



4-2023

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Recommended Citation

Phillips, Jonah (2023) "An Ironic Alliance: The Domestic Foundations of Qatar's Support for Democratic Revolution Abroad," *Sigma: Journal of Political and International Studies*: Vol. 40, Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/sigma/vol40/iss1/10>

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An Ironic Alliance: The Domestic Foundations of Qatar's Support for Democratic Revolution Abroad

Jonah Phillips

Qatar, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Arab Uprisings

When the wave of revolutions commonly referred to as the Arab Spring engulfed the Arab world in the early 2010s, regional powers were suddenly presented with a potentially complete restructuring of the Arab world's political and social structure. In the years leading up to the uprisings, rising food prices, soaring unemployment, and widespread political corruption had converged to make the Middle East and North Africa a fertile ground for revolution. The mounting pressure came to a head in December of 2010 when demonstrations broke out across Tunisia following the self-immolation of a street vendor protesting police corruption. The following months saw mass protests demanding political reform in most Arab states, the overthrow of the Tunisian and Egyptian governments, and the start of ongoing civil wars in Syria, Libya, and Yemen. This upheaval presented global and regional powers with worrying instability in one of the world's most volatile regions, but also with the opportunity to intervene on behalf of the factions—governmental or revolutionary—most likely to protect their interests in a re-ordered Arab world.

While the region's revolutionaries united around their disapproval of their current governments, various factions proposed vastly different replacements for the existing regimes. As countries held elections, penned constitutions, and fought civil wars, some demanded secular democracies while Salafists called for a return to a form of Islamic government more similar to theocracy. Other groups espoused a democracy rooted in and justified by Islamic principles and language. The most well-known of these groups, the Muslim Brotherhood, had been providing social services, including schools, hospitals, and religious education, across the Arab world since its foundation in Egypt in 1928. While its early attempts to move into the political arena had been

staunchly opposed by many of the region's governments, the Brotherhood maintained social and fringe political influence by providing reputable charity work and presenting Islam as the solution to regional issues. During the Arab uprisings and their immediate aftermath, building on its mass popularity, the Brotherhood not only gained control of the Egyptian government but also served as an inspiration and an affiliate for Islamic democratic factions around the region. The Brotherhood and these affiliated factions were aided in their rapid, albeit short-lived, rise to relevance by a somewhat ironic ally: the State of Qatar.

This paper seeks to explain Qatar's seemingly counter-intuitive response to the Arab uprisings and their aftermath—actively sponsoring Islamic democratic revolution across the region. The Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani regime of Qatar, a small, wealthy petro-monarchy that justifies its own autocratic rule in the language of Islam, puzzlingly chose to throw its support behind these groups. In Tunisia, Qatar provided funding to the Brotherhood-inspired Al Nahda party, while the state-owned media giant Al Jazeera gave the Al Nahda positive news coverage during the demonstrations, elections, and early days of its regime in the politically reconfigured Tunisia. Qatar similarly provided round-the-clock coverage of the protests in Egypt and provided billions of dollars in aid to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood before and after its victory in Egypt's first post-uprising elections. In Libya, Qatar provided training and funding for Islamist militias and parties more loosely affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. In Syria, it gave similar support to a collection of Islamic revolutionary factions and used its experience in diplomatic mediation to gather them into a somewhat unified council.

At first glance, these foreign policy decisions seem to run counter to the Al Thani regime's interests at home and abroad, and an explanation of those decisions must thus answer two questions. First, why would an autocratic state like Qatar, which clearly restricted options for democratization at home, sponsor democratic transitions abroad? Fears of revolutionary spread typically discourage authoritarian regimes from supporting revolution in their neighbors. Autocrats fear that the success of democracy abroad, especially in a state with a similar ethnic or religious identity, will provide a model for domestic demands for democracy. In particular, the monarchies of the Persian Gulf, which legitimize their autocratic rule in Islamic terms, have historically oppressed groups like the Muslim Brotherhood that invoke the same Islamic language to call for democracy. In fact, during the uprisings and their aftermath, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) vigorously opposed the revolution in Egypt, supported secular factions in Tunisia and Libya, and backed Salafist groups in Syria (although it should be noted that the ideological difference between Qatar's clients and those of the other Gulf states here was far murkier than in the other revolutions). What, then, explains Qatar's divergence from this trend? Second, in the years leading up to the Arab uprisings, Qatar had risen to a prominent, arguably out-sized, role in regional politics by pursuing a careful policy of diplomatic hedging and mediation. Why would Qatar abandon this successful pragmatic policy, risk its remarkable regional influence, and throw its support behind a controversial movement that would ultimately fail to hold long-term power in any state?

