

QATAR: A PURSUIT OF AUTONOMY

A Revision of the Theory of Subtle Power

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DECLARATION

Unless acknowledged otherwise in the text, this thesis represents the original research of the author.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis makes a unique contribution to the study of the relationship between power and autonomy in the field of international relations, focusing specifically on Qatar's utilisation of subtle power and its pursuit of autonomy from Saudi Arabia. In 1971 Qatar's independence was thrust upon it by the British, and it began its tenuous existence as a sovereign state firmly within the Saudi political sphere. Over the course of the next fifty years this began to change as Qatar emerged from obscurity to become an important regional actor, and as this study will show, gradually achieved its outright political autonomy from Saudi Arabia. This transition is the basis of this study, and evaluates how the four elements of the theory of subtle power, (diplomacy and conflict mediation, national branding, strategic use of a sovereign wealth fund, and physical protection from the United States), impacted on Qatar's political emancipation from Saudi Arabia. This unique study will contribute to existing literature on *how power changes over time*, and how nation states use power not to influence, but to gain greater autonomy from another nation state. This thesis is supported by a wealth of investigation which involved two years of research, including over forty interviews with serving and former diplomats, Qatari and Saudi nationals, civil servants, journalists who reported from the region, and academics working in local universities. Other data gathering activities included archival research, statistical collection, and media and press release discourse analysis.

By evaluating the theory of subtle power and how it was utilised to benefit Qatar's political emancipation from Saudi Arabia, this thesis has found that whilst each of the four elements of subtle power aided Qatar's pursuit of autonomy, their efficacy was impacted largely as a result of Qatar's interventionist foreign policy actions, growing regional prominence, and at times, disregard for the interests of the Saudi ruling elite. As such, around the time of the Arab Spring commencing in 2010, subtle power could no longer be described as *subtle*. Although the four elements of subtle power remained relevant, their utilisation became more overt and competitive in a region undergoing significant geopolitical change, and the four elements were increasingly having to readapt to a more assertive Saudi foreign policy posture and growing sense of nationalism. Due to these changes this study found that a contemporary revision of the theory of subtle power was necessitated.

Whilst the nomenclature of each of the four elements of subtle power remains the same, this thesis has termed the contemporary revision of this theory as *late subtle power*. The theorist

behind subtle power, Mehran Kamrava, originally posited that Qatar's use of each of the four elements was to 'exercise influence behind the scenes'. This study has found however that the contemporary revision of Kamrava's original theory has supplanted its predecessor in a post-Arab Spring geopolitical environment. As the prominence of Qatar in the region has risen, it now utilises the four elements of subtle power in an overt and confident manner, which is also in response to an increasingly competitive sub-Persian Gulf region. Notwithstanding Qatar's newfound confidence in regional politics and the evolution of the theory of subtle power, an increasingly emboldened Qatari foreign policy has led to Saudi repercussions such as the 2017 diplomatic and economic blockade, where not only was Qatar's autonomy threatened, but for a brief period its sovereignty too. As such, by improving our understanding of the *how*, *why*, and *when* subtle power has evolved over time in the case of Qatar, this thesis contributes to the broader knowledge of how forms of power can change, and how power can be utilised to not just influence, but to achieve greater political autonomy.

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INTRODUCTION

Overview

Over the course of the century leading to independence in 1971, Qatar tentatively emerged as a unique entity unto itself. However, the stark reality was that it largely remained a political appendage of the Saudi Kingdom. Independence or not, Qatar began life as a nation state with - according to a former diplomat posted to the region - “little international presence nor relevance on the international stage, a posture which remained the case until the mid-1990s”.¹ Qatar’s foreign policy actions during the reign of Emir Khalifa (1972-1995) were benign and geared towards bandwagoning with Riyadh. While Khalifa was satisfied to remain in the Saudi shadow, his aspirational son and heir apparent Hamad did not agree, and from the mid-1990s onwards Doha began to drift away from Riyadh.²

Hamad was considered something of a ‘Young Turk’³ and became emir in 1995 by deposing his father in a bloodless coup. He immediately began a liberalisation campaign to compensate for his fragile base of support within the ruling Al Thani family which appealed to a broader segment of the Qatari population, and also to the international community.⁴ In doing this, Hamad sought a self-sufficient and independent role for Qatar through a flexible foreign policy that reached out to a wide range of political interests in the region. As a result, over the course of the decades following Hamad’s accession, Qatar gradually politically emancipated itself from Saudi Arabia to become an important regional actor with an international profile seeking to shape events for its own national interest.

This dissertation performs a deep dive into Qatar’s foreign policy strategies and its pursuit of autonomy from Saudi Arabia, its larger and historically more powerful neighbour. It focuses especially on the evolution of *subtle power* as a strategy to enhance its autonomy since the late-1990s, and how subtle power changed over time to become what this thesis terms as *late subtle power*. This thesis further contextualises this evolution of power by examining Qatar’s⁵

¹ Ralph King, (former ambassador, Australian Embassy in Saudi Arabia), in discussion with author, April 2021.

² Abu Sulaib and Mukhyat Faisal. “Understanding Qatar’s Foreign Policy, 1995-2017.” *Middle East Policy* 24, no. 4 (2017): 29-44.

³ Allen Fromherz, *Qatar: Rise to Power and Influence* (London: I.B Tauris, 2017), 26.

⁴ Mehran Kamrava, “Royal Factionalism and Political Liberalisation in Qatar,” *Middle East Journal* 63, no. 3 (2009): 401-420.

⁵ Also meaning Al Thani before Qatar was recognised as a political entity unto itself.

previous foreign policy strategies from the nineteenth century to the accession of Hamad. To achieve this, this thesis captures the external and internal perceptions of Qatar's power and autonomy through interviews with Qatari and Saudi nationals, former foreign diplomats posted to the region, and international and regional journalists working in the region *et al.* Other primary sources include British Foreign and Commonwealth Office archives, state media releases, extracts of media interviews with ruling elites, and data from institutions such as the World Bank and United Nations. These sources reveal that Qatar utilised its subtle power foreign policy strategies to empower itself as a relevant actor in the region, enhance its influence in the Middle East, and achieve outright political autonomy from one of the region's archetypally dominant actors - Saudi Arabia.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This thesis will study the causal mechanisms that enabled Qatar to politically emancipate itself from Saudi Arabia. Qatar's foreign policy strategies will be analysed using a qualitative research methodology to examine the process in which this occurred. Narrowing in on the analysis of Qatar's foreign policy strategies, the theory of subtle power will be evaluated for an in-depth examination of the causal mechanisms behind Qatar's gradual transformation from Saudi adjunct to autonomous regional actor. In using a qualitative research methodology in this study, the methodological analysis of this thesis will include a single (or intensive) case study investigation and process tracing. This will support an answer to the principal research question and the two sub-questions, and will reveal the process of Qatar's political emancipation from Saudi Arabia over a fifty year timeframe. A qualitative research methodology will also support the theoretical framework of the thesis, that being an evaluation of the theory of subtle power and the utility of the application of its four elements.

Research Questions

To guide the research methodology, a principal research question and two sub-questions will be used to examine the use of Qatar's subtle power foreign policy strategies and the impact they had on Qatar's pursuit of autonomy from Saudi Arabia. All three questions are deliberately

theoretical in substance so as to delve deep into the understanding of subtle power and how this form of power could change.

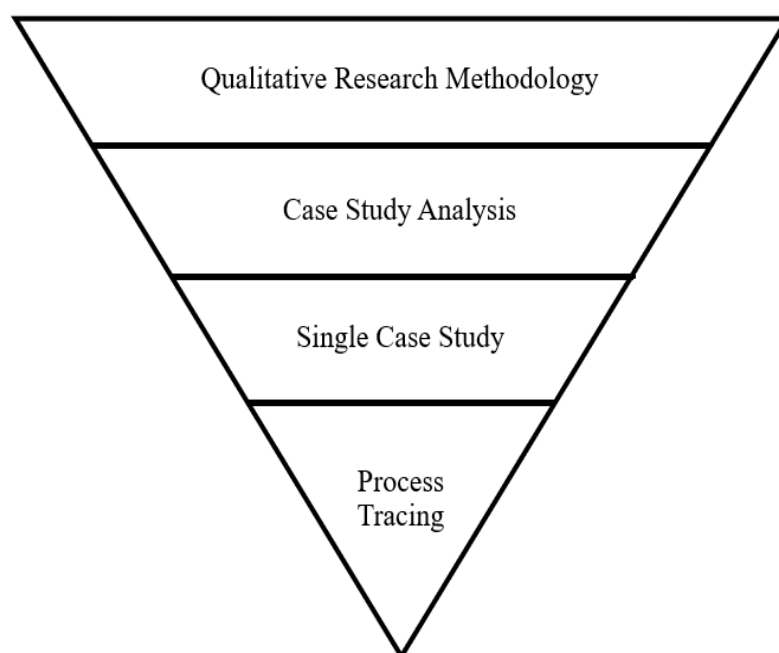
The principal research question is:

- *How, why, and when* did Qatar’s subtle power foreign policy strategies impact its pursuit of autonomy from Saudi Arabia?

In order to answer this overarching research question, the thesis investigates two research sub-questions:

- Has subtle power been impacted over time as awareness of Qatar’s foreign policy actions has grown and its regional influence increased?
- Does subtle power remain an accurate theoretical explanation for Qatar’s foreign policy strategies following its increased regional prominence?

In order to answer these three research questions, this thesis will analyse the causal mechanisms within the single-case study of the Qatari – Saudi Arabian bilateral relationship from 1971 to 2021. To understand the trajectory this relationship undertook over fifty years, process tracing will be used to reveal the intricacies of the *how, why, and when* Qatar utilised the four elements of subtle power, and whether they had been effective in aiding Qatar’s pursuit of autonomy from Saudi Arabia. The chart below is an illustration of the research design and methodology this thesis will use for this intensive study.



Qualitative Research

A qualitative analysis is able to perform four different functions: it can be exploratory, explanatory, descriptive, and emancipatory,⁶ and usually informs the direction of the study in both theoretical and methodological terms. Qualitative research can be perceived as a navigational tool that can help a researcher map possible directions, but also to inquire about the unexpected.⁷ Concomitant with the research questions above, qualitative research methodologies involve asking the kinds of questions that focus on the *how*, *why*, and *when* of human interactions⁸ and of nation state relations. This method of inquiry is thus appropriate for a thesis which examines the *how*, *why*, and *when* of Qatar's foreign policy strategies and whether they aided its pursuit of autonomy from Saudi Arabia.

Additionally, the qualitative research methodology explained above is the most appropriate methodology to investigate whether a contemporary revision of the theory of subtle power is warranted because:

- The first research sub-question, case study analysis and process tracing support the evaluation of *what* caused each of the four elements of subtle power to be impacted, *when* this began to occur, and *how* each of the four elements were impacted in a post-Arab Spring Middle East region.
- The second research sub-question, case study analysis and process tracing support the evaluation of whether subtle power remains the best theoretical explanation of Qatar's foreign policy strategies in a similar era up until 2021.

Case Study Analysis and Single Case Studies

This thesis on Qatar's pursuit of autonomy narrows in on the single case study of Qatari - Saudi Arabian bilateral relations. A single case study analysis of this bilateral relationship is most appropriate because historically, and more recently, Saudi Arabia has been Qatar's most influential neighbour – for better or for worse. Saudi Arabia was the obvious choice for a single case analysis because of the longevity of its relations with the Qatari ruling family dating back to the 1860s, the post-WWII influence of Saudi Arabia in the region through to the present day,

⁶ Jane Agee, "Developing Qualitative Research Questions," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 22, no. 4 (2009): 433-447.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 432.

⁸ *Ibid.*

and the reality that Qatar's pursuit of autonomy has ostensibly been from that of Saudi Arabia itself. A single case study analysis of the Qatari-Saudi Arabian bilateral relationship will further aid the examination of a form of power (subtle power) and how that could be used by any other small state to achieve a greater political autonomy from a larger regional hegemon.

A single case study analysis has the advantage in that the research will examine and consider the causal mechanisms using a process tracing methodology to intensively analyse selected events which impacted on Qatar's attempts to politically emancipate itself from Saudi Arabia. According to Gerring, a work that focuses its attention on a single example of a broader phenomenon is a 'mere' case study, and is often identified with loosely framed and non-generalisable theories and biased case selection.⁹ Yet Gerring states that a case study may be understood as the intensive analysis of a single case (Saudi Arabia) for the purpose of understanding a larger class of cases¹⁰ – such as Qatar's foreign policy strategies in pursuit of autonomy. As such, by using a single case study analysis this thesis will be able to undertake an intensive study of Qatar's many foreign policy strategies in pursuit of autonomy from a single nation state.

Furthermore and according to Peters, a case study can look directly at the sequence of events that produce an outcome, rather than just the outcome.¹¹ Although a common criticism of case studies relates to selection bias,¹² a case study analysis of Qatar – Saudi relations was the most appropriate method of inquiry because the theory of subtle power itself was conceived specifically for Qatar.¹³ A single case study analysis (often termed in-depth or within case studies) supports the ability to develop and test¹⁴ a theory through the application of finely grained empirical evidence.¹⁵ This is a second reason why a single case study analysis was chosen as it supports the theoretical understanding of the causal mechanisms of the impact that

⁹ John Gerring, "The Case Study: What is it and What it Does," in *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics*, ed. Carles Boix and Susan Stokes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 93.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 95.

¹¹ Guy Peters, *Comparative Politics: Theory and Methods* (London: Basingstoke Palgrave, 1998), 141.

¹² That being when cases are selected based on knowledge of the dependent variable. See: Nina Dadalauri and Marianne Ulriksen, "Single Case Studies and Theory-Testing: The Knots and Dots of the Process-Tracing Method," *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 19, no. 2 (2016): 223-239.

¹³ Although the theory of subtle power was conceived to explain the power capacities of Qatar alone, it does not preclude its application in the examination of the use of power by other nation states. For a single theory of power to be attributed to one nation state only is quite rare, yet the reason for this will be explained in Chapter One which theoretically examines Qatar and the concept of power.

¹⁴ The word 'test' is used by Ulriksen and Dadalauri. The author of this dissertation notes that in political science a 'test' is often a contentious term, perceived differently between quantitative and other forms of qualitative analysis.

¹⁵ Dadalauri and Ulriksen. "Single Case Studies and Theory-Testing: The Knots and Dots of the Process-Tracing Method," 223.

subtle power had Qatar's pursuit of autonomy, the *how*, *why*, and *when* subtle power was impacted, and the utilisation of the four elements of subtle power in a post-Arab Spring Middle East.¹⁶

Case studies are valued for their capacity to support theory building and hypotheses generation.¹⁷ The use of a single case study supports the theory building process of this thesis and can better explain the evolving Qatari – Saudi Arabian relationship by evaluating:

- whether subtle power continued to impact on Qatar's pursuit of autonomy following the Arab Spring; and
- whether a contemporary revision of each of the four elements is necessary given the changing geopolitical dynamics of the region.

A focal analysis of this thesis is whether the four elements of subtle power change over time – particularly following Qatar's increasingly interventionist foreign policy actions during and after the Arab Spring which could no longer be perceived as *subtle*. This thesis will investigate whether the concept of 'late-subtle power' as a revised form of subtle power could be considered as an explanation of Qatar's foreign policy strategies in a post-Arab Spring era. For this reason, and to understand the in-depth of the *how*, *why*, and *when* any such change has occurred, a single case study analysis using a process tracing approach is the most appropriate methodology to examine and explain if an evolution of subtle power has occurred.

Process Tracing

Process tracing is central to understanding Qatar's pursuit of autonomy because it can support the linking of causes with their effects i.e. Qatar's subtle power foreign policy strategies and the degree of autonomy it either achieved, did not realise, or lost *vis a vis* Saudi Arabia. According to Dadalauri and Ulriksen:

Process tracing can be defined as the systematic examination of evidence selected and analysed in light of research questions and hypotheses posed by the investigator. In process tracing, the ambition is to understand the processes linking the different relevant factors to the outcome. The strength of applying a process tracing method lies

¹⁶ The Arab Spring is a watershed moment in the evolution of the utilisation of the four elements of subtle power. This is outlined in Chapter One and elucidated in Chapter Four.

¹⁷ Dadalauri and Ulriksen, "Single Case Studies and Theory-Testing: The Knots and Dots of the Process-Tracing Method," 225.

in its ability to provide depth and analytical substance to theoretical causal explanations.¹⁸

According to Beach, process tracing as a distinct case study methodology involves tracing causal mechanisms that link causes with their effects (i.e. outcomes).¹⁹ In tracing causal mechanisms, whereby a cause (or set of causes) produces an outcome, this enables stronger evidence-based inferences about causal relationships because the analysis produces within-case evidence of each step of the causal process. In essence, process tracing mechanisms support a better understanding of how a cause produces an outcome.²⁰ This is the methodological process which this thesis will use to support the analysis of the degree of autonomy Qatar had from Saudi Arabia at different points in time between 1971 and 2021, and the dynamics of the relationship. For example, there were many reasons why Saudi Arabia led a quartet of nations to blockade Qatar in 2017.²¹ Yet to actually understand *how*, *why*, and *when*²² their relations reached this nadir, and the effect this had on Qatar's autonomy, process tracing is necessary to examine the in-depth causal mechanisms explaining the impact of this significant event.

The examination of the causal mechanisms explaining Qatar's pursuit of autonomy analyses selected events from 1971 to 2021 to support the process tracing method of inquiry. These events are not intended to be standalone case studies within the larger case study of Qatar/Saudi relations. They have been chosen as the impact of Qatar's reliance on, or autonomy from Saudi Arabia during an event, or as a result of an event, is noticeable and assessable. This will strengthen the analysis of the causality (and outcomes) of Qatar's pursuit of autonomy and provide an in-depth understanding of the *how*, *why*, and *when* Qatar began to achieve greater autonomy from Saudi Arabia. Examples of events examined to support the process tracing methodology include:

- Qatar's independence (1971)
- The Iranian revolution (1979)
- The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait (1990)

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 224.

¹⁹ Derek Beach, "It's All About Mechanisms – What Process-Tracing Case Studies Should be Tracing," *New Political Economy* 21, no. 5 (2016): 463-472.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 463.

²¹ This example is important because it's the most significant rift in Qatar/Saudi relations.

²² When the blockade occurred is known, yet why this time in history is an important component in the overall examination.

