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QATARI FOREIGN POLICY

IN A PRECARIOUS DECADE

From the Arab Spring
to the Gulf Reconciliation (2011-2021)

ALI ABO REZEG



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FOREWORD

The State of Qatar has been attracting the attention of academicians for the last two decades for its highly proactive foreign policy perspective. It has been following a proactive and relatively autonomous foreign policy and playing an active peace-brokering role in international politics. Qatar has supported an “open door” policy, allowing Doha to maintain its ties to all regional and global actors. The main pillars of this foreign policy perspective are laid down in the official documents of the state. As it is explained in the official documents, the foreign policy of the State of Qatar is based on the following principles: preserving sovereignty and independence, defending the identity of the Arab and Islamic countries, respecting international covenants and conventions, enhancing international peace and security through encouraging the resolution of international conflicts by peaceful means, defending public and private freedoms and human rights, supporting the right of self-determination for all peoples, abstaining from interference in the internal affairs of other countries, and cooperating with all nations that seek peace.

Since Qatar has been trying to pursue an active foreign policy, it has been active in multilateral platforms and international institutions. It is a founding member of the Gulf Cooperation Council, which was established in 1981, and an early member of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Qatar has successfully used its smart and soft power in foreign policy. Besides its *Al Jazeera TV* network, two influential think tanks, namely the *Arab Center for Policy Studies* and the *Al Jazeera Policy for Studies*, serve as key means of exerting international soft power. Qatar’s hosting of the World Cup is one of the manifestations of this power.

Qatar maintained its proactive foreign policy during the Arab uprisings and revolutions that erupted in 2010. Unlike other Arab and Gulf monarchies, Qatar supported the powers of change in the Arab world throughout the so-called post-Arab Spring. Qatar’s *Al Jazeera TV* network has played a crucial role in mobi-

lizing the Arab masses demanding political reform. This TV network has supported reformist and revolutionary political and social actors in Tunisia, Yemen, Libya, Egypt, and Syria. The Qatari government has provided financial, humanitarian, and diplomatic support to the new regimes.

Qatar's pro-reform perspective has worsened its relations with pro-status quo Arab states such as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain. After the relatively mild political crisis in 2014, these three states together with some other conservative states declared a strict embargo and blockade against Qatar. Conservative Arab states abandoned their hostile position in the first month of 2021.

This timely book, which was defended as a Ph.D. dissertation, examines the main parameters driving Qatar to follow its traditional proactive foreign policy. The book nicely reveals "Qatari exceptionalism" and how Qatar differed from other Arab monarchies throughout the Arab Spring. The author discusses the role of the Al Jazeera TV network during the Arab protests and the Qatari policy throughout the Gulf crisis. He also reviews Qatar's policy toward the Egyptian revolution in 2011 and the military coup in 2013.

I believe that this book will provide significant critical perspectives about the Arab Spring and some related Middle Eastern developments. The book delivers new insights and cutting-edge research to readers. I am confident that this book will be a great contribution to the understanding of regional issues.

December 25, 2022

Prof. Dr. Muhittin ATAMAN

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ABSTRACT

Qatar embraced a very proactive foreign policy in the precarious decade of 2011-2021, which commenced with the protests that hit several Arab capitals and ended with the Gulf Reconciliation that put an end to three and a half years of the Gulf row. Unlike the Arab monarchies, Qatar adopted a supportive position towards the Arab revolutions since the moment they broke out in late 2010. In fact, Qatar's Al-Jazeera network had been an essential media mobilizer for the Arab masses, and a major promoter of the revolutionary change process in the region by hosting pro-revolution Arab intellectuals and broadcasting pro-reform messages. Qatar firstly welcomed the Tunisian revolution, and financially backed the country in its transitional stage, behaving similarly with the Egyptian and Yemeni cases. Furthermore, Qatar made efforts to encourage Arab and international support for humanitarian intervention in Libya and Syria, and generously backed revolutionary forces there both financially and militarily. However, Qatar's pro-Arab Spring policies weakened its relations with its conservative neighbors, namely Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain, which, consequently, prompted them to boycott Doha and withdraw their ambassadors in 2014. Following this, in the summer of 2017, the same three states, along with Egypt, announced a total boycott and embargo on Doha, before that rift was finally resolved in early 2021. Given the fact that Qatar's political system is of the conservative-monarchic type, this book aims to review the dynamics that drove Doha to embrace a pro-change policy in the region during the Arab Spring by asking whether regime "types" matter in terms of their respective reactions to revolutions that occur in their geopolitical backyards. Along with studying Qatar's support for post-revolutionary Tunisia, Libya, Yemen and Syria, a detailed analysis was conducted on Doha's role in Egypt with a view to better understanding what has come to be known as "Qatari Exceptionalism." This book also discusses the dynamics behind the Gulf crisis with the geopolitical and

international dynamics that led to the rift between the GCC countries and those that brought the crisis to the desired end.