I argue that the unique way the Arab uprisings threatened the security of the Al Thani regime's domestic rule was the primary reason for Qatar's divergence from both trends. Qatar's relative social cohesion was the permissive factor, allowing the regime to support revolution abroad without triggering a mass revolution at home. However, the regional instability inevitably created by uprisings heightened the regime's perceived risk of an elite coup. Supporting Islamic democratic groups was largely an attempt to secure against that risk, despite potentially adverse consequences on Qatar's regional influence. Regional experts have maintained that the international relations of the Persian Gulf "are best explained by leaders' concerns about their own hold on power domestically" (Gause 2009, 1). While much of the literature on Qatar's response to the Arab uprisings has emphasized the Al Thani regime's freedom from such concerns, I argue that Qatar's response to the uprisings does indeed fit the trend of domestic regime security driving foreign policy. Through comparative analysis with the UAE, I will demonstrate that Qatar's relative social cohesion allowed it to support the Brotherhood without fear of inspiring a similar revolution at home in a way its neighbors could not, despite marked similarities in other areas. However, a look at the history of succession in the Al Thani dynasty demonstrates that Qatari monarchs who failed to appease elites were often removed from power, and that regional upheaval had been a catalyst for palace coups in the past. By examining what political scientists, historians, and the regime itself have outlined as the pillars of its domestic power and comparing it to the rhetoric of the Muslim Brotherhood, I will illustrate how deepening its support of the Brothers and affiliated groups would strengthen those pillars during a time of heightened insecurity. An analysis of the Al Thani regime's public rhetoric on its support of Islamic democratic groups further supports this assertion. Finally, I will explain why existing arguments fail to explain the logic of Qatar's reaction to the Arab uprisings, and the implications of my conclusion on the general study of international relations.

Social Cohesion and Foreign Policy in the Persian Gulf

Before identifying Qatar's motivation for supporting Islamic democratic revolution, we must first explain what permissive factors gave Qatar greater leeway to provide that support vis-à-vis its neighbors in the gulf. While the literature has identified several attributes that give Qatar unique latitude in setting foreign policy, it appears that Qatar's relative social cohesion was the primary cause of that relative leeway. Culturally, Qatari society is quite similar to its Gulf neighbors. Structured around deep-cutting clan ties, it places an emphasis on religion as a basis for social and political order. Qatari society tends towards conservatism in dress, relations between the sexes, and religious observance. While Saudi Arabia is perhaps more conservative than Qatar in this regard, and the UAE more liberal, there is a clear shared Gulf culture emphasizing tradition, family ties, and Islam. Politically, Qatar embodies the autocracy that defines the Persian Gulf. In a semi-constitutional hereditary monarchy, the emir of Qatar has complete control of the state's executive branch and its courts, having total authority to appoint and dismiss ministers. While a consultative assembly has a limited ability to reject the

legislation of those ministers, general elections for that assembly were not held until 2021. Like neighboring monarchies, Qatar cites the preservation of Islamic law as the basis for this autocratic form of government (Qatar Constitution, Article I). Despite these similarities, Qatar is relatively free of the social fissures that restrain its neighbors' foreign policy. Qatar lacks the intense religious sectarian frictions of Bahrain and, as a small unitarian state, lacks the geographical disparities that plague Saudi Arabia and the UAE, where economically disadvantaged regions are often disgruntled at the uneven distribution of petro-wealth (Roberts 2017). While some class divisions in Qatar certainly emerged as oil revenues increased, the state's size allowed for a much more even distribution of wealth among citizens precluding the emergence of entire communities dissatisfied with the established political and socio-economic order (Crystal 1995, 22–36). As such, while the other Gulf monarchies must carefully avoid exacerbating domestic social divisions in their foreign policy, Qatar has a free hand in making alliances and choosing regional clients (Ulrichsen 2014).

Qatar and the UAE: A Case Study

David Roberts's comparative analysis of the history of the Muslim Brotherhood in the UAE and Qatar, and subsequently the states' responses to the Arab uprisings, illustrates the impact of Qatar's social cohesion on its ability to sponsor Islamic democratic clients (Roberts 2017). Lying just southeast of Qatar, the UAE was formed after the withdrawal of British colonial forces as a federation of seven constituent absolute monarchies, each with its own monarch, led by the monarch of the wealthiest emirate, Abu Dhabi. Similar to Qatar, the UAE cites Islamic law as the basis of its form of government. The shared Gulf culture described above is certainly present in the UAE, and the shared emphasis on the traditional, family ties, and Islam has been highlighted by UAE leaders (Rugh 2002, 17). The historical similarities between Qatari and Emirati culture are further evidenced by the fact that both Qatar and Bahrain were set to join the union of emirates in the aftermath of the British withdrawal from the Gulf. The two ultimately withdrew from the union due, not to an inherent societal difference between them and the other emirates, but due to border disputes between each other (Roberts 2017). Despite these fundamental political and social similarities, the federative system of UAE has allowed for regional social disparities not present in unitary Qatar. For example, from 2004–2014 the northern emirates each contributed between 0.2 and 5% of GDP (Roberts 2017) compared to the 56 and 29% that Abu Dhabi and Dubai respectively contributed. These poorer regions experienced unemployment and power outages over the same period, while Abu Dhabi and Dubai flourished (Roberts 2017).

