

The Arab World's Unlikely Leader: Embracing Qatar's Expanding Role in the Region

by David B. Roberts

SUMMARY

Geopolitical changes in the 1990s pushed Qatar to rethink its position in the region, and with the ascension of Emir Hamad to the throne in 1995, this tiny Gulf state began pursuing a dynamic and distinct foreign policy that elevated its visibility on the world stage.

In the wake of the Arab Spring, Qatar has abandoned its previous policy of serving as a neutral mediator in regional conflicts and has led efforts to support protest movements in both Libya and Syria.

Committed to easing tensions between the Sunni and Shi'a sides of the Gulf, Qatar seeks to strike a balance in its policies that antagonizes neither Iran nor Saudi Arabia.

Qatar's image as a champion for democracy in the region, however, is inconsistent with its lack of democratic credentials, as well as with its relative silence on Bahrain—a country in which Saudi Arabia's hard line precluded Qatar from playing a more active role.

Qatar's embrace of all political actors has sometimes rankled the United States, but the U.S. should capitalize on Qatar's relationships to accurately navigate the changing political landscape in the region while also encouraging Qatar to develop its own democratic credentials.

Since the early 1990s, when geopolitical changes forced Qatar to rethink its place in the region, this tiny Gulf state has pursued a dynamic foreign policy that has allowed its strategic influence to exceed far beyond its physical size. Cultivating relations with both Iran and Israel—much to the chagrin of other Arab states—was an early method for Qatar to differentiate itself from the staid politics of the region. More recently, Qatar has harnessed its huge financial and media resources, significant diplomatic power, and gamut of Islamist connections to become a regional leader in responding to the Arab Spring. While some of Qatar's policies have drawn the ire of the United States, Washington would do well to capitalize on the areas where the two countries' interests align in support of democracy movements in the region. The U.S. should also help encourage the development of Qatar's own democratic credentials so that this regional actor can boost both its domestic and international legitimacy, and show that Arab states can indeed be successful democracies.

ADAPTING TO GEOPOLITICAL SHIFTS

Two aphorisms capture Qatar's place in the international system until the mid-1990s: Doha was “the most boring place in the Gulf” and Qatar was “known for being unknown.” In short, Qatar purposefully avoided the international limelight, preferring to rest under the aegis of Saudi Arabia.

However, geopolitical changes pushed Qatar to rethink its policies in the region. At the start of the decade, Kuwait was invaded by Iraq. The invasion of a small, energy-rich state surrounded by significantly larger neighbors was an analogy that Qatar could not fail to miss. Around the same time, tensions with Saudi Arabia escalated as Riyadh blocked Qatar's plans to export its prodigious gas supplies in the Gulf. Previously considered little more than a by-product for the development and sale of oil, gas became an important resource in its own right, increasing Qatar's strategic significance. A border skirmish between Qatar and Saudi Arabia further worsened the bilateral relationship.

There were two immediate ramifications stemming from these developments. First, the break in diplomatic relations between the United States and Qatar in the late 1980s over the latter's possession of Stinger missiles was soon resolved as the U.S. sought bases in the region in the run up to Operation Desert Storm. Second, Hamad bin Khalifah Al Thani, Qatar's then Crown Prince, became ever more convinced that Qatar must pursue a vastly different policy than that of his father if it was to secure its own interests and prosper. By 1995, Crown Prince Hamad had amassed enough domestic power to overthrow his father, Khalifah Al

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Thani, in a bloodless coup. Despite several Saudi-backed counter coup attempts to restore Khalifah, Emir Hamad consolidated his rule and profoundly reshaped Qatar’s geopolitical position.

EMERGENCE OF A REGIONAL POWER

Any and all opportunities were taken to augment Qatar’s status and visibility on the regional level, and then on the world stage. Harnessing its vast oil and gas wealth, Qatar began hosting top level sporting events as well as the World Trade Organization Ministerial Conference in 2001; broadcasting Al Jazeera, the government-backed but mostly independent TV news channel that has forever changed the docile media industry in the Middle East; and, from the 2000s onwards, increasingly serving as a mediator in the region’s most intractable conflicts.

In addition, Qatar stepped up its engagement with both Iran and Israel. In 1996, with the opening of an Israeli trade office in Doha, Qatar became the first Gulf state to recognize Israel and receive top-level ministerial visits. Qatar also sought to normalize its relations with Iran, and even invited its Shi’a neighbor to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) meeting in 2007, much to the surprise and anger of Gulf leaders. Unsurprisingly, these relationships were perennially under pressure from other Arab states.