- The coup and accession of Emir Hamad (1995)
- The attempted countercoup (1996)
- The War in Iraq (2003)
- The election of Obama (2008)
- Qatar's awarding of the World Cup hosting rights (2010)
- The Arab Spring (2010 - 2013)
- The withdrawal of ambassadors and Riyadh Agreements (2014)
- The rise to power of Mohammad bin Salman (2015 onwards)
- The election of Trump (2016)
- The diplomatic and economic blockade of Qatar (2017-2021)
- The US withdrawal from Afghanistan (2021)
- The Al Ula Agreement (2021)

Where the process tracing methodology aids the study and analysis of Qatar's pursuit of autonomy from Saudi Arabia, it is also the most suitable approach when considering whether or not subtle power requires a contemporary revision. The process tracing methodology will thus support the examination of the *how*, *why*, and *when* each of the four elements of subtle power have been impacted, and whether a contemporary theoretical revision of this form of power is required to better explain Qatar's foreign policy strategies.

Sources of Data and Interview Methodology

This thesis draws from a wide range of primary sources and is supported by secondary source material. Sources of data include:

- Primary source material came from semi-structured interviews. Data was collected from a diverse range of contributing interviewees, including serving and former diplomats, journalists with a firsthand experience of the Middle East, Qatari and Saudi nationals, civil service employees from the region, cyber security experts and academics working in local universities. Interviewees selected were able to provide data from the 1970s through to the end of the blockade in 2021 which corresponded with the scope of the thesis. In-country interviews were not possible due to COVID related travel restrictions. Adjustments had to be made to pivot towards an online data collection strategy. As such, interviews were collected from former Middle East diplomats in Australia, and most were conducted via Zoom. Prospective interviewees

were targeted for their expertise in working in Qatar and Saudi Arabia concomitant with the list of events listed above. This thesis sourced data from Qatari civil servants and other nationals, but also deliberately sourced data from foreign diplomats and actors because power is all about perception. For example, interviewees who worked in Saudi Arabia around the time of the Iranian revolution were able to divulge that it was widely understood amongst diplomats at the time that Doha was ostensible a political adjunct of Riyadh, whereas diplomats who worked in both Qatar and Saudi Arabia around the time of the Arab Spring could attest to Qatar's autonomous interventionism. Interviewee contributions from over forty respondents provided a wealth of data for the thesis which supported data collection for this thesis.

- Data from archival sources contributed significantly for this thesis and the understanding of Qatar's foreign policy actions and relations with Saudi Arabia before and after independence. Archival sources were identified mostly from online platforms which have digitised a wealth of the United Kingdom's Foreign and Commonwealth Office records. A pre-pandemic scoping trip to Qatar aided the collection of data, some of which was sourced from the Qatar National Library and the Qatar National Museum. This data was crucial for Chapters Two and Three and aided an understanding of the tenuousness of Qatar's existence, its relations with the British and Saudi Arabia, and the absence of any prospect for political autonomy at the time of independence from the British. Archival data further elucidated the gradual rise to prominence of former Qatari Emir Sheikh Hamad, whose leadership was the first to utilise what would later be theorised as Qatar's subtle power foreign policy strategies.
- Primary source material from government websites, recorded interviews online, twitter feeds and other online platforms aided the analysis of more recent events from the coup in 1995 which saw Sheikh Khalifa deposed, to more recent events such as the 2017 blockade. The revision of the theory of subtle power required considerable observational data to compile supporting evidence for the concept of late subtle power. The sources of data were largely from statements from officials in the media and subsequent journalistic reporting on more recent events. This data was then further corroborated, or cross checked against interview data whereby the interviewees had witnessed or lived through the same event.

- Statistical data from Qatari government sources and independent international agencies supported observations such as an increase in military spending, the increases in investment in other countries and the output of natural gas and the location it was destined for export. Sources included the World Bank, Central Intelligence Agency Factbook, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Qatari government websites and various creditable media platforms. This data was important for the revision of subtle power and the concept of late subtle power as it explained the shift the dynamics of Qatar's for policy actions.

SCOPE OF THE THESIS

This thesis is centred on the discipline of international relations and seeks to explain the process of Qatar's pursuit of political autonomy from Saudi Arabia, which over time, aided its emergence as a regional actor with an international profile – an accomplishment few small states have achieved. As discussed in the Research Methodology, the study of Qatar's political emancipation, and that from Saudi Arabia alone, is an appropriate focus for this thesis as Doha's foreign policies have historically been linked to Riyadh's. Furthermore, by limiting the scope of this thesis to a single case study of evaluating Qatar's relations with Saudi Arabia, this thesis can explain the gradual process of a pursuit of autonomy from a period when Doha reflexively bandwagoned with Riyadh, to an era whereby Qatar utilised its subtle power capabilities and undertook autonomous foreign policy actions which were at times contrary to Saudi national interests. Finally, in limiting the scope of this analysis to a single case study, this thesis remains focused on the bilateral relations of two different actors in the international system, one being by definition a 'small state' and the other a much greater power. This single case study analysis will thus contribute to existing literature on how small states can use a form of power (subtle power) in their pursuit of political autonomy from a greater power, and how that form of power changes over time.

The theoretical scope of this thesis concentrates on Qatar's use of the four elements of subtle power, and the *how*, *why*, and *when* each of the four elements; 1) aided Qatar's pursuit of autonomy, 2) were impacted by Qatar's foreign policy actions, and 3) what has become of the four elements since. In limiting the scope of this thesis to the study a single form of power and

its use by one nation state alone, this dissertation will be able to provide an intensive theoretical study of the dynamics of subtle power and the implications, positive and negative, of its utilisation. By narrowing in on the study of one theory of power, this dissertation will thus make a contribution to existing literature on the study of power in international relations, the theoretical relationship between power and autonomy, and if or whether subtle power is relative to other nation states, particularly small states.

The temporal scope of this thesis is truncated by two dates: Qatar's independence in September 1971 and the end of the blockade in January 2021. These dates are the most suitable as upon independence Qatar could be described as a political adjunct of Saudi Arabia, bandwagoning with Riyadh, with little or no autonomous foreign policy. Contrasting this markedly is the end of the three and a half year blockade which commenced in June 2017, whereby Qatar had undoubtedly survived an attempted Saudi subjugation, and emerged a more emboldened nation state with an autonomous foreign policy posture unique in the region. The scope of this thesis evaluates Qatar's foreign policy strategies over this 50 year period, and is strengthened by a historical analysis of Qatar/Saudi relations²³ dating back to the nineteenth century. Chapter Two is dedicated to this analysis, and delves deep into Qatari/Saudi relations²⁴ dating back to an era of British and Ottoman competition in the region to provide background for the onset of Qatar's subtle power era. This analysis will shed light on the immense challenges Qatar has confronted, and complements the overall examination of Qatar's pursuit of autonomy from Saudi Arabia over a five decade period.

STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

As this thesis is a study of Qatar's foreign policy strategies and its pursuit of autonomy, it was important to first evaluate the concept of power and influence, which foreign policy strategies invariably seek to gain. **Chapter One** begins by evaluating concept of power and its

²³ Qatar became a political entity unto itself in 1868 yet not a nation state until 1971. The Al Saud had long dominated the Arabian peninsula eventually forming the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932. The term 'Qatar/Saudi relations' is used to capture interaction between the two ruling families – the Al Thani and the Al Saud – as well as bilateral relations when both nation states had come into existence.

²⁴ As per the Protection Treaty of 1916, the ruling Al Thani family of Qatar were forbidden by the British to engage in regional diplomacy or international relations. This did not however stop the ruling sheikhs of Qatar from liaising with the ruling Al Saud family of Saudi Arabia who have had historical claims on Qatari territory dating back centuries.

relationship with autonomy, and what it means for small states in contemporary international relations. Following this, Part Two of this chapter narrows in on an analysis of classical forms of power, how they can be applied to explain Qatar's foreign policy strategies, and then justifies why subtle power is the most appropriate theory to explain Qatar's foreign policy strategies. This analysis is important, as the chapter explains, because Nye's classical theories can in part be applied to Qatar's power capabilities, yet not as succinctly as subtle power. Finally, Chapter One introduces the four elements of subtle power in detail, followed by a prelude of this dissertation's contemporary revision of Kamrava's theory which this thesis terms as *late subtle power*. Whilst each of the four elements will retain their nomenclature in this final section, examples and conditions of the *how*, *why*, and *when* each of the four elements may have been impacted, and thus changed, are outlined to provide an overall theoretical foundation for this study.

Chapter Two is a pre-subtle power era chapter, a background chapter that is divided into two parts. Initially evaluated are the Al Thani relations with the Al Saud and as a British protectorate - Qatar's pre-independence years. The importance of this first part is that it aids later chapters of this thesis by providing depth to the understanding and analysis of Al Thani relations with the Al Saud prior to Qatar's independence being thrust upon it by the British decision to withdraw from east of Suez. Part Two of this chapter examines Qatar's foreign policy strategies in its first 25 years of independence and reveals its vulnerability in a region beset by conflict and mistrust – a time whereby any consideration of a pursuit of autonomy was simply not in Qatar's national interest. Research for Chapter One is sourced primarily from British Foreign and Commonwealth Office archives, and obtained via interview with Western diplomats serving in the region at the time. This research revealed that Qatar had long been a pragmatic and opportunistic actor, playing off one power against another (strategic hedging), bandwagoned with Saudi Arabia when circumstances necessitated, or balanced within the confines of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

Part One of **Chapter Three** begins by evaluating Emir Hamad's vision for Qatar and the nascent beginnings its subtle power era. This chapter finds that under his leadership, Hamad sought to politically emancipate Qatar from Saudi Arabia, beginning a journey that was neither rectilinear nor assured. Following this is an evaluation of Qatar's role during the Gulf War (1990/91) whereby the Qatari forces aided the Saudis in defence of their own territory - a watershed moment for Qatar's pursuit of autonomy. Part Two of this chapter delves deep into a theoretical analysis the utilisation of each of the four elements of subtle power and the *how*,

why, and *when* each of the four elements aided Qatar's pursuit of autonomy. This research is supported by over multiple interviews with diplomats, businessmen and civil servants – both Western, Saudi and Qatari alike – who lived and worked in the region during the subtle power era.

One of the most tumultuous socio-political events to have occurred in the Middle East since WWII was the Arab Spring. Grassroots revolutionaries rose up against their autocratic rulers in several countries across the region defenestrating decades-old regimes in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Yemen. Part One of **Chapter Four** evaluates Qatar's role during the Arab Spring, a role whereby Qatar emerged as an active participant attempting to shape the course of some of the revolutions. The Arab Spring heralded in a new era for Qatar's foreign policy strategies, an era whereby the Doha would for the first time act as a regional power in pursuit of its own national interest objectives, signalling to the Saudis a degree of self-confidence and autonomy from Riyadh. Part Two of this chapter is dedicated to the theoretical evaluation the impact that Qatar's autonomous foreign policy actions during the Arab Spring had on each of the four elements of subtle power. Research from various sources revealed that Qatar could no longer 'exercise influence from behind the scenes'²⁵ as subtle power originally posited, and that each of the four elements had been impacted by Qatar's foreign policy actions during and after the Arab Spring, as well as other emerging external forces and pressures.

The Arab Spring set Qatar's foreign policy strategies on a new course, and heralded in the beginning of its late subtle power era. Part One of **Chapter Five** evaluates the changes to subtle power by initially focusing on the rise of two generation leaders - Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani (hereinafter Tamim) and Mohammad bin Salman (MBS) - in a Persian Gulf region that was increasingly dominated by a growing sense of nationalism, competition, enmity, and partially divided into two blocs.²⁶ Following this, Part One of this chapter evaluates what is considered the first iteration of the 2017 blockade - the 2014 diplomatic withdrawal of ambassadors. The second part of this chapter analyses a single event – the 2017 blockade – an event whereby not only was Qatar's autonomy threatened, but its sovereignty too. This significant event in the evolution of Qatar's foreign policy strategies resulted in an irrevocable reality - that being that Qatar had now entered a late subtle power era, and this was reflected in the solidification of the changes that each of the four elements underwent. Part Three is dedicated to an elucidation of these changes. This final part of the thesis reveals the theoretical changes to Kamrava's original

²⁵ As paraphrased by Kamrava to describe subtle power.

²⁶ A 'Saudi bloc' emerged whereby Riyadh expected other GCC members to present a united front.

theory by explaining the new realities and dynamics in which the four elements operate, and how they were now utilised to either promote, support, and/or maintain Qatar's foreign policy actions following the Arab Spring. Whilst each of the four elements have retained their nomenclature, their efficacy had been impacted largely as a result of Qatar's foreign policy actions during the uprisings, but also by other external forces and pressures in the years that followed, all which necessitated a contemporary revision of this form of power.

CHAPTER ONE - QATAR AND POWER: A THEORETICAL APPROACH

Introduction

Power has always been a contested concept in social science, and according to Nye in an email exchange about subtle power – “we should expect that”.²⁷ At first instance, it can be easily argued that Qatar is not a powerful state. Qatar does not have an obvious *capability* to get other states to do what they otherwise would not as it lacks any significant power relative to its neighbours. For example, Qatar has a citizenry of ~300,000 people compared to Iran’s roughly 80 million, an annual GDP of more than \$500 billion short of Saudi Arabia’s,²⁸ and a comparatively symbolic indigenous military force²⁹ compared to both aforementioned neighbours. Qatar’s apparent lack of *capacity* in what has historically been a tough neighbourhood was always going to be a challenge for it in its pursuit of greater autonomy. Notwithstanding Qatar’s obvious vulnerabilities and shortcomings, classical theories of power theorised by Nye can still in part explain Qatar’s foreign policy strategies, however, this chapter will examine and thus explain the pre-eminence of the theory of subtle power which best explains Qatar’s power capabilities.

Chapter One is comprised of two parts. The first part is dedicated to the theoretical understanding of the study of power and its relationship to a nation state’s political autonomy. Where existing literature on the study of power invariably focuses a nation state’s attempt to influence another, not necessarily a nation state’s attempts to pursue political autonomy from another, this thesis thus contributes to the latter by analysing Qatar’s use of subtle power and its political emancipation from Saudi Arabia. To achieve this Part One studies existing literature on the concept of power and what this means for a small state’s autonomy, both within the international system and political autonomy from a single state itself. As such, this introductory study of the relationship between power and autonomy will strengthen this dissertation’s overall focus on the theoretical study of the dynamics of power. Proceeding this, Part Two will analyse Qatar’s power capabilities through the lens of Nye’s classical theories of hard, soft and smart power and their theoretical transferability with respect to Qatar’s power capabilities. The purpose of the first three sections of Part Two is that it aids the understanding

²⁷ Joseph Nye, (Harvard Kennedy School of Government), email discussion with author, June 2021.

²⁸ “World Bank National Accounts Data, and OECD National Accounts Data Files,” The World Bank, accessed August 2019, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?end=2015&locations=QA-SA-OM-AE-KW-BH&start=1965&view=chart>

²⁹ Saudi Arabia has over half a million active military personnel, outnumbering Qatari citizens by 200,000.

of the pre-eminence of the theory of subtle power (section five) as the most appropriate theoretical explanation of Qatar's power capabilities and actions. This analysis is followed by a critique of the differences between a more recent Qatar-centric theory of power - rented power - the second of only two theories of power which rely on Qatar as a case study to theoretically explain its power capabilities. Finally, the final section of Part Two provides an overview of events and foreign policy actions this dissertation will examine to determine whether a contemporary revision of Kamrava's original theory is necessary, and examples of the *how*, *why*, and *when* subtle power may have changed.

PART ONE - THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POWER AND AUTONOMY

The Concept of Power in International Relations

The concept of power is central to International Relations (IR).³⁰ In what is perhaps the most oft-quoted phrase in the history of (the study of) IR, Hans Morgenthau's *second principle of political realism* holds that at its core lies the definition of politics as "interest defined in terms of power".³¹ This concept Morgenthau argues, is crucial if one is to make sense of international politics.³² This concept of power and its relationship with realism remain prescient throughout contemporary IR literature. Barnett and Duvall argue that "the disciplinary tendency to associate power with realism and to work primarily with the realist conceptualisation partly owes to the fact that rivals to realism typically distance themselves from power considerations".³³ Viotti and Kauppi further contribute to the consideration of realism and power in IR arguing that "any attempt for a complete understanding of the realist image of international relations starts with a discussion of power which is *the* core concept for realists".³⁴ Pons too argues that "in effect, realism posits that the most powerful states lead while the rest follow, hence a weak state has no option but to follow the (Western) hemisphere's dominant

³⁰ Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, "Power in International Relations," *International Organization* 59, no. 1 (2005): 39-75.

³¹ Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1948)

³² Michael Williams, "Why Ideas Matter in International Relations: Hans Morgenthau, Classical Realism, and the Moral Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 58, no. 4 (2004): 633-665.

³³ Barnett and Duvall, "Power in International Relations," 40.

³⁴ Paul Viotti and Mark Kauppi, *International Relations Theory* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019) 32.

states,”³⁵ whose ideas and practices (in the field of IR) according to Acharya “gave little attention to ‘the rest’ of the world”.³⁶

The nexus between power and realism is therefore well established. Realists have tended to espouse a hard concept of power, and there are few greater spokesmen for contemporary realism than Mearsheimer and Waltz.³⁷ The former contends that “power is based on the particular material capabilities that a state possesses (which are) essentially tangible assets that determine a nation’s military strength”.³⁸ The latter contends that “power is characterised in terms of capabilities, which consist in turn of the size of a population and territory, economic capability, military strength, political stability and competency”.³⁹ Similarly, Gilpin defines power as “the military, economic and technological capability of a state”.⁴⁰ In the case of Qatar, this thesis examines Qatar’s ability to generate power endogenously, and the extent to which this has translated into the capacity to influence (or resist) external actors such as Saudi Arabia.

Where some realists understand power to be the sum of military, economic, technological and diplomatic capabilities at the disposal of the state, others see power not as the absolute value for each state as if it were in a vacuum, but rather as capabilities *relative* to the capabilities of other states.⁴¹ In considering both perspectives, Qatar has very little power in comparison to Saudi Arabia given its inferior military, much smaller economy and inferior diplomatic clout. However, as this thesis will explain, through its subtle power foreign policy strategies Qatar has demonstrated that both perspectives can be challenged, as it has proven to have the *capability* to influence outcomes in the region, and persuade greater powers internationally. A more applicable definition of power for Qatar fits closely to the argument of Viotti and Kauppi, whereby “an alternative, dynamic definition of power focuses on the interactions of states. A states’ influence (or capacity to influence or coerce) is not only determined by its relative capabilities, but also by the perceptions by other states of its willingness to use these capabilities”.⁴² Testament to this is the principal theoretical focus of this thesis - introduced in

³⁵ Juan Pons, “Small States, Hegemony and the Security Dilemma: Panama’s Quest for Autonomy in the 21st Century,” *Dissertation submitted to the University of Miami* (2010) 17-18.

