

Łukasz FYDEREK 

Jagiellonian University

lukasz.fyderek@uj.edu.pl

THE HYPERACTIVE FOREIGN POLICY OF A RENTIER STATE

THE CASE OF QATAR

ABSTRACT The article examines Qatar's foreign policy during the reign of Emir Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani (1995–2013), focusing on the foundations and instruments of its ambitious, hyperactive, and transformative approach. It highlights how this small rentier state developed and adapted its foreign policy strategy over time. Article frames the hyperactive foreign policy of a small state as a temporal phenomenon, pointing out to the unintended consequences of a hyperactive foreign policy leading eventually to its recalibration.

Keywords: rentier state, foreign policy analysis, Qatar, hyperactive foreign policy, GCC, resource rent

In international relations, it is uncommon for small states to adopt a hyperactive foreign policy. A superpower-style approach seeks to reshape the international environment rather than merely adapt to it. When small states pursue political objectives that extend beyond safeguarding their security and economic well-being, they risk clashing with major powers, overextending their limited resources, and ultimately undermining their own security and global standing. During the latter half of the 20th century and into the early 21st, several small states engaged in such ambitious foreign policies – most notably Libya under Muammar Gaddafi, Venezuela under Hugo Chávez, and Qatar under Emir Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani. In each case, the focus was on transforming the international order rather than advancing narrowly defined national interests. Two common features characterise these instances:

- 1) a resource-rich rentier state economic model, and
- 2) the presence of a charismatic leader operating within an authoritarian regime.

The above characteristics indicate conditions that are favourable but certainly insufficient for a small state to begin pursuing a foreign policy aimed at transforming its international environment. However, it can be assumed that the lack of real political opposition and the concentration of material resources not derived from taxed (dispersed) economic activity create conditions in which charismatic leaders may decide to set ambitious, superpower-like foreign policy goals and attempt to achieve them.

Debate on the rentier state started since Hazem Beblawi and Giacomo Luciani in their influential 1987 study demonstrated that rentier states are defined by economies heavily reliant on external rents – mainly from natural resources such as oil – featuring underdeveloped domestic productive sectors, limited citizen participation in generating this wealth, and governments that act as the main recipients and distributors of these rents to sustain political legitimacy.¹ Despite the differences by scholars on rentier state theory, the consensus persists, that resource rent creates a ‘social contract’ where citizens receive benefits and services in exchange for political acquiescence and the lack of taxation reduces demands for representation and accountability.²

This study analyses the internal sources and international context of Qatar’s foreign policy, attempting to answer two research questions: First, what are the means and instruments by which a small state pursues a power politics? Second, what are the consequences of a small state’s hyperactive policy, and under what conditions does a small state’s power politics undergo recalibration, becoming proportional to its limited size and resources?

Qatar’s hyperactive foreign policy became an attractive research topic for a number of studies. Its sudden rise to one of most influential Middle Eastern states in the first decade of the 21st century brought it to the attention of number of scholars. Mehran Kamarava characterised Qatar during this period as a ‘subtle power’ namely a state being highly effective in mobilisation of resources and able to skillfully develop opportunities to its advantage. The subtle power of Qatar was based on its enormous financial wealth, and its strategic use of its sovereign wealth fund, as well as its carefully calibrated foreign policy

¹ H. Beblawi, G. Luciani, *The Rentier State*, London 1987.

² M.L. Ross, *The Oil Curse: How Petroleum Wealth Shapes the Development of Nations*, New York 2012.

of hedging³. Kamarava acknowledged the important role of personal charisma and international ambitions of Sheikh Hamad Khalifa al Thani, ruling Qatar from 1995 to 2013.⁴

While Kamarava's analysis is more focused on forms of power wielded by the small state and the structural circumstances allowing it, Diana Galeeva's approach is more focused on political economy of a resource-rich rentier state. She extends the analysis of rentier politics beyond traditional economic rent-seeking domestic aspects to explain how resource wealth can be converted into international influence. She argues that Qatar's regional prominence results from strategic use of its resources and systematic cultivation of proxy relationships across diverse sectors – from religious movements to media organisations to sports bodies – creating a web of influence that amplifies Qatar's reach far beyond what its size would traditionally allow.⁵

This analysis of Qatar foreign policy charts the middle way between personalistic explanation of Qatar's hyperactive foreign policy and those based on the political economy of rent. This analysis of Qatar's foreign policy is based on the assumptions of an elite-centred foreign policy model, compatible with the realistic paradigm of international relations. According to this model, foreign policy is formulated by a narrow elite, largely isolated from internal pressures from society, public opinion, or the media.⁶ This is particularly evident in the case of Qatar, whose political system – an absolute monarchy – favours the isolation of the political elite from the interests and aspirations of its citizens. That provides the fertile ground for a charismatic and ambitious political leader, such as Hamad Al-Thani, to mobilise resources for a creative and hyperactive foreign policy. On the other hand, a political economy based on resource rents ensures that the economic needs of the population can be met and leaves the political elite with significant free resources that can be used to pursue an ambitious foreign policy. The foreign policy decision-making process is free from constraints typical of non-rentier states. Political decisions, including those concerning foreign policy, are made by a small group of autonomous decision-makers and implemented by a professional, but hierarchical bureaucratic apparatus with a limited ability to reflect on and influence policy-making centres.

THE ORIGINS OF QATAR'S ACTIVE FOREIGN POLICY

Qatar is a country with a population of approximately 2.5 million, but only about 300,000 citizens. The country is located on the Qatar Peninsula in the eastern part of the Arabian Peninsula, on the Persian Gulf. Qatar's main natural resources are natural

³ M. Kamarava, *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics*, New York 2015.

⁴ M. Kamarava, "Qatari Foreign Policy and the Exercise of Subtle Power," *International Studies Journal*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2017), p. 91.

⁵ D. Galeeva, *Qatar: The Practice of Rented Power*, London 2022.

⁶ Cf. P. Robinson, "The Role of Media and Public Opinion," in S. Smith, A. Hadfield, T. Dune (eds), *Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, Cases*, Oxford 2008, p. 148.

gas and oil, the export of which is the main source of the country's income. Politically, Qatar is a hereditary absolute monarchy ruled by the Al Thani family. From the moment it gained independence in 1971 until the end of the 20th century, the country pursued a rather low-profile foreign policy. Qatar's main area of interest was its relations with its closest neighbours – traditional rivalry with Bahrain and correct but distrustful relations with the United Arab Emirates. Like other small oil monarchies in the region, in their foreign policy, the emirs of the Al Thani family recognised Saudi Arabia's regional leadership for years, and the emirate's foreign activities were consulted with the government in Riyadh. The emirate's foreign strategy in the first two decades of its independent existence was very often about supporting the politics of its powerful Saudi neighbour. This situation only changed after the alteration of central power in 1995.

