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# QATAR'S LEADERSHIP TRANSITION: LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON

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## SUMMARY

When Qatar's Sheikh Hamad suddenly announced his abdication in favour of his son Tamim last year, there was a widespread expectation that Qatar had realised the error of an imperious overreach and would hence roll back its extensive involvement in Arab affairs. Yet, almost one year on, this change has not materialised. Rather, Tamim has continued the foreign-policy approach established by his father, who aimed above all to guarantee Qatar's security and project soft power in the region. A key element of this approach has been Qatar's support for Islamist groups across the Arab world, which it has supported through its pan-Arab media arm, Al Jazeera.

Tamim can be expected to reorder domestic policy to more closely reflect ordinary Qatari concerns over breakneck development preceding the 2022 World Cup and to tone down his father's high-profile foreign policy and in particular his eye-catching foreign investment drives. But Tamim is unlikely to veer much from his father's approach of attempting to insert Qatar into as many regional and international power structures as possible. Qatar's vast natural gas resources will ensure it a place in the energy security of many countries for years to come and it will remain a crucial interlocutor for the European Union on issues such as Egypt and Syria.

Qatar surprised regional and international allies in late June last year with an apparently swiftly arranged power transition from father, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, to son and designated heir, Tamim bin Khalifa al-Thani. The voluntary stepping-down of a Gulf ruler is a rare occurrence, but its timing was particularly arresting. Firstly, just eight days after Sheikh Hamad's abdication, the Egyptian defence minister and head of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi, announced the removal of leading Muslim Brotherhood member and Qatari ally President Mohammed Morsi, following mass protests against Brotherhood rule. Secondly, Qatar had some months before retreated from its key role in organising the effort to bring down the regime headed by President Bashar al-Assad in Syria.

Thus the transition was initially interpreted as recognition of failure in Egypt and Syria, and it created expectations of a shift in Qatari foreign policy away from the support of Islamist movements. But the new approach has not materialised and Qatar has maintained close ties to Islamist groups and individuals throughout the Arab world – even though these relationships have caused serious rifts with other Arab countries and publics in the region. On the one hand, Gulf dynasties such as the House of Saud have long viewed modern Islamist groups as a populist electoral threat to their monopoly on state power. On the other hand, many on the receiving end of Qatar's policies perceive them as brazenly interventionist, leading to something of a popular backlash against it in some cases, as in Libya and Egypt.

Consequently, an amalgam of liberal, government, and other interests stretching across the region that reject Qatari involvement in domestic politics has put pressure on Qatar to shift its policies.

This policy brief examines Qatar's controversial foreign policy and in particular explores why the expected shift away from the support of political Islam has not materialised. With a narrow group of decision-makers leading the country in a closed domestic political and media environment, Qatar has in the past appeared impervious to analysis. But the leadership transition has created some light for deeper investigation, through which it is now possible at this stage to evaluate what has changed and what has not and conclude the likely course of the future. Above all, the transition must be understood within the context of Qatar's role as a key regional player and interlocutor for Western powers – a role that goes back to the previous transition in 1995.

## Al Jazeera and the transformation of Qatar

Once little more than a backwater Saudi vassal state, cradled in the arms of British colonialism, Qatar has worked diligently to acquire the political, economic, and cultural prestige and power that it has today. Despite having a population of only around two million people, most of them foreign residents among fewer than 300,000 Qatari nationals, it has reaped the benefits of its energy investment at home, acquired stakes in major commercial enterprises in many Western countries, largely through its main sovereign wealth fund, and has even won the right to host the 2022 World Cup.<sup>1</sup>

The transformation of Qatar goes back to June 1995, when then Emir Khalifa bin Hamad al-Thani was removed from power during a trip to Geneva. His son, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa, and others in the family, like then Foreign Minister Hamad bin Jassim bin Jaber al-Thani, saw the possibilities of Qatar's vast natural gas resources and liquefaction technology.<sup>2</sup> They embarked on a series of moves to make Qatar as important to as many regional and international players as possible: the United States was invited to make fuller use of al-Udeid Air Base; Israelis were allowed to open a trade liaison office; various Arab and Muslim opposition figures were offered a sanctuary of sorts in Doha; and the state pursued ambitious expansions in the fields of media and education via Al Jazeera and the Qatar Foundation. The aim was to guarantee security and project soft power in a neighbourhood of jealous regional powers such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Iraq.<sup>3</sup>

Al Jazeera, the Qatari-sponsored pan-Arab satellite television channel, had a revolutionary effect in Arab media. It had a stated policy of covering "both sides of the story" and invited guests from the three key strands of Arab politics: political Islam, Arab nationalism, and pro-West liberalism (the left was notably underrepresented). The Qatari government also invited figures from all three to base themselves in Doha, set up or join research centres, and attend conferences. But Al Jazeera betrayed Islamist leanings from the beginning. "Al-Sharia wal-Hayat", a show featuring Brotherhood-associated Egyptian cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi, aired from the channel's first day. Al Jazeera also had a strong contingent of Islamist-leaning broadcasters and journalists in addition to Qaradawi, a long-time Doha resident who had developed close ties with the ruling family.

Even before Al Jazeera was created, Qatar had made use of Salafi imams, judges, and bureaucrats with Saudi training. From the 1950s, Qatar welcomed Brotherhood cadres, among them Qaradawi, who had fled Egypt to escape repression under Gamal Abdel Nasser. It was during this time that Qatar began to promote a fusion of Salafi and Brotherhood thought in periodicals such as *Majallat al-Umma*.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, though, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) began to shift their position on the Brotherhood by degrees – influenced by the movement's participation in Egyptian parliamentary and syndicate politics and its efforts to develop ties with Western powers. After 9/11, Saudi Arabia branded the Brotherhood, rather than its ultra-conservative Wahhabi Salafism, as the true source of Islamist militancy. At the same time, Qatar used Qaradawi to moderate the impact of its own Wahhabi-leaning clerical base in domestic and foreign policy.