³⁶ Amitav Acharya, “Towards a Global IR,” in *International Relations Theory* ed. Stephen McGlinchey, Rosie Walters and Christian Scheinplflug (Bristol: E-International Relations Publishing, 2017) 77-78.

³⁷ Giulio Gallarotti, *Cosmopolitan Power in International Relations: A Synthesis of Realism, Neoliberalism, and Constructivism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 17.

³⁸ John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton and Company, 2001), 55.

³⁹ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Long Grove: Waveland Press, 1979), 131.

⁴⁰ Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 13.

⁴¹ Viotti and Kauppi, *International Relations Theory*, 32.

⁴² *Ibid.*

Part Two of this chapter - in which this thesis examines the four elements of Qatar's subtle power and their impact, or perceived impact, on its pursuit of autonomy from Saudi Arabia.

Alternative concepts of power such as those from the renowned social theorist Pierre Bourdieu⁴³ have received growing attention from IR scholars. Political theorist Stefano Guzzini characterised Bourdieu's approach to power as combining the insights of Steven Lukes⁴⁴ and Michel Foucault.⁴⁵ Lukes argued that power exists and matters not only when it is overtly exercised, as in situations of contested political decision-making, but also when it operates in less obvious ways, such as non-decision-making and agenda setting. Taking this argument even further, Foucault argues that "power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything but because it comes from everywhere",⁴⁶ highlighting the ways in which multiple actors may wield power in any social interaction. This thesis considers Foucault's argument in the examination of Qatar's sources of power, some of which emerged fortuitously. For example, the inception of Al Jazeera demonstrates that power can be 'found' anywhere. From humble beginnings whereby the broadcaster was not thought to last "more than two or three months",⁴⁷ Al Jazeera increasingly became an influential force shaping the views of Western policy makers and grassroots revolutionaries alike.

Like Bourdieu, Barnett and Duvall also argue for a more nuanced, polymorphous conceptualisation of power in the analysis of international politics. Rather than the coercive realist concept of one state getting another state to do what it does not want to do, Barnett and Duvall define power more broadly as "the production, in and through social relations, of effects that shape the capacities of actors to determine their circumstances and fate" which encompasses both 'power over' and 'power to,' and addresses the perennial debates over the relative roles of agency vs structure.⁴⁸ Yet others can see power in a different sense. Poststructuralists encourage a way of looking at the world that challenges what comes to be accepted as 'truth' and 'knowledge'. Poststructuralists always call into question how certain accepted 'facts' and 'beliefs' actually work to reinforce the dominance and power of particular

⁴³ Pierre Bourdieu, *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power* (Boston: Stanford University Press, 2022)

⁴⁴ Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

⁴⁵ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (London: Allen Lane, 1979)

⁴⁶ Mark Philp, "Foucault on Power: A Problem in Radical Translation?" *Political Theory* 11, no. 1 (1983): 29-52.

⁴⁷ Abdul Aziz Al Horr, (former Qatari Diplomat and Director at Al Jazeera, Qatar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Al Jazeera), in discussion with author, November 2020.

⁴⁸ Suerie Moon, "Power in Global Governance: An Expanded Typology from Global Health," *Globalisation and Health* 15, no. 4 (2019): 1-9.

actors within international relations.⁴⁹ As for Qatar's utilisation of subtle power, this thesis builds on Barnett and Duvall's work investigating whether Qatar had the 'power to' act largely resulting from its enormous financial resources and the leadership of Sheikh Hamad which was considered by many Qataris as "visionary".⁵⁰ From this perspective, this would suggest that upon independence Qatar had to contend with the 'accepted knowledge' of Saudi Arabia's relative hard power capabilities, and the 'accepted truth' of its regional dominance.

The definition of power this thesis adopts is the well-established definition articulated by Lukes – "power is the *capacity* to cause effects, to have an impact on, or to modify circumstances in the physical or social world".⁵¹ Yet to understand the effectiveness of the use of power, this thesis pairs Luke's concept of power with a definition of autonomy which this thesis defines as: The extent to which nation state A (Qatar) can undertake foreign policy actions that contravene the national interests of nation state B (Saudi Arabia) insouciant of known potential repercussions be they political, economic, or military. Therefore, in the examination of Qatar's pursuit of autonomy from Saudi Arabia, this thesis considers that if the exercise of a power were to be considered successful, or measurable, then a degree of autonomy must also be identifiable.

The Relationship Between Power and Autonomy for Small State

Does a state need a degree of autonomy before it can seek to exert power, or can a state exert power in pursuit of autonomy? In considering this question and the relationship between power and autonomy, this thesis maintains that the power capacities of nation states are not relative to the degree of autonomy they have in the international system, nor from a greater power – the relationship is fluid and asymmetric. For example, some Pacific Island states have a high degree of autonomy, yet limited power in the international system. China on the other hand is considered to be a global power, yet its autonomy is curtailed by the fact it must contend with, in large part, with the norms of the International Liberal Order which have been conceived by the democratic West.

⁴⁹ Aishling McMorrow, "Poststructuralism," in *International Relations Theory* ed. Stephen McGlinchey, Rosie Walters and Christian Scheinflug (Bristol: E-International Relations Publishing, 2017), 56.

⁵⁰ Bashir Al Shirawi, (former ambassador, Qatari Embassy in South Africa), in discussion with author, February 2021.

⁵¹ Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, iv.

Although the study of autonomy is not as extensive as the analysis of the concept of power, some IR scholars have offered general theoretical definitions of a state's autonomy in the international system. For instance, Altfeld argues that "autonomy is related to the government's capability to adopt whatever positions it wishes to with regards to international issues salient to it, and to change those positions as well".⁵² Morrow offers a similar idea: "A state's autonomy consists of it being able to determine its own policies, and to have external self-assertion".⁵³ Employing more abstract terms, Morrow argues that a state's autonomy can be assessed by "the degree to which it pursues desired changes in the *status quo*," namely, it can be judged by "the difference between its ideal point and its position over the issues in the *status quo* that it would like to change," and "if a state adopts its ideal point as its position, it has made no compromises in its attempt to achieve desired changes, (but if) the difference between the two grows, its autonomy decreases".⁵⁴ In other words, a state's international autonomy (somewhat concomitant with its power) can be observed and measured in terms of whether, and to what extent, it can modify the *status quo* of an international issue to a preferred orientation and condition whenever it wants to do so. The bigger the change a state can make to the international *status quo*, the greater its international autonomy is.⁵⁵ This thesis examines Qatar as a small state, the use of its subtle power foreign policy strategies, and its attempts to modify the *status quo* regionally in its pursuit of greater autonomy from Saudi Arabia.

So how does a small state change the *status quo* to enhance its autonomy? Tang argues that small states can exploit the competition between great powers to make economic gains and ensure security while maintaining (and not losing) their autonomy.⁵⁶ Tang cites US - China competition in Southeast Asia as an important catalyst to regional cooperation and integration, which also enlarges the strategic autonomy and international political autonomy of Southeast Asian states in regional affairs.⁵⁷ Tang further argues that "although small states might seem fated to accept this type of asymmetric relationship, it is not necessarily inevitable. The autonomy-security trade-off between small states and great powers may hinge on the anticipated trajectory of economic development of small states and hegemonic competition

⁵² Michael Altfeld, "The Decision to Ally: A Theory and Test," *Western Political Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (1984): 523-544.

⁵³ James Morrow, "Alliances and Asymmetry: An Alternative to the Capability Aggregation Model of Alliances," *American Journal of Political Science* 35, no. 4 (1991): 904-933.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 909.

⁵⁵ Chin-Mao Tang, *Small States and Hegemonic Competition in Southeast Asia* (London: Routledge, 2018) 90.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 15.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 15-16.

between great powers”.⁵⁸ For Qatar, the Saudi/Iran rivalry and Doha’s shared extraction of natural gas resources with Tehran is a salient example.

Similarly, Padadakis and Starr contend that “enhancements in a small state’s international autonomy can take place with changes in the characteristics of its relationships with other states, rather than in the possession of any objective measures of power”.⁵⁹ Tang finds the same as eluded to above noting that “a small state can realise greater relation-based political and strategic autonomy when its interactions with great powers change”.⁶⁰ As this thesis explores, a major example of this for Qatar is when the United States relocated its largest military base in the Middle East from Dammam in Saudi Arabia to the outskirts of Doha, providing for Qatar not only presence of the world’s greatest military force, and also with a degree of ‘diplomatic cover’ on which it has relied on when some of its foreign policy actions agitated the ruling elite in Riyadh.

Harknett considers the relationship between power and autonomy contending that only powerful actors have the capabilities to act autonomously, and suggests that there is a more static relationship between power and autonomy. Harknett writes that “concentrated power structures by definition are the ones in which there is a significant gap between the capabilities of one side and others”.⁶¹ They are fixed and populated by one powerful actor and the rest. As noted above, this thesis will examine the relationship between power and autonomy in Qatar and analyse whether the relationship is fixed or static, or whether it ebbs and flows. The ‘selected events’ listed in the Research Methodology of this thesis will aid this analysis, and as Hart suggests, “the *control over events* approach has emerged as the best approach to the measurement of power in contemporary international politics”.⁶² Similarly, Hinnebusch too considers the dominance of a powerful actor in his study of the relationship between power and autonomy. Hinnebusch notes that “neither Arab nationalism nor oil were able to overcome the legacy of fragmentation and dependency inflicted on the region by the West, and neither proved able to restore the Arab world or the Islamic Middle East as a major world power ... the West’s ability to intervene militarily or impose economic sanctions revived key features of the age of

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 17.

⁵⁹ Maria Papadakis and Harvey Starr, “Opportunity, Willingness, and Small States: The Relationship Between Environment and Foreign Policy”. In *New Directions in the Study of Foreign Policy*, ed. Charles Hermann, Charles Kegley, and James Rosenau (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1987), 430.

⁶⁰ Tang, *Small States and Hegemonic Competition in Southeast Asia*, 92.

⁶¹ Richard Harknett and Hasan Yalcin, “The Struggle for Autonomy: A Realist Structural Theory of International Relations,” *International Studies Review* 14, no. 2 (2012): 499-521.

⁶² Jeffery Hart, “Three Approaches to the Measurement of Power in International Relations,” *International Organization* 30, no. 2 (1976): 289-305.

imperialism at the expense of regional autonomy”.⁶³ Both Harknett and Hinnebusch view the relationship between power and autonomy as somewhat fixed, or irreversibly favouring the more powerful actor. This thesis will examine this concept of a fixed power/autonomy relationship, and analysis whether a small state can use its (subtle power) foreign policy strategies in pursuit of greater autonomy from a traditionally more powerful actor.

Finally, in the analysis of concentrated power structures and the concept of autonomy, this thesis examines whether a small state can *still* achieve autonomy and gain power, and whether the relationship is either fixed or fluid. In further aiding this study, this thesis will draw on Dahl’s seminal work ‘The Concept of Power’ in which he maintains that “a necessary condition for the power relation is that there exists a time lag, however small, from the actions of the actor who is said to exert power to the responses of the respondent”.⁶⁴ The example of Al Jazeera is again a salient one - Qatar exercised autonomy in creating Al Jazeera and later achieved a powerful foreign policy tool which could influence regional actors. Therefore, Dahl’s ‘time lag’ is consequential when considering the relationship between power and autonomy, as the exercise of power may not immediately produce an autonomous outcome, and sometimes it won’t at all.

PART TWO – CLASSICAL THEORIES OF POWER APPLICABLE TO QATAR

Having formulated the concept of power and autonomy to be utilised in this thesis, the first three sections of Part Two begin by investigating Nye’s classical theories of power and their applicability in terms of explaining Qatar’s power capabilities and capacity to influence. Although many theories of power in academia now exist, this initial examination of Qatar’s power capabilities through the lens of Nye’s seminal classical theories later aids the explanation of why subtle power more accurately explains Qatar’s foreign policy strategies from the late-1990s onwards. This theoretical examination aids the study of the relationship between power and autonomy by revealing that Nye’s classical forms of power can in only in part explain Qatar’s foreign policy strategies. Furthermore, this examination contributes to existing

⁶³ Raymond Hinnebusch, *The International Politics of the Middle East* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), 150.

⁶⁴ Robert Dahl, “The Concept of Power,” *Behavioral Science* 2, no.3 (1957), 201-215.

literature discussed in Part One by broadening the understanding of this relationship. The final two sections of Part Two will then introduce the four elements of subtle power, followed by its successor, and explain why they elucidate Qatar's foreign policy strategies, including the relationship between power and autonomy, in a way that Nye's classical theories do not.

Hard Power

Hard power is defined as the capacity of an actor to influence the behaviour of other actors by *coercion*,⁶⁵ using strategies which focus on military intervention, coercive diplomacy, and economic sanctions to enforce national interests.⁶⁶ Although Qatar lacks the capacities of hard power comparative to its neighbours, Felsch maintains that Qatar in fact does possess hard power, and soft power (below) does not describe the capacity of Qatar's power. Felsch claims that with respect to Qatar's foreign policy strategies, and following strictly on from Nye's definition, Qatar's soft power is in fact rather a myth,⁶⁷ a claim this thesis disputes. Moreover, Felsch argues that traditional or realist conceptions of power describe and explain more adequately Qatar's foreign policy⁶⁸ ... and that soft power is not only inaccurate, but also a redundant analytical tool in regard of Qatar's international influence.⁶⁹

Felsch maintains that by analysing Qatar's possible soft power in terms of culture, political values and foreign policy, it must be concluded that soft power explanations in the context of Qatar are mainly unsuitable and misleading.⁷⁰ That is because its power does not rest on its attractiveness, either in terms of culture or in terms of moral values. Instead, the study of Qatar reveals that it is its enormous wealth that allows it to "affect outcomes"⁷¹ – i.e. economic hard power. Strengthening the argument that Qatar does not possess soft power can be found in survey data collected by Monocle Magazine, which assesses countries' soft power based on four categories: Business/Innovation, Culture, Government Diplomacy, and Education.⁷² What

⁶⁵ Abdulaziz Al Horr, Evren Tok, and Tekla Gegoshidze, "Rethinking Soft Power in the Post-Blockade Times: The Case of Qatar," *Digest of Middle Eastern Studies* 28, no. 2 (June 2019): 329-350.

⁶⁶ Ernest Wilson, "Hard Power, Soft Power, Smart Power," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, no. 1 (2008): 110-124.

⁶⁷ Maximilian Felsch, "Qatar's Rising International Influence: A Case of Soft Power," *Conjuntura Internacional* 13, no. 1 (2016): 24-37.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 26.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 36.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*.

⁷¹ *Ibid*.

⁷² "Soft Power Survey 2018/2019," Monocle Magazine, accessed July 2021, <https://monocle.com/film/affairs/soft-power-survey-2018-19/>

is noteworthy is that Monocle's list of the world's thirty strongest soft powers has never included Qatar or any other Arab nation.⁷³

No evaluation of Qatar's hard power capabilities could be complete without mentioning the *sine qua non* of Qatari hard power; the Qatar Investment Authority (QIA) and the hosting of the United States military – both central to two elements of Qatar's subtle power. Since its establishment in 2005, notable QIA acquisitions have included part or all of world renowned department stores, luxury vehicle manufacturers, international airline groups, prestigious European property and football clubs⁷⁴ – the list is seemingly endless.⁷⁵ Qatar also hosts the United States Airforce at Al Udeid which houses almost 10,000 US personnel, and serves as one of the most critical overseas US military bases.⁷⁶ As such, Qatar *does* possess elements of classical hard power but this does not explain its eclectic blend of foreign policy strategies, many of which originate as a projection of economic hard power, but have also produced a soft power outcome – such as Al Jazeera.

Undoubtedly, Qatar's *prima facie* hard power has contributed to its autonomy from Saudi Arabia. The presence of the United States has given the Al Thani a degree of diplomatic cover at times in its foreign policy actions. During the evacuation of Americans from Afghanistan in September 2021 for example, Qatar became a key staging hub for the United States, and later continued to act as an interlocutor between Washington and the Taliban – an endeavour unlikely without the physical presence of the US military. The presence of Al Udeid and the central role Qatar played in Afghanistan contributed to Qatar earning 'major non-NATO ally' status, and a *sense* of greater autonomy from Saudi Arabia due to Qatar's increasing importance to the United States.

Soft Power

Soft power is a term coined by Nye in 1990⁷⁷ and further refined in 2004,⁷⁸ and is a theory which explains the power of *co-optation*, opposed to hard power's coercion. Nye posits that

⁷³ Felsch, "Qatar's Rising International Influence: A Case of Soft Power," 28.

⁷⁴ Brannagan and Giulianotti, "The Soft Power – Soft Disempowerment Nexus: The Case of Qatar," 1139-1157.

⁷⁵ Qatar is a full or part owner of Harrods Department Store, J. Sainsbury, Porsche, Heathrow Airport, Chelsea Barracks, the 2012 London Olympic Village, the American Embassy in London, the Shard in London, and French football club Paris Saint-Germain to name but a few.

⁷⁶ "Qatar to expand US Airbase as Defense Chief Visits DC," *Al Jazeera English*, accessed July 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/1/29/qatar-to-expand-us-airbase-as-defence-chief-visits-dc>

⁷⁷ Joseph Nye, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990)

⁷⁸ Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Succeed in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004)

the soft power of a country rests primarily on three resources: its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority).⁷⁹ In using Nye's three resources of soft power, Qatar would seem to lack any significant soft power. Qatar has a fascinating culture but compared to Europe's eclectic centuries old history, Qatar falls by the wayside. Qatar's archaic political system is based on absolutist personal rule without any form of popular political participation or even representation,⁸⁰ and Qatar's political values are not embedded in democratic values or adherence to international human rights best practice. Qatar's foreign policies, whilst legitimate and moral from Qatar's perspective, are perceived by its neighbours as nettlesome, divisive, and counter-productive to the interests of its brethren GCC members. As such, Qatar is not universally identified with a particular set of values or ideals that others will voluntarily embrace without inducements, and this can make the interpretation of Qatar's soft power influence as somewhat obfuscative.