Qatar's foreign activism only emerged after 1995, although it is worth noting that the country already met both of the above-mentioned preconditions: it had political rent and an authoritarian political system with high autonomy of a ruler. It should be noted that these conditions are characteristics that distinguish a number of small states in the Middle East. In particular, the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf: Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and, to a lesser extent, Bahrain and Oman meet the above criteria. However, of these countries, only Qatar attempted to play the role of a regional power in the early years of the 21st century. Two additional factors contributed to the emirate's exceptional international activity. The first was the charismatic personality of Emir Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, the ruler who ascended the throne in Doha as a result of an internal palace coup, during which he removed his father from power in 1995. Emir Hamad, who had been the heir to the throne since 1977, paved the way for a more ambitious foreign policy for the emirate and expressed his dissatisfaction with his father's neo-vassal policy towards Saudi Arabia. By removing his father from power, the young emir violated the unwritten rules of succession in the region, which was met with reluctance by the monarchs of Saudi Arabia and the smaller emirates on the Persian Gulf. These experiences strengthened Emir Hamad and the group of Qatari aristocrats surrounding him in their pursuit of an ambitious foreign policy.

The second catalyst for Qatar's international activism was the exceptionally large inflow of funds into the state treasury, unprecedented even for a wealthy oil-producing country in the Persian Gulf region. Qatar, which had been a major oil exporter since the 1960s, also began exporting liquefied natural gas (LPG) after 1995. In the following years, the exploitation of the world's largest gas reservoir, the North Field, located partly in Qatari territorial waters, provided Emir Hamad and the Qatari elite with almost inexhaustible resources to pursue their foreign policy goals.

Thanks to liquefied natural gas exports in the first decade of the 21st century, Qatar became the richest country in the world in per capita terms, and its growing wealth gave the ruling family not only considerable financial resources, but also greater confidence on the international stage. Qatar began to function as an important supplier of raw materials, which are crucial for the functioning of the economies of influential countries.

In 2013, Qatari supplies met a significant portion of the gas demand in, among others, Belgium (40%), Canada (83%), China (38%), France (19%), India (85%), Japan (18%), South Korea (33%), Kuwait (86%), Spain (23%), Taiwan (50%), the United Arab Emirates (84%), the United Kingdom (93%), and the United States (8%).⁷

Since Emir Hamad came to power, Qatar has begun to develop relations primarily with Arab countries and the United States. Relations with the superpower were multifaceted, but their main vector was Qatar's desire to improve its security by strengthening military relations with the hegemonic power. This goal was achieved when Qatar offered the Americans the establishment of an air base on its territory, in Al-Udeid. In 2001, this proposal met the needs of the US, which was looking for a forward air base at the time to conduct operations against the Afghan Taliban.

The strengthening of relations with Arab countries took place both on the diplomatic and economic levels. In the latter case, Qatar was primarily a source of investment, so necessary for the non-oil economies of the region, such as Syria, Tunisia, and Egypt. In addition to developing bilateral intergovernmental relations, which were often personal in nature thanks to the involvement of Emir Hamad and Prime Minister Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani, Qatar also built political contacts with Muslim opposition political organisations, the most influential of which was the Muslim Brotherhood. Qatar's political activity caused a lot of tension with the governments of Arab countries, which perceived the transnational Muslim Brotherhood organisation as a serious threat.

Qatar's regional political ambitions became particularly evident after the outbreak of mass protests in many Arab republics in 2011. The removal from power of the presidents of Tunisia and Egypt, followed by the outbreak of fighting in Libya, Yemen, and Syria contributed to the creation of a power vacuum in which Arab oil monarchies, including primarily the most powerful of them, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, which pursued an active foreign policy aimed at bringing about lasting political change in Arab countries, sought to build influence. The main arena for this rivalry was Tunisia and Egypt, two North African republics where the Muslim Brotherhood or groups associated with it were the best-organised opposition force to the old regimes. From the beginning of 2011, the extremely different attitudes of Qatar and Saudi Arabia towards this organisation began to emerge. While Qatar supported the group using a wide range of means, from public diplomacy to financial support, Saudi Arabia very quickly began to support all political forces opposed to the Muslim Brotherhood's dominance in the changing political scene of the North African republics.

However, before the events of 2011, Qatar had been developing its tools of influence on the countries of the region for a decade and a half. These were of a 'soft power' nature, the most important of which were relations with non-state actors, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, and media tools, especially the Al Jazeera media complex.

⁷ D.B Roberts, "The Four Eras Of Qatar's Foreign Policy," *Comillas Journal of International Relations*, npo. 5 (2016), pp. 1-17.

QATAR'S RELATIONS WITH THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD

Qatar's close relations with the Muslim Brotherhood date back to the 1960s. At that time, the emerging education system of the small emirate was based on Egyptian models. A large part of the teaching staff also came from Egypt, and a significant number of Egyptians seeking employment in the Persian Gulf region were supporters or activists of the Muslim Brotherhood, which was persecuted in Egypt at the time. Supporters of the Brotherhood who held high positions in the Qatari education system also invited influential activists and ideologues of the movement, such as Muhammad Kutb, Muhammad al-Ghazali, and Abdul Wafa al-Tahtazani, to Qatar.⁸

Despite the influence of Muslim Brotherhood members on the emirate's intellectual elite, Salafism remained the dominant form of political Islam in the emirate. The main reason for this is the genealogy of the ruling Al Thani family, which originates from the same tribal federation (Bani Tamin) of the Arabian Peninsula as the tribe of the founder of Wahhabism, Muhammad al-Wahhab.⁹ The importance of Salafism in the emirate's internal politics was symbolically emphasised when, in 2011, the newly opened national mosque in Doha was named after the founder of Wahhabism himself. These strong historical and institutional influences of Salafism meant that the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood's ideas within the state of Qatar was and remains limited. The Brotherhood's preachers and ideologues, led by Yusuf al-Qaradawi, had freedom of action within the emirate, but the Qatari ruling elite did not give the Brotherhood much opportunity to influence the local population. However, the situation was different on the international stage. The foreign activities of the Muslim Brotherhood's preachers and the activities of the organisation's foreign cells were financially and organisationally supported by Qatar.

The symbiotic relationship between the Muslim Brotherhood and the state of Qatar developed over the last four decades of the 20th century, when Qatar did not pursue an active foreign policy and was a rather insignificant player on the inter-Arab scene. The ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood, which enjoyed considerable prestige and support and had numerous sympathisers in many Arab countries, gave Qatari foreign policy certain opportunities to exert influence in the region and raised the status of the small emirate. Qatar's growing importance in the region at the turn of the century did not bring about a significant change in its approach to the Muslim Brotherhood. Even in the new political reality, the ideology and organisational structures of the Brotherhood were seen by the Qataris as an effective tool for building influence in the region. This became particularly evident with the launch of Al Jazeera television in 1996, whose programming was strongly inspired by the political ideals of the Muslim Brotherhood.