Such policies were highly effective in differentiating Qatar not only from its fellow GCC states, but also from its own previous policies. Qatar slowly carved a niche as an unusual and mature diplomatic actor, eschewing the staid and typical policies of most Arab states.

QATAR AND THE ARAB SPRING

By the time the Arab Spring swept across much of the Middle East and North Africa, Qatar was already well established as a state with a reach and an influence far exceeding its physical size. Its role in negotiations in Lebanon, Darfur, between Ethiopia and Eritrea, and between the Houthis and the Yemeni government had established Qatar’s pedigree as a neutral, well-resourced, and dedicated mediator. Though it was not always successful—such as in Yemen where various ceasefires broke down—Qatar had an effective combination: a non-threatening posture, lack of *realpolitik* interests in the countries in question, significant financial inducements, and nimble rapid responses in the face of crisis thanks to a lack of bureaucratic impediments.

Yet in Libya, and increasingly in Syria, Qatar has changed tack and overtly supported one side, encouraging the Arab League to vote for a Western-backed military no-fly zone to help the Libyan rebels. A highly unusual geopolitical climate, in which revolutionary fervor coupled with general distaste among Arab states toward Muammar Qaddafi, enabled Qatar to pursue this new policy of intervention. Against a backdrop of democratic uprisings, Arab states worried that their own populations may rise up in protest if they did not support action against a brutal dictator. In Doha, the decision to intervene was driven by the elite’s personal mantra that “Arabs should solve Arab problems,” as well as by a desire to elevate Qatar’s status on the international scene as the *de facto* leader of the Arab world.

Qatar supported the Libyan rebel cause with money, supplies, arms, military training, full-throated diplomatic support, and six Qatari Mirage fighter-jets patrolling the skies. Such policies carried risks: not only could Gaddafi have remained in power, leaving Qatar with an unstable mortal enemy with a history of sponsoring terrorism, but Qataris on the ground could have been captured—or worse, killed—with serious domestic ramifications for the Qatari elite.

There are now similarities in Syria. Despite grave concerns of Bashar Assad seeking reprisals against Qatar or, should a post-Assad Syria descend into chaos, Qatar being accused of hastily seeking his removal without proper planning, Qatar nevertheless sacrificed billions of dollars of investments in Syria and has led efforts to topple Assad—first by pushing the Arab League to suspend Syria’s membership and now by donating up to \$100 million to the Syrian opposition amidst its calls for the international community to arm them. As in Libya, Qatar needed a pliant international atmosphere to pursue its activist policy. In the face of Assad’s gross human rights violations, much of the Arab world has supported efforts to oust a leader whose close alliance with Iran already caused tensions.

QATAR’S DOUBLE STANDARDS?

Noticeably, Qatar is the only Arab state that has not faced increased agitation among citizens during a period of regional upheaval. Nevertheless, the government has taken conciliatory measures. In September 2011, it announced salary increases of 60 percent and 120 percent for public sector workers and Qatari Armed Forces officers, respectively. This move, however, was not motivated by public pressure, but rather by a desire to appear as generous as its neighbors pursuing similar policies. Similarly, the Emir reiterated a long-held but delayed promise to hold elections for Qatar’s parliament as per the approved 2003 constitution; this was not so much a necessary reaction to domestic pressure but a way for Qatar to retain its position as a forward-thinking leader in the region. Despite false promises in the past, it seems likely that these elections will take place in 2013. Whether they will lead to a “democratic” Qatar is a different question. Not only would this elected parliament have limited powers, but given the extent of tribal, familial, and other informal links, fundamental institutional reforms would be needed for Qatar to begin a genuine process of democratization.

Inconsistency between Qatar’s lack of democratic credentials and its support of democracy movements elsewhere in the region has often been noted. Even in its foreign policy, Qatar has been selective in backing uprisings, as demonstrated most clearly by its relative silence on Bahrain. Why, many question, did Qatar not seek to intervene there if it really is a moral crusader?

The answer is quite simple: basic geopolitical realities precluded Qatar from acting in Bahrain. Not only was Qatar leery of potentially weakening a fraternal Sunni monarchy, but any efforts to mediate or ease tensions would have profoundly fractured its relations with its key neighbor, Saudi Arabia. The elite in Riyadh viewed the predominately Shi’a uprising in Bahrain as an existential threat because of what it meant both for its own Shi’a

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population (located near Bahrain and the majority of Saudi’s oil facilities and fields) as well as for its regional rivalry with Iran.