Although Qatar lacks soft power as per Nye's three resources mentioned above, evidence of Qatar's *co-optation* lies in Qatar's hyperactive national branding initiatives, which at their core focus on raising awareness of a country. Qatar's national branding aligns more with strategies of public diplomacy, which include creating and maintaining mutual understandings, long-lasting relationships, and active cooperation. While branding *informs* others of Qatar's national uniqueness, its public diplomacy seeks to *exercise influence* by building positive and resilient affiliations, which other parties consider to be attractive and valuable.⁸¹ National branding is a form of co-opting influence, not coercive like hard power, and has in fact attracted a global audience. Examples of Qatar's soft power include Al Jazeera and Qatar Airways, and the awarding of the hosting rights to the FIFA World Cup, all of which have raised Qatar's profile distinguishing it from Saudi Arabia, and at the same time contributing to a sense of greater autonomy from Riyadh. Yet like hard power, Qatar's soft power does not explain its overall foreign policy strategies, as it is the use of elements of hard and soft power, both in tandem and in isolation, which Qatar has utilised in a unique way to project power.

⁷⁹ Joseph Nye, "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, no. 1 (2008): 94-109.

⁸⁰ Felsch, "Qatar's Rising International Influence: A Case of Soft Power," 31.

⁸¹ Brannagan and Giulianotti, "The Soft Power – Soft Disempowerment Nexus: The Case of Qatar," 1141.

Smart Power

Given that it can be argued that Qatar possesses *capacities* of its own versions of hard and soft power, it could be argued that Qatar in fact possesses smart power - the dual use,⁸² or confluence of both hard and soft power. Smart power, the third of Nye's classical theories of power, assumes that power is rooted in military and economic strength *and* cultural values,⁸³ and is "a strategy in which hard and soft power reinforce rather than undermine each other".⁸⁴ Nye developed the term in 2003 to counter the misperception that soft power alone can produce effective foreign policy. He argued that there are three basic ways to affect the behaviour of others to get what you want: coercion, payment, and attraction. Hard power is the use of coercion and payment. Soft power is the ability to obtain preferred outcomes through attraction and smart power is the combination of both.⁸⁵

As for Qatar therefore, smart power has its merits. In his theory of subtle power however, Kamrava contends that with respect to Qatar, there was a need to rethink and refine existing conceptions of power, as traditional assumptions about power were rooted in military strength or cultural values and no longer adequately described the nature of Qatar's position in the Persian Gulf and in the larger Middle East.⁸⁶ Kamrava argued that during the period under study, Qatar's influence and power were neither military nor cultural, nor a combination of the two,⁸⁷ but were derived from a carefully combined mixture of marketing, domestic politics, regional diplomacy, and through strategic use of its sovereign wealth fund (SWF) – and this thinking gave rise to the theory of subtle power. Although when asked about subtle power, Nye responded by email saying - "This (subtle power) seems to be another label for smart power".⁸⁸ This thesis will argue however that Kamrava's nuanced evaluation of Qatar's smart power, and the four elements which constitute subtle power, is the foremost explanation for its foreign policy strategies and power capabilities. Furthermore, this thesis will argue that only through

⁸² For an evaluation of the combination of hard and soft power, see: Richard Armitage and Joseph Nye, "How America Can become a Smarter Power," in *CSIS Commission on Smart Power: A Smarter, More Secure America*, ed. (Washington: Centre for Strategic and International Studies, November 2007)

⁸³ Mehran Kamrava, "Qatari Foreign Policy and the Exercise of Subtle Power," *International Studies Journal* 14, no. 2 (November 2017): 91-135.

⁸⁴ Joseph Nye, (Harvard Kennedy School of Government), email discussion with author, June 2021.

⁸⁵ Joseph Nye, "Get Smart: Combining Hard and Soft Power," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 88, no. 4 (2009): 160-163.

⁸⁶ Kamrava, "Qatari Foreign Policy and the Exercise of Subtle Power," 95.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Joseph Nye, (Harvard Kennedy School of Government), email discussion with author, June 2021.

the lens of the examination of subtle power can an explanation of the *how*, *why*, and *when* Qatar was able to achieve political autonomy from Saudi Arabia be understood.

Rented Power

A more recent theory of power specific to Qatar analysed in this chapter is rented power theorised by Galeeva. Supporting the nomenclature behind the concept is according its originator: “Qatar, as a state with limited capacity, using its only credible power resource (wealth), has relied on its engagement with non-state actors (political Islam, tribes, the media and sport, among others) to wield its power”.⁸⁹ This policy, as perceived by the theorist, “has allowed Qatar to rent the well-established influence of non-state actors due to their transnational nature”.⁹⁰ Therefore rented power is defined as “the power employed by a well-endowed state to back a non-state actor in return for access to the latter’s transnational influence”.⁹¹ It is out of this definition that this thesis finds the theory of rented power unsuitable to explain Qatar’s foreign policy strategies from the mid-1990s onwards, as when considering each of the four elements of subtle power as the following section will elucidate, Qatar’s power projection initiatives ostensibly targeted *nation states* themselves, which is a significant differentiation from the concept of rented power. The United States for example is critical to Qatar’s external security architecture, as are its natural gas customers which underpin its importance to the global community.

In considering the non-state actors Galeeva cites to substantiate the theory of rented power, this thesis finds that some of the non-state actors mentioned are in fact state or sub-state actors themselves. Members of the Muslim Brotherhood were engaged by the Qatari state as bureaucrats in the earlier years of Qatar’s independence, and later as international partners when Qatar actively supported the group when it came to power in Egypt during the Arab Spring – both examples when members of the group emerged as ‘state’ actors. A second example refuting the veracity of the ‘non-state actors concept’ is the media sector, whereby Al Jazeera’s existence for example would not have been possible without direct state-sponsorship from the Qatari state. Additionally, Qatar’s neighbours viewed the trailblazing broadcaster as a state-sponsored provocateur during the Arab Spring, perceiving Al Jazeera as a mouthpiece for the Qatari state. As such, neither political Islamists such as the Muslim Brotherhood, nor

⁸⁹ Galeeva, Diana *Qatar: The Practice of Rented Power* (Routledge 2022) pp. xiii - xiv

⁹⁰ *ibid*

⁹¹ *ibid*

Al Jazeera, can necessarily be defined as *purely* non-state actors when considering their role in the international relations of the region, and the power projection initiatives of Qatar itself.

Rented power is not strictly a Qatar-specific theory – nor was this the intention of the theorist. Galeeva notes that “the concept of rented power may be profitably applied to a number of nations,⁹² ... (and) Qatar was consequently a critical case study in the demonstration of rented power, particularly because it leads to an understanding of Qatari power beyond the lens of any existing types of power (particularly soft power, which has often been used in relation to Qatar) and small state theory”.⁹³ Much like subtle power, the theory of rented power has its transferability with respect to other nation states, however, subtle power is a theory intentionally specific to Qatar and which most accurately explains Qatar’s power projection capabilities and foreign policy strategies. The breath and scope of the foreign policy actions of Qatar since the mid-1990s onwards simply can’t be explained without discussing the exponential outreach to other nation states around the world in sectors or diplomacy, branding, strategic investment, and direct state-to-state military relationships and procurement (i.e. subtle power). Therefore, rented power is not a theory which thoroughly explains Qatar’s foreign policy strategies, nor its power projection capabilities.

Subtle Power

Theorised by Mehran Kamrava whilst working at Georgetown University in Doha, subtle power is a form of power specific to Qatar which at its simplest can be described as ‘exerting influence and power from behind the scenes’.⁹⁴ There exists a fundamental difference in the formulation subtle power when compared to Nye’s classical theories of power. Nye’s theories essentially focus on the resources and power capabilities that are inherent to the state, whereas Kamrava’s subtle power is more focused on how nation states (specifically Qatar) take advantage of opportunities and on the ‘creation of power’ through foreign policy strategies and actions. Furthermore, subtle power differs from classical forms of power in that it is reliant on both the state and external forces conjointly. Subtle power is a nuance of smart power and can be briefly perceived as a confluence of soft power, indigenous economic hard power, and the importation of military hard power. It is this unique confluence of classical forms of power which gives theoretical weight to substantiate the specificity (or uniqueness) of subtle power

⁹² Galeeva, Diana *Qatar: The Practice of Rented Power* (Routledge 2022) pp. 9-10

⁹³ *ibid*

⁹⁴ Mehran Kamrava, *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2013), 60.

to Qatar and no other nation state. Subtle power has four key elements: diplomacy and international relations, marketing and branding efforts, global investments, and physical and military protection.⁹⁵ Although Qatar remains vulnerable as a small state due to its population size and inferior military, this study will examine how subtle power aided Qatar's pursuit of autonomy from Saudi Arabia and empowered it as a regional actor.

To understand the origins of subtle power, in an article titled *Qatari Foreign Policy and the Exercise of Subtle Power* Kamrava wrote that:

One of the primary reasons for Qatar's ability to exercise subtle power in the late-1990s and the first decade of the 2000s was the regional context: Iraq was both internationally isolated and marginalised and simply incapable of exerting much power beyond its borders; Iran was not in much better position and could only buy loyalty of non-state actors near and far; Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE were all saddled with stale and quite old leaderships that neither had the wherewithal nor the desire to exert regional leadership; and revenues from oil and gas revenues kept rising. Qatar in other words was enjoying a fortuitous moment in history.⁹⁶

As noted above, where smart power is the dual use of both hard and soft power, the four elements of subtle power operated largely independent of each other which is key to understanding the differentiation between the theories of smart and subtle power. The analysis of the four elements of subtle power aids the understanding of the *how*, *why*, and *when* Qatar was able to begin to achieve political autonomy from Saudi Arabia which Chapter Four elucidates. An introductory summary of these four elements is as follows:

Diplomacy and Conflict Mediation – Up until the Arab Spring, Qatar had emerged as one of the most proactive conflict mediators in the Middle East. Qatar's conflict mediation was motivated by a combination of international prestige and making itself relevant regionally. According to a Qatari national and academic at Qatar University, through diplomacy and conflict mediation, "Qatar wanted to brand itself as a trustworthy ally internationally, and as a normative power state like the European state model of normative power in international relations".⁹⁷ Although the disputing parties engaged in Qatari mediation were often motivated by promises of reconstruction funds and investments, Qatar's diplomacy and conflict mediation

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 61.

⁹⁶ Kamrava, "Qatari Foreign Policy and the Exercise of Subtle Power," 122.

⁹⁷ Sheikha Noof Al Dosari, (Qatar University Department of International Affairs-Public Policy Program), email discussion with author, December 2020.

had a similar soft power effect like national branding, that being that it began attracting the world's attention. This in turn aided Qatar's reputation as a go-to impartial mediator and sponsor of conflict resolutions in the region, differentiating it from Saudi Arabia, thus enhancing its status as a regional actor and thereby its autonomous posture.

National Branding – Qatar has aggressively advertised itself to the international community arguably since Al Jazeera first began broadcasting in the mid-1990s. Qatar's hyperactive national branding initiatives are many and include for example: The purchase of a French football team and Harrods department store, the global reach of Qatar Airways, and the prestige of being awarded hosting rights for the 2022 Football World Cup. Although it is Qatar's financial (economic hard power) clout which sponsors these initiatives, national branding *attracts* the world's attention, it *co-opts* other states' participation with Qatar, and as such can be viewed as a soft power element of subtle power. Qatar's earlier national branding initiatives promoted it to an international audience, raising Qatar's profile and putting it on the map as an actor (or investor) autonomous from Saudi Arabia.

Strategic use of the QIA – Qatar's strategic use of its SWF has channelled state largesse into post-conflict mediation investments, prestigious global property purchases and rescue packages for ailing economies *et al.* Qatar's development of its Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) exports is also a prominent feature of its global investments which have a strong link to its international relations⁹⁸ by inviting prominent global firms from multiple advanced economies to invest in joint ventures in the LNG sector of Qatar's largely energy-driven economy. These (economic hard power) international investments have increased Qatar's profile internationally, and made Qatar an indispensable partner to many states around the world, *co-opting* international cooperation and engagement. By casting a wide net and engaging with multiple commercial partners around the world, particularly economic powers in the West and Asia, Qatar enmeshed itself as an important business partner to other states, heightening its importance internationally especially in the energy sector, and this in turn secured a greater degree of autonomy from Saudi Arabia.

Physical Protection – Since 2000, Qatar has been home the United States' largest prepositioning hub outside continental America, and forward headquarters for CENTCOM – the United States' command and control centre for the region. Since the inception of the Al

⁹⁸ Matthew Gray, *Qatar: Politics and Challenges of Development* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2013), 110.

Udeid airbase, Qatar has reportedly spent \$8 billion to support US operations in the country, compared to Washington's \$450 million.⁹⁹ This 16-fold contribution of Qatar's (economic hard power) essentially buys protection.¹⁰⁰ Qatar has also, consistent with its decades-long practice of strategic hedging, welcomed Turkish military forces to base themselves on the northern fringes of the Qatari peninsula.¹⁰¹ The physical protection element of Qatar's subtle power foreign policy strategies is its principal hard power component, yet notably, sponsored by Qatar's economic hard power via state investment. The physical presence of the United States military gives Qatar a significant degree of importance regionally, distinguishes it from Saudi Arabia, and provides a degree of diplomatic cover in some of its autonomous foreign policy pursuits.

Given Qatar's financial clout is the keystone of each of the four elements which produces either a hard, soft, or smart power outcome, it could be argued, as per email correspondence from Nye mentioned above, that subtle power is in fact the same as smart power. However, smart power is the *dual* use of both hard and soft power, the synchronistic or in-tandem use of hard and soft power together. This thesis is not equivocating in arguing that subtle power is a Qatari version of smart power, yet subtle power *does* differ from smart power as each of the four distinctive elements are independent of one another, the elements do not require a 'dual use', and endogenously produce either a hard, soft, or smart power outcome.

According to Kamrava, the efficacy of subtle power, and the need for a separate theory explaining Qatar's foreign policy strategies, was articulated in an interview where he contends that:

We only had moved on from soft power and we had even understood what smart power was, yet none of these explained to me satisfactorily what accounted for Qatar's international stature ... Everybody, it seemed to me, was actively trying to court this little country, from the Iranians who needed an Arab friend, to the Americans who often needed a country to cover for them when they talked to the Taliban, to the different warring parties in Lebanon, to the capitalists in Spain. It occurred to me that this was a different kind of influence. Our traditional analytical

⁹⁹ "Qatar to Fully Pay for the Expansion of Al Udeid Air Base, Emir Buys Protection with Money," *Egypt Today*, accessed July 2019, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/72745/Qatar-to-fully-pay-for-expansion-of-Al-Udeid-Air>

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ "Turkey to Open New Military Base in Qatar," *Middle East Monitor*, accessed August 2019, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20190815-turkey-to-open-new-military-base-in-qatar/>

tools, our traditional theoretical tools, didn't adequately explain this position of Qatar ... That's how I came up with the idea of subtle power.¹⁰²

Kamrava continues by emphasising Qatar's growing prominence globally by noting:

This country has positioned itself in a way that people actively wanted it at the table, it's a country that frames agenda, and is actively asked to participate in the framing of agenda ... and they (Qatar) were actively courting this. They were bringing in massive amounts of money. At the same time as they're negotiating, they're bidding for the World Cup, they're promoting the national airline, and they're hosting warring parties from Sudan and Lebanon, they're doing these other things at the same time. That was the beginning of how I started to think about this whole notion of subtle power.¹⁰³

In another interview discussing theoretical explanations of power and Qatar, David Roberts said that:

In one of my most cited articles¹⁰⁴ I wrote ... 'in the bowels of the Emiri Diwan, or the foreign ministry, there is no single white paper that explains Qatari foreign policy', and the reason I say that, is that it has always been very central to my approach when it comes to Qatar - not in a mean way - it is such an *ad hoc* bodging along sort of a place, therefore we need to be careful of transposing theories of things onto the pragmatic reality of how did, and does, Qatar do its foreign policy.¹⁰⁵

In considering Roberts' views, it is important to note that a theory cannot explain everything, nor anything in perpetuity. Yet subtle power explains the eclectic nature of Qatar's foreign policy strategies, opportunistic and pragmatic as they are at times, in a way that no other theory of power can better articulate. However, whilst this study found that each of the four elements of subtle power aided Qatar's pursuit of autonomy, around the time of the Arab Spring the four

¹⁰² Mehran Kamrava, (Director of the Centre for International and Regional Studies, Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service in Qatar), in discussion with author, December 2021.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ David Roberts, "Understanding Qatar's Foreign Policy Objectives," *Mediterranean Politics* 17, no.2 (2012): 233-239.

¹⁰⁵ David Roberts, (School of Security Studies at King's College London), in discussion with author, November 2020.

elements of subtle power had been impacted largely by actions Qatar itself took – Qatar no longer ‘exercised influence from behind the scenes’ as the theory of subtle power originally posited. As a result, this thesis will investigate the evolution of subtle power over time, and as introduced in the next section, will offer a contemporary revision of subtle power - *late subtle power* - that better explains Qatar’s post-Arab Spring foreign policy strategies.

Late Subtle Power

This thesis will investigate how subtle power has changed over time, and will examine whether a contemporary revision of Kamrava’s theory is required. This final section of Chapter One outlines some examples of how subtle power may have changed, and whether the four elements are now utilised differently since this theory was originally conceived. For example, is subtle power still considered to be the ‘exercise of influence from behind the scenes?’ i.e. do Qatar’s foreign policy strategies and actions remain furtive, uncontroversial, and/or oblique – do they remain subtle *per se*? Or is there a more contemporary theoretical explanation for Qatar’s power capacities and its ability to influence other nation states? Conjointly, this thesis investigates Qatar’s political emancipation from Saudi Arabia, and whether this has been a successful pursuit or not. Given that Qatar’s political autonomy began from a very low base, that being little autonomy upon independence, a change is certain to have gradually occurred. As such, the relationship between Qatar’s power capacities and its actual autonomy is expected to have done so as well. For example, if subtle power did in fact aid Qatar’s pursuit of autonomy, could subtle power continue to protect and/or preserve its autonomy in the event it came under threat, which was the case during the 2017 blockade? These questions amongst others are what necessitates a contemporary revision of the theory of subtle power. Below are examples of how the four elements of subtle power may have changed subject to investigation in this thesis.

Diplomacy and Conflict Mediation – Prior to the Arab Spring, Qatar was engaged in a number of conflict mediation initiatives. The conflicting parties often agreed to a resolution to the conflict, although were at times partly motivated by Qatar’s financial inducements such as post-conflict reconstruction funds. Given Qatar’s prominent role as a regional conflict mediator, and given the number of occasions Qatar acted in the role, this thesis will investigate whether this element of subtle power continued to generate the same degree of status and prestige as it once did. This thesis will further investigate Qatar’s increasingly proactive role in the region and

whether this impacted on this element of subtle power. For example, did Qatar's active military participation in Libya during the Arab Spring, or support for the Muslim Brotherhood-led government in Egypt, impact on its perceived neutrality and status as an impartial conflict mediator?