A more overt shift at Al Jazeera towards an Islamist editorial line began under the guidance of Wadah Khanfar, who had been Al Jazeera's Kabul bureau chief and took over as managing director in 2003 and as network director general in 2006. On the occasion of the 2006 war in Lebanon, in which Israel tried to crush Hezbollah, for example, Al Jazeera championed the Shia militia's cause and Qatar then went on to mediate in Lebanese politics, in Riyadh's eyes to the advantage of Hezbollah. Hamas received similar coverage during Israel's Operation Cast Lead in Gaza in late 2008. By the time of the Arab uprisings of 2011, Qatar was well placed to facilitate distant revolts and support Islamist groups linked to Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood.

<sup>1</sup> The Qatar Statistics Authority gave 1,864,817 as of 31 August and 2,035,106 as of 30 September, a striking increase. See the Ministry of Development Planning and Statistics website, available at <http://www.qsa.gov.qa/eng>.

<sup>2</sup> Some analysts date the new regime's predilection for Islamists to before the coup, locating it in Hamad bin Jassim's conversations with US State Department officials in his first few years as foreign minister following the Gulf War of 1991.

<sup>3</sup> Qatar suspected Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Bahrain of playing a role in a 1996 counter-coup attempt.

<sup>4</sup> Author interview with Salah Eddin Elzein, head of the Al Jazeera Center for Studies, March/September 2013.

## Qatar and the Arab uprisings

In 2011, Qatar took on the mantle of enabler of distant revolts and benefactor of a network of Islamist groups linked to Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. It provided the political and financial muscle for armed rebellions that brought down the emir's once-close friend Muammar al-Gaddafi in Libya – even sending several hundred troops to help the rebels – and that, while so far unsuccessful, have targeted his other former friend, Bashar Assad in Syria. As well as supporting the Brotherhood government in Egypt, Doha provided loans, hand-outs, and promises of massive investment to the Ennahdha-led government in Tunisia, the Hamas-run government in Gaza, the Syrian Brotherhood, its preferred party among the opposition groups there, and Islamist parties in Libya, Yemen, and Morocco. Al Jazeera promoted their narratives, resulting in a considerable boost for some of these movements during national polls.

Qatar's support for Islamists caused particular tensions with other Gulf states. While Saudi-Qatari relations have been strained since 1995, Qatari-UAE relations have worsened in recent years, particularly as a result of the deteriorating situation in Syria. Just last year, the UAE government put 94 Islamists on trial for allegedly plotting to overthrow it, and UAE perceptions of Qatari support for the Brotherhood and criticism of the UAE on Al Jazeera from Qaradawi have caused further tension in their relationship. UAE officials described Qatar at this time as “public enemy number 3”, after Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>5</sup> In a sign of the friction, a Qatari citizen was detained for months before his trial began this year, and a number of others were refused entry to the UAE at airports.<sup>6</sup> Echoing these sentiments, one Emirati writer accused Qatar's rulers of “religious extremism”, while also suggesting that the Islamists were “snakes” in their lap that would eventually bite them.<sup>7</sup>

Qatar has also been criticised in Egypt. Sheikh Hamad was one of the first foreign leaders to visit Morsi after his election victory, which Brotherhood opponents charged had been achieved through Qatari funding. In the few months before the 3 July coup against the Morsi government, Egyptian TV satirist Bassem Youssef publicly ridiculed Qatar on his popular show. Morsi's electoral opponent Ahmed Shafiq suggested that Egypt would be “sold” to Qatar by renting out its antiquities for display in Doha or outsourcing the management of Egypt's historical sites to Qatar. These comments reflect the depth of antipathy among the interests associated with former president Hosni Mubarak towards Qatar. Diplomats, analysts, policymakers, and journalists in Dubai, Cairo, and Abu Dhabi feverishly debated opaque decision-making processes in Doha, predicting that if Qatar didn't ditch the Brotherhood, a palace coup would sort things out.

At an Arab League summit in Doha in March, just three months before they stood down, Prime Minister Hamad bin Jassim took (apparently planted) questions at a press conference on the issue of the Brotherhood in which he defended Qatar against these charges in Egypt. He argued that Qatar was only acting out of a duty to help protest movements in the Arab world rather than bringing them into existence in the first place. “There are huge amounts of money that have gone to media in Egypt to launch a campaign against Qatari-Egyptian relations and against Doha, while Qatar has done nothing wrong”, he said. “Qatar didn't call for these revolutions but they started because of circumstances there – authoritarianism, and the desire for leaders to pass on their rule [to their sons].” It's interesting to consider that these remarks were made when the leadership was almost certainly already involved in effecting an as-yet undeclared transition.

Qatar also looked towards the Brotherhood as a natural ally in Syria. But its decision to target the Assad regime was a surprise to observers given the close ties at the time between Sheikh Hamad and Assad – even their wives were friends. It has been suggested that the emir felt offended that Assad rejected his advice to stop the repression. But other calculations of a structural nature were likely to have played a role: Gulf states felt deeply threatened by the protest fervour spreading throughout the Arab world, and Qatar, via Al Jazeera and its charismatic leadership, was in more of a position than its peers to demonstrate agency in averting the danger by championing the revolution, rather than publicly fearing it, but in lands further afield. With the campaigns in both Syria and Libya, Qatar appeared to be carrying the torch of Arab revolution while in fact it was attempting to subvert and redirect, if not snuff it out, at least within the Gulf zone. Syria offered another context in which an identifiable Islamist ally could deliver Qatar's policy aims in the form of the Muslim Brotherhood, which Qatar sought to empower in opposition bodies based abroad, though it gave aid to some Salafi groups too as the unrest descended into armed conflict. Qatar's position also placed it in opposition to Iran, threatening the ideal of balance, though in the Saudi view, Qatar had been in the Iranian camp since 2006.