⁸ D.B. Roberts, "Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood: Pragmatism or Preference?," *Middle East Policy*, vol. 21, no. 3 (2014), pp. 84-94.

⁹ The terms Wahhabism and Salafism are used interchangeably in this article. It should be noted that although the term Wahhabism is widespread in political science literature, the followers of this doctrine refer to themselves as Salafis – following in the footsteps of As-Salaf as-Salih – the orthodox ancestors.

In 2011, with the outbreak of the Arab Spring, the Qatari political elite, seeking at that time to emphasise the emirate's important role in the Middle East, used their excellent and historically established relations with the Muslim Brotherhood as a foreign policy tool. It was probably recognised that in countries such as Tunisia, Yemen, Egypt, and Syria, after the overthrow of secular presidents, it was the Muslim Brotherhood that had the best chance of achieving political victory, whether through democratic elections or through mass social mobilisation and street demonstrations. These calculations were not without basis. In the highly fragmented political scene of the Arab authoritarian republics ruled for decades by secular dictators, there were virtually no well-organised opposition groups with a clear and attractive ideology other than the Brotherhood. The overthrow of presidents who had ruled for decades and the secular-nationalist parties that supported them created a political vacuum. Thanks to its tactics of influencing the population through religious, social, and charitable organisations, the Muslim Brotherhood appeared to be one of the few movements with real structures and the ability to gain broad political support. The decision of the Qatari elite to strongly engage with the Brotherhood was therefore based on both historical reasons – the long-standing symbiosis between the Muslim Brotherhood and Qatar's foreign policy – and pragmatic ones – rational forecasts regarding the development of the political situation in Arab countries undergoing transformation.

AL JAZEERA

Another important tool for conducting foreign policy was the Al Jazeera satellite television channel, founded in 1996 by Emir Hamad Al Thani. Qatar was a pioneer in using the popular, high-circulation satellite medium to build its image and, in subsequent years, to pursue its foreign policy goals. It should be noted here that the thesis, often formulated in literature, about the influence of the Qatari ruling family on Al Jazeera's activities has been met with opposition from the station's management and authorities, who point to the independence and professionalism of the television station. However, Mehran Kamrava, a long-time researcher and observer of the Qatari political scene, notes that: *Regardless of the loud denials made by the television network, the links between Al Jazeera and Qatari foreign policy (...) cannot be denied or ignored.*¹⁰

Al Jazeera was the first modern news channel in the Arab world to use a large budget to present professional and impartial journalism. It provided viewers with a product comparable in quality to American or British news stations, but presenting a point of view closer to Arab and Muslim viewers. This was reflected, for example, in its coverage of events in Afghanistan and Iraq from the perspective of groups fighting against American domination, or in its presentation of a clearly pro-Palestinian perspective in its reporting on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.¹¹ These features, together with a professional

¹⁰ M. Kamrava, *Qatar. Small State, Big Politics...*, p. 75.

¹¹ O. Kessler, "The Two Faces of Al Jazeera," *Middle East Quarterly*, vol. 19, no. 1 (2012), pp. 47-56.

team of journalists and an interesting program lineup, made the station extremely popular among Arabic-speaking viewers in the Middle East. It also contributed to breaking the information monopoly of state-run news channels, which exist in every Arab country, and the Qatari station's criticism of the governments of large Arab countries was accepted by viewers as proof of the channel's impartiality.¹² The station's growing popularity during the first decade of the 21st century made Al Jazeera more than just a tool for Qatari nation branding. The media conglomerate, owned by the Qatari ruling family, not only became the fifth most recognisable brand in the world, but also transformed into a means of influencing millions of viewers. This development was made possible by the commitment of enormous resources: the station's annual budget in 2010 was approximately \$650 million.¹³

The coordination between foreign policy and the station's activities became particularly evident after 2011. The station was criticised for following Qatar's political line through two types of activities: 1) publicising and uncritically reporting on events perceived as beneficial from Doha's point of view, 2) avoiding and silencing topics inconvenient for the Qatari ruling family. Both tendencies became apparent with the outbreak of the Arab Spring. The station devoted hours of airtime every day to reporting and commenting on the protests in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. During the same period, the suppression of topics difficult for Qatar became particularly noticeable when the station ignored the mass anti-royal protests in neighbouring Bahrain. Although the mass protests by citizens in Pearl Square in Manama were no different in scale and significance from the events taking place on the streets of Tunis, Cairo, or Tripoli during that period, the station omitted them from its coverage. Criticized by viewers and media monitoring organisations, Al Jazeera aired an extensive documentary program on the events in Bahrain, but the broadcast was only available to English-speaking viewers.¹⁴ The selective approach to reporting events contributed to tensions within the journalistic team and resulted in the station being placed under stricter control, as evidenced by the replacement of the long-standing director of the station (who was Palestinian) with a new one, who was a member of the Qatari ruling family¹⁵ [6].

Tal Samuel-Azran, analysing Al Jazeera's activities, pointed out that the station's *modus operandi* changed depending on the conditions of the international political environment. Under normal circumstances, the station functioned similarly to private news networks, building a loyal audience base through committed, high-quality journalism. However, in times of crisis, when Qatar's interests were threatened, Al Jazeera began to format its message in accordance with the rules of state networks, i.e., by silencing

¹² T. Samuel-Azran, "Al-Jazeera, Qatar, and New Tactics in State-Sponsored Media Diplomacy," *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 57, no. 9 (2013), pp. 1293–1311.

¹³ E. Dickinson, "The Case Against Qatar," *Foreign Policy*, 30 September 2014, at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/09/30/the-case-against-qatar/>, 23 April 2024.

¹⁴ M. Kamrava, *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics...*, p. 77.

¹⁵ G. Steinberg, "Qatar and the Arab Spring. Support for Islamist and New Anti-Syria Policy," *SWP Comments*, no. 7, February 2012, pp. 1–8, at https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2012C07_sbg.pdf, 23 April 2023.

unfavourable content and publicising facts and promoting narratives favourable to the emirate's authorities. Samuel-Azran notes that *Qatar has reinvented and uniquely adapted the state broadcaster model to the contemporary media environment, thereby (...) regaining control over the narratives conveyed to the world (...)*.¹⁶ Another important distinguishing feature of Al Jazeera was its scale – the station operated on a budget many times larger than traditional news channels and dealt with issues affecting the entire region, rather than focusing on Qatar. This specificity of the channel prompted Kamal Hroub to describe Al Jazeera as Qatar's 'geo-media' tool, by analogy with geopolitical and geo-economic tools.¹⁷

QATAR AS A MEDIATOR

Parallel to the development of soft power tools, Qatar's charismatic leader sought opportunities to mark his presence on the regional stage. Such an opportunity arose in the form of numerous crises and conflicts in the Middle East, in which Qatar aspired to play the role of mediator. The beginnings of Qatar's mediation-focused foreign policy date back to 2005. At that time, Qatar, already enjoying greater recognition among the elites of Arab countries mainly thanks to the popular Al Jazeera television channel, began to undertake a series of diplomatic initiatives aimed at mediating in conflicts in the Middle East. This was the case in the conflicts in Yemen, Sudan, and Lebanon, where the active diplomacy of Qatari politicians brought some results.

