

REFLECTING ON QATAR'S "ISLAMIST" SOFT POWER

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Qatar has developed a reputation for engaging with and supporting Islamist groups around the Middle East. This is not surprising and reflects the reality that on countless occasions in recent decades, Qatar has engaged with a wide range of Islamist actors, from Hamas to a litany of groups in Syria and Libya to the Taliban. Consequently, Qatar is sometimes viewed as a closeted Islamist actor itself, as if the state's leadership harbors a plan to spread religious doctrine wherever and however it can. The truth, however, is far more prosaic. The best explanation for the facts at hand is that Qatar is a pragmatic actor that wants—like all states—to maximize its influence. With abundant financial resources, but limited human resources, Qatar's leaders have relied on personal links and speculative bouts of support to various intermediaries as a key foreign policy modus operandi. This often led Qatar to support groups related to the Muslim Brotherhood. But this less reflected state preference than it simply reflected the world as Qatar found it. The Brotherhood was, in a practical sense, a sensible organization with which to forge ties: large, well developed, and multinational. Add to this the fact that Qatar's elite—unlike many in the region—see the Brotherhood as a perfectly reasonable organization to engage with, and the state's policy was obvious. But, in the post-Arab Spring world, the range of groups deemed palatable by some key states has shifted decisively. Consequently, Qatar's Islamist connections are castigated as outlandish and beyond the pale when they have actually been quite normal for most Arab states in recent decades.

INTRODUCTION

For millennia, humans carried their wares from place to place, lifting them up and hefting them around. But it was only in 1970 that a man realized that this state of affairs could be revolutionized by incorporating into a modern lugging device (the suitcase) a Neolithic invention (the wheel). Rolling luggage was born, and a simple solution was discovered to an age-old problem.¹ Joseph Nye's coining of the term "soft power" in 1990 is much the same.² It was a simple, elegant way to meet a need no one had stated before to more

dexterously describe the obvious reality that there are different types of power. Military power is self-evidently important. While the impact of culture, religion, or other sources of influence was seldom ignored, summing up these and other diverse forms of power as "soft" bequeathed a helpful nomenclature that broke through to mainstream international relations and wider scholarship.

One fruitful space for the employment of soft power concepts is with the Gulf monarchies. Most of these states have barely a half-century of history as contiguous nation-states, have (excepting Saudi

Arabia) tiny populations, and have historically tended to eschew using their military forces externally.³ Yet, as the 21st century progressed, they exerted tremendous influence across the Middle East and further afield. No state achieved a more disproportionate amount of influence for its size than Qatar, a state with the population of Plano, Texas that managed to play a key role during the Arab Spring.⁴ Qatar is frequently described as producing, cultivating, leveraging, and deploying some kind of “soft” power via its financial resources and through foreign policy connections.⁵ Notably, links were implied or explicitly drawn between Qatar and individuals and groups on the Islamist spectrum in Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, Mauritania, Mali, Syria, Israel and Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Iraq, Afghanistan, and the UAE.⁶

This paper analyzes Qatar’s diverse links and associations with Islamist actors. The key research questions center around ascertaining how and why Qatar so frequently interacted with actors on the Islamist spectrum as a means of statecraft—and religious soft power. This is perhaps particularly surprising given that the institutional religious authorities in Qatar are conspicuously weak. This paper argues that, contrary to claims that Qatari leaders are actively pursuing an explicitly Islamist agenda, the most persuasive explanation for Qatar’s Islamist links stems from a combination of convenience, pragmatism, and sheer opportunism.

