Moreover, Qatar's reliance on business ties to lubricate political relationships has proved to give Qatar only limited diplomatic influence (as evidenced by what happened in Syria after the 2011 uprising, or in the case of tensions with Algeria). All those factors may eventually damage rather than serve Qatar's political ambitions. Although Qatar appears to be a country with clear political ambitions, it does not seem to possess a coherent, long-term political strategy to realize those ambitions. Instead, Qatar's foreign policy strategy can be seen as based on opportunism and promiscuity—and thus carries a high risk of volatility.

⁵⁹ Roberts, 'The Arab world's unlikely leader'.