In the conflict in Yemen between the government of Ali Abdullah Saleh and the Houthi rebels, which had been intensifying since 2004, Qatari diplomacy declared Doha's readiness to mediate between the warring parties. This took place during Sheikh Hamad's visit to Sana'a in June 2007. The initiative proved successful, as on June 16, 2007, government forces and rebels declared a ceasefire, and on February 2, 2008, they signed a formal peace treaty in Doha. An important element in persuading both sides of the conflict to sign the agreement was the Qatari government's commitment to provide Yemen with funds for post-conflict reconstruction, estimated at approximately \$300-500 million. However, the victory of Qatar's peaceful diplomacy proved short-lived due to divisions within the Houthi movement: some factions of the group did not recognise the peace agreement and continued to fight, which was met with a military response from the government. In October 2008, fighting broke out again, and in the summer of 2009, government forces launched an offensive in areas occupied by rebels.

In the face of the failure of the first agreement, Qatar resumed its diplomatic efforts. In July 2010, Emir Al-Thani visited Sana'a, which marked the beginning of a new round of negotiations in Doha between the Yemeni government and the rebels,

¹⁶ T. Samuel-Azran, "Al-Jazeera, Qatar, and New Tactics....", pp. 1293–1311.

¹⁷ K. Hroub, "Qatar and the Arab Spring," *Perspectives*, no. 4 (2012), pp. 35–41, at <https://opendata.uni-halle.de/bitstream/1981185920/110050/97/798419679.pdf#page=35>, 23 April 2023.

resulting in another ceasefire agreement. Qatar's diplomatic mediation efforts in relation to the conflict in Yemen were not viewed positively by the regional hegemon, Saudi Arabia. King Abdullah's government perceived the Houthi rebellion as a serious threat to its security and strongly supported the government side, both in the form of military operations against Houthi forces and financial transfers to the Yemeni government and its allied tribes. When another round of peace negotiations was underway in Doha in August 2010, the Saudi government publicly declared that it would grant the Yemeni government \$1 billion in investment funds, thereby weakening the government's motivation to continue negotiations and neutralising an important tool of Qatari peace policy, which was to offer economic incentives to the parties to the conflict.

Qatar's involvement in resolving the Lebanese crisis ran almost parallel to its involvement in Yemen. In May 2008, in Beirut, militias opposed to the Hezbollah government carried out a surprise military operation as a show of force, occupying key locations in the Lebanese capital and paralysing the government's work. This most serious crisis in Lebanese politics in years alarmed the Arab League. Under the auspices of this organisation, Qatar offered to organise talks between the Lebanese government and the opposition on neutral ground in Doha. These talks proved to be extremely fruitful, as Lebanese politicians reached an agreement on the election of a new president, the formation of a national unity government, and the withdrawal of Hezbollah militias from central Beirut. The Doha Agreement stabilised the Lebanese political scene, and most of its provisions were observed in the following months and years. It was widely believed that the agreement was a major success for Qatar and a credit to the Qatari Prime Minister, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim. The significance of the mediation in the Lebanese crisis stemmed from the fact that the internal Lebanese political divisions reflected the growing regional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and its possible continuation threatened to escalate into a proxy war. In this case, the success of Qatar's mediation was facilitated by the acceptance of the emirate's position as an impartial broker by both Tehran and Riyadh.

While Prime Minister Hamad bin Jassim and Emir al-Thani were the main actors on the Qatari side in the mediation in Lebanon and Yemen, in the case of the next conflict in which Qatar became involved – the war in Darfur – the most active member of the Qatari elite was Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Ahmad bin Abdullah al-Mahmud. When Qatar became involved in attempts to resolve the conflict in Darfur in 2008, the history of that conflict was marked by numerous unobserved ceasefires and peace agreements between the government and the rebels. Minister Mahmoud's shuttle diplomacy led to Qatar being accepted as a mediator both by the internal actors in the conflict – the Sudanese government and the main rebel group, the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) – and by the external governments involved in the conflict: Egypt, Chad, and Libya. As a result, the Qatari capital also became the venue for successive rounds of peace talks in 2009, 2010, and 2011. These talks culminated in the signing of a peace agreement in 2011. To consolidate the agreement reached, in 2013 the Qatari authorities organised an international conference of humanitarian donors, which

raised USD 3.6 billion for the reconstruction of Darfur, of which the Qatari government pledged USD 0.5 billion.

The cases of mediation in conflicts and crises described above have raised Qatar's international profile, giving the emirate a reputation as an active political player in the Middle East. It should be added that Qatar has also been involved in mediating conflicts outside the region, as exemplified by its mediation in talks to resolve the border conflict between Djibouti and Eritrea. Qatar's diplomatic activism was not driven by necessity, but was an expression of its desire to find a niche and play a more significant role in the regional international relations system. The Qatari ruling family and the media sought to capitalise on international activity to enhance the legitimacy of the emirate's authorities, both in international relations and in domestic politics. Despite optimistic declarations, many of the effects of mediation proved to be short-lived. Qatar's international activism also aroused the resentment of large countries in the region, such as Egypt (in the case of Sudan), Saudi Arabia (in the case of Yemen), and Iran (in the case of Lebanon), which perceived Qatari mediation as interference in their own spheres of influence.

In a broader sense, Qatar's foreign policy, focused on mediation in local conflicts, required maintaining a wide network of political relations with various countries, often in conflict with each other. Qatar had good relations with Iran, which aroused the resentment of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which perceived Iran as the main threat to their security. The emirate maintained good relations with both the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, which ruled the Gaza Strip, while also having working contacts with the Israeli authorities. At the same time, Doha had close relations with the United States, whose military presence on its territory it saw as a guarantee of its security, while also cultivating contacts with groups perceived by the US as terrorist: the aforementioned Palestinian Hamas, Lebanese Hezbollah, and the Afghan Taliban. This multi-vector foreign policy meant that, at the beginning of the 21st century, Qatar became more than just a mediator in numerous conflicts in the Middle East. In an attempt to influence the parties to individual conflicts, it used the tools of influence at its disposal: financial transfers, the 'soft power' of the emirate-controlled media, and sometimes also influence through Islamist organisations.

The Qatari political elite began to recognise their potential not only to mediate in political conflicts in the Arab world, but also to influence the course of these conflicts. Qatar's sense of agency stemmed from three premises: first, the Qatari elite developed the ability to effectively use innovative tools in foreign policy.