THE STORY SO FAR

Prior to the Arab Spring, Qatar was castigated as a state with promiscuous international relations that rejected traditional Arab and Gulf norms. Qatar’s foreign policy was (and remains) rooted in the U.S. sphere thanks to military agreements that go back to 1992, which formalized and expanded the U.S. military presence in Qatar. The still-growing Al Udeid air base and the As Sayliyah logistical depot developed into pivotal nodes in the U.S. regional military infrastructure. Today, Al Udeid remains the U.S. military’s forward regional headquarters, whose purview stretches from the coast of the Horn

of Africa to the Middle East up to and including Pakistan, Central Asia, and Afghanistan. As the central command node for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Qatar received criticism from regional states for facilitating war against Arabs and Muslims.⁷

Because of such concerns, the Qatari administration of Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, who was de facto ruler from as early as 1988 though officially in power from 1995-2013, sought myriad ways to make sure Qatar was not perceived as purely a patsy for America. Indeed, such a charge has long concerned the monarchies, not least because U.S. support of Israel has been so unpopular domestically that rulers typically sought to cover up the true extent of their U.S. relations.⁸ Outreach to Iran from the late 1980s—which included extensive but never-realized plans to construct a water pipeline for fresh water from Iran’s Karun Mountains to Qatar—irritated both the United States and neighboring Gulf monarchies alike, demonstrating Qatar’s independent streak. As the 1990s wore on, Qatar also developed close relations particularly with Hamas but also with Hezbollah. Qatar’s desire to build relations with a diverse set of regional actors even led them to embrace Sudanese President Omar Al Bashir in the late-2000s after he became an international pariah indicted by the International Criminal Court. Despite both international and domestic criticism, Qatar also—along with Oman—eschewed the Gulf rejection of Israel.⁹ There was an Israeli trade office in Doha from 1996 to 2008.¹⁰

Qatar engaged with this motley bunch of international actors for a variety of reasons centered around making a name for the state as an independent actor. This was to both differentiate the (then) new Qatari regime from the staid slumbering policies of the previous government; to strive to diversify Qatar’s regional contacts and links across the Middle East region; and to forge a new reputation for the state as an innovative, engaging international actor or even as the proverbial Switzerland of the Gulf, as many articles in the 2000s suggested.

QATAR AND ITS ISLAMISTS

Qatar is often depicted—certainly by its Gulf neighbors and particularly after the Arab Spring—as having an “Islamist” agenda at the heart of its foreign policy.¹¹ This is not that surprising given that the Qatari state has long developed institutional ties, personal elite-level relations, and basic *modus operandi* with actors like Hamas, Jabhat al Nusra, the Taliban, the Houthis, and the Muslim Brotherhood government of former Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi.¹² The notably trenchant critiques of Qatar as some kind of Islamist-supporting state point to such relationships going back many decades. Yusuf Al Qaradawi, who is today one of the Arab world’s most prominent theologians and a man who enjoy a life-long association with the Muslim Brotherhood, moved to Qatar in 1961.¹³ He took on various roles in the Qatari state including the establishment of the College of Sharia Law at Qatar University and he has been a regular personality on Qatar television over the decades. Most notably, Qatar gave him his own TV show on Al Jazeera, which significantly amplified his reach and notoriety.

During the Arab Spring, Qatar shifted its foreign policy and threw its lot in with a range of revolutionary forces around the region that were usually to be found on the Islamist spectrum.¹⁴ Qatar’s interaction with Islamists is executed through both formal and informal channels with each reinforcing the other. In Libya, Qatar deployed its own fast-jets as part of the NATO Operation Unified Protector to contribute and to provide political cover for the wider operation, which, though nominally in place to protect civilians, ended up precipitating the overthrow of former President Gadhafi. Informal links were, however, crucial in associating Qatar with Islamists in Libya seeking to ferment revolution. An exiled Libyan resident in Doha, Ali Al Sallabi, became the key conduit for the channeling of money and arms to Islamist groups in Benghazi. Sallabi sent funds on to his brother Ismael Al Sallabi and the reformed former al-Qaida-associated leader Abdulkarim Belhaj. These links are not in dispute, and Qatar’s support was critical in supporting their side of the

country-wide civil conflict against the nationalist and anti-Islamist forces of General Khalifa Haftar and his UAE backers.¹⁵