National Branding – Qatar's national branding strategies have matured and developed over the last decade or more. For example, the purchase of showcase properties and ostentatiously branding them 'Qatari' with the national flag has been tempered. This element of subtle power now adroitly targets an audience, including both the leaderships of nation states and their populations - Qatar's World Cup preparations a case in point. Whilst Qatar's national branding strategies have changed, this thesis will investigate this element of subtle power in terms of Qatar's ability to influence other states, and whether national branding has too impacted on Qatar's power capacities and autonomy from Saudi Arabia. For example, given the fame and prestige of winning the hosting rights to the World Cup, did this elevate Qatar's international image to a desired greater height? Or did the World Cup bring too much attention to Qatar, as was the case with the negative media reports on the rights of migrant labourers? This thesis will consider these questions to examine whether this second element of subtle power has been impacted, and how it may have changed.

Strategic use of the QIA – The role and global prominence of SWFs continues to put their host nation states in the spotlight. Where this element of subtle power was initially used in part to backend a conflict mediation resolution, or fund efforts of diplomatic outreach for example, the QIA has since matured and is now geared more towards sustained rentierism and commercial returns, whilst some investments still have politically motivated intentions. A second change the QIA has had to contend with is the operating environment of the GCC in which its members are increasingly competitive. Saudi Arabia for example will soon insist on foreign firms basing their headquarters on Saudi soil if they want to access to government contracts.¹⁰⁶ This thesis will investigate these changes and what they mean for this element of subtle power, Qatar's autonomy from Saudi Arabia, and Doha's ability to compete in an intra-GCC economic environment whereby the economic integration project has stalled, and is increasingly beset by a growing sense of nationalism and competition.

¹⁰⁶ "International Companies must have a Regional HQ in Saudi by 2024 or they won't bag Govt deals, says Ministry", *Gulf Today*, accessed March 2023. <https://www.gulftoday.ae/business/2021/02/16/international-companies-must-have-regional-hq-in-saudi-by-2024>

Physical Protection – The security dynamics of the sub-Persian Gulf region have changed markedly since subtle power was first conceived - the Arab Spring and the rise and fall of ISIS amongst a few of the significant events. Yet it was the presidencies of both Obama and Trump that altered perceptions and practices in the region as the perceived reliability and trust in the United States came into question. For example, Obama’s reticence to act militarily in some of the Arab Spring theatres of conflict led some leaders of Gulf states to be concerned if they would be supported in a similar event. Following this, Trump’s capricious foreign policy messaging and expressed derision for existing alliances such as NATO further concerned some Gulf leaders. As the cornerstone of Qatar’s physical protection, the staunch support of United States also came into question, especially after Trump’s mid-2017 tweets which alluded to support for the blockade,¹⁰⁷ or when Secretary of Defence Gates suggested Al Udeid should be relocated.¹⁰⁸ As such, this thesis will investigate this shift in the perception of the United States’ reliability and how this element of subtle power may have changed. Further analysed will be Qatar’s more recent diversification of security partners, increased military equipment procurements and suppliers, and how this has impacted on Qatar’s external security profile, autonomy from Saudi Arabia, and capacity to project power and influence.

In Summary

Power is to political analysis, what energy is to physics, or money is to economics.¹⁰⁹ Where the study of the concept of power in international relations invariably focuses on one nation state’s capability, or capacity, to influence another, Part One of this chapter focused on the concept of power and one nation state’s political autonomy from another. What this thesis will continue to examine will contribute to the existing literature on the concept of power by analysing the relationship between subtle power and Qatar’s pursuit of political autonomy from Saudi Arabia. This investigation will evaluate whether the relationship between power and autonomy is fixed or fluid, how this relationship changes over time or is impacted by pivotal events, and the role foreign policy strategies can have on the relationship between a nation state’s power capabilities and the degree of autonomy it did (or could not) achieve in the process.

¹⁰⁷ “Trump Tweets Support for Saudi-led Blockade of Qatar,” *The Straits Times*, accessed April 2023, <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/united-states/donald-trump-says-arab-leaders-accused-qatar-of-funding-extremism>

¹⁰⁸ Salman Al Ansari, “The Case for Moving Al Udeid Airbase from Qatar,” *The Hill*, accessed April 2023, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/354555-the-case-for-moving-al-udeid-airbase-from-qatar/>

¹⁰⁹ Joseph Nye, *The Future of Power* (New York, Public Affairs, 2011), 3.

Part Two of this chapter began by analysing Qatar's power capabilities through the prism of Nye's classical theories of power. Although this examination found that Nye's theories of power are applicable in explaining Qatar's power capabilities, the theories of hard, soft, and smart power can only *partially* explain its foreign policy strategies and the motivations behind them. As this thesis will discuss, Qatar's pursuit of autonomy from Saudi Arabia has been central to its modern-day¹¹⁰ political and international relations objectives. Following the examination of the applicability of Nye's classical forms of power was a critique of rented power, a more recent Qatar-centric theory which only partial explains Qatar's foreign policy strategies, and finally, Part Two concluded with a summation of Kamrava's seminal theory of subtle power and the origins of its conceptualisation. This introductory explanation will aid the analysis of the *how*, *why*, and *when* theories of power change, and whether subtle power itself has been subject to the shift in the geopolitical dynamics of the region. In considering this prospective change, Part One concluded by proposing investigatory factors for which a contemporary revision of subtle power may be necessitated. In doing this, Part One presented late subtle power as an alternative and more contemporary explanation for Qatar's foreign policy strategies. Chapters to follow will then investigate whether the elements of subtle power have changed, the *how*, *why*, and *when* this may have occurred, and their ongoing impact on Qatar's pursuit of political autonomy.

¹¹⁰ Approximately since the late-1990s onwards.

CHAPTER TWO - QATAR IN A PRE-SUBTLE POWER ERA

Introduction

This background chapter of the thesis delves into the historical relations between the ruling Al Thani and Al Saud families of Qatar and Saudi Arabia prior to the onset of Qatar's subtle power era which commenced in the late-1990s. The purpose of this chapter is to evaluate the historical relations between the two states¹¹¹ and to set the scene for Qatar's eventual pursuit of autonomy and modern day use of its subtle power foreign policy strategies. In doing this, this chapter will reveal that Qatar's historical relations with Saudi Arabia, and some of its foreign policy actions¹¹² bear many of the hallmarks of the more recent subtle power era. Examples include Al Thani efforts prior to Qatar's independence in 1971 of the branding of a distinct Qatari identity and the necessity of physical protection from the British. This background analysis as such aids the comprehensive understanding of the complexities and challenges of Qatar's pursuit of autonomy which, much like the experience of other nation states in the region, had to contend with colonial legacies, tribal politics, historical enmities, and foreign intervention. This background chapter further contributes to an understanding of *the history behind the origins of subtle power* and the pragmatic and opportunistic disposition of the Al Thani in its relations with the Al Saud from the late nineteenth century onwards.

This chapter is divided into two parts, pre- and post-independence. This chapter relies on British Foreign and Commonwealth Office archival resources and key secondary resources throughout for the extraction of documented relations between Qatar and Saudi Arabia. This chapter also includes interviews with former foreign diplomats posted to the region who worked from either Jeddah or Riyadh, cities from which diplomatic representation to Qatar was initially stationed. English language literature on Qatar's historical relations with Saudi Arabia is scant as per the observations of key authors such as Crystal and Zahlan – this being concomitant with Qatar's relevance on the international stage at the time. Qatar's significance was affirmed by a former foreign diplomat posted to Bahrain and Saudi Arabia in the mid-1980s who said: "Qatar was a small state and it was out of sight. Qatar did not cut through with

¹¹¹ This chapter will refer to 'Qatar' as though it were an independent, sovereign entity prior to its independence.

¹¹² In this instance, the term 'foreign policy actions' captures all relations between the Al Thani and Al Saud prior to and after independence. Also discussed in this chapter is that under the 1916 Protection between Britain and Qatar, the latter was forbidden from engaging in any foreign relations matters, as under the provisions of the Treaty this was a responsibility reserved for the British Political Resident stationed in Bahrain.

a personality of its own. No objectives of its own or activity. It did not draw attention to itself”.¹¹³

Ultimately, this chapter will explain that prior to Qatar’s subtle power era it remained an adjunct of Saudi Arabia with little political autonomy of its own. Prior to Qatar’s subtle power era commencing in the late-1990s, Qatar’s foreign policy strategies could be categorised by instances of bandwagoning with a greater power for protection, strategically hedging against two greater powers, or later and after independence balancing within an group of states (the GCC) for regional security. However and as this chapter will reveal, there are many examples of Al Thani *pragmatism and opportunism* which would later set the stage for the emergence of subtle power, an eclectic yet symbiotic foreign policy strategy that would propel Qatar onto the international stage and gradually secure its political autonomy from Saudi Arabia.

PART ONE - THE STRUGGLE TOWARDS INDEPENDENCE

The Emergence of a Political Entity

The eighteenth century local politics of Qatar was shaped by local players: the Ottomans, Persians, Omanis, pirates, tribes, and the Al Saud pushing its control eastward,¹¹⁴ as such, it was the internal dynamics within the Arabian Peninsula and the intervention of foreign powers which dominated the landscape at the time, quite like the situation in the region today.¹¹⁵ As for Qatar’s relations with the Al Saud, as the eighteenth century opened, the tribes of the central Arabian province of Najd were settling their differences with those of Hasa whose power extended into Qatar.¹¹⁶ In 1787 and 1788 the Wahhabis (who later allied themselves with the Al Saud) made their first incursion into Qatar penetrating the western coast north of Zubara.¹¹⁷ By 1810 the inevitable happened - Qatar and Bahrain were joined together under the Wahhabi

¹¹³ Geoff Randal, (former Diplomat, New Zealand Embassy in Saudi Arabia), in discussion with author, November 2020.

¹¹⁴ Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 16.

¹¹⁵ Ali Bakir, “The Evolution of Turkey-Qatar Relations Amid a Growing Gulf Divide,” in *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, ed. Andreas Krieg (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) 197.

¹¹⁶ Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar*, 16.

¹¹⁷ Rosemary Zahlan, *The Creation of Qatar*, (London: Croom Helm, 1979), 30.

governor Abdallah bin Ufaysan,¹¹⁸ an unwelcomed marriage later upheld by the British, who (eventually) became the dominant power in the Persian Gulf in 1820.¹¹⁹

The British recognition of Bahrain and Qatar as a single political entity was upheld until 1868 when a *partial* divorce was decreed by a British treaty.¹²⁰ As such, as an autonomous entity unto itself, the *concept* of Qatar simply didn't exist at the time, as the search for water, commerce, and security from external and internal threats overwhelmingly dictated the *modus vivendi* of Arab societies and the politics of region.¹²¹ At the time it was the strong and complex interaction between physical geography, natural resources, Saudi, Ottoman, and British interests that could have led Qatar to an amorphous political existence.¹²² As the eighteenth century was drawing to a close, the British were establishing a new trading route through the Syrian desert, linking the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf and India, and this increased the Gulf's importance to London and Bombay as a commercial and political zone (of interest).¹²³ Qatar however remained (of little importance to the British) and existed as an adjunct of the larger Wahhabi territory, with no recognisable¹²⁴ identity of its own other than belonging to the central Arabian tribes of the Najd and Hasa.

Qatar had begun the nineteenth century as a land of no permanent settlements and without a consolidated leadership. With little commercial opportunity other than pearl diving and a small production of dates, Qatar remained constantly susceptible to the Al Saud with little prospect other than being eventually absorbed into greater Arabia. During the early nineteenth century, Qatar outside of Bidaa (present-day Doha) was ruled by whoever could make the most effective claim to the land, and at times this became the Al Saud. All this began to change with the consolidation of the British presence in the Gulf, although for Qatar this was far from immediate. For example, Qatar did not sign the 1820 General Truce Treaty, nor the 1853 Perpetual Maritime Truce Treaty with Britain (unlike other emirates in the Gulf) as Qatar was seen as a dependency of Bahrain. This is evidenced by the absence of the recognition of a signatory sheikh (in any treaty) from Bidaa or Qatar more largely.¹²⁵

¹¹⁸ Zahlan, *The Creation of Qatar*, 30.

¹¹⁹ Louis Allday, "The British in the Gulf: An Overview," *Qatar National Library*, accessed December 2019, www.qdl.qa/en/british-gulf-overview

¹²⁰ Fromherz, *Qatar: Rise to Power and Influence*, 44.

¹²¹ Zahlan, *The Creation of Qatar*, 24.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ Fromherz, *Qatar: Rise to Power and Influence*, 44.

¹²⁴ From the perspective of available English language literature.

¹²⁵ "Treaties and Engagements in Force on 1 January 1906 Between the British Government and the Chiefs of the Arab Coast," *Arabian Gulf Digital Archives*, accessed August 2021. <https://www.agda.ae/en/catalogue/tna/fo/93/137/n/26>

Therefore, British presence in the region or not, Qatar continued to totter on the verge of absorption by two neighbouring powers: the Ottomans and the Al Saud. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, the Ottomans and the Al Saud perceived the territory of the Qatari peninsula as potential spoils of conquest, it was of little political interest to the British, and was essentially regarded as an outpost of Bahrain. As such, prior to the 1868 Treaty discussed below, the sheikhs of Qatar had little by way of a recognisable territory and national identity of their own. This however changed in 1868 when the British signed a treaty with Qatar, establishing for the first time a unique Qatari identity and differentiating it from the Al Saud and the emirate of Bahrain – the first step in a century long process towards its 1971 independence.

The 1868 Treaty and Autonomous Recognition for the First Time.

The 1868 Treaty was a significant moment in the history of Qatar and for the Al Thani as it marked for the first time British recognition of Qatar, and its leader Mohammad Al Thani, the signatory sheikh, as an entity unto itself. There was simply no known tradition of monarchy or dynastic succession in Qatar before the treaty of 1868 signed by Mohammad bin Thani and British Colonel Pelly.¹²⁶ The treaty did not give Qatar independence (it in fact recognised its tributary ties to Bahrain), but the effect was to mark off and recognise Qatar as distinct from the territories of the Al Saud and partially autonomous from Bahrain. The treaty (further) laid the juridical basis for Britain's later acknowledgement of Qatar as an autonomous political unit, and through recognition, gave special standing to the Al Thani who would thereafter rule Qatar.¹²⁷ However, upon the signing of the 1868 Treaty, Qatar had to accept a limited Ottoman sovereignty, compelling Mohammad Al Thani to bandwagon with the Ottomans, as his immediate concern was with the ongoing Bahraini claims on Qatari territory.¹²⁸

Although many designate 1868 and the recognition of Mohammad Al Thani as the beginning of Al Thani rule, it was not until 1871, and a famous repulsion of an incursion by the Ottomans, that the Al Thani truly emerged as the titular representatives of Qatar. However, the Ottoman raids and incursions continued, and with this began a long history of successful Al Thani manipulation of external powers, akin to modern day strategic hedging, to shield and support their authority on the peninsula. This was a strategic manipulation, often subtle, sometimes

¹²⁶ Fromherz, *Qatar: Rise to Power and Influence*, 52.

¹²⁷ Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar*, 30-31.

¹²⁸ *Ibid*, 31.

more explicit, that has continued into the present period.¹²⁹ As recorded by British Officer John Lorimer in his 1905 Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman and Central Arabia:

Jassim Al Thani's¹³⁰ relations with (and at times protections from) the Ottomans was for example, particularly important during his almost nine year-long warfare with Zaid bin Khalifah, Sheikh of Abu Dhabi, in the last years of the nineteenth century. During this conflict, Qatar maintained a claim to the possession of Khor Al Odaid¹³¹ which was in Abu Dhabi territory at the time. This was a decision (which was brought about by) a scare of an invasion from Central Arabia (by the Al Saud, and their intentions to) bring about an alliance of the other Trucial sheikhs against the Saudi enemy – Zaid.¹³²

And:

During the continuance of the war (with the Sheikh of Abu Dhabi), the Turkish garrison at Doha received orders to assist Sheikh Jassim in defending the town, (only) if attacked; but they were prohibited from operating at a greater distance than four hours' march from Doha. In 1890 (for example, the) raids and counterraided continued, (yet) the advantage of the whole resting with the Sheikh of Doha. In 1891, a raiding party from Qatar actually reached a point beyond Abu Dhabi town and succeeded in evading pursuit.¹³³

Albeit one example, the 1868 Treaty and the Al Thani's *quasi* autonomy was the dawning of a new reality of having to simultaneously deal with the threats and ambitions of the Al Saud, the Ottomans, the British, the Sheikhs of Abu Dhabi and Bahrain, just to name a few. Although with no formal foreign policy to speak of at the time, Jassim nevertheless had to negotiate the threats of much greater powers, and consistent with Al Thani bandwagoning and strategic hedging in the century to follow, Qatar played two great powers off against each other for

¹²⁹ Fromherz, *Qatar: Rise to Power and Influence*, 58.

¹³⁰ Son of Mohammad Al Thani, and later ruling sheikh.

¹³¹ Present day south-eastern Qatar

¹³² Lorimer, John. "Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman and Central Arabia by J G Lorimer CIE, Indian Civil Service." *Qatar National Library*, accessed December 2020. (1908), https://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100022770472.0x00004d

¹³³ Lorimer, John. "Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman and Central Arabia by J G Lorimer CIE, Indian Civil Service." *Qatar National Library*, accessed December 2020. (1908), https://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100022770472.0x000070

external security. As noted by Brannagan and Reiche in their background chapter on the state of Qatar:

At the time (*circa* 1870s), the two dominant powers across the Gulf were the British and the Ottomans. This was something Jassim took advantage of. While the British, with its dominant navy, controlled the seas, the Ottoman expansion was an increasing land-threat for Qatar. Whilst maintaining good relations with the British, in 1872 Qatar simultaneously became an official ‘Kaza’ (small district) of the Ottoman Empire, with Jassim occupying the role of ‘Qaim Maqam’, or ‘regional governor’. This suited Qatar in two specific ways. First by keeping close relations with the two powers of the day, Qatar helped to ensure its survival ... second, Qatar was also able to strategically play international powers off against one another, which not only guarded against ‘mono-dependance’, but also provided the state with a degree on control over its fate (i.e. its autonomy), a tactic Qatar would come to employ again and again.¹³⁴

Jassim’s famous defeat of the Ottomans was part of a larger pattern of revolt and demands for independence by Arab subjects of the Sublime Porte,¹³⁵ and was preceded by an Ottoman sea and land blockade¹³⁶ of Doha to punish Jassim for refusing to meet with the *vali*¹³⁷ from Basra.¹³⁸ By 1902 the Ottomans had weakened substantially and Jassim focused his energies on protecting Qatar from the ambitions of the young Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud¹³⁹ who had taken Riyadh,¹⁴⁰ from the rule of the Al Rashid,¹⁴¹ (an oft-cited fable in the history of the third Saudi state still in existence today). Rather than battle Ibn Saud, Jassim Al Thani, consistent with his father’s practice of regional pragmatism, turned to him with pleasure. He became a Wahhabi by conviction, and began an active relationship with Ibn Saud, sending him tribute (payments) and friendly assurances.¹⁴² Yet this conversion was much more a political, symbolic act,¹⁴³ and

¹³⁴ Paul Brannagan and Danyel Reiche, *Qatar and the 2022 FIFA World Cup*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 25.

