

## Review - Qatar and the Arab Spring

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SILVIA COLOMBO, DEC 28 2015

### *Qatar and the Arab Spring*

By Kristian Coates Ulrichsen

London: Hurst & Company, 2014

Five years after the Arab uprisings, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have developed an increasingly active posture in their foreign policies towards the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The strategic shifts caused by the wave of popular unrest that swept through this region since the end of 2010 revealed the increasing importance of the GCC countries' foreign policies in influencing the changes taking place in a number of domestic contexts, as in the case of Egypt, Libya, and Syria. It also influenced the restructuring or redefining of the matrix of regional roles and alliances among the international powers that are active in the region, such as the United States, Russia, Iran and the European countries. These developments prompted many academics and policy makers to argue that the centre of gravity in the MENA is shifting towards the Gulf region, namely towards Saudi Arabia and Iran, the old regional contenders, and new players (Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates). This is the strategic environment in which it is possible to assess the rise of Qatar on the regional and international scenes, signalling a marked shift in the country's foreign policy in 2011 towards a more assertive and interventionist approach. This is the main thread that runs through Kristian Coates Ulrichsen's new book *Qatar and the Arab Spring*.

The book is divided in two parts, which are closely knit with one another. The first part explores the material and immaterial drivers and motivations of Qatari foreign policy, leading to the strategic re-orientation that happened following the outbreak of the Arab uprisings. The second part discusses in detail Qatar's role in the Arab spring theatres, particularly in Libya and Syria, and assesses its short- and medium-term implications for the country. The rich empirical material that is presented in the book gains even more relevance since it is linked to a solid analytical framework that allows the reader to appreciate the extent to which the outbreak of unrest in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya in the early months of 2011 was regarded "as an opportunity to be seized, rather than a challenge to be contained" (p.1). Furthermore, Qatar's rising star status provides a useful case study to highlight the opportunities and constraints facing small states, surrounded by countries with greater geopolitical and military capabilities, in their attempt to carve out spaces of relative autonomy in regional and international affairs. The concepts of 'omni-balancing' and 'managed multi-dependence' as well as the changing meaning of the notions of 'power' and 'influence' become crucial in this respect. The interplay of domestic and external challenges and opportunities creates a fluid environment for Qatar's increased foreign policy activism. This activism is a direct consequence of both the shifts caused by the Arab uprisings, and of the willingness to capitalize on the energy resources and capital accumulation made possible by the oil boom in the previous decade, which it uses as a form of leverage.

Among the main drivers of Qatar's foreign policy, Coates Ulrichsen highlights the powerful impact of branding and soft power tools, such as education and culture, and communication through the popular Al-Jazeera satellite television channel, in turning the country into a self-assertive regional and international player. This has been compounded by a growing sense of responsibility and opportunity *vis-à-vis* regional conflicts, which – as underscored by the Qatari Emir during the annual General Debate of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2007 – "have become too big for one single power to handle them on its own" (p.68). The mediation role played by the country in numerous conflict situations during the 2000s was a direct response to the specific set of policy choices taken by the few people in charge of foreign policy, as well as changing regional dynamics in the

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MENA and, specifically, the relative decline of Egypt and Saudi Arabia as traditional centres of power and influence. In this respect, Qatar's increased regional clout has meant that it has come into conflict with other regional players, primarily Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The lingering sectarian tensions characterizing the region as a whole have contributed to heightening the disputes between Doha and the two neighbouring states. Tensions have also resulted from the unwelcome pragmatic cooperation inherent in Qatar's relationship with Iran, on the one hand, and Israel, on the other.

Such disputes have become even more acute in the wake of the Arab uprisings. In the initial phase of the post-2011 era, it appeared as if Qatar's actions would significantly limit Saudi Arabia's role as the regional hegemon. Riyadh has traditionally been considered as the main pillar of the Gulf security architecture as well as the most powerful factor legitimizing the stability-oriented policies pursued by the United States in the region. Qatar's activism in Egypt, Libya and Syria started to erode this role and opened spaces for competition and rivalry among the Gulf countries, which ultimately impinges on the prospects for development of the GCC as a regional organization. This is aptly illustrated by the author's discussion of the implications of Qatar's actions in the wake of the Arab uprisings and the challenges facing the country's new generation of leaders following the accession of Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani as emir. To illustrate this, Coates Ulrichsen delves into the factors that have led to an over-stretch and increased contradictions in the country's domestic and external posture and outlook. The first implication is that Qatar's move to foreign policy activism has jeopardised its reputation as an impartial and honest broker. This, Coates Ulrichsen points out, is due – among other factors – to the mishandling and the erosion of the credibility of the very soft-power tools that had propelled the country to the centre stage on the regional and international scenes in the late-2000s. The second implication has to do with the regional dimension. As already recalled, the country's tendency to pick winners and to side with the Muslim Brotherhood in most of the theatres in which it was engaged was short-sighted at best, if not totally disruptive, for the country's long-term standing. Finally, in light of the interplay of domestic and external factors in shaping the country's foreign policy, Coates Ulrichsen's book acknowledges that Qatar's strategy has backfired in that it triggered accusations of double standards domestically and externally. Overall, the author argues that "Qatar's activist response to the Arab Spring achieved the opposite of what was intended" (p.147). This sober and well-documented, but rather pessimistic, evaluation raises a number of questions related to the future of the country as it navigates through domestic and regional turmoil and uncertainties.

Kristian Coates Ulrichsen's book is a rich, accurate and compelling account of one of the most fascinating stories of a country's rise as a prominent foreign policy actor and its related pitfalls. Its accessible style makes it a long-needed intellectual resource that will benefit experts of the region, practitioners and the general public alike.

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### **About the author:**

Silvia Colombo is Senior Research Fellow in the Mediterranean and Middle East Programme at the International Affairs Institute (IAI) in Rome. An expert on Middle Eastern politics, she works on Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, transatlantic relations in the Mediterranean and domestic and regional politics in the Arab World. Among her research interests are the relations between the European Union and the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and energy dynamics in the Euro-Mediterranean region. She holds a Ph.D. in Comparative Politics from the Scuola Normale Superiore of Pisa (Florence Branch) and a Master's Degree in Near and Middle Eastern Studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London. She speaks Arabic fluently and has traveled extensively in the Middle Eastern region. She can be contacted at [s.colombo@iai.it](mailto:s.colombo@iai.it).