In Egypt, Qatar assiduously supported the Muslim Brotherhood-associated government of Mohammed Morsi with tens of billions of dollars of investment, loans to shore up the Central Bank, and free tankers of liquified natural gas (LNG). Otherwise, his government was lavished with Al Jazeera coverage with even the establishment of a 24-hours-a-day live news channel direct from Cairo—Al Jazeera Mubasher Misr—as a way to not only publicize the revolution, but to cement Al Jazeera (and thus Qatar’s role) therein. There have long been tens of thousands of Egyptians resident in Doha, many of whom were crucial in founding and staffing nascent Qatari ministries.¹⁶ A small segment of these individuals were senior functionaries or otherwise notable members of the Muslim Brotherhood who were forced to leave as the price for restoring Qatar’s relations with its three Gulf neighbors at the end of 2014 after the UAE, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia had withdrawn their ambassadors earlier in the year in protest at Qatar’s foreign policy approach. This list includes Mahmoud Hussein (the Secretary General of the Muslim Brotherhood); Amr Darrag (a former Brotherhood cabinet minister in Mohammed Morsi’s government in Egypt and an important member of the Brotherhood’s political wing, the Freedom and Justice Party [FJP]), Wagdi Ghoneim (an [in]famous Islamist preacher), Essam Telima (a former office manager of Yusuf Al Qaradawi), and Hamza Zawbaa (a spokesman for the FJP); Gamal Abdel Sattar (a prominent Al Azhar professor and a leader of the National Alliance party); and Ashraf Badr Eddin (a senior Brotherhood leader who fled Egypt after the Sisi coup).¹⁷

The Qatari role during the Syrian Arab Spring was always hybrid. Doha hosted dozens of political conferences from 2011 onwards that sought to coalesce opposition forces, many of whom were recipients of Qatari financing, and most of whom were on the Islamist spectrum. Meanwhile, Qatar and its Turkish allies were conspicuously prominent

in 2011, 2012, and 2013 as vocal and noted supporters of a range of militias ranging from the Free Syrian Army to more extreme Islamist groups like Jabhat Al Nusra (as it was then known). These kinds of relations earned Qatar a reputation as a state fermenting strife and willing (if not eager, in some states' view) to support extremist groups.¹⁸ Of course, Qatar was far from the only state engaging with such actors so often found on the Islamist spectrum. Saudi Arabia and Turkey, most notably, had their own such arrangements, and there are more prosaic and pragmatic explanations for Qatar's affiliations with groups like Jabhat.¹⁹ But, taken as yet another example of Qatar's apparent penchant for interacting with such groups, its actions in Libya and Syria are represented as just another instance of its pathology of behavior of persistently engaging with and supporting Islamists.

Meanwhile, with Qatar's policies in Palestine there is a long and well-documented relationship between the state and Hamas, the Gaza-based Islamist organization that is designated as a terrorist group by the United States, European Union, and Canada. Qatar has given Hamas up to \$1 billion since 2012, according to Israeli reports, typically channeled into Gaza to pay for aid, fuel, and government salaries, while the Qatari and Hamas elites meet regularly.²⁰

Qatar's reputation as a state frequently intertwined with Islamist forces preceded itself, and the state was soon simply assumed to be working with Islamists. Despite a notable lack of evidence of Qatar supporting extremists in Mali, academics from respected institutions were charging that Qatar supported al-Qaida in these areas via military air lifts of support.²¹ When Qatar became vocal about its willingness to host the Taliban office in Doha—and indeed such an office eventually opened—this became folded into the narrative about Qatar's seemingly perennial desire to host or support antagonistic groups on the Islamist spectrum.

