Long a minor regional actor in the shadow of Saudi Arabia, Qatar wants to increase its influence. But Doha’s expansionist foreign policy has been plagued by miscalculations, domestic challenges, and international pressure—all issues connected to Doha’s relationship with Riyadh. As a result of these setbacks, Qatar’s regional role has diminished, and for the foreseeable future, its external influence is likely to remain under the direction of Saudi Arabia.

Qatar’s Strategic Miscalculations

- Qatar’s desire to chart an independent path led it into confrontation with Saudi Arabia, particularly in Egypt and Syria. This has damaged both countries’ external power and increased instability in the Middle East.
- In countries undergoing democratic transitions, Qatar initially supported the Muslim Brotherhood. Doha has longstanding ideological ties to the Brotherhood and believed the group was likely to dominate the new political landscape in transitioning countries.
- When the Brotherhood government in Egypt was overthrown in July 2013, Saudi Arabia backed the coup leader and now president, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Qatar continued to support the Brotherhood, prompting Riyadh to increase pressure on Doha to change course.
- Both Qatar and Saudi Arabia have sought to gain influence in Syria by supporting often-competing groups, including jihadists. This has divided the Syrian opposition and empowered jihadist groups that threaten regional stability.
- Confronting domestic challenges from Qatar’s religious establishment, intellectuals, and local tribes, Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani has focused on internal affairs at the expense of foreign policy activities.

Recommendations for Qatar and Saudi Arabia

Prioritize strategic cooperation. Riyadh and Doha must learn from their mistakes and overcome their political rivalry. Their strategic cooperation will be critical to maintaining their political relevance.

Support a compromise between the Egyptian government and the Brotherhood. The government’s crackdown on the Brotherhood following the group’s removal from power has resulted in the emergence of jihadist cells across Egypt, which is not in Qatar’s or Saudi Arabia’s security interests.

Cooperate to unify and empower the Syrian opposition. Saudi Arabia and Qatar should work with the United States and Turkey to help Syria’s southern and northern fronts coordinate strategically.

Coordinate counterterrorism efforts more closely. The advance of the militant Islamic State in both Iraq and Syria presents an opportunity for Riyadh and Doha to work together to stabilize the region.

Solidify Qatari state institutions. Before he can aim for a more significant international political role, Emir Tamim has to address Qatari’s concerns over where the country is going and how its political and economic policies can benefit citizens.