This paper was written prior to the June 2013 abdication of Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani in favor of his son Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad. Aged 33, the Emir is the youngest leader in the Gulf region, and the first Qatari ruler to ascend to power following a voluntary abdication. Additionally, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim al-Thani – the Foreign and Prime Minister at the time – was also replaced with Abdullah bin Nasser bin Khalifa Al Thani, who was previously the Minister of Interior Affairs. Both Sheikh Tamim and Abdullah bin Nasser were key figures in the Qatari-Saudi Joint Coordination Council; formed in 2008 to improve relations between the two neighbor countries.
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Introduction

In the past decade, but particularly in the context of the Arab Spring, Qatar has played a much larger role in regional affairs than its small size would suggest. Its robust foreign policy agenda does not cater to a particular ideology or bloc because Qatar engages in relations with a wide range of states and actors from both the Arab region and the West. It has ties to Islamists, including Hamas and Hezbollah, and is a second home to individuals like Yusuf Al Qaradawi. It has semi-normalized relations with Israel at the same time that it has close relations to Iran and Syria. It hosts a large US base yet often works counter to how the US would like it to behave. Furthermore, it is home to Al Jazeera, a complex and significant media phenomenon that has been a major player in the coverage of the uprisings of the Arab Spring (and played a significant role previously in coverage of other events such as the second intifada). Another puzzling contradiction is that Qatar is imbued with an image as a progressive and semi-liberal state, yet it is almost an absolute monarchy and has minimal semblance of a true democratic process.

Qatar’s foreign policy objectives, unlike other Arab regimes and monarchies, do not appear to be directed towards regional stability. Qatar’s dominant role at the Arab League and its military intervention in Libya, in addition to its leading role in condemning Syria’s Bashar Al Assad, have been seemingly contradictory policies and generally run counter to maintaining the regional status quo. Furthermore, it appears that the Qatari government did not constrain Al Jazeera in its coverage of the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen. However, in contrast to this “pro-revolution” stance; Qatar was nominally silent about the mass mobilization in Bahrain. Though there is no overt evidence of government interference, Al Jazeera Arabic also turned a semi-blind eye to the same events although its English language counterpart did air an in-depth documentary of the uprising called “Shouting in the Dark.” In the case of Bahrain, it is possible that the interest in maintaining the stability of the GCC monarchies was still of prime importance. However, the question remains: Why has Qatar pursued foreign policies directly counter to regional stability in the context of the Arab Spring? Why has it pursued foreign policies that are frequently antagonistic to Saudi Arabia’s interests, and enraged other Arab regimes, to the extent that Qatar could potentially jeopardize its own regional security and relationships?

This paper argues that Qatar’s recent regional actions during the past year’s uprisings are an escalation of the regime’s prior foreign policy patterns, which emanate from the vision of a few elite members within the ruling family such as the emir, the prime minister, and some advisors. Qatar’s past and current foreign policies are oriented towards cultivating a positive international image of a progressive, innovative, business friendly and neutral state whose policies conform to international norms and values. Furthermore, these individuals believe that there exists more opportunity and security for Qatar in being internationally respected as opposed to depending on and lying in the shadow of Saudi Arabia. Due to Qatar’s small size, homogenous national population, and significant wealth, this small cadre

2 “Qatar’s Leadership is Politically Astute,” http://gulfnews.com/opinions/columnists/qatar-s-leadership-is-politically-astute-1.949632
of individuals responsible for Qatar’s foreign policy can afford to be flexible in ideology and actions without real risk of internal destabilization or pursuit of legitimate domestic political reform. Furthermore, Qatar’s foreign policy decision-makers believe that their courtship of Western powers and nimble foreign policy abilities have kept them relatively secure from any regional threat which might emerge as a result of their unconventional behavior, so that they are able to continue their precarious balancing act in the future.