Qatar's apparent Islamist-supporting actions against status quo leaders during the Arab Spring constituted the breaking of one regional taboo too many. First in 2014, as noted above, Saudi

Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE—without any overt warning—withdrew their ambassadors from Doha in an attempt to force the (then) new emir, Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, to desist from such status quo-challenging policies.²² Though Qatar made some concessions, such as evicting a few Brotherhood functionaries from Doha and closing down Al Jazeera's 24-hour-a-day Egyptian news channel, neither side was happy. Early on, it appeared that the disagreement was far more between Qatar and the UAE, while Bahrain was broadly irrelevant and Saudi Arabia under the leadership of nonagenarian King Abdullah prioritized Gulf monarchy unity over pressuring Qatar to extract concessions. However, with the passing of King Abdullah in 2015 and the rise to preeminence of the young Mohammed bin Salman, the prioritization of Gulf unity suddenly became anachronistic, and the same ground was fought over once again with the June 2017 blockade of Qatar by the same states (plus Egypt). Qatar stood accused, again, of supporting political Islam and extremist forces around the region to the detriment of states near and far.²³ Qatar rejects such allegations, not least arguing that its policies are scarcely any different to other monarchies approaches to regional Islamists, but the blockade remains in place.

THE MECHANICS OF QATARI FOREIGN POLICY

The structure of the policymaking arena in Doha has an unsurprisingly profound impact on the contours of Qatar's foreign policy. Despite the preoccupation of many who insist on describing Qatar's shape (is it a mitten or a thumb?) or its equivalent geographical size (Connecticut or Wales), it is its location and its small population size that are salient factors in understanding Qatar. The state finds itself in a tinder box of a region that sees a major conflict, or several of them, every decade. Its key borders are with regional hegemon Saudi Arabia (a land border) and Iran (a maritime border), which is something that has long concerned Qatari leaders. Consequently, since the early 1990s, Qatar's leaders have taken a twin-track approach to securing the state. First, Qatar has sought

implicit U.S. protection through the hosting of two critical American military bases; and second, to avoid being overly dependent on the United States, Qatari leaders have pursued broader and more diverse sources of support throughout the Middle East. Developing Qatar's soft or "subtle" power, as Mehran Kamrava puts it, is one-way Qatari leaders have made their state more important and more influential across the region.²⁴

Qatar faces this complex region with a population of approximately 300,000 citizens, of whom 194,000 are of working age and are needed to staff all corners of its economy.²⁵ While Iceland with its Qatar-sized domestic population can manage without relying on foreigners, it has not had to build its state from scratch like Qatar. This hydrocarbon revenue-fueled development catapulted Qatar from an underdeveloped and introverted near-hermit of a state in the mid-20th century to a state with global prominence via its gas sales, sports promotion, and world-spanning national airline. But this rush was only possible because the process—most of the designing, planning, and all the physical construction—was tendered out to legions of foreigners that today account for approximately 2.3 million (88 percent) of those living in Qatar.

All of Qatar's institutions and ministries are thus relatively new, still developing, and swamped by the size of the task they face. The Qataris staffing these ministries are limited in number and experience. The United Kingdom's civil servant graduate application route for those looking to work in government ministries—the "Fast Stream"—attracts approximately 40,000 applications per year for just under 1,000 jobs. This acceptance rate of around 2.5 percent makes it an extremely competitive field. In contrast, Qatar University, the state's largest higher education institution, graduated across all faculties 3,362 students in 2018, which includes an unspecified number of foreigners.²⁶ Even including the few hundred Qataris graduating from Qatar's private universities and from universities abroad, there are nowhere near enough Qataris—let alone interested or qualified Qataris—to staff

the state. Add to this the premium on hiring Qataris due to understandable societal norms to employ nationals ("Qatarization" programs that set a quota for Qataris) and we see a Qatari unemployment rate of 0.4 percent.²⁷ Thus, rather than employers like the U.K. Fast Stream rejecting 97.5 percent of applicants, in Qatar, the competition for jobs is much less intense, and ministries and companies need to compete to attract employees.