¹³⁵ Also known as an Ottoman Porte, an outpost representing the central Ottoman government.

¹³⁶ An historical irony given it was Turkey who was the first nation state to support Qatar logistically and deploy military forces to Qatar (within 48 hours) in response to the 2017 blockade.

¹³⁷ The Ottoman administrative districts were the *vilayet* (province) governed by a *vali*. See: Zahlan, *The Creation of Qatar*, 57.

¹³⁸ Zahlan, *The Creation of Qatar*, 53.

¹³⁹ Often referred to as ‘Ibn Saud’.

¹⁴⁰ Fromherz, *Qatar: Rise to Power and Influence*, 62.

¹⁴¹ Ellen Wald, *Saudi Inc: The Arabian Kingdoms Pursuit of Profit and Power*, (New York: Pegasus Books, 2018), x.

¹⁴² Zahlan, *The Creation of Qatar*, 54.

¹⁴³ Akin to bandwagoning.

a pre-emptive recognition of the influence of Al Saud.¹⁴⁴ Furthermore, Jassim was displeased with his relationship with the (weakened) Ottomans thus a renewed relationship with the Al Saud benefitted Qatar.¹⁴⁵ Once again the Al Thani bandwagoned with one great power, to balance against the threat from another.

In 1913 Sheikh Jassim bin Mohammad Al Thani died leaving power to his son, Abdullah. Perhaps the most important threat on the mind of Sheikh Abdallah was his father's difficult relations with Abdul Aziz, future king¹⁴⁶ of Saudi Arabia.¹⁴⁷ Abdul Aziz opposed Sheikh Jassim's sponsorship of the Turkish garrison which remained on Qatari soil. Major Trevor, the Political Agent in Bahrain in 1913, even suggested (at the time for example), that Bin Saud¹⁴⁸ may attempt to take over Qatar altogether.¹⁴⁹ Indeed, between the Turks, the Al Saud and the British, the situation grew quite difficult (for Abdullah) after the death of his father as the internal situation in Qatar appeared to be even more perilous. There were erroneous reports and rumours for example that members of Abdullah's own family had killed Sheikh Jassim.¹⁵⁰ Qatar seemed yet again to be on the brink of being consumed by Al Saud after Sheikh Abdallah's brother and rival, Sheikh Khalifa bin Jassim Al Thani intrigued with Bin Saud to overthrow Abdallah.¹⁵¹ As such, it was in the early years of Abdullah's rule that Qatar's autonomy, and external and internal security, appeared less assured than ever. It was the Treaty of 1916 however that would later allay some of these concerns, however only partially. Abdullah however had to wait until the mid-1930s for substantive external security assurances which were forthcoming when an oil concession agreement with the British formalised official physical protection (discussed below) – the first such vestige of evidence of what would later become an element of Qatar's subtle power.

In summary, the 1868 Treaty was a critical first step in Qatar's eventual pursuit of autonomy from Saudi Arabia, however for the next forty years (preceding the 1868 Treaty) Jassim and Abdullah had to balance the powers of the Ottomans against the growing British fears of Ottoman encroachment on their interests in the Gulf, all the while staving off Bahraini attempts

¹⁴⁴ Fromherz, *Qatar: Rise to Power and Influence*, 62.

¹⁴⁵ Zuhlan, *The Creation of Qatar*, 54.

¹⁴⁶ Saudi Arabia did not come into formal existence until the unification of the kingdoms of Nejd and the Hijaz in 1932.

¹⁴⁷ Fromherz, *Qatar: Rise to Power and Influence*, 67.

¹⁴⁸ This thesis uses 'Bin Saud' and 'Ibn Saud' interchangeably depending on when its directly quoted.

¹⁴⁹ Fromherz, *Qatar: Rise to Power and Influence*, 67.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

to reassert their sovereignty over Qatar.¹⁵² Albeit at a time whereby the Al Thani had to contend with multiple threats to its external security and the politics of great powers and empires, the 1868 Treaty signaled to the Al Saud that Qatar, as far as the British were concerned, was an entity distinct from those of the rest of the Arabian peninsula and the Al Saud themselves. As such, although the concept of nationalism did not permeate the historically tribal cultures of Arab side of the Persian Gulf at the time, the embryonic foundations of the subtle power element of national branding were laid as a unique Qatari identity was born.

The 1916 Treaty¹⁵³ and the First Iteration of the Element of Physical Protection

Few events in history have had such tectonic implications for so many as the First World War. For Qatar, WWI resulted in one dominant chess piece being removed, only to be replaced with another. With the defeat of Germany and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Gulf emerged as an uncontested British lake.¹⁵⁴ Leading up to WWI, Saudi forces captured Hasa which in turn brought the Wahhabi movement into direct contact with the Gulf and the British representatives for the first time in the twentieth century. As a result, Saudi Arabia then demanded the annexation of Qatar on the pretext that it was (once) part of the province of Hasa, the first of many Al Saud intrusions on Qatar's autonomy. The British authorities were however well aware of the significance of the nearby Wahhabi presence on places like Qatar and the Trucial Coast. In 1914 a British representative to the Gulf voiced his fears of this specifically referencing Qatar noting: "I have no doubt that Bin Saud could eat up Qatar in a week and I am rather afraid that he may do so".¹⁵⁵ Ibn Saud however preferred to avoid any offense against entities under the British protectorate¹⁵⁶ - of which Qatar was about to become - and border between Saudi Arabia and Qatar was soon after recognised by Ibn Saud by the signing the Darin Treaty in 1915, which brought Ibn Saud into a new relationship with the British Government.¹⁵⁷

With the Ottomans gone the Saudis were now the local power, and Sheikh Abdallah had to find his own external ally for security. Without the old pre-war worries of endangering its relations

¹⁵² Zahlan, *The Creation of Qatar*, 46.

¹⁵³ "The Qatar Treaty of 1916," *Qatar Digital Library*, accessed December 2020. https://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100000000648.0x000180

¹⁵⁴ Zahlan, *The Creation of Qatar*, 66.

¹⁵⁵ Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar*, 115.

¹⁵⁶ Tamsamani, Rabia. "The Salwa Canal and the Island of Qatar." *Arab Studies Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (2020): 168-180.

¹⁵⁷ Zahlan, *The Creation of Qatar*, 66.

with the Porte (the Ottomans), Britain could now conclude an agreement with the clearly independent Qatar.¹⁵⁸ For Sheikh Abdullah, his tenuous leadership over the Qatari peninsula and security from external and internal rivals was about to gain British assurances. The 1916 Treaty signed by Britain and Sheikh Abdullah finally brought Qatar into the Trucial system, a system whereby Abdullah was obliged “to not commit any breach of the 1868 Maritime Peace Treaty”¹⁵⁹ aligning it diplomatically with the other sheikdoms of the Gulf. The 1916 Treaty also established a framework for British presence on the Qatari peninsular¹⁶⁰ which was the first iteration Qatar’s official reliance on a great and powerful international protector for external security, a practice which continued into the modern era.

The 1916 Treaty virtually handed over all of Qatar’s foreign policy to the British government, even forbidding Qatari correspondence with any other power without the consent of the British Government.¹⁶¹ The 1916 Treaty not only assured the stability of Abdallah’s position internally, but it also prevented an invasion of Qatar, or at least caused Ibn Saud to think twice about such a move.¹⁶² By signing the treaty, Abdullah largely abrogated the responsibilities of external security to the British, although the defensive assurances he presumed he was afforded were not to his expectations. The threat of action by Ibn Saud was constantly on the mind of Abdallah and seemed a very real prospect. In 1923 Lieutenant-Colonel Trevor, the Political Resident of the Persian Gulf, went so far as to suggest:

I think it would be a pity if Qatar disappeared as a separate entity.¹⁶³ From our point of view it is convenient to have the rulers of the coastal districts on the coast, but I do not see any practicable means of preventing a peaceful penetration of the county by the Akhwan¹⁶⁴ and Ibn Saud’s adherents.¹⁶⁵

In the early years of the 1916 Treaty, Qatar would not receive British protection from marauding Wahhabi raids or Ibn Saud interfering in internal Qatari affairs. Ibn Saud considered

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 60.

¹⁵⁹ “Treaty Between the British Government and Shaikh Abdullah bin Jasim bin Thani, Shaikh of Qatar,” *Arabian Gulf Digital Archives*, accessed December 2020. <https://www.agda.ae/en/catalogue/tna/fo/93/137/n/8>

¹⁶⁰ Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar*, 115.

¹⁶¹ Fromherz, *Qatar: Rise to Power and Influence*, 71.

¹⁶² Zahlan, *The Creation of Qatar*, 60.

¹⁶³ *Ibid*.

¹⁶⁴ Islamic Warriors.

¹⁶⁵ Fromherz, *Qatar: Rise to Power and Influence*, 73.

all of Qatar as part of Hasa and continued to work to weaken Abdallah's position at home.¹⁶⁶ With British protection not forthcoming, Abdallah Al Thani worked out his own arrangement: He secretly agreed to pay Ibn Saud 100,000 rupees a year,¹⁶⁷ acknowledging a limitation of his autonomy which continued into the late 1940s.¹⁶⁸ Tributes and payments amongst tribes and families had been common on the Arab side of the Gulf for centuries, yet this is an early example of the Al Thani using official funds in the foreign policy space to stay the hand of an aggressor. As such, despite the signing of the 1916 Treaty, Abdallah remained concerned about the possibility of Wahhabi interests in Qatar. At the time, Ibn Saud was deliberately courting all disaffected members of the ruling Al Thani family who openly defied Abdallah's authority.¹⁶⁹ The Political Resident realised the gravity of Abdallah's position, yet all he could suggest was that the British Government write to Ibn Saud and ask him to restrain his people from all forms of aggression in Qatar.¹⁷⁰ Where Abdallah had initially thought he was afforded physical protection, the British had told Abdallah that the most he could expect was diplomatic help.¹⁷¹

Throughout the 1920s Abdallah feared Saudi power as Ibn Saud began to reap great territorial advances across the Arabian peninsula,¹⁷² including in modern day Kuwait.¹⁷³ In 1922 Ibn Saud ruled an enormous area that extended from the Red Sea to the Gulf, in 1926 became King of the Hijaz, and in 1932 proclaimed King of Saudi Arabia.¹⁷⁴ This occurred all whilst the British were aware of the growing prominence and influence of Ibn Saud in the region. For example, in 1930 the British Political Resident in Bahrain remarked of the crucial coast: "We hold the front door to these principalities, but we do not hold the back door".¹⁷⁵ Therefore despite the signing of the 1916 Treaty with the British, Abdallah never received the actual physical protection assurances from the British he demanded, and the threat of Saudi incursion remained

¹⁶⁶ Zahlan, *The Creation of Qatar*, 81.

¹⁶⁷ Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar*, 115.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 164.

¹⁶⁹ Zahlan, *The Creation of Qatar*, 63.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 64.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid*, 62.

¹⁷² *Ibid*, 80.

¹⁷³ Following border disputes with the Kuwaitis, Ibn Saud succeeded in persuading the British to give the Saudis two-thirds of Kuwaiti territory. Decades later, (during the Saudi-led blockade of Qatar) Sheikh Sabah of Kuwait may even have retained childhood memories of the long Saudi blockade of Kuwait, which began in 1921 and ended in 1935, when he was six years old, and which caused significant disruption to the rule of his father, Sheikh Ahmad al Jabir Al Sabah. See: Robert Fletcher, "Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Re-Orienting Kuwait, c.1900 – 1940," *Journal of Historical Geography*, 50 (2015): 51-65.

¹⁷⁴ Zahlan, *The Creation of Qatar*, 80-81.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 81.

ever-present. It took oil negotiations however to bring the Al Thani and British together,¹⁷⁶ securing for Qatar physical protection from a great and powerful nation for the first time in its history.

The 1935 Oil Concession and Saudi Territorial Designs

Hydrocarbon rents have long been the capstone of many of Qatar's foreign policy successes. Prior to the discovery of oil, the 1916 Treaty only afforded Abdullah the diplomatic intervention of the British in the event of an attack by the Al Saud. Realising this, since Abdallah could not rely on British protection from Ibn Saud, he would have to reach a *modus vivendi* with his powerful neighbour. As mentioned above, Abdullah was paying Ibn Saud a secret subsidy of 100,000 rupees a year, and thus with no military effort, the latter was able to gain control of Qatar,¹⁷⁷ even though the soon-to-be Saudi king was not able to include any Qatari territory in his oil concession negotiations with the Americans. However, when the British stepped into the fray having recognised the threat of competition from American oil giants, Abdullah's autonomy from Ibn Saud was about to be enhanced by formal physical protection assurances from the British. These assurances were formalised in the 1935 oil concession agreement, however during the negotiations the shadows of Ibn Saud loomed large and constantly threatened Abdullah's authority.

Following discovery of oil and prior to the granting of any oil concessions, the immediate considerations before Abdullah and Ibn Saud were the vast tracts of land in which oil concessions would need to be granted, and by extension, which territory was controlled by whom. This in turn provoked disputes over territory, some of which would linger for the remainder of the century. In recognising the challenge before them, the British Political Resident in Bushire, Sir Percy Cox, wrote to the Secretary for the Colonies in 1923 foreshadowing the impending considerations of oil concessions and the territorial integrity of what the British considered the lands of Qatar reporting:

Ibn Saud probably considers he has completely absorbed Qatar, and unless (oil concession) negotiations are conducted through Ibn Saud, he will probably take umbrage. In January 1923 in his letter to Delhi, Cox remonstrated sharply with Ibn Saud for attempting to include Qatar in the tract of Nejd territory for which the oil

¹⁷⁶ Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar*, 115.

¹⁷⁷ Zahlan, *The Creation of Qatar*, 81-82.

concession was being granted, presumably to the Eastern and General,¹⁷⁸ but our present information goes to show that since then Ibn Saud has encroached considerably on Qatar's independence and rendered it impossible to continue without protesting from us.¹⁷⁹

A few years later the matter of Qatar's territorial integrity reared its head once again when during the oil option negotiations of 1926, when Cox had conversations with Ibn Saud about the granting of a concession for oil in Hasa who proposed to include the whole of Qatar, and Cox took him to task¹⁸⁰ for it.¹⁸¹ It was only at this point that Ibn Saud accepted an eastern boundary along the Salwa Bay.¹⁸² In fact, Saudi Arabia regularly threatened Qatar, and indicated to Abdallah that he had no right to make concessions to Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC) nor to any British company and that oil in the hinterlands of Qatar belonged to the Saudis. The British however were determined to stop this interference. Sheikh Abdallah was not immediately impressed with British attempts to help secure Qatari oil, and instead, he deftly managed to encourage competition between APOC and other oil companies, even receiving offers from the Standard Oil Company, playing the oil giants off against each other.¹⁸³

The British quickly intervened, forcing Abdallah either to choose APOC or risk withdrawal of British protection.¹⁸⁴ The British, fully aware that Ibn Saud through the machinations of Americas Standard Oil of California (SOCAL) was trying to absorb Qatar into Saudi Arabia,¹⁸⁵ deepened its interest in oil concessions negotiations. There were further indications of the rising interest in Qatar's oil potential, when right after Ibn Saud had granted a concession to SOCAL, the US Government officially enquired of the British Government what the eastern frontiers of Saudi Arabia were. This was the first time the thorny question of boundaries came up officially, marking the beginning of endless debates on the subject.¹⁸⁶ Whilst wary of the British protection assurances, Abdullah played one power off against another, and the oil companies too, in another pre-independence example of Qatari strategic hedging.

¹⁷⁸ In 1920 British (New Zealander) geologist Frank Holmes help set up the Eastern and General Syndicate in London to develop, among other things, oil ventures in the Middle East.

¹⁷⁹ "Foreign and Commonwealth Office Archive," *Arabian Gulf Digital Archives*, accessed August 2021, <https://www.agda.ae/en/catalogue/tna/co/727/5/n/302>

¹⁸⁰ To hold one accountable for an error they committed.

¹⁸¹ Fromherz, *Qatar: Rise to Power and Influence*, 74.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar*, 116.

¹⁸⁴ Fromherz, *Qatar: Rise to Power and Influence*, 75.

¹⁸⁵ Zahlan, *The Creation of Qatar*, 73.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 74.

For Abdullah, for any oil concession to be granted to the British, the inclusion of a clause that would assure him protection from land attacks, not just from the sea, was obligatory.¹⁸⁷ The existence of a protection agreement and acknowledgement of his son as heir would (also) give Abdallah the added security and assurances he so desperately sought.¹⁸⁸ The Government of India was anxious to sign an oil concession, and as such agreed with the Cox's suggestion that he should offer Abdullah the physical protections that had originally asked for in 1921.¹⁸⁹ Therefore, it was not so much the 1916 Treaty which assured the security of Abdullah's reign and by extension Qatari external security protections, but the discovery of oil and the scramble of the great powers to mark off ones sphere of influence – a geopolitical scramble the world still bears witness to today.

In May 1935, an oil concession was signed for 75 years giving APOC exclusive rights for production, transportation, refining and marketing of petroleum and natural gas, and the territory of Qatar was defined by a map attached to the concession.¹⁹⁰ The oil concession gave Abdallah the first firm, if still qualified, protection from unprovoked aggression from a ruler of a neighbouring state. The signing of the 1935 oil concession with the British was a momentous occasion for Qatar, an example of Qatar's strategic hedging, and yet another example of Al Thani pragmatism and opportunism regardless how dire the situation may have been. The example of the 1935 oil concession is analogous to Qatar's modern-day practice of signing of long-term natural gas contracts with multiple nations, many of them great economic powers, securing for Qatar an increasingly greater degree of relevance and interdependence on the international stage.