The Unique Case of Qatar

Qatar is a small, prosperous, and ethnically and religiously homogenous state. Apart from the significant expatriate community, there are no marginalized groups or minorities within Qatari society who are politicized as such. (Though women may be marginalized for the most part they are not currently politicized.) It has a “very high” human development rank in the UN’s 2010 Human Development Report and a relatively small “youth bulge” compared to its neighbors. Its gross national income per capita makes it one of the richest countries in the world and unemployment is not an issue. Unlike Bahrain and other GCC countries, Qatar’s natural gas and oil reserves are projected to last for decades, relieving some pressure to diversify the economy and opening the possibility to continue a rentier mentality. Though it initially cut back on spending during the fiscal crisis of the 1990s, Qatar did not experience the same impact as other MENA countries. In spite of such incentives and inherent wealth, Qatar has attempted to diversify its economy and invest abroad as part of its far-sighted vision to build for the future.

Qatar is a monarchy with little democratic process. In spite of this fact, “there is no evidence of any real domestic demand for either elections or increased women’s rights, certainly not demand of a kind that would have threatened the regime.” Furthermore, civil society is very limited, political parties are outlawed, and there exist very few institutions for Qatari to engage in politics. For example, there are no official mechanisms for Qatari society to express any disapproval they may have of the state’s relations with Israel (if they hold them). Whether or not a negative public perception of these relations exists, and is relevant, is left very much to the judgment of the regime. There are no coalitions, pressure groups, parliamentary players, etc. (even illegal ones) that pressure or communicate to the regime or influence its ideology and action. In fact, society is disconnected from the regime to the extent that it is possible for members of the regime to hold a completely different vision of the world than Qatari society in general. This fact does not mean, however, that the regime is not liked or does not enjoy legitimacy. The majority of Qataris are very content with the regime and look to the emir as a leader and the guide who will push society to new heights.

Overall, Qatar has no significant structural pressures, either domestically or regionally, that push the regime to implement economic liberalization or political reform. According to conventional understandings, the dynamics of both the domestic and international domains should be pressuring Qatar to do exactly the opposite of what it has:

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3 Rabi, 444.
5 Lambert, “Political Reform in Qatar,” 94.
6 Ibid., 96.
7 Miles, Al-Jazeera, 22.
to not undergo any political or economic reform and not encourage regional regime change. Therefore, attempts to understand Qatar’s behavior require looking beyond the economic pressures and societal push for change that characterize traditional literature, to the regime and the decision-makers.

The choice of an individual level of analysis does not assume that all non-democratic states have relatively little or no domestic constraints or influences that impact maneuver space within foreign policy. There exist differences in the types and strengths of these factors from regime to regime and country to country. Qatar happens to be an exceptional case that, as discussed above, has relatively few domestic constraints, though this does not mean that they are not relevant whatsoever. Even in the case of Qatar, domestic issues can be detrimental to the regime if their dynamics are misjudged by unskilled decision-makers. As Hill notes, “however much leaders get seduced into making international affairs their priority, they are always pulled back by the elastic which connects them to their domestic base, often with rudely shocking results.”

Regardless, understanding why certain behavior occurred, rather than judging if it was the “best” or most “rational” behavior given the situation, requires an attempt to understand the agenda and perception of the decision-making apparatus.

As there appear to be relatively few domestic structures that constrain the regime, this paper assumes that the majority of both Qatar’s domestic and foreign policies emanate from the perceptions, world-view, goals, and decisions of a few individuals within the Qatari regime: the emir, the prime minister, and a few other advisors (Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim Jaber al-Thani is generally regarded as the architect of Qatar’s foreign policy). Many of the explanations for Qatar’s behavior are likely to be more coherently understood by utilizing an individual level of analysis that focuses on these key foreign-policy decision makers and their vision of Qatar, as opposed to pure rational actor model based on the notion of a personified and rarified nation state that has its interests defined by the structure, be it economic, balance of power, etc. In this case, the most important factors to understand are what decision-makers perceive as their interests (and their constraints) and what strategy they think is best to realize these interests.