The history of the Muslim Brotherhood in Qatar and the UAE demonstrates how these disparities ultimately restrained the UAE from supporting Islamic democracy abroad. The Gulf chapter of the Brotherhood was founded in UAE in 1974, where it quickly exploited economic disparities to garner popular following and elite patronage in the poorer emirates of Ras al-Khaimah and Fujairah. In the following decades, Islam would use this patronage to avoid Abu Dhabi's attempts to co-opt the group and limit

its domestic activities. Thus, when the Arab uprisings broke out, and Brotherhood-related groups mobilized across the region, the UAE's efforts to repress them at home and abroad reflected its concern that the groups' newfound power would be used to incite the dissatisfied Emiratis. Even if it had found supporting these groups strategically valuable, doing so would threaten the monarchs' rules at home.

On the other hand, similar concerns were largely absent in Qatar because the threat of a Brotherhood-inspired mass uprising had long since been neutralized. While *Islah* set up a chapter in Qatar shortly after its establishment in the UAE, it found no dissatisfied factions, mass or elite, that resonated with the calls for a comprehensive political overhaul. As Roberts points out, Qatar is a unitary state with marked social cohesion and a relative lack of economic disparities among its citizens. With no regional patronage to shield them from the Emir's attempts to co-opt the actors, *Islah* and other Brotherhood-affiliated individuals entered into a tacit agreement with Qatar whereby they could reside in the state if they refrained from calling for reform within Qatar. This agreement was successful and, with no discontent audience for democratic aspirations, the Brothers abolished their Qatari chapter in 1999. In fact, as Roberts points out, the small, rapidly developing state used these skilled, charismatic individuals to lead ministries and fill other leading roles in a rapidly expanding bureaucracy. And yet, despite becoming an increasingly important part of the Qatari political elite, they were met with a lack of mass democratic demands that held true through the Arab uprisings. While the percentage of Emiratis who listed democracy as important rose from 58% in 2008 to 75% in 2011, the percentage of Qataris that considered democracy important dropped from 68% to 33% over the same period ("Democracy Top of Youth Agenda" 2011). While Qatar was still cautious during the uprisings, stepping up cash payments to keep its citizens content, there was no large, dissatisfied group that would view the success of Islamic democracy abroad as a convincing model for needed change at home. With little threat of mass revolution spreading to Qatar, the Al Thani regime had a free hand to support their Islamist democratic patrons in revolutions throughout the uprisings and their aftermath.

While Roberts does not explicitly dismiss them, this comparison suggests that several elements commonly identified as essential in Qatar's unrestrained foreign policy were not the defining factor in its freedom to support Islamic democracy vis-a-vis its neighbors. First, some emphasize the ability of the Al Thani regime to react agilely to international developments because of its institutional autonomy. Qatari leadership is unrestrained, for example, by the more complex factional politics of the Saudi royal family or the proactive parliament of Kuwait (Kamrava 2015, 42). In fact, it has been said that Qatari foreign policy decisions are made by, at the most, four individuals (Khatib 2013, 429). There is a general consensus that this centralization allows Qatar to react to systematic changes in ways other states cannot (Kamrava 2015, 43; Khatib 2013; Ulrichsen 2014). However, it does not appear that the UAE's response was in any way limited by a lack of institutional autonomy. Leaked US diplomatic cables suggest that crown prince Muhammad bin Zaid had essentially monopolized security policy in the UAE (US Embassy Abu Dhabi 2009), and he was able to mobilize support for his

clients in Tunisia and Libya just as quickly as his Qatari counterparts mobilized support for theirs (Roberts 2017).