Privately, Qatar has been urging the Bahraini government to address the grievances of its people and to ease sectarian tensions. Having mediated between the various factions in Lebanon’s fractured political system, Qatar’s elite knows the dangers of marginalizing a certain segment of the population. Moreover, with little sectarian strife at home—Qatar’s Shi’a minority (representing seven percent of Qatari nationals) is very well integrated—Doha has the luxury of adopting a more nuanced approach to the region. Indeed, there are fears that Saudi Arabia’s explicit internationalization of the Bahraini uprising—namely through the GCC Peninsula Shield Force intervention—may backfire. Qatar is not alone among Gulf states in fearing that this external interference to “protect” Bahrain from a questionable Shi’a threat may actually become a self-fulfilling prophecy; Bahrain could potentially become the site of a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

SAUDI ARABIA’S RED LINES

Qatar can hardly control Saudi Arabia; indeed, their relationship has often been fraught with tension. Years of antagonistic Al Jazeera coverage, Qatar’s unappreciated diplomatic olive branches to Iran and to Israel, and personal enmity stemming from Saudi support for at least one coup against Emir Hamad bin Khalifah Al Thani culminated in the departure of the Saudi ambassador from Doha in 2003. It took five years for Saudi Arabia to come to terms with the fact that Qatar was a sovereign diplomatic actor pursuing independent policies: in 2008 the Saudi ambassador finally returned to Doha, albeit amid assurances that Al Jazeera’s reporting of the Kingdom would be toned down, which it duly was.

Despite the resumption of diplomatic relations, Saudi Arabia still maintains red lines, particularly concerning Bahrain and Iran. And while Qatar resolutely prefers engaging rather than confronting Iran and stoking sectarian tensions, it recognizes that there are limits to its divergent policy.

In fact, Qatar remains as wary of the Iranian threat as Saudi Arabia and pursues a more conciliatory approach precisely for this reason. In particular, with Qatar and Iran sharing the world’s largest gas field, Qatar fears that its natural gas reserves could be in jeopardy, as they were in 2004 when the Iranian Revolutionary Guard attacked and stole equipment from unmanned Qatari gas platforms. Moreover, Qatar would likely be pulled into any war between Iran and Saudi Arabia or the United States, and thus seeks to calm relations between the Sunni and Shi’a sides of the Gulf. Herein lies the key concern for Qatar in the foreseeable future: striking a balance that antagonizes neither Iran nor Saudi Arabia.

THE TENSE BUT CRITICAL QATAR-U.S RELATIONSHIP

Similar to its relationship with Saudi, Qatar’s relationship with the United States has suffered from its embrace of all political actors. Alleged incidents of Qataris, including members of the royal family, supporting or facilitating terrorism raised significant concerns in the U.S both in the lead up to and wake of 9/11. American

politicians also roundly criticized Qatar for maintaining links to and financially supporting groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah. As John Kerry noted after a visit in 2009, “Qatar cannot be an ally of America on Monday that sends money to Hamas on Tuesday.” Al Jazeera’s coverage of the Iraq war was also typically perceived to be explicitly anti-American, further stoking tension. Relations started to improve when Qatar began to cooperate on terrorist financing issues and the U.S. accepted—much as Saudi had—that Qatar’s dynamic foreign policy would not always align with its own strategic interests.

Yet Qatar and the U.S. need not have overtly cordial relations as long as the fundamentals of the relationship remain intact. The U.S.-Qatar relationship is based first and foremost on security guarantees, with the U.S. expanding its military presence in Qatar since the Gulf War. Today there are two critically important U.S. bases in Qatar, one of which is the largest U.S. prepositioning base outside of continental America, while the other has served as the command center for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Given the strategic importance of these bases both for U.S. operations in the region and for Qatar’s own security, Qatar and the U.S. recognize that neither can afford to jeopardize the relationship.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In the wake of the Arab Spring, the U.S. has found Qatar to be an exceedingly useful ally. Its unique position as an ally for numerous Islamic actors—relationships cultivated over decades—has enabled it to play the critical role of interlocutor. For example, Qatar hosted discussions between NATO and Abdel Hakim Belhaj, the leader of an influential anti-Gaddafi militia as well as former Emir of the Al Qaeda-aligned Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, who was rendered by the U.S. in 2004 to a secret prison in Bangkok. Similarly, Qatar is currently an intermediary between the U.S. and the Taliban, having agreed to host a Taliban office in Doha. In terms of Syria, Qatar has been the site of numerous international meetings regarding the future of Syria, which have included key Syrian opposition figures such as Ali Sadr al-Din al-Bayanouni, former General Supervisor of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria. These examples show Qatar’s long-term game plan coming to fruition whereby it offers not only a platform for a range of speakers to make their case, but also a place for key western allies and a range of ‘problematic’ Muslim groups to meet and discuss their issues. The United States should:

- *Capitalize on Qatar’s relationships with a wide spectrum of actors to accurately map the contours of the Arab Spring political fallout and engage in dialogue with these new loci of power.* It is becoming ever clearer that Qatar is singularly fashioning a place for itself as a mediator between a number of Islamist groups (Hamas, the Taliban, various Libyan factions, etc.) and Western countries. Moreover, as one of the few Sunni Arab countries with links to Iran as well as Hezbollah, Qatar is uniquely positioned to play a role in easing sectarian tensions in the region. It has the skills, the speed of action, and the money to grease the diplomatic wheels, as well as the interest to take such a provocative role. The U.S. must continue to avail itself of this asset, as it is doing with the Taliban, in order to understand the new post-Arab Spring political dynamics and to establish, maintain, and augment ties with those new to power.

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- ***Encourage the elite in Doha to pursue a more multilateral approach to addressing international problems.*** Qatar has made a name for itself as an independent actor with a dynamic, distinct foreign policy. Yet Qatar's efforts to pursue its self-interest do not need to be as aggressively unilateral as they sometimes are. For example, Qatar's individual calls for arming the Syrian opposition rather than reaching consensus within the Arab League have been met with skepticism at a time when the highly volatile climate requires a circumspect international response. By contrast, policies that are endorsed by a variety of actors will be stronger and more credible. As the U.S. increasingly relies on regional allies to respond to crises in their respective neighborhoods, this multilateral approach will also ease potential U.S. concerns of individual states battling it out for regional hegemony.
- ***Encourage Qatar to stick to its promise of holding parliamentary elections in 2013.*** While parliamentary elections themselves will not bring about significant changes in Qatar, they can serve as an opportunity for discussion about further democratic reforms. Although Al Jazeera rarely focuses its coverage on Qatar's internal politics, it should seize this moment to stimulate debate about the country's domestic issues. Qatar's credibility as a leader in an evolving region will be strengthened by a commitment to advancing reforms back home.
- ***Further explore with Qatar's elite the possibility of hosting the 5th Fleet in Qatar, given Bahrain's deteriorating security situation.*** Unrest in Bahrain continues unabated and could escalate to the point that the U.S. may be forced to reconsider Manama as the location for the 5th Fleet. Qatar offers one of the few viable options for relocating the 5th Fleet within the region, even if only on a temporary basis. Advance preparation is needed for both political and practical considerations—dredging requirements for a new port currently under construction could be impacted by an additional military base.
- ***Pressure and support Qatar to improve its record in human trafficking as it has remained on the U.S. State Department's 'Tier 2 Watch List' for three years.*** Despite promising rhetoric and the passage of select human trafficking laws, Qatar has not taken meaningful action on this issue. Either through private diplomatic channels or through support for established charities focusing on this topic, the U.S. should encourage Qatar to take tangible steps to reduce human trafficking. While assuming leadership on this topic may not be popular domestically since it would add bureaucratic "impediments" to businesses, it would further augment Qatar's reputation as a cutting edge regional leader striving to pursue positive change.
- ***Push the elite in Qatar (and Israel) to re-establish an Israeli trade office in Doha.*** Reportedly, Qatar is willing to reopen the Israeli trade office in Doha after suspending diplomatic ties with Israel in the wake of the 2009 Israeli offensive on Gaza. Recent offers, however, were contingent upon Qatar sending large quantities of construction material into the Gaza Strip—a condition Israel (and Egypt) rejected. Yet the resumption of trade ties would help allay Israeli fears of rising hostility from across the Arab world and would strengthen Qatar's position as a leader in the region. While the days of the late 1990s when Qatar was discussing selling gas to Israel may be some time away, reopening the trade office would be an important first step in getting the relationship back on track.