The Emir and His Vision

Sheikh Hamad was 44 years old when he overthrew his father in a palace coup in 1995 (while his father was on vacation). Upon assuming the throne, he immediately initiated a series of reforms, one of which established the position of prime minister -to which he appointed his brother. The emir, who was educated in the UK’s Sandhurst military academy, also appointed a team of young, Western-educated advisors and technocrats to help him run the country. This group was significantly younger than its regional counterparts and was immersed in different social and political ideas from the West, which it desired to employ in governance. Sheikh Hamad seemed to be a different type of Arab monarch. He approached his society differently than many of his regional counterparts: rather than remain aloof and

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distant, he spoke to the press, explained his policies and why he wanted to pursue them. 
He repeatedly asserted that Qatar should be known and noticed in the world.\textsuperscript{10}

According to the Emir, being known and noticed in the world required building an image of a liberal and progressive state that stood out from its peers in the region. In a sense, democracy and liberal reforms were the way of the future, much like advanced technology also opened doors to future security. This perspective carries an underlying assumption that liberalism, reform, neutrality, etc. are not good simply in and of themselves. They are ideal and positively associated representations that need to be seen and recognized as part of Qatar's international image. In other words, Qatar's elite play a game that relies extensively on perception and are not necessarily beholden to any ideology except that which increases the value of Qatar's image.

**Qatar's Domestic Policies: Cultivating an Image of Liberal Reform**

Foreign policy is not the only area where Qatar has defied traditional understandings of how oil monarchies behave or tailored its desired international image. Since 1995, Qatar has also shown initiatives in domestic political reform when it appeared that there were no structural impetuses to do so. According to Lambert, Qatar's domestic reforms actually appear to be regarded as part of the foreign policy toolbox because the emir and his cadre conducted these reforms in order to gain the approving eye of the international community. It is clearly important to the regime to be liked. Conforming to international norms is part and parcel of the image construction that Qatar's elite is pursuing to bolster the state's external reputation.\textsuperscript{11}

Paradoxically, Sheikh Hamad and his regime have often pushed their reforms and liberal values through non-liberal and non-democratic means in an attempt to cultivate Qatar's progressive and modern international image. He and the Qatari elite felt that there were some norms that "ought" to be embraced in spite of the fact that the masses were not clamoring for them. For example, in 1995 the new emir announced that elections would be held for 29 seats of the Central Municipal Council. At the same time he also declared that it would be acceptable for women to both vote and run for office and there was a large push from the regime to get a woman elected. The media was instructed to portray women's issues in a positive light. However, the regime was sorely disappointed when Qatar's conservative society refused to elect a single female. It was not until 2003 that a female was elected to CMC, though she ran unopposed after it was rumored that her competitors were asked to step down. In this case, liberalization occurred from the top down.

Qatar's domestic reform case demonstrates the ambivalence that exists among the decision-makers' conceptualizations of liberalism and democracy. Though Sheikh Hamad promised to hold elections for the Shura Council, these elections have been repeatedly postponed. (They are currently scheduled for the latter half of 2013.) It is possible that the delay in democratization occurred because the emir was unsure if society would elect the "correct" individuals and subsequently legislate the "correct" or liberal types of reforms that would mesh with the desired international Qatari image. The interest in liberalism is very much strategic: it adds to the "right" image. Opening political space to society is only feasible when the emir feels that society is "ready" and guaranteed to lead Qatar in the

\textsuperscript{10} Miles, \textit{Al-Jazeera}, 14-15.

\textsuperscript{11} Lambert, "Political Reform in Qatar," 96.
appropriate direction. Therefore, Qatar’s domestic policies are part of its foreign policy and international image. Furthermore, its robust and dynamic foreign policy behavior, like its domestic behavior, is also built around maintaining and building an image and not endorsement of a particular ideology in and of itself. Additionally, because Qatar’s citizens “are quite pleased with the political system,” further political reform can even be interpreted as a provocative regional move aimed towards Saudi Arabia and other neighbors.

Qatar’s Foreign Policy: The “Honest Broker”

Before the Arab Spring, Qatar’s most active foreign policy role was playing that of negotiator in multiple regional issues. It cultivated what Kamrava refers to as “niche diplomacy.” Qatar’s mediation style is highly personalized and often comes with financial incentives for reaching a peace agreement. Since Qatar’s regime portrays itself as flexible and beholden to no one in its relations, it is often able to approach the mediation table as an honest broker (which further feeds into its desired role of neutrality). Its success rate is not always very strong and can be categorized as more cosmetic in nature. Though parties come to agreements at the negotiation table, they often fall apart after a short amount of time has passed. Regardless, Qatar is still able to play a role that was previously played by states such as Egypt (in the case of Sudan and Chad) and Saudi Arabia (in the case of Yemen).