Despite the assurances Abdullah secured through the signing of the 1935 oil concession, his troubles with Saudi encroachment did not evanesce. Not long after World War II concluded, the enormous petroleum reserves of both Qatar and Saudi Arabia were being recognised and exploited, and both countries were intensely involved in their economic and social development. The border dispute between Qatar and Saudi Arabia commencing decades earlier that had been left in abeyance during World War II,¹⁹¹ emerged as a threat to Abdullah once again. At the forefront of Saudi ambitions were two intentions, one being Ibn Saud's interest in what he regarded at the time as his need to reclaim what he considered as his ancestral lands,

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 61.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 79.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 73.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 77.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid*, 78.

and two, access to the Persian Gulf to the east of Qatar for the export of oil. As per British Foreign Office Minutes at the time:

The British continued to worry about the possibility that King Saud regarded Qatar as the thin end of a wedge, and that he would split the Persian Gulf states open to his ambitions, and that the ruler of Qatar appears fully aware that, and but for the British protections, his state might be swallowed up by Saudi Arabia.¹⁹²

Further noted in internal British Foreign Office correspondence in 1952, an officer wrote to a colleague saying that Ibn Saud remained:

Greatly interested in the whole area of the Abu Dhabi and Qatar coastal strip and does not wish to indicate any particular area which we would be prepared to surrender voluntarily ... I should mention that our primary interest is to preserve unchanged the southern boundary line of our Qatar concession and we hope it would be possible to exclude from an arbitration the consideration of any claims by the Saudis which might extend northwards beyond this line ... If it is simply an outlet to the sea east of the Qatar Peninsula that the Saudis are after, might it not be possible to satisfy them by arranging for a perpetual lease of a corridor through the Sheikhdom of Abu Dhabi to deep water? Such a corridor would need to be no wider than required for a pipeline and a road and would not carry with it any rights to oil, nor, of course, any offshore rights in territorial waters or seabed. It seems possible that deep water anchorages could be found at some suitable place to serve both the interests of the Saudi Arabian Government as well as our own in this area.¹⁹³

In later correspondence recorded in Foreign Office Minutes in 1959 it was reported by the British that:

I do not think that the Saudis are interested in the coastline of Abu Dhabi in order to create a port. I think their interest there is to gain further oil bearing structures for themselves and, in the King's mind, to regain his ancestral lands.¹⁹⁴ ... And the Sheikhdom of Qatar was viewed favourably by Ibn Saud only because the King is

¹⁹² Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar*, 165.

¹⁹³ "Foreign and Commonwealth Office Archive," *Arabian Gulf Digital Archives*, accessed August 2021, <https://www.agda.ae/en/catalogue/tna/fo/371/98831/n/79>

¹⁹⁴ Mr. Evans, "Minutes – Saudi Arabia," *Arabian Gulf Digital Archives*, accessed February 2021, <https://www.agda.ae/en/catalogue/tna/fo/371/98831/n/77>

personally disposed towards the Ruler (Ali bin Abdullah by this time). But the King regards the Sheikh of Abu Dhabi as a contemptible person who has the effrontery to endeavour to usurp his territory while hiding behind the skirts of Great Britain.¹⁹⁵

As far as the British were concerned, the border disputes of eastern Arabia and the grand designs of Ibn Saud remained an unresolved matter that the British would need to continue to consider. Once again for Qatar, its territorial integrity was threatened by Saudi Arabia and at the mercy of the motivations of a great and powerful protector.

It was only well after WWII in 1965 that the question of the Qatar/Saudi boundary was resolved amicably by the two states,¹⁹⁶ but not permanently. As later chapters will discuss, the border dispute resurfaced again in 1992 and led to armed clashes, resulting in deaths on both sides. Only in 2001 was border demarcation officially recognised in international law by both sides – 66 years after the signing of the 1935 oil concession which had attached a map of Qatar’s southern frontier. The border dispute commencing in the 1930s was arguably the first of many instances whereby Qatar sought to emancipate itself from Saudi Arabia, a pursuit of autonomy which took on a multitude of methods, tactics, and subversive regional initiatives. However intractable the resolution of a final border demarcation between Qatar and Saudi Arabia may have been, their relations had other nagging points of disputation, one being Qatar’s ongoing relations with the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt, a point of contention that led to outright enmity and hostility, and one of Saudi Arabia’s principal grievances that led to the 2017 blockade.

Qatar’s Nascent Relations with the Muslim Brotherhood

Prior to independence, the threat that Saudi Arabia continued to pose motivated a now wealthier Qatar to further insulate itself rather than relying solely on the British for protection. Although British protection remained the cornerstone of Qatari external security, the wealth that oil brought enabled Qatar to experiment in differentiating itself from Saudi Arabia, a practice accelerated by its national branding strategies during the subtle power era decades later. One salient example of Qatar’s attempts to distinguish itself from Saudi Arabia was in the social

¹⁹⁵ G.C. Pelham, “Confidential – British Embassy Jedda,” *Arabian Gulf Digital Archives*, accessed February 2021, <https://www.agda.ae/en/catalogue/tna/fo/371/98831/n/105>

¹⁹⁶ Zahlan, *The Creation of Qatar*, 82.

and cultural space, and this involved the invitation of members of the Muslim Brotherhood and the injection of their scholars and bureaucrats into the education system and burgeoning ministries. As reported by the British in 1963:

The Brotherhood began¹⁹⁷ as an Egyptian religio-political movement, and by 1954 had built itself up into a powerful political organisation¹⁹⁸ ... and as a result of the suppression of the Brotherhood in Egypt, a considerable number of Brethren were dispersed throughout the Middle East, including in the Persian Gulf.¹⁹⁹

Although the initial purpose of inviting Muslim Brotherhood dissidents fleeing Nasser's repression was for state development purposes, it was according to a political Islamism expert:

It was maybe later on, that Qatar *did* want to get out from under the shadow of Saudi Arabia, both the religious shadow as well as the political and foreign policy shadow which is how the Muslim Brotherhood began to serve a dual purpose for Qatar.²⁰⁰ For a period of three years from 1953, most of the teachers who were brought in to run the Qatari schools were ideologically in favour of the Muslim Brotherhood, and when the head of Islamic sciences at the Department of Education went to Cairo's Al Azhar University in 1960 to recruit Islamic scholars, he returned with several Islamist intellectuals. Most notably recruited from Al Azhar was the outspoken Brotherhood ideologue Sheikh Yusuf Al Qaradawi²⁰¹ to teach at the Qatari branch of the university in 1961. These Brotherhood members, able to disseminate their ideology through schools, sparked a desire for greater organisation of the Muslim Brotherhood at the grassroots level, as they stamped the educational system with their Islamic ideology, whilst the education department of Qatar was under their control.²⁰²

¹⁹⁷ Hassan Al Banna founded the Muslim Brotherhood was founded in the city of Ismailia, Egypt in 1928 as a pan-Islamic, religious, political, and social movement. Although the Muslim Brotherhood has various branches and offshoot organisations throughout the Middle East, the beating heart of the Muslim Brotherhood has been for decades been in Cairo.

¹⁹⁸ "The Muslim Brotherhood (Al Ikhwan Al Muslim Since 1954)," *Arabian Gulf Digital Archives*, accessed March 2021, <https://www.agda.ae/en/catalogue/tna/fo/464/60/n/34>

¹⁹⁹ "The Muslim Brotherhood (Al Ikhwan Al Muslim Since 1954)," *Arabian Gulf Digital Archives*, accessed March 2021, <https://www.agda.ae/en/catalogue/tna/fo/464/60/n/44>

²⁰⁰ Courtney Freer, (Middle East Centre at the London School of Economics), in discussion with author, January 2021.

²⁰¹ Al Qaradawi would later go on to host one of Al Jazeera Arabic's most influential broadcasts, *Sharia and Life*, which for the Saudis was one of Al Jazeera's most controversial shows.

²⁰² Freer, "Rentier Islamism in the Absence of Elections: The Political Role of the Muslim Brotherhood Affiliates in Qatar and the UAE," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49, no. 3 (2017): 479-500.

Qatar's initial reliance on the Muslim Brotherhood however can be exemplified by the reticence of some Arab states in the region to commit to the development of the Persian Gulf states. As reported by the British:

A conference of Arab Prime Ministers was held in Cairo in January 1965, which proposed the institution of a fund of £5,000,000²⁰³ to be devoted to the promotion of culture, health, and education in the Persian Gulf states. At the outset it appears to have been the intention that all League²⁰⁴ states should contribute, but the response from participating states was poor,²⁰⁵ ... and that the Committee refuses to channel aid through the Persian Gulf States Development Office in Dubai, and as opportunity for direct aid is lacking, it would appear that League initiative in regard to Gulf development has come to a standstill.²⁰⁶

This reinforced the notion that if Qatar wanted to develop its education sector, it needed the assistance from others than regional Arab states. Although Qatar's preference for the Muslim Brotherhood had originated in a structural need for staff who would not establish systems that deferred authority to Saudi Arabia, supporting the Muslim Brotherhood later allowed a different force to develop Qatar's bureaucratic systems,²⁰⁷ and in the 1960s, influential Brotherhood members were appointed to important positions in the education sector.²⁰⁸ Therefore, long before the creation of a formal Muslim Brotherhood branch in Qatar in 1975, its supporters, many from Egyptian and Palestinian branches, had managed to secure substantial influence inside Qatar's education sector, undermining a degree of autonomy the rulers of the nascent Qatari state had in its educational and burgeoning bureaucracies. As noted by the political Islamism expert discussing the roots of the Muslim Brotherhood in Qatar:

It wasn't until the members of the Muslim Brotherhood began becoming so powerful within, especially education ministries, that people realised the political potential of this ... once the Brotherhood was seen as having these little fiefdoms,

²⁰³ Approximately £125,000,000 in 2023 adjusted for inflation.

²⁰⁴ Meaning "The Arab League".

²⁰⁵ "Foreign and Commonwealth Office Archive," *Arabian Gulf Digital Archives*, accessed February 2021, <https://www.agda.ae/en/catalogue/tna/fo/464/60/n/105>

²⁰⁶ "Foreign and Commonwealth Office Archive," *Arabian Gulf Digital Archives*, accessed February 2021, <https://www.agda.ae/en/catalogue/tna/fo/464/60/n/105>

²⁰⁷ David Roberts, "Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood: Pragmatism or Preference?," *Middle East Policy* 21, no. 3, (2014): 84-94.

²⁰⁸ Freer, "Rentier Islamism in the Absence of Elections: The Political Role of the Muslim Brotherhood Affiliates in Qatar and the UAE," 486.

whether in education, in judiciary, a little bit in the Awqaf Ministry²⁰⁹ as well. That is when they had a vehicle through which to change policies ... That scared not just the Saudis, but there was also concern in Qatar about the power of an indigenous Muslim Brotherhood.²¹⁰

In summary, despite the initial concern of the growing influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Qatar, the presence of its members and other associated groups inevitably served a dual purpose, and enabled Qatar an opportunity to differentiate itself from Saudi Arabia culturally and socially. This conveniently and somewhat deliberately avoided a reliance on Saudi scholars or jurists, who would have designed and staffed Qatari institutions in a Wahhabi image that inevitably tilted towards Riyadh. Although, Qatar's status as a Wahhabi country was firmly established by the founder²¹¹ of the modern state,²¹² for the Qatari leadership, Wahhabism could not be overtly used to strengthen Qatar's legitimacy or promote the state because the creed was indelibly linked to Saudi Arabia. To raise the status of Wahhabism in Qatar by explicitly instilling it through education or by giving its scholars posts in government would have been to intractably establish deference to the Saudis.²¹³ Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood continued through to its subtle power era, not to strengthen Qatar's educational and governance institutions, but as one of the many prongs in its foreign policy strategies, or as a former Qatari civil servant asserted decades later during the 2017 blockade:

Qatar supports all Islamists ... because we are Muslim nations and Qatar says that Islamists have more power to have influence in the societies. Secular liberal figures are not influential in our region. In order to make balance²¹⁴ with your neighbours, you have to have soft power, and Qatar thinks that Muslims, Islamists, or Muslim Brotherhood are part of its soft power.²¹⁵

²⁰⁹ A Religious Endowments Ministry.

²¹⁰ Courtney Freer, (Middle East Centre at the London School of Economics), in discussion with author, January 2021.

²¹¹ Sheikh Jassim bin Mohammed Al Thani.

²¹² Zahlan, *The Creation of Qatar*, 54.

²¹³ Roberts, "Qatar and the Brotherhood," 89.

²¹⁴ Meaning 'compete with your neighbours'.

²¹⁵ Nayef bin Al Shamari, (former Qatar Petroleum engineer), in discussion with author, February 2021.

PART TWO – INDEPENDENT YET NOT AUTONOMOUS

Introduction

Qatar began its existence as a nation state in 1971 dependent on Saudi Arabia for external security protections, diplomatic representation, and with little or no obvious political autonomy from Riyadh. Now without the formal protections of the British nor any external security guarantees from a great and powerful nation, Qatar reflexively deferred to Riyadh, a close ally of Washington, for the external security of the state. For the Saudis, the newly independent states of the Gulf were simply not a major concern, and were expected to simply remain acquiescent to the much larger Saudi Kingdom which dominated Persian Gulf sub-region. This was confirmed by the perceptions of a former Australian diplomat posted to Jeddah in the 1970s who recalls that:

The Saudis saw themselves as having dominance among these states even though they were not doing very much to actually cement their relations ... (throughout the 1970s), the Gulf Arab states, were not a priority for the Saudis. They (the Saudis) saw them as being just in a sense something that was still developing but they did want to keep them on side.²¹⁶

This was also noted by a former Australian Ambassador posted to Saudi Arabia decades later: “Qatar began life as a nation state with no international presence and no relevance on the international stage which remained the case until the mid-1990s”.²¹⁷ As such, in a Saudi dominated sub-Gulf region undergoing significant change due to oil rents, and with threats such as Saddam Hussein’s Iraq to remain cognisant of, Qatar was content to remain a political adjunct of the Saudi Kingdom, with no sign of its subtle power foreign policy strategies on the horizon.

Part Two of this chapter will examine Qatar’s nascent years following independence up until what this thesis terms as ‘Qatar’s subtle power era’ which began to emerge after the Gulf War

²¹⁶ Ian Parmeter, (former Australian Diplomat, Australian Embassy in Saudi Arabia), in discussion with author, January 2021.

²¹⁷ Ralph King, (former ambassador, Australian Embassy in Saudi Arabia), in discussion with author, April 2021.

in 1991 and around the time of the 1995 accession of Hamad as emir.²¹⁸ This second part will show that Qatari foreign policy actions during the years of Emir Khalifa were not autonomous and largely geared towards bandwagoning with Saudi Arabia, and later balancing with the GCC. Further examined are the challenges Khalifa was confronted with which now included the management of an economy which severely lacked in administrative structure, and an ever more demanding citizenry. The macro and micro economic malaise confronting Khalifa precluded the possibility of the emergence of subtle power foreign policy strategies during this period, which as discussed in Chapter One, were conceived and remained buttressed by Qatar's economic hard power – ostensibly the enormous windfalls from the extraction and sale of natural gas. Following independence, Qatar remained largely irrelevant on the international stage, dependent on Riyadh for physical protections, as its burgeoning yet still underdeveloped economy could not support a pursuit of political autonomy, nor an ambitious subtle power foreign policy strategy.

Vale the British and Physical Protection

Unlike the jubilation and liberalising experience of other post-colonial²¹⁹ states, many Qataris, including members of the Qatari royal family, were shocked to see the British military protection and guarantees evaporate in the late-1960s.²²⁰ Instead of welcoming the withdrawal of the British, the Qataris, like the other trucial emirates, feared the domination of neighbouring powers.²²¹ Initial responses by the Gulf rulers (Khalifa included) to the British decision to withdraw military forces east of Suez by 1971 were permeated by fear and disbelief. The former British protectorates were bereft of what to do without London's security guarantees, as recalled by a former US Ambassador to Qatar:

They (the British) weren't terribly subtle - they just left! At that point, every Gulf state was left to fend for itself ... Sheikh Zayed of Abu Dhabi actually went to the Brits and offered to pay for the maintenance of a carrier battle group in the Indian Ocean and the Gulf. Sheikh Zayed offered to just pay the bill himself and for the continuation of British military presence. The Brits refused him.²²²

²¹⁸ Once Qatar became an independent nation state, the title of the country's leader became 'emir' whereas the title 'sheikh' was used whilst Qatar was under a British protection treaty. Emir directly translates as 'commander' where sheikh translates as 'old man' or 'elder'.

²¹⁹ Qatar was a British protectorate, not necessarily a colony.

²²⁰ Fromherz, *Qatar: Rise to Power and Influence*, 65.

²²¹ *Ibid*, 18-19.

²²² Former US Ambassador posted to Qatar, in discussion with author, April 2021.

Before independence in 1971, it was hard to speak of ‘government’ (or an external security apparatus) in the bureaucratic sense outside the British advisors, as the British-organised the military and police units.²²³ Although the British would be withdrawing east of Suez and rescinding the Treaty of Protection of 1916, they remained cognisant of the needs of Qatar and the state of its affairs. As noted in a diplomatic dispatch by the Political Resident in Bahrain one month after independence:

But for its oil, indeed, the future of Qatar would be no more than the unedifying story of an obscure tribe on the outskirts of Arabia ... Qatar's importance to us will remain undiminished, and the cultivation of good Anglo-Qatari relations is of some importance. At present the omens are good: Sheikh Ahmad²²⁴ spoke to me in private with unaccustomed volubility, and with a sincerity so clear that even I was convinced of his desire for good relations with the United Kingdom.²²⁵

Nevertheless, Qatar remained particularly vulnerable. Not since prior to the Treaty of 1916 was Qatar faced with the prospect of no great and powerful nation for external security guarantees. Despite this, optimism in London regarding the long-term survival of Qatar exceeded any of the other eight emirates, albeit from a low base. An Arabian Department report on Qatar’s independence states that:

Whatever its defects – and they are obvious to the most casual visitor – the present regime serves our interests better than any likely alternative. It has depended on our presence less than the other regimes in the Gulf states and it is correspondingly more likely to survive our withdrawal. Indeed, I²²⁶ have been in the habit of saying that if I had to put my money on the durability of any Shaikhly regime in the Gulf, it is the Al Thani I would choose. The active members of the family seem to be sounder in the perception of their own interests, and more ruthless in the pursuit of them, than the other Shaikhly families.²²⁷

²²³ Gause, *Oil Monarchies: Domestic and Security Challenges in the Arab Gulf States*, (New York: Council On Foreign Relations Press, 1994), 63.

²²⁴ Ahmad bin Ali Al Thani ruled Qatar from 1960 to 1972. His tenure as emir ended six months after Qatar’s formal independence.