Syrian society proved far more complicated than Doha imagined, however, and the Brotherhood was for various reasons unable to deliver. The diversity of Syrian society trumped Doha and trumped the Brotherhood. Commonly stated statistics such as that 65 or 70 percent of society is Sunni mask complications for a homogenising force such as the Brotherhood, which has had trouble reaching out to Kurdish and tribal communities in Syria, both of which come under the Sunni rubric. At the same time, both Qatar and Saudi Arabia over-relied on tribal forces with which they had traditional links through marriage and geography to direct operations on the ground. As lead organiser of the campaign to bring Assad down, Doha's attempt to ensure Brotherhood domination of civic representative bodies outside Syria such as the Syrian National Coalition was

<sup>5</sup> Sourced from a private briefing of political analysts in Dubai in March 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Shabina S. Khatri, “Qatari doctor detained in UAE has first day in court”, *Doha News*, 4 November 2013, available at <http://dohanews.co/qatari-doctor-detained-in-uae-has-first-day-in-court/>.

<sup>7</sup> Hamad al-Mazrouei, “Indama tastathmir Qatar fi al-tatarruf al-dini” (When Qatar invests in religious extremism), *Middle East Online*, 9 April 2013, available at <http://middle-east-online.com/?id=152842>.

unsuccessful because of the heterogeneous mix of social forces in Syria's urban centres.

As Western fears of the growth of radical Islamist movements among the insurgents increased in 2012, Doha was seen as responsible for failing to prevent its weapons falling into the hands of the "wrong" groups. By early 2013, Doha was relieved to cede co-ordination of an impossible war to Riyadh. With the failure by that point of the plan to topple Assad, continued leadership was only set to expose a small country such as Qatar to danger of interference, including domestic or even foreign-engineered coup attempts, by Assad supporters or fellow Gulf governments infuriated by Qatar's support for Islamism. In 2013, for example, the Syrian Electronic Army hacked into the websites of the Qatar Foundation and government ministries and stole confidential documents, causing panic within the Qatari ruling elite.

### Qatar's Islamist links: strategy or ideology?

On the eve of Tamim's accession, Qatar was an oasis of Arab Islamists who were a notable presence in university departments, think tanks, and other non-governmental organisations, while also forming a constant stream of participants at endless seminars and forums. Notably, debates suppressed elsewhere in the Gulf were fair game for public discussion – issues such as stability in Saudi Arabia in a post-uprising environment and the UAE's handling of Islamists.<sup>8</sup> Content to remove any semblance of threat or irritation to a regime that already favoured the wider movement through its open editorial policy at Al Jazeera, Qatar's branch of the Muslim Brotherhood disbanded in 1999. But its leading figure, Jassim Sultan, has since re-emerged with a study centre and website using the name al-Nahda (renaissance) – an Islamist brand that gives Tunisia's Ennahdha party its name (also used by the Brotherhood in their 2012 presidential campaign for Morsi).

Taken together, these policies raise the question of whether Qatar's promotion of the Islamist movement has been purely strategic or whether there has been an element of the ideological. Most analysts assume that Doha's positions are merely opportunistic, but there is some reason to believe that an element of ideological preference is involved. Qatari intellectuals, themselves seeking answers to the question of why their country's leadership has put such store in political Islam, also wonder whether it is more complex and less clear than is usually assumed. "It's a difficult question", conceded Hassan al-Sayed, a Qatari professor of Islamic law, choosing his words carefully. "Perhaps it's to support Arab peoples, to support the oppressed, to encourage Qatar's role in the Arab world."<sup>9</sup>

Qatar's alliance with Islamists has indeed offered strategic advantages: access to an ascendant political network across the Arab world, each element of which would look to Doha for financial, diplomatic, and media support, in addition to having a privileged relationship with a Gulf oil and gas power that could mediate relations with Washington; opportunities for investment from empowered Islamist groups that would look favourably upon Qatar; an opportunity for Qatar to garner prestige in the Arab region by aligning itself with a populist and progressive yet conservative political trend; and an opportunity for Qatar to establish itself with Western powers as the key Arab interlocutor with its finger on the pulse of the Arab street, the Svengali behind an alliance sold to the West as a moderating influence that could compete easily with hardline Islamist forces such as al-Qaeda and jihadist groups. These moderate Islamists, the argument went, have a popular base that secular, liberal groups just don't have. In short, Doha would deliver the West stability for a whole generation to come in the troublesome Arab republican zone, where the certainties of Gulf monarchism have for decades avoided giving Western powers a headache.

Political Islam also offered the Qatari leadership under Sheikh Hamad new avenues for asserting independence at the level of religious ideology from Saudi Arabia, an independence that has become intimately linked in Qatari minds to their country's successes since 1995. One notable example concerns the class of *ulama*, or religious scholars, among Qatar's tribes who originally adhered to the Maliki school of law but then shifted to the Hanbali school under the influence of Saudi Wahhabism during the time of Sheikh Jassim. From the 1960s, however, the injection of Brotherhood cadres and thinking into Qatari society began to temper the ultra-conservatism of these *ulama*. Therefore, when Sheikh Hamad and his team carried out the 1995 coup, they were able to draw on a discourse of moderation that Qaradawi and his followers had fostered. With this, Qatar began to fashion for itself an Islamic identity separate from its Saudi neighbour, most crucially preventing its *ulama* from evolving into a class completely under the thumb of their Riyadh-based peers.