Second, some argue that the growth of Qatar as a key US ally and the "primary locus of US forces" in the region has allowed Qatar to feel secure from regional backlash to its more radical foreign policies (Kamrava 2015, 41). However, the UAE, which houses three US bases and has been described as the US's best counter-terrorism ally in the Gulf (Kean and Hamilton 2004), appears to have enjoyed a similar status. Finally, it is argued that the financial resources at the disposal of the state allow the regime to further smooth any domestic discontent (Bank, Ritcher, and Sunik 2014), finance regional clients, and embark on ambitious "subtle power" projects such as Al Jazeera and the Qatar Foundation (Kamrava 2015, 43–44). However, the UAE clearly did not lack the financial resources to attempt to assuage domestic strife or sponsor regional clients at the outbreak of the uprisings. While the central government sent a \$1.5 billion package to the poorer emirates, according to Roberts, that package failed to stave off Islah's ability to exploit the country's long-standing regional grievances (Roberts 2017). The lack of financial restraints on the UAE's foreign policy was evident, for example, in its ability to, along with Saudi Arabia, more than replace Qatari aid to Egypt after the military retook power in 2013 (Kepel 2020, 137–138). With other factors apparently equal between the UAE and Qatar, it appears that the primary factor permitting Qatari support of democratic Islamist groups relative to the rest of the Gulf was indeed its social cohesion. The question, then, is what motivated Qatar to use this foreign policy freedom to launch a campaign of active intervention in the region's uprisings.

From Pragmatism to Intervention

Before the Arab uprisings, Qatar primarily used its free hand to engage in careful diplomatic hedging and carve out a reputation as a mediator. Qatari policy under Hamad bin Khalifa emphasized maintaining open communication with as many regional actors as possible (Khatib 2013) and engaging in diplomatic hedging. Qatar would take big bets in one direction, such as its close ties to the US, and smaller bets in the other direction, such as maintaining cordial relations with Iran (Kamrava 2015). Additionally, in the years leading up to the Arab uprisings, Qatar had raised its regional influence by carving out a reputation as an adept, impartial mediator in local and regional conflicts (Khatib 2013). The success of these policies in augmenting Qatar's ability to stabilize regional politics was great enough to call into question academic assumptions about the power of small states (Kamrava 2015, 8–10). According to then crown prince Tamim bin Hamad, the success of Qatar's pragmatism had been vital to the survival of Qatar as a small state stuck between two much larger, antagonistic states in a region marked by instability (Kamrava 2015, 75). Why would Qatar abandon this successful policy in favor of throwing its full support behind a controversial movement with an unclear movement?

I argue that the Al Thani regime abandoned pragmatism and mediation in favor of intervention on behalf of its democratic Islamic clients in order to reinforce its

legitimacy among domestic elites during a time of regional social turmoil. While the literature largely agrees that Qatar was relatively secure from a mass revolution, it has under-emphasized the underlying threat of a palace coup in bin Khalifa's foreign policy calculus toward the Arab uprisings. The literature acknowledges the general salience of that threat, and it acknowledges that bin Khalifa had secured himself against that threat by co-opting key players in domestic politics and by demonstrating his ability to actively balance countervailing social forces—in other words, by moderating the pace of social change and keeping that change tethered to the region's Islamic foundations. However, there has been little discussion of the threat of a palace coup as a motivation for the specific actions taken by the Al Thani regime during the uprisings, despite marked similarities between the regional instability they produced and the conditions that had paved the way for the cousins or sons of previous emirs to gain the support of political elites and depose the apparently unfit head of state. By supporting the Brotherhood and its affiliates during the spring, the regime attempted to strengthen the traditional pillars of its domestic power in order to shield itself against the threat of deposition. By escalating its support for groups who couched their democratic aspirations in Islamic language, the Al Thani regime could demonstrate to domestic elites that, while it acknowledged that regional change was inevitable, it was actively moderating the pace of that change by promoting a popular regional movement that—although vastly different from Qatar's Wahabi interpretation of Islam—would honor the region's Islamic roots and lead to long-term stability.

Bases of Domestic Power in Qatar

The turbulent history of regime succession in Qatar led Hamad bin Khalifa to make securing the domestic legitimacy of his regime a priority of both domestic and foreign policy. Both historians and political scientists agree that the threat to Qatari Emirs has come from elites, not the masses (Kamrava 2015, 113; Fromherz 2017, 77–85). Before the uncontested transition of power from bin Khalifa to his son Tamim bin Hamad in 2013, the last five emirs had come to power through palace coups or contested successions. Historically, the emir of Qatar was more likely to be deposed by a brother, cousin, or son who had convinced other royal family members that the emir was unfit to rule than he was to pass the authority off to his chosen heir after abdication or death. The lessons bin Khalifa took from his ability to overthrow his father, Emir Khalifa bin Hamad, in the bloodless coup of 1995 guided his efforts to solidify authority for himself and his eventual successor. While bin Hamad oversaw rapid modernization and economic development in Qatar, he alienated broad sectors of the Qatari elite who felt the rate of social change threatened the Wahabi identity of the state. This dissatisfaction was exacerbated when bin Hamad grew increasingly passive in regional politics at a time when decreasing oil prices created uncertainty about the region's future and the Gulf War brought conflict to Qatar's front door (Fromherz 2017, 77–88). This paved the way for bin Khalifa to secure the loyalty of stakeholders in Qatari politics and depose his father in 1995 (Kamrava 2015, 77–85). While the countercoup mounted by

bin Hamad in 1996 was a dramatic failure, a recent hour-long Al Jazeera special about the attempt testifies to the durability of Qatar's turbulent history in Qatari discourse (“A Last Second Withdrawal. . . Uncovering a Conspiracy against Qatar ” 2018) and avoiding his father's fate appears to have informed bin Khalifa's efforts to solidify domestic power, as demonstrated in the literature and Qatar state documents.