Key Words: Qatar, Arab Spring, revolutions, Egypt, regime type

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BICI	: Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry
EU	: European Union
FSA	: Free Syrian Army
FSA	: FREEDOM Support Act
FSLN	: Sandinista National Liberation Front
GCC	: Gulf Cooperation Council
IAF	: Islamic Action Front
IMF	: International Monetary Fund
LNG	: Liquefied Natural Gas
MB	: Muslim Brotherhood
NATO	: North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NTC	: National Transition Council in Libya
PRC	: People's Republic of China
QFF	: Qatar Friendship Fund
QFFD	: Qatar Fund for Development
SCAF	: Supreme Council of the Armed Forces in Egypt
SEED	: Support for Eastern European Democracies
SESRI	: Social and Economic Survey Research Institute
SIPRI	: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
SNC	: Syrian National Coalition
UAE	: United Arab Emirates
UNSC	: UN's Security Council
US	: United States
YYC	: Yemeni Youth Coordination



CHAPTER ONE



INTRODUCTION

Qatari foreign policy passed through a hazardous decade in the period between 2011 and 2021 with this era amounting to be the Arab and Gulf regions' most eventful and flaming decade. Commencing with the protests which hit several Arab capitals, the year 2011 marked one of the riskiest years for the Arab dictators, within which we saw the disposal of four rulers in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya as the harsh and expanding protests provided a forewarning to the heads of Bahrain and Syria of their possible fate. Not only this, the Gulf region was hit by two domestic crises in 2014 and 2017 with the latter being seen as the most dangerous in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)'s history before the rift was quelled in early 2021. The two crises in fact erupted as a result of the Qatari monarchy's pro-active foreign policy in general and the pro-Arab Spring stance in particular, with the Gulf neighbours of Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain coming together twice in less than three years and deciding to sanction Qatar for these policies.

Throughout history, monarchies have been largely skeptical regarding revolutionary change taking place within their geopolitical reach, with a majority of them positioning themselves in opposition to the revolutionary movements promoting such change. Since the French Revolution (1789), the Bolshevik Revolution (1917) and the Iranian Revolution (1979), international factors have played a crucial role in the success or failure of various revolutions. Exporting revolutionary ideas and principles abroad has been the most critical issue of concern to the neighbors of revolutionary countries, especially monarchies, prompting them, in some cases, to establish counter-revolutionary coalitions with a view to foiling these movements or, at least, containing them within their borders.

In the case of the Arab Spring revolutions that erupted in Tunisia (in late 2010) and in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain (in early 2011), Saudi Arabia and other Arab monarchies, especially the UAE, played crucial roles in

thwarting these revolutions and the nascent democratic process. Saudi Arabia even provided safe haven for Tunisia's fugitive president, Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, and for former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Furthermore, Riyadh, along with other Gulf monarchies, sent "Peninsula Shield" forces to help quell protests that erupted in Bahrain. With the exception of Qatar, the Gulf monarchies welcomed and financially supported Egypt's military coup against Mohammed Morsi, the country's first-ever democratically elected leader. Following the coup in Egypt, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi also extended assistance to Libyan General Khalifah Haftar, who continues to lead counter-revolutionary forces in the North African country.

Unlike the Arab monarchies, Qatar adopted a supportive position vis-à-vis the Arab Spring uprisings. This was demonstrated by its Al-Jazeera media network, which played a major role in mobilizing the Arab masses who took to the streets to demand change and in promoting the revolutionary process. Indeed, Qatar firstly welcomed the Tunisian revolution and generously supported the country during its transitional stage, and continued this stance in the Egyptian and Yemeni cases. Qatar also exerted efforts to drum up Arab and international support for humanitarian intervention in post-revolution Libya and Syria. Al Thani's emirate was even accused by its monarchial neighbors of covertly assisting peaceful protests that had erupted in Bahrain.