According to Kamrava, “primary motivation for Qatari mediation efforts is a combination of small state survival strategies and the desire for international prestige.” Certain aspects of Qatar’s mediation activities accentuate the fact that it desires international attention for its efforts. Usually mediation is most successful when conducted in secret. However, Qatar conducts its mediation, like its liberal reforms, very much in the limelight. Its officials grant interviews regionally and globally and are not shy in praising Qatar’s efforts. Qatar has also benefited in more concrete ways from mediation efforts. For example, in Sudan its influence increased and it was able to purchase farmland for food security (a significant issue for the majority of the region). Understandably, Qatar’s regime works to expand and diversify its investments and activities globally so that it has security for the future.

Qatar’s Regional Relations: Saudi Arabia

Qatar’s foreign policy also cannot be analyzed in isolation from its relations with Saudi Arabia. The emir’s deposed father was satisfied with remaining in Saudi Arabia’s shadow throughout his rule. However, his son and younger surrounding advisors did not agree with this policy and began in the mid 1990’s to drift away from the regional powerhouse. Before the palace coup, tensions were already high between the two states as a result of a border clashes that killed two guards in 1992. After the coup, Saudi Arabia was reluctant to support the new emir and even went so far as to reject Qatar’s candidate for secretary general of the GCC. In 1996, Sheikh Hamad founded Al Jazeera, which proved over the years to be a large thorn in Saudi Arabia’s side. The Saudi regime has also been

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12 Gengler, “Qatar’s Ambivalent Democratization,” *Foreign Policy*, (November 1, 2011)
13 Kamrava, “Mediation and Qatari Foreign Policy,” 540.
14 Ibid., 542.
displeased with Qatar’s relations with Israel, Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah. Qatar repeatedly invited Israelis to events in Doha, such as the MENA conference, consistently angering Saudi Arabia and other neighbors. Sheikh Hamad has repeatedly asserted his desire to have a foreign policy independent of Saudi Arabia and this desire is part of the drive behind the cultivation of Qatar’s international image.

In spite of a history of animosity, in 2007 Saudi Arabia and Qatar’s relations began to warm. According to a New York Times article, the emir had the director of Al Jazeera accompany him on a visit to Saudi Arabia where it was agreed that the network would refrain from covering anything controversial in Saudi Arabia. In 2010 Sheikh Hamad pardoned the Saudi prisoners who had taken part in an attempted coup against the emir in 1996. According to Sultan Al Qassemi, the relations are likely to grow warmer until 2022 when Qatar will hold the World Cup (another component of Qatari soft power and international recognition). In order for the event to unfold successfully, Qatar will need Saudi Arabia’s help and cooperation.15

The Al Jazeera Phenomenon

Probably the most significant element that propelled tiny Qatar into regional and international prominence is its famous media network Al Jazeera. Founded in 1996 by the emir, it later rose to become the most dominant news network in the Middle East. “Exactly what the emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, had in mind when he decided so firmly to establish a satellite news channel—whether it was for financial gain, or from a desire to make political capital over his long time rivals the Saudis, or out of a genuine yearning for democratic reform—is a matter of opinion.”16 Whatever his intentions were, Al Jazeera was situated ostensibly outside of censorship in a region where information control remained a vital tool for managing society and securing authoritarian regimes. Its presentation and style were sharp, sleek, and modern; it was a perfect complement to the image Qatar’s elites desired of their nation. It not only aired vivid and raw scenes from events such as the Palestinian intifada, covered the inefficiency of the PLO (and was thus accused of being on the side of Hamas), and the violence of the American invasion of Iraq, but was also the first regional network to go so far as to air interviews with Israelis, thus depicting another side of a conflict that Arabs had previously never seen (except occasionally through Western media coverage). It also aired messages from controversial figures like Osama bin Laden, much to the irritation of both its neighbors and the West.