The pillars of bin Khalifa's domestic politics outlined in the literature, and those outlined by the regime itself in their own developmental plan, express the emir's continued emphasis on avoiding his father's fate by checking rapid social change, co-opting domestic actors, and playing an active role in regional politics. According to Kamrava, balancing countervailing social forces and co-opting domestic actors were key pillars of bin Khalifa's domestic political power (Kamrava 2015, 130–35). While bin Khalifa continued his predecessor's policy of aggressive political, economic, and social modernization, he emphasized balancing that progress by honoring tradition. Further, informed by his father's inactivity in regional affairs, bin Khalifa stressed his commitment to actively balancing social change in the region. Additionally, by offering patronage to various domestic social, political, and religious actors, bin Khalifa minimized the possibility of someone repeating his 1995 takeover.

The importance of balancing progress and tradition to the Al Thani regime is evident in *Qatar National Vision 2030*, the development plan it released in 2008. The document emphasizes that “Qatar's very rapid economic and population growth have created intense strains between the old and new in almost every aspect of life” (General Secretariat of Development Planning 2008, 4) and names balancing “modernization and tradition” (General Secretariat of Development Planning 2008, 3) as a key pillar of development. Furthermore, the document specifically highlights that modernization must happen in the context of Qatar's Islamic identity (General Secretariat of Development Planning 2008, 22). The initiative is also clear that this balancing is not limited to domestic society. It lists international cooperation as one of three pillars of social development and asserts that Qatar will take on an increased regional role politically and socially (General Secretariat of Development Planning 2008, 23). This testifies to both the regime's concern toward unchecked, rapid social change and its commitment to facilitating the balancing of the change both domestically and abroad.

While the Arab uprisings threatened to drastically change regional society, they also provided bin Khalifa with an opportunity to solidify his domestic security by playing an active role in moderating that change. With unprecedented mass uprisings threatening to establish new regimes in states across the Arab world, bin Khalifa had reached the exact type of crossroads that paved his father's overthrow. While the threat of revolution spreading to Qatar was low, the discussion above indicates that such a situation would heighten bin Khalifa's perceived risk of a palace coup. The two primary factors leading to the elites' dissatisfaction with bin Hamad, unchecked social change and regional instability on Qatar's doorstep, were both clearly present in the uprisings. Governments were falling across the region, and the future of the region's socio-political order was far from clear. While the civil wars breaking out across the region were not identical to the Gulf War, which brought scud missiles to Qatar's doorstep, such wars

certainly did not make Qataris feel more secure. As bin Khalifa was ultimately successful in preventing the emergence of such a coup, there are no clear indications of what specific members of the royal family would potentially have been vying for power at the time. However, given the history of palace coups during similar regional conditions, it is reasonable to believe that bin Khalifa would have been on higher alert and taken extra precautions during the uprisings. Intensifying his policy of actively balancing social change with honoring tradition, an established pillar of his securing domestic power would thus be vital for maintaining power—while emerging from the Spring with increased regional power would be ideal, the one thing Khalifa could not risk was appearing passive during a time of immense regional change. The regime's relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood not only offered connections to actors in multiple uprisings, but it also provided the perfect partner to demonstrate its commitment to promoting social progress balanced by honoring tradition.

The Brothers: Framing Democracy in Islamic Language

The Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates' combination of Islamic and democratic rhetoric made them ideal clients through which bin Khalifa could reaffirm his ability to balance modernization and tradition. While the Muslim Brotherhood was certainly a force for change and not conservatism, establishing democracy and interpreting Islam in a vastly different way than Qatar, the way it used Islam as the language of democracy allowed the Al Thani regime to present it as a force that honored tradition while promoting modernization. For example, the rhetoric of Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a prominent intellectual leader of the Brothers based in Qatar from 1961 until his death in 2022, clearly complemented the balancing mission outlined in *Qatar National Vision 2030*. While Qaradawi emphasized the need for Muslims to adopt certain Western practices, he expressed that need in Islamic terms. For example, he described democracy as an extension of the Islamic concepts of Ummah (community) and Shuruh (the obligation of a ruler to consult the governed) (Salazar 2014). He explicitly stated that Muslims must “wrap [democracy] in [their] spirit” and adapt democratic mechanisms “as they suit [them], retaining the right to make alterations and modifications” (Salazar 2014). By deepening their support for a movement that expressed sentiments so similar to the balancing act on which bin Khalifa based his domestic legitimacy, he could demonstrate to Qatari elites that, unlike his predecessor, he would take an active role in moderating this regional revolution in a way that honored the Islamic foundations of Arab society. Again, while there is an ideological chasm between Qatari Wahabism and the Brotherhood, the fact that al-Qaradawi and individuals of his ilk had long served in the ministry of education speaks to Qatar's view that their ideology could certainly play a role in a stable future for the region. And, as stated previously, there was little reason for him to fear that their revolutionary-democratic rhetoric would find a receptive mass audience within the state.