Secondly, the emir and his inner circle were convinced that they had an excellent understanding of the problems of Arab politics. Thirdly, they observed that the traditional powers of the Arab world, such as Egypt, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, were suffering from a leadership crisis, which limited their ability to effectively influence regional international relations. In a situation of international leadership vacuum, Emir Hamad's Qatar, with its resources, tools, and political vision for the Arab world, had the opportunity and the will to play a role far beyond that of a mediator.

QATAR AS AN INTERVENING POWER

The success of building Qatar's international position through mediation and media tools became a premise for Emir Hamad and Qatar's decision-making elite to further strengthen the country's influence in the region. The mass political protests that erupted in Arab countries at the turn of 2010 and 2011 were interpreted by the Qatari ruler as an opportunity to strengthen the country's position and reshape the political scene in those Arab countries that had entered a period of political instability.

Qatar's desire to influence the political transformations taking place in neighbouring countries was pursued through a wide range of foreign policy measures and tools of both soft and hard power. The Qatari media, in particular Al Jazeera television, actively reported on the protests taking place in 2011 in all Arab Spring countries, with the notable exception of Bahrain. Qatar put forward important diplomatic initiatives with regard to Libya and Syria, and its leader was an influential voice for change in the Arab world, as demanded by protesters in Tunisia and Cairo. Let us consider below the cases of Qatari political, diplomatic, and sometimes also intelligence and military intervention in the four main countries that were the arenas of the Arab Spring political events: Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Syria.

Libya

Qatari diplomacy initiated the process of excluding representatives of the Libyan government from the Arab League, and Qatar was the first country to recognise the National Transitional Council as the legitimate representative of the Libyan people. Under the leadership of the small emirate, the Arab League also adopted a resolution calling for military humanitarian intervention in Libya. Qatar's unequivocal opposition to the Gaddafi government, which was interpreted by international actors as representative of the Arab states, was also an important argument in the debates taking place in the UN Security Council. The Council took into account the arguments put forward by Qatar when considering the developing crisis in Libya. This resulted in the adoption of Resolution 1973 of March 19, 2011, introducing a no-fly zone for humanitarian reasons. The adoption of this document was a success for Qatari diplomacy, and its implementation became one of the main reasons for the victory of the Libyan rebels and the fall of Muammar Gaddafi's regime.

In terms of hard power tools, Qatar had much less potential as a country with a small armed force of only 12,000. Despite this, the Qatari elite decided to support the international humanitarian intervention in Libya, not only through diplomatic means, but also by contributing Qatari Air Force fighter jets to the operation. The scale of this involvement is evidenced by the fact that six Qatari Mirage fighter jets, half of the country's total combat aircraft, took part in the NATO-coordinated humanitarian intervention. Qatar also supported the Libyan rebels with arms supplies and by sending military instructors.¹⁸

¹⁸ M. Nuruzzaman, "Qatar and the Arab Spring: Down the Foreign Policy Slope," *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, vol. 8, no. 2 (2015), pp. 226-238.

This strong and unequivocal commitment to the anti-government side also had an economic dimension: in 2011, Qatar supported the opposition Libyan National Transitional Council with \$400 million and undertook to act as an intermediary in the sale of oil from rebel-controlled areas to international markets. To strengthen its propaganda impact and build support for the Libyan opposition, the Libia al Ahrar television station was also launched.

The capture of Tripoli by the rebels and the killing of Muammar Gaddafi in October 2011 were also seen as a victory for Qatar in the Middle East. Libyan rebels publicly declared their gratitude to Qatar, symbolically renaming Tripoli's Algiers Square as Qatar Square. The raising of the Qatari flag on one of Muammar Gaddafi's palaces shortly after its capture by the rebels also had symbolic significance. In post-revolutionary Libya, Qatar continued to strive to play an important role, which, however, was not easy due to the ongoing political fragmentation of the country, which had been deprived of strong institutions by years of dictatorial rule. In the mosaic of regional political groups and self-proclaimed leaders, Qatar supported Islamist factions associated with the former leader of the Salafist terrorist group Abdel Hakim Bel Haj, commander of the Tripoli Military Council. The Salibi brothers were important actors in Libyan politics in the period 2011-2014, supported by Qatar. Ali Salibi became one of the most influential Islamic preachers in the country, and his brother Ismail was the commander of a militia called the 17 February Brigade (Liwa Rafallah al-Sahati). Due to the generous support that this unit received from Qatar, Libyans jokingly called it the '17 Ferrari Brigade'.¹⁹ Qatar's support was both financial and military. According to statements by Qatar's chief of staff, Gen. Hamad bin Aleg al-Atija, quoted in the press, military advisers from that country were involved in organizing Libyan rebel units.²⁰

Despite significant financial involvement in these forces, the factions supported by Qatar did not win a majority in the elections to the Libyan National Assembly, which meant that its influence on Libyan politics gradually declined between 2012 and 2014. During this period, Qatar, together with Turkey, sought to politically support the Justice and Construction Party (Hizb al-Adala wal-Bina), part of which was politically and ideologically linked to the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood. This party's refusal to accept its defeat in the June 2014 elections was one of the main causes of the outbreak of the Libyan civil war and the division of the country into two warring governments – the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord supported by Qatar and the Government of National Accord based in Tobruk and supported by other Arab states, led by Saudi Arabia.

In a divided country ravaged by civil war, Qatar's influence waned in proportion to the involvement of other foreign actors, both Middle Eastern and European. While Qatar's political and military intervention in Libyan affairs in 2011 brought it victory

¹⁹ K.C. Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring: Policy Drivers and Regional Implications*, Washington 2014, p. 18.

²⁰ I. Black, "Qatar Admits Sending Hundreds of Troops to Support Libya Rebels," *The Guardian*, 26 October 2011, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/oct/26/qatar-troops-libya-rebels-support>, 23 April 2023.

in the political and diplomatic arena, in subsequent years the emirate was unable to maintain its key role in Libyan political games. The main tools at Qatar's disposal – financial support for selected political forces and media influence – proved insufficient in the absence of direct political and military influence. The Qatari elites lacked the ability to understand the dynamically changing, chaotic, and pluralistic political scene of post-revolutionary Libya, where numerous local and international interests clashed. Furthermore, between 2011 and 2014, Saudi Arabia consolidated its foreign policy around the goal of limiting the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in the region. Libya, alongside Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, and Yemen, became one of the arenas of Saudi-Qatari rivalry. Saudi Arabia, supported by the United Arab Emirates and, after 2013, also by Egypt, began to use tools similar to those used by Qatar to influence Libyan politics, effectively limiting Qatari influence.