This had ramifications at a structural level. While the justice and religious endowment ministries remained under Salafi control, media and culture came under Brotherhood influence, such that Qaradawi not only appeared regularly on Al Jazeera but his Friday prayer sermons were often carried on Qatari state television. A large mosque in the name of Mohammed Ibn Abdul Wahhab, the Salafi ideologue who helped found the modern Saudi state, was opened in 2011 in Doha in an apparent effort to mollify Salafis over Brotherhood and liberal gains. (The mosque also represented a challenge to Saudi Arabia for implying that Qatar's moderated Wahhabism – its Salafi-Brotherhood hybrid – is the true representative of Mohammed Ibn Abdul Wahhab's message as a "renewer" (*mujaddid*) of the faith.)

Qatar has further used political Islam as part of a wider strategy to diversify its Salafi social leanings and base

<sup>8</sup> Mohammed al-Mukhtar al-Shangiti, a Mauritanian professor of Islamic history at the Qatar Foundation's Faculty of Islamic Studies, said: "The Saudi state is a disaster for Islam and for Saudi people, and I hope it will change peaceably and gradually, otherwise it will change violently." Author interview, March 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Author interview, March 2013.

of *ulama* for domestic purposes. In Qatar's first major break with the Wahhabi modus operandi, the government established a penal code after gaining independence from Britain in 1971. But reforms concerning religious scholarship and the judicial system weren't revisited until after the 9/11 attacks, when Qatar decided to speed up social and religious changes. On the one hand, this led to, for example, more freedoms for women. Hamad's unveiled wife, Sheikha Moza, was able to take on a distinctly public persona; women were allowed to drive; and, in 2003, Aisha al-Mannai became the first female dean of Qatar University's College of Sharia and Islamic Studies, where she has made an effort to promote Sufi professors (to the chagrin of her Saudi counterparts who refused to attend an annual Gulf meeting of sharia faculty heads when they subsequently convened in Qatar).<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, it prompted the Qatari leadership to send more of its religious scholars (working as judges in sharia courts) to Egypt's al-Azhar University for training rather than to Saudi institutions, such as the Imam Mohammed Ibn Saud University in Riyadh.

Political Islam also retained a key role in Qatar because of the leadership's belief that Islamism was the centre of the spectrum of Arab politics. Secular Arab politics has been in retreat historically since the Arab defeat in the war of 1967 with Israel; it was from that point that post-colonial Islamism in various guises – from piety and religious conservatism to jihadism – began to make inroads in the Arab public sphere.<sup>11</sup> Building on its desire to house the Arab body politic, Doha has hosted Azmi Bishara, a former member of the Israeli parliament, since 2007 and presented him on Al Jazeera as a leading intellectual of the Arab nationalist left. Both Bishara and Qaradawi were advisors to Sheikh Hamad; both are thought to be advising Tamim too.

Qatar's innovation has been to identify the movements that come under the rubric of "political Islam" (Brotherhood, Ennahdha, Hamas, Islah, etc.) as the political centre, putting the secularists on one side and the jihadists, al-Qaeda, Wahhabism, and other brands of Salafism on the other. Qatar marketed these policies as part of a wider effort to affect a new Arab renaissance – in media, education, the arts, the economy, and even in politics – with the emir packaged as a kind of Haroun al-Rashid of his time. It is not too far-fetched to imagine that sometime in the near future tourists of a cultural bent will make an effort to stop over in Doha simply to witness architecture by the likes of Zaha Hadid, I.M. Pei, or Norman Foster, or the artwork spectacles of others such as Damien Hirst, in perhaps the most unlikely of urban landscapes.

<sup>10</sup> Author interview with Hassan al-Sayed, March 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Egyptian politics professor Hassan Nafaa, a Brotherhood opponent who favoured the military coup, agreed with this assessment: "It's partly true. But they want to take control of authority as a means of change and they see themselves as the true representatives of Islam." Author interview, August 2013.

## A recalibration of Qatari foreign policy?

Several features of the transition added to speculation of a major shift in Qatari foreign policy. Firstly, there was its timing: rumours of the emir stepping down were circulating in Doha as early as March. At that time, Qatar had taken a step back from the role it had played as lead organiser of the Syrian opposition abroad, most likely in response to Western powers that had expressed irritation that Qatar's operation to arm Syria's rebels had been directed haphazardly, aiding al-Qaeda-linked groups, and a general sense that the project to remove Assad was going nowhere under Qatari stewardship. Shortly thereafter, in June, a British newspaper reported that Sheikh Hamad's standing down was imminent.<sup>12</sup> The emir gave a farewell speech on the 25th of the month, and the next day his designated heir addressed the nation, just as Egypt braced for mass protests against Morsi's presidency. The Egyptian military indicated through defence minister Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi that it expected Morsi to make concessions in response to the street mobilisation. On 28 June, Qaradawi left Doha for Egypt, sparking press reports that he had been ejected from Qatar, or, sensing the direction of the wind, had ejected himself.<sup>13</sup>

Those who expected a recalibration of the country's bold foreign policy saw confirmation in Tamim's speech.<sup>14</sup> He talked of Qatar's economic successes in the period of his father and how to continue on the path to realising development goals outlined in the "Qatar National Vision 2030" plan of 2008. He made interesting use of the word "arrogance" and said that Qatar is "not with one trend against another" in the regional political arena. The Arab nationalists among Qatar's intellectual elite generally interpreted Tamim's statements as an indication that Qatar would adopt a more measured position in regional affairs while also trying to extricate itself from some of its more troubling relationships. "We thought there'd be [a change] when we heard the emir saying Qatar would not stand with any one party against another", said Saad al-Matwi, a columnist for the *Arab Daily*.<sup>15</sup>

However, in their wider context, Tamim's comments appear less heavy with intent. "Arrogant" was used in the context of Qatar's advancement since 1995, which led it to become the world's wealthiest nation per capita. "We should not become arrogant. The humility that Qataris are known for is a sign of the strong who are sure of themselves, and arrogance leads to committing mistakes", Tamim said. His comment on not backing one group over another could be seen in the context of regional sectarian division driven by

<sup>12</sup> Damien McElroy, "Qatar preparing for leadership transition", *Daily Telegraph*, 9 June 2013, available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/qatar/10108717/Qatar-preparing-for-leadership-transition.html>. The article said that Qatar had briefed British, US, and Iranian officials on the plans; a source at Al Jazeera said in March that the timing was not clear.