Further, supporting the Brotherhood allowed the Al Thani regime to secure the support of a critical domestic actor by deepening their dependence on it. As indicated

by Roberts, individuals affiliated with the Brotherhood had for decades filled government positions, and securing their support, along with that of other domestic elites, had been critical to each Emir's solidification of power (Roberts 2017). Al-Qaradawi's rhetoric in the aftermath of the uprisings suggests that the regime's increased support for the Brotherhood helped secure their support and shielded them from potential criticism. Throughout the uprisings, al-Qaradawi became increasingly hostile toward the other Gulf monarchies. For example, in a 2014 sermon, al-Qaradawi cited the UAE's alignment with the reinstated military government in Egypt as evidence of the Emirates as "standing against all Islamic rule" (*France 24 Arabic* 2014). Similar statements towards Qatar could have been devastating to a Qatari regime already facing the type of regional chaos that had paved the way for the deposition of previous emirs. While there would be little threat that those statements would lead to mass uprisings, Brotherhood-affiliated elites losing confidence in the regime could pave the way for an aspiring member of the royal family to begin to amass elite support for a potential coup as others had done before him. However, as Al Thani continued providing him with a platform, al-Qaradawi's rhetoric at the time not only extolled Qatar as "standing with the truth, with justice, and with God," but it also classified the revolutionary groups they supported as a "moderate current" and supported that claim with references to the Quran (al-Qaradawi 2014). Ensuring this type of characterization from influential domestic elites provides a plausible explanation for why Qatar continued to provide a platform for al-Qaradawi's inflammatory rhetoric against al-Sisi's Egypt and the other GCC members, despite its contribution to Qatar's regional isolation and declining influence in Egypt (Kepel 2020, 298–300).

Framing Intervention in Public Discourse: Facilitating Social Change

A look at the public rhetoric of Qatari leaders on the Arab Spring supports the assertion that the state's support of democratic groups was motivated by the need to present itself as actively managing the pace of regional social and political change. In striking similarity to the language of *Qatar National Vision 2030*, both Hamad bin Khalifa and the then foreign minister Hamad bin Jassim warned against a rushed solution to the upheaval in Syria and Libya. In a 2011 interview with Al Jazeera Arabic, bin Khalifa was asked if Qatar's continued support of Islamist militias in Libya was merely prolonging the bloodshed, and if a quick resolution to the civil war should be prioritized. Hamad's response stressed the dangers of forcing rapid, unchecked social change: "We cannot expect a revolution to achieve rapid breakthroughs. Revolutions usually go through growing pains" (Al Thani 2011). In a 2013 interview, bin Jassim was similarly asked about the need to prioritize a swift diplomatic solution to end the bloodshed in Syria. He responded by saying that "a solution requires our persistent support, but it also needs to come at a time where it can truly be endorsed. Will it lead to something or is it a dead end?" (Al Thani 2013). He further clarified that the issue with a political solution at the time was not the specific personnel involved in the negotiations, but "an

issue of moving forward a quarter step just to take ten steps back” (Al Thani 2013). Both leaders’ statements indicate concern that the revolutions could end in a rushed, unsustainable outcome. However, their public statements suggest that they saw supporting democratic factions as a way to push a more stable outcome that balanced that change with tradition.

Both bin Khalifa and bin Jassim frame their support for democracy as a way to temper the extremism and regional crisis that might emerge from the uprisings if they went unchecked. In the same 2013 interview, bin Khalifa addressed concerns about extremism taking hold of the revolution in Syria, framing Qatar’s support of democratic groups as a means of curbing that extremism: “You can find extremist tones in any revolution in the Arab World. The issue of extremists, Al Qaeda, Salafism, Jihadists. . . call it what you want, exists. But if the revolution is subjected to democracy. . . I believe you will see this extremism transform into civil society” (Al Thani 2011). In a similar fashion, bin Jassim indicated that the failure of Syria to contain that extremism required specifically external intervention: “The Syrian people were once without terrorists, if you can even call them that. If there are terrorists, who allowed that? Who caused destruction, imprisonment, and terror to the point that the far (foreign actors) had to intervene before the near (domestic actors)” (Al Thani 2013). Bin Jassim also frames Qatar’s economic support for newly democratized countries as a way of preventing regional economic turmoil that could threaten Qatar, saying that economic problems after a revolution are natural but that Qatar has offered its resources to ease the transition. In the specific case of Egypt, he states, “Our goal in Egypt was to help them overcome the economic hurdles. . . the strength of Egypt is the strength of the Arab world” (Al Thani 2013). The above statements all align with a Qatari foreign policy aimed at leveraging its ties to Islamist, democratic factions to avoid regional turmoil that could spell the end of bin Khalifa’s regime as it had his father’s.