Syria

The undoubted success on the international stage, which was the support for Libyan rebels and the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi's regime, strengthened the confidence of the Qatari elite. In the face of another political crisis beginning in March 2011 in Syria, it was decided to apply a similar strategy. Mohammed Nuruzzaman notes that it was characterised by three elements: 1) diplomatic isolation of the government in question; 2) transfer of weapons and financial aid to anti-government rebels; and 3) persuading the West to use military force to support the rebels and remove the government from power.²¹

While agreeing with the above thesis, it should be noted that in the first weeks of the political crisis in Syria, Qatar did not unequivocally side with the protesters, which was probably influenced by the good personal relations between Emir As-Sani and President Bashar al-Assad. However, as the protests grew in strength, Al Jazeera television began to present them in a positive light. In response, the Qatari embassy in Damascus was burned down, prompting the emirate's government to recall its ambassador from Syria. In view of the increasing violence against demonstrators, in November 2011 Qatar, together with Saudi Arabia, led to the condemnation of Syria at the Arab League forum, followed by the suspension of Syria's membership in that organisation. Furthermore, under the influence of the oil monarchies, political and economic sanctions were imposed on the Syrian regime. Another diplomatic initiative launched by Qatar was to send an Arab League observer mission to Syria. Unfortunately, this did not curb the political violence or bring Qatar closer to achieving its political goals in this conflict.

The first months of 2012 also brought Qatar setbacks in building a united front of Arab states against the Syrian regime. Qatar sought to use its rotating leadership of the Arab League at the time to develop diplomatic and military initiatives against the regime. However, these efforts were unsuccessful; countries with stronger ties to Syria

²¹ M. Nuruzzaman, "Qatar and the Arab Spring: Down the Foreign Policy Slope...", pp. 226-238.

and its regional ally, Iran, primarily Iraq and Lebanon, opposed the formation of an Arab military mission to intervene in the conflict. These two countries, which are neighbours of Syria, were also responsible for the incomplete implementation of Arab economic sanctions imposed on that country under the influence of Qatar.

The failure to build a common Arab front led to Qatar being perceived as a country pursuing a 'hawkish' policy hostile to Bashar al-Assad. Emir Hamad al-Thani was the first Arab leader to publicly call for intervention in Syria, saying in an interview with CBS television in January 2012 that *in order for this situation to be stopped... some military forces should be sent to stop the killing*.²² This change in the official position effectively prevented Qatar from acting as a mediator, as confirmed by the failure of Qatari diplomacy to negotiate a ceasefire between the parties to the conflict in the fall of 2012. On the broader international stage, Qatar also failed to build a coalition willing to undertake military intervention, because unlike the marginalised leader of Libya, the Syrian president enjoyed strong support from Russia and conditional support from China and India, which were reluctant to undermine the principle of national sovereignty through humanitarian-motivated military interventions.

In parallel with exerting diplomatic pressure, Qatar also supported the rebels by paying the salaries of anti-regime fighters and providing salaries for the administration in areas controlled by rebel forces.²³ It is highly likely that Qatar also supported the insurgents with arms supplies, as reported by the international media.²⁴ These actions were initially agreed with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, but as the conflict developed, differences in the approaches of the Gulf states deepened. Qatar's desire to support groups and militias associated with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood began to cause tensions in its relations with Saudi Arabia. In view of these tensions, from April 2013, Qatar agreed to pursue a less active policy towards the Syrian conflict, declaratively recognising Saudi leadership on this issue. In practice, the emirate coordinated its policy with Turkey, which also sought to strengthen groups ideologically linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, particularly those active in northern and central Syria. Qatar's support for Islamist groups was partly based on political preferences and partly on pragmatic considerations: thanks to earlier contacts, the Qataris had personal networks of acquaintances with Islamist activists who became militia commanders during the conflict. This network of personal contacts was crucial for the transfer of financial support, which amounted to approximately \$3 billion by the summer of 2013.²⁵

²² K.C. Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring...*, p. 14.

²³ U. Rabi, Ch. Mueller, "Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the Syrian Uprising," *Tel Aviv Notes*, vol. 6, no. 17 (2012), pp. 1-4.

²⁴ R. Abuzaid, "Opening the Weapons Tap: Syria's Rebels Await Fresh and Free Ammo," *Time*, 22 June 2012, at <http://world.time.com/2012/06/22/opening-the-weapons-tap-syrias-rebels-await-freshand-free-ammo/#ixzz2j7zkZnQl>, 23 April 2023.

²⁵ Ch. Phillips, "Gulf Actors and the Syria Crisis," *The New Politics of Intervention of Gulf Arab States*, Collected Papers, vol. 1, April 2015, p. 47, at <https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/61772/1/The%20new%20politics%20of%20intervention%20of%20Gulf%20Arab%20states.pdf>, 23 April 2023.

The evolution of the Syrian crisis from political destabilisation to civil war did not change Qatar's attitude. Qatar's determination to remove the Assad regime stemmed from two reasons. First, as in other Arab Spring countries, the Qatari elite saw an opportunity for groups close to the Muslim Brotherhood to take power in post-revolutionary Syria. Secondly, political change in Syria was expected to limit Iran's regional influence. Given that Bashar al-Assad's regime is Tehran's most important political client in the Arab world, its overthrow was expected to reduce Iranian influence among Arab countries. The Iranian factor in Qatari politics, whose importance is emphasised by Hussein Ibish, among others, distinguished Syria from other arenas in which Qatar intervened during the Arab Spring.²⁶ The subsequent shift in the focus of Qatari involvement in Syria from diplomatic pressure to military support for the rebels placed the emirate in increasingly strong opposition to Iran. In this way, the Syrian conflict led to the most serious crisis in Qatari-Iranian relations, which had been good in previous decades, particularly when compared to Iran's relations with its other Arab neighbours.

Egypt

In the early days of the Egyptian revolution, Qatar maintained a cautious stance, not officially declaring its support for the opposition, due to its recently restored relations with Hosni Mubarak's government, which came after more than a decade of mutual distrust. Despite the official silence of government officials in Doha, Al-Jazeera television began to present a clearly pro-opposition stance almost from the very beginning of the protests. The most influential of the television commentators, preacher Yusuf al-Qaradawi, did not stop at expressing his support for the protesters, but went to Tahrir Square in Cairo himself and personally supported the demonstrators. This attitude is not surprising, given Qatar's previous relations with the Muslim Brotherhood, whose Egyptian members and supporters were active in the protests almost from the very beginning. The support of this charismatic preacher, who is well known throughout the Arab world, was significant in strengthening the protest movement and weakening the legitimacy of President Hosni Mubarak's rule. Qatar also influenced the situation in Egypt through formal institutions, such as the An-Nahda association founded by Jassim al-Sultan and the Academy for Change, founded by Hisham Morsi, which cooperated with it. The latter activist was arrested in Egypt in the course of his opposition activities in 2011.²⁷

As the political changes of the ongoing Egyptian revolution unfolded, Qatar's role also changed. In the period following Hosni Mubarak's removal from power in February 2011, power was held by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. During this period, Qatar maintained good relations with this body, promising financial

²⁶ H. Ibish, *What's at Stake for the Gulf Arab States in Syria?*, Washington 2016, pp. 2-3.