<sup>13</sup> A spokesman from his office said at the time that Qaradawi had left, as was his custom to spend the first part of Ramadan in Egypt, but would return to attend a reception with the new emir in mid-August, which he did.

<sup>14</sup> See <http://hammonda.net/?p=1919> for the original text, in Arabic.

<sup>15</sup> Author interview, September 2013.

Saudi Arabia and Iran; it is also consistent with the country's official mantra since 1995 of maintaining close ties with all of the main Arab political trends. "We are a cohesive state, people, and society, not a political party. Therefore, we strive to maintain relations with all governments and states, and we respect all sincere, influential, and effective political trends in the region", he said, adding: "But we are not with one trend against another; we are Muslims and Arabs who respect diversity in sect, and we respect all religions inside and outside our countries. As Arabs, we reject dividing Arab societies along sectarian lines."

Indeed, the general thrust of the speech was that Qatar should continue to be different in order to survive, with an implied caveat that more attention would be paid to domestic development. When his father had taken over, Qatar was "stuck in the past" and "fighting for its survival", Tamim said, praising Sheikh Hamad for taking risks in establishing an infrastructure base for the oil and gas industry. Qatar had thus been transformed from "a country that some people could hardly locate on the map to a principal actor in politics, economics, media, culture, and sports at a global level." Again, he pushed the theme of independence, going on to say: "We don't live on the edge of life, lost without direction, and we are not answerable to anyone or wait on anyone for instructions. Qatar is known for its independent behaviour now, and those who deal with us know we have our own vision."

Expectations of a new tack seemed to be vindicated with Qatar's immediate response to Morsi's removal. Government statements suggested a desire to acquiesce in the new order. In a note of congratulations addressed to a foreign ministry official and published by the state news agency, the tone appeared defensive and almost apologetic. "Qatar's policy was always with the Egyptian people and its choices in realising democracy and social justice [...] Qatar will continue to respect the will of the Egyptian Arab Republic and the Egyptian people with all its constituents", it said, praising Egypt's military for "defending Egypt and its national interests". Meanwhile, contrary to press reports, Qaradawi had not been ejected from Qatar, but his return did not prompt local newspapers to carry close-up photographs of him with Tamim at the emir's Ramadan Iftar. One paper even ran an open letter from a son of Qaradawi explaining why he, unlike his father, opposed Morsi.<sup>16</sup>

Relations with Egypt started to sour in the second week of the coup, when Qatar's state news agency issued a statement of regret from the foreign ministry after the Egyptian army killed 55 Morsi supporters on 8 July; it also called for restraint and dialogue. On 23 July, Qatar issued a call for Morsi's release. A foreign ministry source "expressed

surprise at the continued detention of elected president Mohammed Morsi because of the dangers [it presented] for the gains of the Jan 25 revolution", the state news agency said. Commentaries in Qatari media were generally critical of the military, but it was on Al Jazeera that a new language of contestation and resistance was taking shape.

Al Jazeera Arabic continued to give airtime to Brotherhood supporters, settling back into the oppositional role towards the Egyptian government that it had played for over a decade. It began to host both supporters and opponents from Egypt in a Doha hotel for three-week daily stints as talking heads on Al Jazeera's discussion shows. "Al Jazeera has become even more pro-Brotherhood", said one channel insider in August, just over a month after Morsi's removal.<sup>17</sup> The failure of Al Jazeera to shift its editorial line was a clear indication that expectations of a shift in Qatari policy were not being fulfilled. In response, some staff from Al Jazeera's Egypt operation, Al Jazeera Mubasher Misr, left in protest, and those who remained pondered whether change would come (Egypt eventually closed the channel).<sup>18</sup>

By September, relations with Egypt had deteriorated, possibly irreparably for the medium term. Egypt returned the \$2 billion that Qatar had deposited in its central bank after talks to convert the funds into three-year bonds broke down (Qatar gave Egypt \$7.5 billion during the year that Morsi was in power), and Egypt refused a Qatari request to increase the number of flights between the two countries.<sup>19</sup> Interim Prime Minister Hazem el-Beblawi said that Egypt was "not happy with Qatar's position, which we can't find an interpretation for".<sup>20</sup> After Egypt's government designated the Brotherhood a "terrorist group" in December, Egypt detained three journalists working for Al Jazeera English, accusing them of forming a "terror cell" that was distributing false information about Egypt. Qatar's foreign ministry issued a statement saying that the designation was a "prelude to a shoot-to-kill policy" against demonstrators, prompting Cairo to summon the Qatari ambassador.<sup>21</sup>

Was this deterioration inevitable? There had been an apparent effort by Qatar to put relations on a new footing in the first days of the new Egyptian government. But, as the situation worsened in Egypt, the relationship suffered because neither party was willing to expend the energy necessary to prevent such deterioration. Thus, events may have taken on their own momentum, with no particular

<sup>17</sup> Name withheld.

<sup>18</sup> Sheikh Ahmed bin Jassim al-Thani officially resigned as director general at Al Jazeera Media Network in Tamim's reshuffle to take another post; Qatari media, including and beyond Al Jazeera, remains in the hands of Sheikh Hamad bin Thamer al-Thani, the chairman of the Al Jazeera network and effective minister of information who oversaw the channel's pro-Islamist shift under Wadah Khanfar.