Like Qatar’s foreign policy, Al Jazeera seemed to be beholden to no one, often portraying both the West and various Arab regimes in a negative light. “To understand Al Jazeera’s influence, it is necessary to look at the channel not from the perspective of Western policymakers who consider it to be a malignant nuisance, but rather from the standpoint of its Arab audience, which see it as a magnifier of shared frustrations and aspirations and as a truth-teller.”17 Al Jazeera was felt by many across the region to depict the Arab side of the story. As a result, there was no longer a necessity to watch Western news networks to

16 Miles, Al Jazeera, 27
17 Seib, The Al Jazeera Effect, 15.
understand the events of the region. Al Jazeera’s ability to tap into and influence Arab societies make it a powerful foreign policy tool and it is apparent that Qatar’s elite views it as such.

Employees of Al Jazeera have claimed that they are completely independent and receive no instructions from the regime as to their content and coverage. It is certainly possible that the Qatari regime does not exert extensive control over the network. However, it is also no secret that Al Jazeera is reliant on the regime’s funding. Even if overt censorship does not usually occur, self-censorship still plays a significant role. Furthermore, even if the regime does not control Al Jazeera, this does not mean that the network does not fulfill the goals for which the emir originally created it. Additionally, Al Jazeera creates new situations and opportunities for the regime to capitalize on, such as the ability to be a relevant and influential player in the Arab Spring.

While the regime and Al Jazeera were certainly not responsible for the Arab Spring, the network did play a large role in how the uprisings developed and spread rapidly from country to country. This situation placed Qatar in a position where they had influence, intentional or not, on the development of the uprisings. Al Jazeera was regarded by Arab publics as a force of good and of truth. Its 2006-launched, English-language sister also gained positive recognition from Western nations. The fact that Al Jazeera is based in Doha further added to Qatar’s image as a modern and progressive state, in addition to accentuating that Qatar did indeed have a large role to play in the region and the world. Perhaps of even greater significance, it increased its power to exert influence in the region (as it has the ability to control Al Jazeera if it so desires) even if this caused further anger from its neighbors. As previously discussed, there was little reason for the regime to be concerned about its own stability and legitimacy (though Sheikh Hamad did announce his intentions to hold the much delayed parliamentary elections in 2013).

In September of 2011, Al Jazeera’s successful director, Wadah Khanfar, unexpectedly resigned and was replaced by a member of the royal family with no prior media expertise. Sheikh Ahmad bin Jassim al-Thani, the new director of Al Jazeera, claimed that his primary focus was streamlining the administration of the ever-growing network so that the bureaucracy became a seamless experience for employees. Reactions to this action portrayed Khanfar’s removal as a possible attempt by the regime to constrict and control Al Jazeera’s coverage during a very turbulent time (and resulted from displeasure over possible cooperation with the US). However, no firm information exists as to whether this is the case or if Qatari regime has re-evaluated its stance on media censorship. It is readily understood and expressed by key members of the regime that they regard Al Jazeera as a foreign policy tool. However, much of its credibility and legitimacy is built on the perception that it is generally not censored and not biased; it is a speaker of truth. If this perception changes then Al Jazeera will become like all the other state media channels in the region and lose its influence. There is little doubt that the Qatari regime, quick and nimble on multiple matters of foreign policy, is also aware of this fact.

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Qatar’s Behavior during the Arab Spring

Although Qatar has employed a robust, dynamic, and flexible foreign policy since Sheikh Hamad took power in 1995, its actions have never been forward and extensive enough to conduct a military intervention. Libya then appeared as a new and perhaps risky course taken by Qatar’s elite. Yet, such behavior does not deviate from Qatar’s previous foreign policy balancing act: it is simply a more aggressive version of it in an intense regional situation. Qatar is one of the only regimes not reeling from the dynamics of Arab Spring and has, thus far, been able to ride the waves and currents, at times even pulling from the front. In other words, Qatar’s regime has harnessed the events of the region and run ahead with them (while other regimes have been perceived to be slow, unstable, and inflexible).