²⁷ J.M. Dorsey, "Wahabism vs. Wahabism: Qatar Challenges Saudi Arabia," *RSIS Working Paper*, no. 262, 6, September 2013, p. 11, at <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/rsis-pubs/WP262.pdf>, 23 April 2023.

and investment support for Egypt. At the same time, the emirate sought to strengthen Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and its Freedom and Justice Party. Qatar's support proved effective: as a result of the June 2012 elections, Muhammad Mursi, leader of the Freedom and Justice Party, became the new president of Egypt. Qatar was the only member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to openly express its satisfaction with the outcome of the Egyptian elections and the victory of the Muslim Brotherhood candidate.²⁸

The political change opened up wide opportunities for Qatar to provide much-needed economic support to the crisis-stricken Egyptian economy. Qatar's aid initiatives for Egypt included a series of grants, loans, joint ventures, and acquisitions in the Egyptian economy. The scale of this support was probably around \$8 billion in the form of direct investments, grants to support state-owned companies, and loans. A separate form of aid was a \$2 billion deposit made by Qatar in the Egyptian Central Bank, which was intended to secure liquidity and stabilise the Egyptian currency. The sale of gas at highly preferential prices was also a significant source of support. During his visit to Cairo in September 2012, Qatari Prime Minister Hamad bin Jassim announced investment plans in the areas of energy, heavy industry, and tourism worth \$18 billion, while assuring the Egyptians that Qatar would provide 'unlimited' support.²⁹

The political change in Egypt, which was in line with the wishes of the Qatari elite, was not permanent. After twelve months in power, President Morsi was removed from office as a result of mass protests and the subsequent military coup carried out by Field Marshal Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. The coup was carried out under the influence and with the support of Qatar's Gulf rivals: Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The perception of the Muslim Brotherhood's rule in Egypt in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi was unequivocally negative, for two reasons. Firstly, the political victory of the Muslim Brotherhood in the largest Arab country was seen as a dangerous precedent that could strengthen anti-monarchical Islamist movements in these countries and pose a threat to the ruling families. Secondly, the Qatari-backed Morsi government attempted to repair relations between Egypt and Iran. A potential thaw in relations between the two most populous countries in the Middle East was perceived as a strategic security threat in the countries of the Arabian Peninsula, with the exception of Qatar.³⁰

Qatar's ambitious attempt to influence Egyptian politics resulted in short-lived success, followed by failure. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood was outlawed and its members arrested. The autocratic President Sisi and the elite surrounding him viewed Qatar solely through the prism of their political struggle with the Muslim Brotherhood. Their aversion to Qatar led to the de facto suspension of diplomatic relations at

²⁸ G. Steinberg, "Qatar's Foreign Policy: Decision-Making Processes, Baselines, and Strategies," *SWP Research Paper*, no. 4, April 2023, pp. 1-34, at https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/research_papers/2023RP04_Qatar_ForeignPolicy.pdf, 23 April 2023.

²⁹ K.C. Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring...*, p. 22.

³⁰ Y. Farouk, "More than Money: Post-Mubarak Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf," *Gulf Research Center*, April 2014, pp. 1-21, at https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/179860/Egypt_Money_new_29-4-14_2576.pdf, 23 April 2023.

the turn of 2013 and 2014. The reasons for the political change in a country as complex as Egypt were manifold and largely internal in nature, unrelated to external interference by regional powers. The outcome of the internal political struggle in Egypt defined international politics in the Middle East in the post-Arab Spring era.

The rivalry for influence in Egypt between Qatar and Turkey on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia, supported by the other GCC states, on the other, resulted in a decisive victory for the Saudi coalition. The Saudis not only had more financial resources, but also a better understanding of the intricacies of Egyptian politics, supported by a network of relationships in various sectors of Egyptian society, which they had built up over decades. In a broader perspective, one can agree with Yasmine Farouk's thesis that Egypt and Saudi Arabia are linked by strong interdependencies, which allow us to speak of the existence of an imagined security community and an informal but very strong alliance. A dense network of interdependencies linked the two countries in the fields of economics, social ties, historical dependencies, and military relations: from the 2.4 million Egyptians working in Saudi Arabia, through Saudi support for Salafi mosques and political groups in Egypt, to Saudi subsidies worth millions for the Egyptian army and joint military manoeuvres and exercises.³¹ Qatar was able to counter this multi-level relationship with its strong ties to the most popular opposition group, the political power of its media, and economic diplomacy. These tools proved sufficient to support the mass protests that led to the fall of Hosni Mubarak's unpopular regime. However, in the months that followed the political transformation in Egypt, it turned out that support for the Muslim Brotherhood's policies was less than the Qataris had assumed, and that the forces of secular republicans, nationalists, and Islamic Salafists supported by Saudi Arabia were powerful enough to tip the scales of victory in their favour. The result was the events of 2013, sometimes referred to as a counter-revolution, which led to the emergence of a new authoritarian system. Both its leader, Marshal Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, and the country's military elite, who came to power as a result of the political struggle in 2013, pursue a foreign policy that is clearly hostile to Qatar.

RE-CALIBRATION OF QATAR'S FOREIGN POLICY

Prior to the political realignment in Egypt that strained Qatar's regional relationships, a significant and unprecedented transfer of power occurred in Doha on 25 June 2013. Emir Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani voluntarily abdicated the throne in favour of his son, Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, then 33 years old. This voluntary resignation – particularly by a ruler who remained in full command of his faculties – was virtually without precedent among the absolutist monarchies of the Arab world.

While the timing of Emir Hamad's departure surprised many observers, the selection of his successor did not. Tamim had long been groomed for leadership and was widely regarded as his father's favoured heir. His prior governmental experience was both

³¹ Ibid., pp. 2-17.

extensive and strategically significant: in 2008, he was entrusted with the oversight of Qatar National Vision 2030, the country's long-term development agenda, as well as chairing the Qatar 2022 Supreme Committee, which was responsible for organising the FIFA World Cup. In addition to his domestic policy roles, Tamim had been deeply engaged in Qatar's foreign policy apparatus, playing an active role in diplomatic mediation and regional conflict resolution. These assignments not only signalled a deliberate preparation for leadership but also positioned him at the centre of Qatar's strategic planning apparatus well before his formal accession to power.³²

The change of monarch brought about transformations within Qatar's political elite. One of the new emir's first decisions was to dismiss his uncle, the long-time prime minister and foreign minister, Hamad bin Jassim al-Thani, who had been the co-author of the emirate's assertive foreign policy. Personnel changes in Qatari politics went hand in hand with the elimination of Qatari influence in Egypt and Syria. International observers saw this as a sign of a change in the emirate's foreign policy. The new emir's first public statements hinted at a recalibration of the country's foreign policy. Emir Tamim focused on emphasising the role of economic development and announced that the country *will not take sides* in regional disputes. At the same time, Emir Tamim expressed pride in the country's growing importance on the international stage.³³ This shift in emphasis could signify a desire to return to a strategy of building the country's position as a mediator of international disputes, rather than an active participant in them.