Addressing Alternate Explanations

The theory presented in this paper for Qatar’s action during the Arab uprisings explains the rationality of Qatar’s policy shift in a way existing explanations have been unable to do. The literature has essentially presented two explanations of Qatar’s seemingly irrational shift to support Islamic democratic revolution. Some characterize it as simply another piece of Qatar’s hedging policy. Kamrava, for example, suggests that Qatar had calculated that the days of the regimes contested by the uprisings were numbered, and its increased support for Brotherhood-related groups secured its position in regional politics in that event (Kamrava 2015, 78–79). Others characterize Qatari support for revolution during the Arab uprisings as a radical break demonstrating the regime’s lack of a cohesive foreign policy. They argue that the outsized success of Qatari foreign policy had inflated the regime’s confidence in Qatar’s abilities (Nuruzzaman 2015), leading to a wild miscalculation of the Arab uprisings as an opportunity to flex its foreign policy muscles and cement its position as a regional power (Ulrichsen 2014; Khatib 2013).

Neither characterization provides a satisfactory explanation of Qatar's abandonment of its pragmatic policy. While Qatar would certainly not be alone in overestimating the durability of regional democracy in the early days of the uprisings, it seems difficult to classify active support for a fundamental restructuring of the regional political landscape as another small bet focused on ensuring regional stability. Further, while it is not unreasonable to assume that Qatar miscalculated the intensity of the regional response to its support of the Brothers, culminating in a blockade of Qatar, it is difficult to imagine that it was not aware that such support would threaten its "open-door" policy with states like Saudi Arabia or Egypt, states it had recently made a point of reconciling with (Khatib 2013). It is equally unlikely that the Al Thani regime failed to predict at least some of the impact its intervention would have on its reputation for impartial mediation or its subtle power tools, such as Al Jazeera and the Qatar Foundation.

On the other hand, characterizing Qatar's intervention in the Arab uprisings as solely a miscalculated power grab fails to explain Qatar's continued support of Brotherhood affiliates well after the limits of those groups' regional power became apparent. It is reasonable to assume that Qatar initially miscalculated the uprising's outcome, and it would seem logical for a state to lend greater support to a client poised to take regional power. However, a motivation to establish itself as a regional power fails to explain why Qatar continued doubling down on its support for Brotherhood groups well after it was clear that this support was diminishing, not strengthening, Qatar's regional influence. Well after the fall of Qaddafi, Qatar continued supporting and supplying the Islamist homeland party in Libya, despite its declining influence there (Jacinto 2012) and the adverse effect of the support on Libyan public opinion of both Qatar and its client (Khatib 2013). Qatar failed to restrain Al Jazeera's aggressive rhetoric against the Egyptian military regime well after it was clear that the Brotherhood would not be returning to power anytime soon. Not only did this coverage play a key role in its isolation from the rest of the Gulf over the next decade, but it also damaged the reputation of Al Jazeera and Egyptian public opinion of Qatar (Kepel 2020, 298–300). Without taking into account the domestic pressures the regime was likely facing, these policies which clearly decreased Qatar's regional power seem irrational.

Further, returning to the regime's public rhetoric demonstrates that it was well aware that its intervention in the uprisings would come at the cost of its successful diplomatic policy. In the same 2011 interview cited above, bin Khalifa explains why Qatar ultimately abandoned amicable relations with Syria in favor of the opposition: "In light of the exceptional relationship between Syria and Qatar, there were calls between Assad and us about how we could contain this issue [the uprisings]. And in our view, containment required considering the requests of the protestors who were asking for, in our view, basic things. It became clear that if things continued the way they were heading, it would be necessary to quickly find a solution" (Al Thani 2011). Similarly, in a 2012 interview with Al Jazeera's *Bila Hadood*, bin Jassim stressed that Qatar "preferred a top-down solution over a bottom-up solution, for it to be orderly. It doesn't benefit Qatar for Syria to be in chaos. . . we pleaded with the Syrian government to preserve the country" (Al Thani 2012).