Qatar’s intervention in Libya happened under the umbrella of the Arab League (where the emir currently plays a dominant role) and NATO. Though it was accused of being co-opted by western nations and their interests, Qatar’s past behavior does not demonstrate it as being overly favorable to any power. Analyzed in the context of the Qatari regime’s past history of foreign policy and vision, it is likely that the Libya intervention was nothing more than upping the stakes of the emir’s desire to play on the world’s center stage. Though it may have irritated them, Qatar did not extensively anger many of its neighbors with the intervention. It also demonstrated to western states and the rest of the international community that it could be a helpful and useful ally if it chose to (though not necessarily at anyone’s beck and call). Furthermore, Qatar’s regime could also afford to send their small military because the tiny state hosts US Central Command and is therefore guaranteed de facto security from the United States.

The intervention in Libya was, of course, primarily a political move as opposed to a full military operation. The emir claims that the intervention in Libya was not oriented around gain, as Qatar is a wealthy country, but for the sake of the Libyan people. This type of rhetoric feeds into the overall image of Qatar as a benevolent and progressive nation. However, aside from building its image, there is little doubt that Qatar will gain from being better positioned to invest in Libya’s multiple sectors, particularly banking. Just as it was able to extend its influence in Sudan, Lebanon, Yemen, and other locations through mediation, Qatar will now be better positioned than its regional counterparts to influence the new Libya. The intervention in Libya accomplished results and goals very similar to those garnered in Qatar’s previous mediation efforts.

In contrast to its pro-revolution stance in Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Tunisia, and eventually Syria, the regime of Qatar remained silent during Bahrain’s uprising and the follow-on GCC intervention. This behavior can possibly be attributed to the regime’s warmer ties with Saudi Arabia and its interests with the GCC as a whole. Supporting the uprising in Bahrain may have been judged by regime members as not tenable because it would have eaten away at Qatar’s image of “neutrality.” It might have simply been understood as a line not to be crossed. When considered in the context of a past foreign policy history of allying with multiple sides and players, Qatar’s behavior does not seem strange, but only a more pronounced emphasis of prior trends. Its lukewarm embrace of democracy (often in pursuit of a liberal image) has been an ongoing phenomenon in both its domestic and foreign policies for years. Though the emir and his family espouse “liberal” values, they often pursue them in autocratic manners. Qatar’s regime has had no problem in

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the past dealing with Islamists, Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Western states, and others simultaneously. The stable characteristic of all these divergent behavioral trends has been the pursuit of opportunities to bolster an internationally recognized image and not an adherence to a particular ideology or side, even that of liberalism.

Conclusion

The lingering question that remains for Qatar's regime is how long such nonconventional behavior can be sustained. As Dudley notes, despite its purported neutrality, "the events of this year have exposed a problem at the heart of Qatar's foreign policy, namely the county's strategy of supporting autocratic GCC regimes, while backing democracy movements elsewhere." As this paper has argued, Qatar's foreign policy has revolved around the regime's desire to cultivate an image that is recognized internationally. An image can prove to be a fundamentally delicate item to control and maintain because it is based on the perceptions of others. The more Qatar's regime places itself in the limelight, and the more that it gains in international prestige, the more it will find its actions scrutinized and analyzed by other players in the system. The divergence that has been characteristic of Qatar's foreign policy is becoming increasingly stressed and increasingly noticed. In the future it may not serve as an indicator by which the world judges Qatar to be benign and neutral, but as the characteristic of a self-serving and self-interested state that may assist you presently but cannot be depended upon in the future. Furthermore, the limited domestic and international constraints that Qatar currently enjoys may not allow the regime such latitude in the future. If the emir does carry out parliamentary elections and allow his more conservative society to participate in politics, Qatar's foreign policy is likely to become less nimble and fickle as it will no longer be solely based on the visions of a few men somewhat freed from the apparatuses of a large governing bureaucracy. However, Qatar's ruling elite have, thus far, shown significant foresight and skill in their ability to prepare for the future and harness the turbulence of the Arab Spring to their benefit. It is likely that in the near future Qatar will continue to play a dynamic and forward-leaning role both regionally and globally.

21 Ibid, 31.
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