

QATAR AND THE ARAB SPRING: POLICY DRIVERS AND REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS

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During the Arab Spring, Qatar moved away from its traditional foreign policy role as diplomatic mediator to embrace change in the Middle East and North Africa and support transitioning states. Regional actors viewed Qatar's approach as overreaching, and skepticism of Doha's policy motivations increased. Qatar's new leadership, which came to power in June 2013, is adapting by reverting to a more pragmatic foreign policy and addressing the fallout from its support for Islamist movements in the region.

Qatar's Rise and Regional Backlash

- Qatar's political stability, economic wealth, ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, and international reputation as a mediator gave it the confidence to take an interventionist role during the Arab Spring.
- The leadership backed ascendant Islamist political forces in transitioning countries and led the regional response to upheaval in Libya and Syria in the name of seeking Arab solutions to Arab problems.
- There was a mismatch between the Qatari leadership's intent and the state's diplomatic and bureaucratic capability: Qatar lacked the administrative and on-the-ground resources to leverage its influence into tangible results.
- The new emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, has faced growing pressure from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to reverse his predecessors' support of the Muslim Brotherhood and local affiliates in states undergoing transitions.

Back to Basics

- Qatar's comparative advantage in mediation is its ability to serve as an intermediary for indirect negotiations and back-channel communications between sworn adversaries and to balance relationships with an array of mutually antagonistic foes.
- Any return to a policy of quiet backroom diplomacy will strengthen Qatar's credentials as an effective interlocutor among disputants that cannot easily engage in direct dialogue. Qatar can serve an important role as a back channel to moderate among groups that U.S. officials in particular may not be able to directly reach but whose participation in political processes is nevertheless constructive.
- Although Qatar is unlikely to fully recover its pre-Arab Spring reputation as a diplomatic mediator, U.S. and Qatari officials should examine how they can engage productively on a range of thorny issues, such as dialogue with Iran on nuclear issues, political stability in Afghanistan following the 2014 withdrawal of international troops, talks with Islamist groups in Syria and Egypt, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
- To regain its reputation for mediation and overcome its limited institutional capacity, Doha may need to take a step back and allow others to lead—something that the leadership may be loath to do.

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