The problem of a lack of Qataris to staff their economy is exacerbated by the scale of Qatar's ambitions. It not only seeks to host the world's largest sporting event (the 2022 FIFA World Cup in soccer) and expand an international airline and television station, but it maintains approximately one hundred embassies, consulates, and missions around the world. In contrast, and in keeping with its human resource capabilities, Iceland—with a similar population to Qatar—has less than one-quarter of Qatar's foreign missions (only 26).

Growing, overstretched ministries in combination with relatively inexperienced staff within a wider culture of deference to leadership means that a small number of Qatar's senior most leaders set the state's direction to a profound degree.²⁸ The personalization of rule was most evident during the era of Emir Hamad bin Khalifah Al Thani (de facto power from 1988 and de jure power 1995-2013) and his counterpart the Prime Minister (2007-2013) and Foreign Minister (1992-2013) Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani, who oversaw most of the controversial Qatari foreign policy gambits. Both men were transformative, and the foreign minister in particular—described as a modern-day Metternich—led a highly personalized ministry.²⁹ So busy and active was Hamad bin Jassim, personally launching so many initiatives around the world, that he employed an assistant foreign minister titled the Minister For Follow-Up Affairs.

Such senior-level decisionmaking is enhanced by oil and gas-derived financial power. This means that leaders can undertake expensive foreign policy initiatives—such as spending billions of dollars propping up the Egyptian economy and financing

groups in Libya and Syria—without having to worry about cutting back on domestic spending. Another factor facilitating Qatar’s foreign policy ambitions was an unusually quietist domestic scene. Qatari citizens enjoy one of the most generous welfare states in the world. Their discontent was so low that during the Arab Spring demands by Qataris for democracy went down.³⁰ Nor are there any meaningful legislative elections in Qatar or other formal parliamentary checks on the emir’s power. There are no equivalents of the U.K. House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee or the various U.S. government foreign affairs oversight committees there to both vet state policy and provide input into decisionmaking. Together, these three factors—the small population, the country’s wealth, the ruler’s relative autonomy—combine to empower Qatar’s leaders to translate ideas and ambitions into policy to an unusual degree. They allow Qatar’s leaders to make grand strategic choices with remarkably little impediment.

Under Emir Tamim bin Hamad, there has been a slow process of institutionalization across Qatar. In the sovereign wealth fund, the first moves announced were the hiring of more staff to—it was portrayed at the time—professionalize the organization away from the more personal modus operandi of Hamad bin Jassim. In foreign affairs, Qatar did not change tack abruptly, not least as this would have been seen as a repudiation of Emir Hamad’s policies, something that was all but impossible given the foundational and formative nature of his rule.³¹

During his apprenticeship as crown prince, Tamim seldom displayed any particular desire to engage in foreign policy by taking over portfolios or starting new international mediations.³² He arguably signaled his orientation for Qatar early on when, in contrast to his father who gave the foreign minister the most influential domestic portfolio of prime minister, Tamim made his minister of the interior the prime minister. The chances are that, in time, he would have calmed down Qatar’s overactive foreign policy, but we will never know. Within months of rising to the throne, Tamim had to contend with increasingly

hostile local neighbors that monopolized his time and focus. One of the new foreign policies undertaken by Tamim in reaction to regional challenges was deepening, quite profoundly, Qatari relations with Turkey. United by a worldview that is content to support actors along the Islamist spectrum, and with good contacts in such a world too, the two states feel jointly targeted by the anti-Islamist approach emanating from states like the UAE and, to some degree, Saudi Arabia. This has led to a vast expansion in their economic relations and the return of Turkish military forces to Qatar and the founding of a new Turkish military base on the Qatari peninsula almost exactly a century after Ottoman forces left.

ISLAMIST “SOFT POWER” TO WHAT END?

Qatar is presented by some regional states as if it has a near-insatiable appetite for supporting Islamist groups, even extreme ones, come what may. It is clearly true that the Qatari state has worked with a range of Islamist forces over the years throughout the Middle East and North Africa. But there are four problems with the thesis that Qatar’s rulers—both Hamad and Tamim—are closeted, active Islamists, eager to subtly or even boldly support a range of Islamist causes as if supporting these groups is an end in and of itself.