<sup>19</sup> "Egypt returns \$2 billion to Qatar in sign of growing tensions", Reuters, 19 September 2013, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/09/19/us-egypt-qatar-deposits-idUSBRE98IoNo20130919>.

<sup>20</sup> "We're not happy with Qatar's position, but we can't find an explanation for it" (in Arabic), 20 October 2013, available at <http://www.albawabnews.com/183659>.

<sup>21</sup> "Egypt summons Qatari envoy after criticisms of crackdown", Reuters, 4 January 2014, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/01/04/us-egypt-brotherhood-qatar-idUSBREA0304W20140104>.

<sup>16</sup> In the spirit of wishful thinking, analysts close to Saudi Arabia claimed that the ascent of Tamim would be good for Riyadh. See Robert F. Worth, "Egypt Is Arena for Influence of Arab Rivals", the *New York Times*, 9 July 2013, available at [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/10/world/middleeast/aid-to-egypt-from-saudis-and-emiratis-is-part-of-struggle-with-qatar-for-influence.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/10/world/middleeast/aid-to-egypt-from-saudis-and-emiratis-is-part-of-struggle-with-qatar-for-influence.html?_r=0).

intent on either side. Yet it is clear that Qatar's leadership had the option of being proactive via Al Jazeera, but it chose not to make that call. Indeed, it was not long before Qaradawi was back not only on Al Jazeera but also on Qatari state television, where he condemned the military government in Friday prayer sermons in Doha that were broadcast live on the official channel.

## Qatari views

Qatari writers, analysts, and academics, from Islamists to liberals, feel that little has changed in Qatar's key foreign-policy orientations in the region. The Islamists among them are happy about this fact, and this is the opinion most commonly found in Qatari newspaper columns. "Personally, I am proud and happy with the Qatari stance on Egypt. It's not with the Brotherhood, though I have no problem with that, but it's obviously an ethical stand. I would be upset with my government if they didn't take that stand", said a columnist and writer who has been close to the unofficial Qatari Brotherhood trend. "I don't think [a policy change] is going to happen. [Qatar] might slow down because of pressure, but it's not going to change its stand", he added.<sup>22</sup>

Liberal and Arab nationalist Qatari writers are more disturbed by the country's direction. "There are accumulations and networks of relations created over time that are not easy to pull apart in a short time. I can't predict if there will be a change or not, but I'm one of those who hope there will be", said Abdelhamid al-Ansari, former dean of the Islamic law faculty at the University of Qatar. He went on to say: "Qatar looked right to bet on the Brotherhood when they reached power, but now I think that things have changed with the setback for the other group, and it will affect them in other Arab countries. So I think that Qatari policy must be reviewed." Matwi of the *Arab Daily* said that the new emir's first speech had raised unfulfilled expectations among some: "I don't imagine any change. We thought there'd be one when we heard the emir's speech on not standing with any one party against another, but you can see that Al Jazeera and Qaradawi are still part of the team. In the foreseeable future, there will be no change."<sup>23</sup>

In the view of Ali al-Kuwari, a prominent critic of Qatar's ruling group who organises a monthly salon for writers and thinkers, the transition has to be seen in the context of misgivings and fears among ordinary Qataris about the sudden, jolting evolution of their urban space in the face of the regime's real-estate speculations. *The People Want Reform... In Qatar, Too*, a book that Kuwari edited and which is authored by different attendees of a year of

discussion salons, outlines succinctly what those concerns – many of them otherwise publicly unsaid – are: how energy revenues are spent, uncontrolled spending by the Qatar Foundation and Qatar Airways, the population imbalance, education, media, the environment, and constitutional and judicial reform.<sup>24</sup> "Qataris are always surprised by policy decisions, as if they were a private affair that citizens have no right to know about or take part in", Kuwari wrote in the book's introduction.<sup>25</sup>

The 2030 development plan highlights the need to create a high standard of living for all, with first-class health and education, and claims awareness of the country's acute population imbalance. But it uses vague terms and language unfamiliar to ordinary Qataris, reflecting a trend over the last decade in which small Gulf states have employed foreign consultancies and public relations firms to devise national visions that are in effect out of touch with reality. Qataris are in fact bewildered by the changes around them, experiencing a form of what Alvin Toffler once termed "future shock". The sleepy downtown area of the old Souq Waqif faces off against the otherworldly skyscrapers of the prominent West Bay district, with schizophrenic effect. Arising out of the sea on reclaimed land, these structures give the impression of almost floating on air.

In a survey conducted by the Doha-based faculties of Northwestern and Georgetown universities in 2013, 77 percent of Qataris polled said that more resources should be spent inside the country rather than in overseas investments and policy gambits.<sup>26</sup> Five-star hotels located in West Bay, for example, want to project an image of international cosmopolitanism and sophistication. As a result, social conservatism among some sectors of the Qatari population is rising in response to this sudden and intense Westernisation, and not without effect: Greece removed two ancient statues of nude males from an exhibition in Doha last year after Qatari officials insisted on covering their genitalia with black cloth. And while internal development is being packaged as the actions of a paternalistic state responsive to Qatari concerns, it in fact meets the requirements of Qatar's hosting of the World Cup in 2022, an event in which the interests of capitalist expansion and the relentless pursuit of international prestige perfectly align.

## Main aims

Sheikh Hamad's abdication was explained as a desire to give new blood to the leadership. But many had speculated that, in addition to being exhausted and ill, bowing out at this stage was a way of defusing criticism of Qatar from Arab neighbours as well as from street protesters in Egypt and

<sup>22</sup> Mohammed al-Ahmari, a widely respected Saudi Islamist intellectual now based in Doha, where he runs a research centre, said: "He won't change the ideas of the father."