Qatar was also known for sending military and financial support to Syrian revolutionary forces. Qatar's pro-Arab Spring policies led to unprecedented tension between it and its royal neighbors before bilateral ties were indefinitely suspended when Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain withdrew their ambassadors from Doha in 2014. The three countries, plus Egypt, also imposed a comprehensive boycott and embargo on Qatar in the summer of 2017 over hosting the Muslim Brotherhood figures, Hamas leaders, "terror charges"¹ and good relations with Iran. Lasting till January 2021, the Gulf rift came to an end thanks to the many geopolitical and international transformations, most specifically, the defeat of the ultra-conservative US President Donald Trump, who was the main supporter of the Saudi-led bloc.

Given that Qatar's political system is a conservative monarchic one, this book aims to review the dynamics that drove Doha to embrace a pro-change policy in the region during the Arab Spring, a policy that led to angering the Gulf neigh-

¹ Qatar had vehemently denied these charges as baseless, groundless and politically-motivated.

bors, prompting them to boycott and blockade the country. We have done this by analyzing Qatar as a case study to determine whether regime “type” matters with regard to states’ foreign policies vis-à-vis revolutions that take place within their geopolitical reach.

Hence, contrary to the positions adopted by other Arab monarchies, Qatar was the only Arab monarchy that not only backed revolutionary change in the Arab world through its media (Al-Jazeera), but also provided financial, military and diplomatic support to those countries in which revolutions had occurred. Unlike its Gulf Arab counterparts, the Qatari leadership appeared unafraid of the apparent changes sweeping the region at this time.

BOOK’S PUZZLE

This book attempts to answer the question, why did the conservative Qatari monarchy, unlike the other Arab monarchies, embrace a supportive foreign policy towards the Arab Spring and endorse a pro-change strategy in the Arab world in 2011?

In order to answer this question and understand the Qatari oxymoron as a monarchic regime supporting revolutionary change, we first reviewed a number of essays, articles and books written on the topic, following the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011, with a view to understanding how the Arab monarchies dealt with the revolutions that engulfed five or six of their fellow Arab states. We must also understand how these monarchies themselves were affected by the same winds of change, as most of the Arab monarchies were similarly hit by protests, which they managed to suppress before forming a coalition aimed at countering revolutionary change across the region. These events pose other questions, such as: What are the motives and dynamics that prompted Doha to adopt such exceptional policies that antagonized their Gulf neighbors?; Why was the Qatari regime itself unafraid of being hit by the same winds of change?; Was the Qatari position based entirely on moral considerations, or was Qatar carrying out a US agenda in the region?; Did Qatar’s position have anything to do with the alleged ideological background of the ruling family, which was known to be on good terms with Islamist groups in the region?; Were Qatar’s pro-Arab Spring policies intended to challenge Saudi hegemony?; How can Qatar’s position be understood from the perspective of historical tribal competition in the Gulf region?; and finally, How can we understand Qatar’s decision to support militant Islamist groups in Libya and Syria?.

MAIN ARGUMENT

The policies that were adopted by Qatar during the Arab Spring were aimed at backing pro-change movements, which were largely supported by popular forces. In contrast with the other Arab monarchies, Qatar actively supported pro-change movements in almost all Arab countries that saw popular protests. Qatar's exceptional position leads us to question whether the regime "type" matters in a country's foreign policy as it pertains to revolutions, given that Qatar's monarchic and conservative regime type did not prevent it from embracing pro-change positions in 2011. Qatar bet on the success of the Arab Spring, allying itself with pro-revolution figures and popular movements, assuming that such an alliance would give Al Thani's micro state more power and influence, which the country's ambitious leaders sought on both the regional and international levels. However, the pro-change powers were subject to a series of regional defeats that started with the military coup in Egypt in 2013 followed in 2014 by the military coup in Libya and, the Houthis coup against the legitimate government in Yemen. Furthermore, there was the Russian intervention to support the government in the civil war in Syria in 2015 and the fact that these developments affected the promises for political reform in Bahrain with the government detaining the leaders of the protests and sentencing them to hundreds of years in prison.