These statements seem to contradict the idea that Qatar was simply emboldened by its previous foreign policy success and overextended its capabilities, or that supporting Brotherhood-related groups was simply another piece of the state's careful hedging. It appears that the Al Thani regime preferred to continue with its pragmatic policy and was well aware that throwing its full support behind rebel groups would limit its ability to continue its “open-door” diplomacy. However, when supporting these groups became, in their minds, the only way to manage and contain regional social upheaval, Qatar was willing to abandon its careful hedging. While public statements do not always reflect a regime's internal decision-making, they tell us how it wants specific audiences to view its decisions. The similarity of the regime's statements to their developmental plans suggests that they were, at least in part, a component of bin Khalifa's efforts to assure Qatari elites that he was actively facilitating and moderating social change in a way that balanced tradition, modernization, and stability.

While other explanations of Qatari foreign policy could provide interpretations of Qatar's rhetoric, an explanation that ignores the domestic pressures on the Al Thani regime fails to fully explain Qatar's support of the Brothers. On the one hand, those who view Qatar's actions during the uprisings as a misguided power grab could argue that the above statements were simply public posturing to justify their actions and not a reflection of real motivations. However, as mentioned, a motivation based on increasing regional power fails to address why Qatar continued supporting its clients well after it was clear that this support was decreasing Qatar's influence abroad. On the other hand, those like Kamrava, who see Qatar's support for Islamist democrats as a continuation of a Qatari policy primarily aimed at maintaining regional stability, have an easier time explaining Qatar's framing of the uprisings—Qatar was supporting these groups because they thought it would lead to that stability, regardless of any need to appease domestic elites. Again, knowing the exact calculus of a closed regime like Qatar is impossible, and there is no doubt that regional stability remains a foreign policy goal. However, the general salience of a palace coup threat (which Kamrava himself lays out), the similarity between the Arab uprisings and the regional situation surrounding previous successful coups, and the similarity between the pillars of domestic power outlined in the literature and Qatar's framing of its support for democratic factions make it reasonable to assume that a heightened risk of coup was a crucial factor in Qatar resorting to a policy of active intervention.

Conclusion: Regime Security and the International Relations of Autocracy

In 2018, the unmitigated foreign policy failure of Qatar's support for democratic Islamic revolution abroad could not have been clearer. Qatar's clients in Libya had only marginal political import, the Brotherhood in Egypt had been replaced by a Saudi-backed military government for nearly five years, and the two had joined their Gulf allies in a years-long diplomatic and economic isolation campaign against Qatar. However, perhaps even more worrisome was the complete deterioration of regional public

opinion towards Qatar and its soft power tools. As Egypt played Uruguay in that year's world cup, Egyptians flocked to the Israeli public broadcast of the match, rather than paying for the BeIn SPORT (A Qatari state-owned service) broadcast, with one Egyptian telling *The Economist* (2018), "I'd watch the broadcast in Hebrew before I gave money to Qatar" and another telling *LA Times*, "There is no big difference, really—Qatar is as bad as Israel when it comes to their political views of Egypt" (Hassan 2018). That Qatar was held in similar esteem to perhaps the most consistently disdained entity in the region speaks volumes to just how far Qatar's carefully built reputation had fallen in the Arab world.

However, the success of this strategy at securing the domestic rule of the Al Thani regime was just apparent as its failure to increase the state's regional power. In 2013, Hammad bin Khalifa did what his predecessors had failed to do for decades: abdicating to his heir, Tamim bin Hammad, in an uncontested power transfer. It appears that local elites had indeed bought bin Khalifa's strategic reasons for supporting the Brotherhood and its affiliates, and he was largely able to place the blame for the failure of the strategy's execution on his foreign minister (Kepel 2020, 234). Five years later, bin Hammad was still enjoying a stable hold on domestic power, leading a period of economic prosperity and diversification despite Qatar's rival's attempts to isolate it (Ramani 2021). While caution is needed when interpreting intent from results, explaining those results through Qatar's domestic, rather than merely foreign policy goals, returns rationality to a regime known for its savvy in the decade leading up to the uprisings.

These findings not only affirm the lengths to which the autocrats of the Middle East will go to maintain their domestic hold on power but could also enhance the general framework for studying the international relations of autocracy. While the regime-security lens of international relations has typically theorized that authoritarian regimes will likely intervene abroad and form alliances with the goal of preventing the emergence of a successful ideology likely to provide a model antithetical to their own rule, the case of Qatar demonstrates that this does not hold true when the threat comes from elites who feel comfortable with the political status quo, but may still have specific foreign policy expectations of the autocrat. While there are likely few states that find themselves in Qatar's specific situation, lending a greater focus on how autocrats justify their rule to elites, not just their populace, could greatly enhance our ability to predict their actions abroad.

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