First, for a state supposedly so eager to support Islamists, the Islamic establishment in Qatar is notably weak and without obvious influence. There is simply no equivalent in Qatar of the systematic and symbiotic relationship between the political and religious establishments evidenced in Saudi Arabia for most of the past century. While Yusuf Al Qaradawi played a role in establishing the College of Sharia Law at Qatar University, what information there is suggests that its graduates are small in number (in the low hundreds) and, as ever in Qatar, the majority are not even Qatari. Further, there is no office of Grand Mufti in Qatar and the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Endowments was only established in 1993.³³ That Qatar’s national mosque, opened in 2010, is called the Mohammed

ibn Abd Al Wahhab mosque is little more than an irrelevant factoid. Yes, Qatar and Saudi Arabia are the only Wahhabi states in the world, but it is difficult to think of any practical way that this influences Qatar's foreign policy whatsoever. Certainly, Qatar cannot be accused of supporting Wahhabi movements or groups to any meaningful degree.

Second, Qatar rarely works alone with such groups. Rather, in recent years, Qatar has assiduously sought to work explicitly with international partners and allies. In Syria, when seeking to support groups against President Assad, Qatar's military intelligence from 2014 at least worked closely with both Turkish, British, and American intelligence.³⁴ Even Qatar's working relationship with Jabhat Al Nusra, as it was formerly known when it was formally aligned with al-Qaida, was reportedly undertaken with the connivance of Western intelligence agencies with the aim of drawing the influential group away from al-Qaida. This gambit was arguably successful, allowing Qatar to use its relations to release hostages as well as to induce the group to officially renounce its al-Qaida patronage.³⁵ Critiques of Qatar's "Islamist" agenda such as working with the Taliban or Hamas are especially nonsensical. Qatar only worked as an intermediary with the Taliban specifically on behalf of the U.S. government—and with the explicit and practical help of the German government in launching the effort.³⁶ Similarly, Qatar's relations with Hamas come with the direct blessing of the United States and pragmatic assistance from Israel. Such a multilateral reality cuts against critiques charging that Qatar is somehow beyond the pale in its interactions with Islamist actors.

Third, there is plenty of evidence of Qatar instituting policies that are typically uncomplimentary to Islamist approaches, such as paying for Western university campuses to base themselves in Doha with their secular pedagogical approaches in mixed-sex classrooms. Similarly, alcohol and pork products are available in Qatar, while from the 1990s onwards, Qatar had arguably the Arab world's most

influential and visible female leader in Sheikha Moza bint Nasser Al Misnad, the mother of current Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani. All states can (and do) support competing policies with competing priorities, and the fact that Qatar engages in these ways is no proof that it does not have an Islamist agenda. But such contraindications, even if they are ultimately dismissed, are seldom adequately considered and need to be part of the wider calculus when judging Qatar's motivations.

Fourth, there are simply more plausible rationales afoot explaining Qatar's choices. Qatar put a bet on revolutionary forces during the Arab Spring that looked like they were sweeping their way to power around the region. While such uprisings failed, at the time, there was an intoxicating possibility that a domino of revolutions might herald a fundamentally new era. Qatar's leaders wanted to get their support in early to new power centers. That Qatar was able to take such a large bet—shifting the state's core orientation from backing states to backing revolutionary forces—is precisely the kind of grand strategic shift that a Qatari leader can effect with minimal difficulty, facilitated by a pliant domestic arena, plentiful cash resources, and comforted in the knowledge that, with a U.S. base mere kilometers from the emiri bed at night, the wider state's security is likely covered too.

The question then becomes a practical one: how can a state like Qatar with a small and underdeveloped foreign policy apparatus effect influence? The only answer is via informal contacts, and this is what Qatar did. For example, the central reason that Ali Al Sallabi, the popular, exiled Libyan preacher, became Qatar's critical conduit for supporting the Libyan revolution was a matter of opportunism: he was in Doha, on Al Jazeera, speaking eloquently about the conflict as Qatar's senior leaders were considering how they themselves could "help" the revolution. Ali was in the right place at the right time.