Unfortunately, the country's earlier unequivocal involvement on one side of the ideological and religious conflict that was heating up the Arab world made a return to the status quo impossible. In the following years, despite a change in leadership, Qatar struggled with the consequences of its previous policy. Between 2014 and 2017, Emir Tamim pursued a much less active foreign policy than his father. During this period, the Qatari government focused on the challenges of modernising the country and sought rapprochement with Saudi Arabia in its foreign policy. This policy direction was also influenced by the shift in the balance of power in the region, linked to Iran's growing regional position. Attempts to warm relations with the Saudi monarchy were initially unsuccessful. One of the reasons for this was the change of power in Saudi Arabia – in 2015, King Abdullah died, and his brother Salman ascended the throne, who soon appointed his son, Mohammed bin Salman, as Crown Prince. The foreign policy of the Saudi kingdom began to be determined by a more hawkish faction, which perceived Qatar and its attempts to build regional influence as a threat to security.

The Saudi-Qatari conflict escalated on 5 June 2017, when all of Qatar's Arab neighbours: Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE suspended diplomatic relations and

³² K.C. Ulrichsen, Foreign Policy Implications of the New Emir's Succession in Qatar, *Norwegian Peace-building Resource Center (NOREF), Policy Brief*, August 2013, pp. 1-3, at https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/pbei/noref/0029884/f_0029884_24190.pdf, 23 April 2023.

³³ A. Hammond, "Qatar's Leadership Transition: Like Father, Like Son," *Policy Brief*, European Council on Foreign Relations, February 2014, pp 1-12, at https://ecfr.eu/archive/page/-/ECFR95_QATAR_BRIEF.pdf, 23 April 2023.

announced a transport blockade and economic boycott of the emirate. Egypt, which had already suspended diplomatic relations with Qatar, soon joined the anti-Qatar coalition. The blocking countries banned Qatari airlines and ships from using their airspace, land, and sea space. A list of demands that Qatar must meet to end the crisis was also published, setting a ten-day ultimatum for the demands to be met, which included closing the Al-Jazeera television channel, reducing diplomatic relations with Iran, and ceasing Qatar's military coordination with Turkey.

The immediate and officially cited justification for the blockade against Qatar was a statement attributed to Emir Tamim, which appeared on the Qatar News Agency website on 23 May 2017. In response, the Qatari government swiftly declared that the website had been hacked and that the emir had not made the remarks in question. Despite this denial, the diplomatic and economic blockade – along with a broader boycott – remained in effect until early 2021.

The prolonged crisis presented significant challenges to both the Qatari state and its economy, disrupting trade and complicating regional alliances. In terms of foreign policy, the blockade marked a turning point: Qatar's previously prominent role as a regional power broker was diminished. While it retained influence, its diplomatic posture shifted toward that of a somewhat isolated actor within the broader landscape of Middle Eastern international relations.

DISCUSSION

Diplomatic, political, and military interventions in countries where the Arab Spring protests took place deprived Qatar of its reputation as an impartial mediator. In the transforming arena of Arab politics, Qatar has unequivocally sided with one of the poles of the dispute – that associated with the fundamentalist modernist movements under the banner of the Muslim Brotherhood. In doing so, it not only deprived itself of the opportunity to act as a mediator, but also turned politicians and states supporting other options in this arena against it: secular nationalists and fundamentalist Islamic traditionalists. What is more, the effectiveness of Qatar's policy in the first months of the Arab Spring was so great that it prompted politicians representing these two forces to cooperate closely with each other in order to stem the influence of the Brotherhood and Qatar, which supported it.

Authors such as Khalid Hroub point out that the key factor in Qatar's activism was the leadership and vision of its ruler. From the beginning of the first decade of the 21st century, Emir Hamad Al Thani recognised the crisis in the Arab world and believed that traditional leaders – large Arab countries such as Egypt, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia – had ceased to play a significant role on the international stage. At the same time, non-Arab powers in the region, particularly Iran and Turkey, began to dominate Middle Eastern politics. Especially after the outbreak of protests in 2011, the lack of initiative on the part of the large Arab countries was evident in comparison with the active diplomacy of the non-Arab Muslim powers in the region. Hence the decision to fill

the international leadership gap by Qatar, despite unfavourable conditions such as the country's limited size and small population.³⁴

Qatar's period of assertive and highly active foreign policy, spanning from 1995 to 2013, came to a close following a transition in political leadership. Unlike states such as Libya or Venezuela, whose activist foreign policies often positioned them in opposition to dominant global powers, Qatar's approach was characterised not by balancing against stronger actors but by pursuing strategy of hedging.

This strategic shift in Qatari foreign policy was driven by a combination of domestic and international factors. Internally, segments of the Qatari elite began to reassess the sustainability of such an ambitious diplomatic posture, recognising the growing financial and political costs, as well as emerging threats to national security. Externally, the period between 2010 and 2013 witnessed increasingly assertive efforts by regional powers – most notably Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates – to curtail Qatar's expanding influence. These converging pressures contributed to a recalibration of Qatar's foreign policy priorities and a more restrained international engagement in the years that followed.

The shift in state leadership and the change in the ruling elites of Qatar after 2013 led to a decline in the country's foreign activism. Confronted with increasing hostility from more dominant regional actors, Qatar struggled to sustain the influence it had established between 2001 and 2010. The shift in international roles initiated by Qatari elites in 2011, when the country transitioned from a mediator to an active force in regional conflicts, ultimately harmed its international standing. While Qatar's assertive approach during the Arab Spring temporarily boosted its regional prominence, this increase was short-lived. Structural factors, including the intensifying rivalry between Middle Eastern powers in the years that followed, further diminished Qatar's influence. While regional powers had initially tolerated Qatar's role as an impartial mediator, its attempts to reshape regional politics sparked strong resistance. In response, Qatar recalibrated its foreign policy in the following years, returning to its role as a mediator rather than an intervening power.

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³⁴ K. Hroub, *Qatar and the Arab Spring...*, pp. 35-41.

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Łukasz FYDEREK – a political scientist, focused on governance and state building. He researches comparatively political systems and public policies of countries under political transitions, mostly in the Middle East. With more than fifteen years of academic experience, he currently holds the position of Associate Professor of Political Science at the Faculty of International and Political Studies of Jagiellonian University in Krakow.