<sup>23</sup> A source at Al Jazeera said that a search is on for an eventual replacement for Qaradawi (born in 1928), preferably a Qatari who would still be independent of Saudi-influenced Salafism. Author interview, September 2013.

<sup>24</sup> "What change? Do you see a change? There's no change", Kuwari said of Tamim's policies. Author interview, September 2013.

<sup>25</sup> Published in Beirut in 2012, available at <http://dr-alkuwari.net>.

<sup>26</sup> Justin Gengler, "Collective Frustration, But No Collective Action, in Qatar", MERIP, 7 December 2013, available at <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero120713>.

Tunisia who condemned Sheikh Hamad's policy of backing Islamists. Beyond that, it had been clear that Tamim was being groomed for taking over if not the full portfolio of ruler then many of its elements. Since 2007, he had been liaising with Saudi Arabia as the Qatari point man for reconciliation between the two Gulf states. And, in the last two years, three issues were attributed to Tamim's leadership or intervention: shifting the language of university instruction back to Arabic from English, closing Doha shopping malls for a safety review after a fire in the Villaggio Mall in 2012 killed 19 people, and stopping sales of alcohol in restaurants in the luxury residential district called The Pearl in 2011.

Since Tamim took over, the government has apparently wanted to send a message to Qataris that it is paying attention to their concerns, such as the problems associated with rapid expansion in Doha. Immediately upon the leader's accession, for example, the government went about expanding the roads around the capital as a way of affirming this new direction. At the same time, however, the leadership has clearly wanted to tend to Qatari needs without appearing to bow to popular demands. In a departure from previous governments, for example, the foreign minister post has passed to a non-royal, former deputy foreign minister, Khalid al-Attiya, signifying that meritocracy can count for something in Qatar (though Attiya is from an important Thani-allied family). Likewise, instead of a prime minister who doubles up as foreign minister, now Qataris have a prime minister, Sheikh Abdullah bin Nasser al-Thani, who also occupies the interior minister portfolio. This development in particular reflects a domestic concern for foreign immigration, visa over-stayers, and crime on one hand, and the potential for Arab Awakening-era dissent on the other.

Yet, fearful of a growing undercurrent of disaffection among ordinary Qataris, the government has taken it one step further. The case of poet Mohammed Ibn al-Dheeb al-Ajami provides a ready example. A young colloquial Arabic poet, popular on YouTube, he was prosecuted months after the Arab Awakening uprisings over a poem circulated on YouTube in which he appeared to mock the ruling family; he had received notoriety in the immediate months prior to his arrest with a poem denouncing Arab leaders, but which did not specify any names. Ajami is currently serving a 15-year jail sentence. And, contradictory to expectations about Tamim's first months in office, the government has indicated no plans to pardon him.

But, despite high-profile cases such as Ajami's, Qataris aren't necessarily keeping their heads down. On the contrary, they have begun to talk publicly (notably on the state radio show "Watani al-Habib Sabah al-Khair" (Good Morning, My Dear Nation)) about issues of a more critical nature. These have included where the nation's wealth is being spent, income inequalities among Qataris and between Qataris and Western expatriates, and the blurred lines between the wealth of state figures and the state itself – specifically citing Hamad bin Jassim's personal business interests in the local economy

and leading role in Qatar's foreign investments through his leadership of the Qatari Investment Authority (QIA).

Under Hamad bin Jassim's tenure as chief executive, the QIA accumulated assets of \$100 billion, investing surpluses from Qatar's vast oil and gas wealth in ventures. The QIA bought big stakes in companies such as German automakers Volkswagen and Porsche, Anglo-Swiss mining giant Xstrata, and French football team Paris Saint-Germain. The fund also made large investments in former colonial power Britain, acquiring stakes in Harrods, the London Stock Exchange, and the Shard, the tallest building in the EU. The investments were to some degree a complement to Al Jazeera, the Qatar Foundation, and Qatar's activist foreign policy – they sought to put the country on the map and further establish its independence. But given that Qatar is facing financial pressure, with Citigroup predicting a possible budget deficit in 2015 due to high spending and changing energy markets, the state is expected to pursue less flamboyant investing abroad.<sup>27</sup>

## An anti-climactic transition

The biggest expectation of the transition was that it would usher in a new approach to political Islam. In tune with the changes listed above, Qatari foreign policy has been quieter, partly because of the departure of a larger-than-life figure like Hamad bin Jassim and partly because Qatar had ceded place to Saudi Arabia as the main Arab power guiding the Syrian opposition abroad and funding and arming rebel groups inside Syria. Aside from this, however, a major shift away from Islamist groups has not taken place, as most clearly illustrated by Qatar's relations with Egypt since June. This can in part be explained by political Islam's central role in the regime's plans for expansion on the domestic and foreign fronts, even in the face of continued Islamist losses in the Arab region, as well as ongoing but not necessarily persistent tensions with some of its Gulf neighbours.

Notably, Qatar remains invested in a number of Islamist movements, including the PJD party in Morocco, Islah in Yemen, the Syrian Brotherhood, Tunisia's Ennahdha party, and Hamas. Given that the jury is still out on the Brotherhood in Tunisia, there would be no reason for Doha to ditch Ennahdha at this stage. In the case of Hamas, as with its post-coup policy towards the Brotherhood, Qatar will most likely maintain political and financial support for what it considers to be the popular position of Hamas – Khaled Meshaal continues to reside in Doha, and Qatar provided much-needed fuel for Gaza in November. Tamim is not, however, expected to replicate media spectacles such as his father's 2012 visit to Gaza, when Doha fancied itself as the power that would go down in history – and win Western kudos – for coaching Hamas into a peace

<sup>27</sup> Robert Tuttle, "Qatar Emir Says New Era Has Begun as He Passes Power to Son", *Bloomberg Businessweek*, 25 June 2013, available at <http://www.businessweek.com/news/2013-06-24/qatar-s-emir-to-hand-over-power-to-son-al-jazeera-says-1>.

arrangement with Israel. Likewise, the Brotherhood in Egypt remains a major force not only in Egypt but also regionally and even internationally, with members based in many capitals around the world. An immediate shift away from them, therefore, would not make sense – they may still make a comeback, if not in the short term then perhaps in the medium term.