At the time of the uprisings, Doha had been hosting Palestinian thinker Azmi Bishara, head of the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, since 2008. He had been calling for dramatic change in the Arab region's politics and was described by *Le Monde*² -- due to his high-profile role in the Arab Spring -- as "the godfather of chaos in the Arab world". Further, Qatar had backed Wadah Khanfar, director manager of Al-Jazeera during the Arab Spring and coordinator of the network's pro-revolution news coverage. Khanfar currently leads many Qatar-funded projects targeting Arab youth, including the Al-Sharq Forum. Doha's media platforms, meanwhile, were also promoting Tawakkul Kerman, a Yemeni revolutionary figure who received a Nobel Peace Prize in 2011 for her "fundamental" role in Yemen's uprising. Kerman had been vociferously calling for the removal of "Arab dictators" especially those at the helm of the Arab monarchies. Prominent Muslim cleric Yousuf al-Qaradawi, one of the historic leaders of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood (MB) group (and often described as its spiritual guide), had also been frequently

² "Par Benjamin Barthe, Qatar: Azmi Bishara, l'éminence libérale de Doha" *Le Monde*, https://www.lemonde.fr/long-format/article/2018/11/16/qatar-azmi-bishara-un-progressiste-a-doha_5384456_5345421.html, (Accessed date : 25 February 2020).

hosted by Doha since 1961. Al-Qaradawi was one of several high-profile clerics who vocally supported revolutionary change in the region. Many of al-Qaradawi's fellow MB members were also hosted by Doha for several decades. These figures, along with other popular forces, played a pivotal role in mobilizing support for the toppling of Arab dictators in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Yemen. What's more, Doha had promoted Ali al-Salabi and Abdel-Hakim Bilhadj, high-profile Libyan figures who helped mobilize revolutionary forces against Muammar Qaddafi.³ Moreover, Qatar became the permanent residence of leaders of the Palestinian resistance group Hamas, who departed the Syrian capital after the outbreak of the Syrian revolution. Qatar was thus able to benefit from the wide popularity enjoyed by Hamas throughout the Arab world.

PREVIOUS AND SIMILAR WORKS

While studying many books, articles and essays to underline the existing literature on revolutions, Qatari exceptionalism, regime types and monarchic regimes, we have realized that there are many trends regarding the question of Arab revolutions in general and the Qatari role in support of these revolutions in particular. While many researchers prefer to describe the Arab Spring as no more than temporary uprisings and protests, we also have Azmi Bishara, Jack Goldstone, and Bayram Sinkaya, along with other academics, who insist that these uprisings developed into full-fledged revolutions, which we will discuss in detail below.

With regards to the Qatari interests and dynamics that drove Doha to embrace a supportive position towards the Arab Spring, we have no comprehensive study to fully explain these dynamics, especially the geopolitical ones. Hence, we see a large number of academics, mainly Ulrichsen and al-Hroub, highlight the domestic dynamics (the absence of domestic threats and the state's welfarism) to clarify Qatar's pro-Arab Spring policies. Others, like Roberts and Steinberg, focus on the country's close ties with Islamists in general and the Muslim Brotherhood in particular, as the latter group saw a major rise in popularity at the beginning of the Arab Spring. A third trend highlights the personal diplomacy of the father, Emir Hamad, who ascended the throne in the mid-1990s as an ambitious leader for a small country. After he assumed power, Doha experienced a rebound in terms of power and influence in both the regional and international arenas.

³ A detailed study on the Qatari forms of support to the Arab Spring will be discussed in the fourth chapter.

This book is a bid to analyze the Qatari proactive foreign policy in the precarious decade of 2011-2021, which commenced with the protests that hit several Arab capitals and ended with the Gulf reconciliation that put an end to the three and a half years of the Gulf row. Unlike the Arab monarchies, Qatar adopted a supportive position toward the Arab revolutions since the moment they broke out in late 2010. In fact, Qatar's Al-Jazeera network had been an essential media mobilizer for the Arab masses and a major promoter of the revolutionary change process in the region. Furthermore, Qatar made efforts to encourage Arab and international support for humanitarian intervention in Libya and Syria, and generously backed revolutionary forces there both financially and militarily. However, Qatar's pro-Arab Spring policies weakened its relations with its conservative neighbors, namely Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain, which, consequently, prompted them to boycott Doha and withdraw their ambassadors in 2014. Following this, in the summer of 2017, the same three states, along with Egypt, announced a total boycott and embargo on Doha before that rift was finally resolved in early 2021. Given the fact that Qatar's political system is of the conservative-monarchic type, this book aims to review the dynamics that drove Doha to embrace a pro-change policy in the region during the Arab Spring by asking whether regime "types" matter in terms of their respective reactions to revolutions that occur within their geopolitical reach. It also discusses the reasons behind the Gulf crisis with the geopolitical and international transformations that led to the rift between the GCC countries and those that brought the crisis to the desired end.