That Qatar typically found itself supporting actors on the Islamist spectrum, often linked to the Muslim Brotherhood is a factor of pragmatism above all

else. If a small country wants to make a bet and put its resources behind any one sociopolitical organization in the Arab world, there is practically-speaking no better one to support. There is no competitor organization that has a century of history, can claim hundreds of thousands of members, and whose branches can be found throughout the Middle East. Moreover, Qatar—like many Gulf states—had for decades provided asylum to fleeing members of the Brotherhood, motivated simply by the need for educated and experienced individuals to staff rapidly expanding schools, universities, and government ministries. Thus, with links already established, using informal Brotherhood connections in lieu of others during the Arab Spring made sense. Chris Rock, the U.S. comedian, commented ruefully that in relationships “men are as faithful as their options.” Qatar’s relatively monogamous relations with Islamists is partly a matter of a lack of other options.

At the same time, there is doubtless some preference involved. The UAE is a state deeply opposed to the expansion of the Muslim Brotherhood across the region. Emirati leaders take the view that the Brotherhood and political Islam more generally is a pernicious if not cancerous movement that seeks to insidiously dominate society to its own ends.³⁷ Qatar simply takes the opposite view. Blessed with no antagonistic history or experience with political Islam—notably unlike the leadership in Abu Dhabi—Qatar’s leaders were, in addition to it making a lot of sense pragmatically, perfectly content to support this kind of movement.

Qatar’s foreign policy certainly seems puzzling. It is a state with grand ambitions and relatively few of the constraints that others in the region have had to contend with. Over the decades, the argument could be made—though it is far from certain—that Qatar engages with Islamists more than most states in the Arab world as a matter of course. In these relations, Qatar and some of the groups in question make odd bedfellows. Little about the Qatari state’s domestic priorities or *modus operandi* chime in any sensible way with the more revolutionary and

sometimes militant groups with which the state associates itself. In explaining the high overlap between Qatari foreign policy and Islamist actors, many draw the quick conclusion that Qatari leaders must simply want to support them because they share and believe in their ideology. Such analysis, though logical, is simplistic, ignoring the rest of the evidence about the nature of the Qatari state. It also too readily implies that Qatar is unusual when the reality is that all states in the Arab world engage at one time or another with such Islamists. The most logical explanation for Qatar’s frequent association with these groups is that, rather than Qatari leaders being closeted Islamists cloaking their “real” beliefs in a smoke-screen of relative liberalization in Doha, as some antagonists imply, these groups are a means to an end. A powerful logic argues that developing Qatar’s soft power with these groups is a way to cultivate influence among potential newly emerging centers of power—and a way for a small state like Qatar to be a critical part of some of the core conversations shaping the contemporary Arab world.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Since the onset of the 2018 blockade of Qatar, the small Gulf state has sought to double-down heavily on all of its key Western relationships, most noticeably with the purchase of expensive fast-jets from the United States, France, and the U.K. Qatar also quickly engaged the United States specifically to work out deals to expand access to the Al Udeid airbase and to sign accords on counter-terrorist financing with the U.S. Treasury and State Department. And still Qatar leverages its Islamist soft powers to help U.S. regional foreign policy with Hamas and with the Taliban negotiations that are needed to cauterize a grim and long conflict for the United States.

The point is that Qatar since the blockade has been scouring the length and breadth of the U.S. government to find ways to make itself increasingly useful if not crucial to key policymakers and portfolios in Washington, DC. Such assiduous levels

of courtship will not last forever, but a window may still be apparent whereby Qatari policymakers would welcome inventive U.S. suggestions as to ways that they could make themselves useful to

American counterparts, all in the name of firming up their U.S. partnership in the face of hostile local states.

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