The situation in Egypt is volatile and will remain so until the state manages to co-opt or accommodate the Islamist movement. The Egyptian state – and Saudi Arabia – hopes that this can be achieved through the Salafi Nour party, but the chances of success are slim. And while the post-Morsi regime is being kept afloat financially by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait, with only grudging acceptance from the US and the EU, this support has not brought stability; the security establishment appears determined to extend its crackdown to dissenters beyond the Islamists, opening the way for a possible realignment as the united front in favour of the coup slowly disintegrates. Consequently, it seems clear that Qatar, along with its continued close Islamist-led ally Turkey, has decided to wait the situation out for now.

Given the significance that Qatar places on its ties with the US, one possible short- to medium-term scenario in which Qatar may reconsider the level of political and media support it allows the Brotherhood could involve a US policy shift on Egypt. The US–Egypt relationship is heading down a path of normalisation. The first stage, the referendum, in which voters endorsed a new constitution, has passed; now come the presidential and parliamentary elections. Once the government goes through these last two hooplas, the US will be able to deal with the 3 July regime as “normal”. To a lesser extent, any more trouble for Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan – indicating a possible temporary end to Islamist government in Turkey – could also force a rethink in Doha, although for the moment this seems only a distant possibility.

Washington’s realignment on Iran over its nuclear programme and on Syria – for which it now appears to favour at least the survival of the Assad regime’s structures in some form or another – has created the possibility of a Qatari policy shift in both countries. Thus, like other small Gulf states, Qatar was remarkably quick to open up to Iran following the November 2013 breakthrough in talks between the US and Iran over its nuclear programme. At the same time, even though the leadership continues to fund Syrian armed opposition groups, it is also seeking to revive contacts with Hezbollah and trying to rebuild its once cordial relationship with Tehran, both of which collapsed as a result of Qatar’s early and active support for the Syrian opposition. A clearly defined and reformulated Syria policy is not likely to emerge until there is a political resolution; until then, the Qatari leadership is likely to continue diluting its strategy of regime change by also pursuing other alliances and outcomes at the same time.

Ties with Gulf neighbours have of course been strained by Qatar’s positions on Egypt and Arab Islamist movements in general, because they empower Islamists in the Gulf who have the potential to garner popular support for political reform. Collateral damage has included Doha’s relations with Jordan. The latter has been moving further into the Saudi orbit since 2011 (stability there is seen as vital by Riyadh to its own health). Though Doha approved of Saudi efforts to provide financial aid to Jordan and Morocco via the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) decisions, it is not clear that Doha is driven by the same concern for the fate of those regimes as monarchies per se. Doha’s policies, including its support for Bahrain’s government in its crackdown on the 2011 protest movement, indicate that Qatar believes only in the survival of GCC regimes as a matter of policy – the rest is negotiable.

Thus the transition in Qatar has been an anti-climactic one. The Hamad branch of the Thanis intends to continue on its path of carving out a very distinct and independent political, economic, religious, and cultural identity for Qatar, with minor adjustments in nuance and style to suit the requirements of the time. This means that Qatar will remain in a position to support the EU in its engagement with the Gulf and the region through its ties to Islamist movements and its relationship with the smaller Gulf states that have resisted Saudi entreaties to distance themselves from Iran. Qatar has contacts with, and sway over, Islamist movements, and there is no sign that it will withdraw its conviction that political Islam remains at the heart of Arab politics.

## Implications for the EU

Qatar will remain a crucial interlocutor for the EU. In particular, since Doha is now a key refuge for members of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, the EU could press Qatar to use its relationship with these actors to promote European interests. Qatar also offers possibilities for doing the same with other Islamist groups such as Ennahdha in Tunisia and the PJD party in Morocco. Other issues of concern could range from militant groups, to immigration, to political backing for a diplomatic initiative, to resolution of a conflict such as the Arab-Israeli one. Europeans should also continue to use Al Jazeera to engage with Middle East publics and decision-makers on issues such as Yemen and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

Qatar will also remain critical to Europe on Syria. Doha is not as committed as Saudi Arabia to bringing down Assad and reducing Iranian influence in the region. Given Doha’s inability to achieve its own objectives in Syria, its decision to acquiesce to Riyadh’s desire to lead the charge against Assad was probably a wise move in that regard. But since it retains leverage over the Syrian Brotherhood and other Islamist groups, Qatar is in a position to facilitate Western policy choices in Syria and steer the conflict in a direction towards mutually agreed-upon goals. But Qatar can still be expected to support the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria and argue that

it is the only moderate Islamist force that the West can and should deal with.

Ultimately, however, Qatar is likely to remain an unpredictable power. Since 1995, it has reoriented its positions in order to remain an autonomous political player. Its policies and actions – as elsewhere in the Gulf – are partially driven by the strength of personal relationships as much as by wider strategic considerations. For example, Qatar developed close links with France in part because Sheikh Hamad and Hamad bin Jassim liked certain French leaders such as President Nicolas Sarkozy (which paid off with co-operation over Libya and Syria and Qatari investment in the Paris property market). Thus long-term agendas and carefully crafted policy positions can therefore defy analysis or fall foul of over-analysis. Ultimately, the transition from Hamad to his son should be seen as a move calculated to ensure the continuation of the 1995 regime.

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