²²⁵ “The Independence of Qatar,” *Arabian Gulf Digital Archives*, accessed January 2021, <https://www.agda.ae/en/catalogue/tna/fco/8/1724/n/39>

²²⁶ The British Political Resident of Bahrain.

²²⁷ “The Independence of Qatar,” *Arabian Gulf Digital Archives*, accessed January 2021, <https://www.agda.ae/en/catalogue/tna/fco/8/1724/n/22>

Needless to say, although the British were withdrawing from east of Suez, their interests and influence remained strong and durable in a region of significant importance to international trade and security. From the British perspective, in a briefing prepared for the visit of US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to the Gulf, “it was a pity a union of nine Emirates was not possible, (therefore) the Union of Trucial States is the next best combination,²²⁸ with close practical links with neighbouring states now, and possibility of more formal relationship later”.²²⁹ Ultimately however, considerations of Qatar’s future still had to be broached with the Saudis, as according to the same British briefing for Henry Kissinger:

Bahrain and Qatar were ready to opt for separate independence, and only prevented from doing such by King Faisal, who adhered for his own reasons, to the idea of a Union of all nine Gulf states. We (the British) tried urgently to convince the Saudi King that Bahrain and Qatar should be allowed to seek separate status without further delay, so that efforts can be focused on building a strong union of seven or six if Dubai²³⁰ wishes to stand.²³¹ ... (Ultimately), the Qataris informed King Faisal on 25 August 1971 of their intentions (not to become a member of the United Arab Emirates and to opt for independence), and he did not object ... On 15 September the Security Council unanimously endorsed Qatar’s application for UN membership and on 21 September the General Assembly voted in favour of her admission.²³²

As for relations with the Saudis in a newly independent Qatar, according to a former US Ambassador to Qatar, “in 1971 Qatar essentially became a feudal vassal of Saudi Arabia dependant on Riyadh for security protections. In return for fealty to the Saudi King for example, the price was that every six months, Sheikh Khalifa had to go to Riyadh and be humiliated”.²³³ As such, the withdrawal for the British may have made Qatar an independent nation state, but by no means an autonomous nation state and one that deferred directly to Riyadh.

²²⁸ The formation of the United Arab Emirates.

²²⁹ “Secretary of States Visit to New York: The Gulf,” *Arabian Gulf Digital Archives*, accessed January 2021, <https://www.agda.ae/en/catalogue/tna/fco/8/1590/n/25>

²³⁰ ‘Dubai wishes to stand’ means opt for independence like Qatar and Bahrain.

²³¹ “Secretary of States Visit to New York: The Gulf,” *Arabian Gulf Digital Archives*, accessed January 2021, <https://www.agda.ae/en/catalogue/tna/fco/8/1590/n/64>

²³² “Secretary of States Visit to New York: The Gulf,” *Arabian Gulf Digital Archives*, accessed January 2021, <https://www.agda.ae/en/catalogue/tna/fco/8/1590/n/25>

²³³ Former US Ambassador to Qatar, in discussion with author, April 2021.

However, with no certain great and powerful actor to rely upon, Qatar's reflexive deference to Saudi Arabia had its challenges. In a typical dilemma for a small state in a neighbourhood with multiple new and competing states and a weak security architecture, Qatar also sought to balance ties with Saudi Arabia and Iran.²³⁴ As reported by the Arabian Department in London:

The Qataris have no serious international problems: only a claim to the offshore island and shoals of Hawar, which Her Majesty's Government awarded some twenty years ago to Bahrain ... Qatar will however suffer if there is a confrontation between the Arabs and Iran, for they will be caught between the pressure of their Iranian friends and the demands of Arab nationalism.²³⁵

As such, although the Qataris reflexively bandwagoned with Saudi Arabia immediately following independence, a foreign policy of strategic hedging was also required which was confirmed in the same reporting by the Arabian Department in London: "The Qataris saw this dilemma long ago and have prepared their escape, for which they are well-equipped by their skill in double-dealing".²³⁶ Nevertheless, in the years immediately following independence, Qatar's external security protector was effectively a self-nomination of the Saudis who were long allied with the United States. This is confirmed by a former US Ambassador to Qatar who recalled:

Although the United States, through the Saudis was the obvious security protection candidate for the smaller Gulf states, the US was totally disinterested in stepping into that role. The US relegated that role to Saudi Arabia, and every time the small states of the Gulf would approach the US they would always say – well, Saudi Arabia is your protector and we're Saudi Arabia's protector.²³⁷

The withdrawal of the British thrust independence upon Qatar. It was not fought for like in so many other colonies and protectorates of the British Empire. The withdrawal of the British also saw the end of Qatar's first iteration of subtle power's element of physical protection, albeit in

²³⁴ Gray, *Qatar: Politics and Challenges of Development*, 44.

²³⁵ "The Independence of Qatar," *Arabian Gulf Digital Archives*, accessed January 2021, <https://www.agda.ae/en/catalogue/tna/fco/8/1724/n/40>

²³⁶ "The Independence of Qatar," *Arabian Gulf Digital Archives*, accessed January 2021, <https://www.agda.ae/en/catalogue/tna/fco/8/1724/n/40>

²³⁷ Former US Ambassador to Qatar, in discussion with author, April 2021.

a pre-subtle power era. Upon independence, Qatar may have achieved the status of nation state, but politically it had become an adjunct of a much more powerful Saudi Arabia, and any concept of autonomy from Riyadh was not considered as at the time, nor was it sought after or even possible.

Khalifa's Predicament Becomes Hamad's Lesson

It did not take long for Sheikh Khalifa to oust the disengaged ruler Ahmad from power in a bloodless coup in February 1972 whilst he was on a hunting trip in Iran. The coup was well planned and the Saudis sent troops to the borders to ensure Ahmad would not attempt to restore his power.²³⁸ Although the Saudis had long posed a threat to the Al Thani, within the first twelve months of Qatar's independence, it played an instrumental role in shoring up the new leadership in Doha. As such, from the very beginning Khalifa's reign was a design backed by the Saudis. The predicament for Khalifa was that although Qatar was a newly independent state, he had little foreign policy autonomy from Riyadh, and would be subject to the calls and humiliation of the Saudi King.

For example, in the years following independence, the Saudis would remind Khalifa of their dominant position sometimes in an extroverted manner. As recalled by a former US Ambassador to Qatar:

Khalifa may have had an appointment with the king, but the Saudis would make him wait in the ante room.²³⁹ On occasions, Khalifa got into a room and they didn't actually offer him a seat. It was sort of, 'we are going to tell you exactly who you are'. The Saudis just wanted to cut them (the Qataris) down to size,²⁴⁰ but they never really tried to dominate them, and they did the Qataris a fair number of favours.²⁴¹

²³⁸ Fromherz, *Qatar: Rise to Power and Influence*, 77.

²³⁹ Meaning: 'Payment room'.

²⁴⁰ Meaning: 'Demonstrate to the Qataris that the Saudis are more important and in charge'.

²⁴¹ Former US Ambassador to Qatar, in discussion with author, April 2021.

Despite this humiliation and overt demonstration of who was in charge, Khalifa was in little position to remonstrate as the Saudis could influence foreign policy matters in favour of Qatar if Khalifa remained compliant. As recalled by the same US Ambassador:

As Khalifa was bound to pay deference to the Saudis, their relations warmed to a point whereby the Saudis agreed to stop pushing their border dispute with Qatar, and also agreed to stop taking the side of Bahrain in its territorial dispute with Qatar. Essentially, they never actually withdrew their claims or their support, but they simply stopped exercising it. The price of Saudi external support and quiescence on the border matters was that, as mentioned above, every six months Sheikh Khalifa had to go to Riyadh and be humiliated.²⁴²

The humiliation Khalifa was subjected to was witnessed by his son Hamad, and according to the former US Ambassador, “as time went on, a deep resentment of the Saudis built within Hamad”.²⁴³ Khalifa’s predicament was Hamad’s lesson, and thus planted the seeds of what would later become a visceral desire to politically emancipate Qatar from Saudi Arabia, and achieve an outright autonomy from Riyadh in all forms. The former ambassador continued by stating:

The good news for Khalifa was that the Saudis weren’t very efficient or effective at trying to dominate Qatar, so they just took it out on humiliating the emir ... Importantly, although a child at time, Hamad bin Khalifa, was present at some of Khalifa’s meetings with the Saudi King, and witnessed this humiliation. As time went on, Hamad knew all about this, so there was this deep resentment of the Saudis.²⁴⁴

As for Qatar’s former great and powerful protector, the British remained ‘interested’ in Qatar upon independence, and had greater faith in Khalifa than his predecessor, (also Riyadh’s choice of leader), as noted in three separate diplomatic reports from 1973/74 recorded by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office:

²⁴² *Ibid.*

²⁴³ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁴ Former US Ambassador to Qatar, in discussion with author, April 2021.

Qatar remained an important bastion of good sense and moderation in the Lower Gulf, on good terms with Iran, and on the closest possible terms with Saudi Arabia. For these reasons Qatar was worth supporting.²⁴⁵ ... When Sheikh Khalifa took over as emir in February 1972, British prospects brightened considerably, since by doing so he removed the one bar to rapid progress, the inhibiting idleness and irresponsibility of Sheikh Ahmad with whom he had previously been forced to run²⁴⁶ in harness.²⁴⁷ ... We regard Khalifa as an energetic, enthusiastic, and hard-working person, with considerable native intelligence and ability. Apparently handicapped by a lack of education, Khalifa learned the hard way by experience, and did not take advice unless it suited his wishes. Upon accession, Khalifa settled down to concern himself largely with the economic and social problems at home. He was ruthless, headstrong, and impulsive, but a conscientious worker, and his sincerity in his desire for progress and development in Qatar was undoubted.²⁴⁸

Despite the confidence the British had in Khalifa, they were well aware of Khalifa's administrative impotence, and the instrumental role of Muslim Brotherhood experts and advisors within the ranks of government who could undermine British interests in Qatar. As reported by the British in a 1973 diplomatic report discussing oil affairs in Qatar:

The emir himself seemed as well-disposed as ever, yet in the echelons below him there were experts and advisers who did not share his sympathies. They had his ear not because he wanted to give them power, but because of the lack of suitably qualified Qataris to manage the increasing weight of government business. As a result, Khalifa was less able than before to take action on the side of the British when the inevitable 'Egyptian expert' in a key position in a ministry deftly swings a contract away from us towards one of our competitors.²⁴⁹

One positive turn of events for Khalifa was the 1973 oil revolution which flushed the state coffers with an ever greater source of funds. The boon in oil rents was an enabling agent for Khalifa to consolidate patrimonial practices and further secure his reign. Yet as noted by a British diplomatic report a decade later, the increased rents from 1973 onwards only further

²⁴⁵ "Diplomatic Report," *Arabian Gulf Digital Archives*, accessed January 2021, <https://www.agda.ae/en/catalogue/tna/fco/8/2086/n/12>

²⁴⁶ 'Run in Harness' is an idiom meaning 'to continue or return to work'.

²⁴⁷ "Oil Affairs in Qatar," *Arabian Gulf Digital Archives*, accessed January 2021, <https://www.agda.ae/en/catalogue/tna/fco/8/2086>

²⁴⁸ "Audience of the Amir of Qatar," *Arabian Gulf Digital Archives*, accessed January 2021, <https://www.agda.ae/en/catalogue/tna/fco/8/2294/n/26>

²⁴⁹ "Oil Affairs in Qatar," *Arabian Gulf Digital Archives*, accessed January 2021, <https://www.agda.ae/en/catalogue/tna/fco/8/2086>

exposed the lack of skilled labour in the administration of the Qatari state, and Khalifa's ongoing reliance on Egyptian bureaucrats and British oversight:

Just as the 1970s had been a period of regional stability for the Arab Gulf states, so had they been years of rapid economic development, particularly after the substantial growth of revenues following the oil price increases of 1973/74.²⁵⁰ The prosperity Qatar enjoyed, much like that of the other Gulf states, partially disguised an underlying problem for their broadly similar economies ... that being their small domestic and regional markets, and the scarcity of skilled labour and natural resources other than oil, which led to an uncoordinated industrial development.²⁵¹

Increased oil rents did little for Qatar by way of its autonomy from Saudi Arabia and its policy of bandwagoning with Riyadh for external security protections. As recalled by a former New Zealand diplomat who was posted to the region shortly after the oil boom, and also reported separately in a 1973 British diplomatic dispatch reporting on Qatar's oil affairs:

Saudi Arabia was the swing producer in OPEC, which Qatar joined in 1961²⁵² ... and dictated (oil) policy for all the others. As such there was a strong sense of unity and solidarity amongst the Gulf monarchies including Qatar, which was not a vociferous member of the team²⁵³ ... Qatar's position was simply to maintain a policy which was not unacceptable to the Arab states, and did not step too far out of line.²⁵⁴ For New Zealand in 1973 onwards Bahrain became more important and Saudi Arabia. It was only later that an Embassy was (first) opened in Saudi Arabia when people realised that it was a bit too quirky to have an Embassy on an offshore island (Bahrain), and diplomatically, Saudi Arabia would be a better operating base. The post in Saudi Arabia was opened up, the ambassador was accredited to Qatar.²⁵⁵

²⁵⁰ "The Gulf Cooperation Council: The First Two Years," *Arabian Gulf Digital Archives*, accessed January 2021, <https://www.agda.ae/en/catalogue/tna/fo/464/60/n/47>

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*

²⁵² "Oil Affairs in Qatar," *Arabian Gulf Digital Archives*, accessed January 2021, <https://www.agda.ae/en/catalogue/tna/fco/8/2086>

²⁵³ Geoff Randal, (former Diplomat, New Zealand Embassy in Saudi Arabia), in discussion with author, November 2020.

²⁵⁴ "Oil Affairs in Qatar," *Arabian Gulf Digital Archives*, accessed January 2021, <https://www.agda.ae/en/catalogue/tna/fco/8/2086>

²⁵⁵ Geoff Randal, (former Diplomat, New Zealand Embassy in Saudi Arabia), in discussion with author, November 2020.

At the time, given the fragility of Qatar's external security posture and the diplomatic weight Saudi Arabia posed in the international oil industry, it was obvious for Khalifa to continue to bandwagon closely with the Saudis, and reap the rewards of the substantial influx of rents and exponential international interest in the region.

In summary, where the Treaty of 1916 forbade Qatar from autonomous foreign policy posturing, it was now forced to actively engage with other countries like any independent nation state would be required to do so. Khalifa may have gained power as emir in Qatar, yet his authority and autonomy were according to the British: "Not only subject to the external whims and desires of the Saudis, but internally too Khalifa was challenged to defend against the machinations of self-interested expatriate Arab experts".²⁵⁶ As such, upon independence Qatar's autonomy from internal and external actors was either limited or non-existent. Khalifa was bound to please the Saudi King, remain on amicable terms with Iran, manage ongoing British interests, and the balance the vagaries of Muslim Brotherhood administrators and experts who were the crux of the public administration of the country. For a greater autonomy to be achieved, which Khalifa's son Hamad later desired as emir, a political emancipation from various actors had to be achieved. This far from inevitable prospect was soon to suffer a serious setback due to the defenestration of the Shah of Iran in 1979, an event which reminded Qatar of its vulnerability and its reliance on Saudi Arabia, and later the pragmatism of balancing within a Saudi-dominated GCC to stave off shia-led grassroots revolutionary forces many feared would spread.

Revolution in Iran - Balancing with the GCC

By the late-1970s bandwagoning with the Saudis had become a mainstay of Qatari foreign policy posture. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran conjointly provided a degree of certainty in the region whereby the greatest threat was arguably a hegemonic Saddam Hussein. While the two countries became known as the 'twin pillars of the Gulf,' quiet competition commenced between them during the 1970s, with Iran seeking to be the bigger partner.²⁵⁷ This all changed when the Shah of Iran was overthrown and Iranian monarchical state proselytised to come a Shia Islamic theocracy, and thus a clear and present danger to the Arab states all led by Sunni

²⁵⁶ "Oil Affairs in Qatar." *Arabian Gulf Digital Archives*, accessed January 2021, <https://www.agda.ae/en/catalogue/tna/fco/8/2086>

²⁵⁷ Sanam Vikal, "Iran and the GCC: Hedging Pragmatism and Opportunism," *Middle East and North Africa Programme Chatham House*, accessed November 2021, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2018/09/iran-and-gcc/impact-tehrans-internal-dynamics>

leaders. As reported by the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office Research Department, and recalled separately by a former Australian diplomat posted to Jeddah in the 1970s:

For seven years following Britain's military withdrawal from the Gulf at the end of 1971, the Arab states of the Gulf enjoyed a degree of regional stability as a result of the dominant role in the area played by the pro-Western monarchy in Iran. Although the Arabs resented Iran's pretensions to being the policeman of the Gulf, they benefitted from Iran's position as a buffer between them and the Soviet Union, and from its ability to counter-balance the other leading (and more disruptive) power in the Gulf, Iraq²⁵⁸ ... and even though the Shah of Iran had been someone whom the Saudis had a lot of disagreements with, particularly on oil policy, they did have a common denominator, that they were both very strong allies of the Americans.²⁵⁹ This relatively comfortable situation was reversed at the beginning of 1979 by the fall of the Shah. The attendant chaos in Iran removed the Iranian restraint on Iraq's ambitions and the Islamic Republic's threat to export its revolution introduced a new source of potential subversion".²⁶⁰

Already a region of interminable change, the ongoing legacy and reverberations of the Iranian revolution remains one of the most tectonic events to impact the Arab states of the Gulf. The establishment of a revolutionary regime under Ayatollah Khomeini caused much anxiety among the elites of the six oil-producing sheikhdoms of the Gulf.²⁶¹ This transformed the security situation in the region, as the sole use of Islam in constitutional and social foundation appealed to many people of the Gulf, especially the Shia populations of Bahrain, Kuwait and those of the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia.²⁶² As affirmed by the former Australian diplomat posted to Jeddah: "When a virulently Shia Islamic regime came into power in Iran, it was clearly of enormous concern to the Saudis",²⁶³ and was perceived by the Arab Gulf states as threatening to their internal stability.²⁶⁴

Further to the regional shock of the Iranian revolution was the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by Sunni extremists in the same year, an event which would later become a precursor

²⁵⁸ "The Gulf Cooperation Council: The First Two Years," *Arabian Gulf Digital Archives*, accessed January 2021, <https://www.agda.ae/en/catalogue/tna/fo/464/60/n/47>

²⁵⁹ Ian Parmeter, (former Australian Diplomat, Australian Embassy in Saudi Arabia), in discussion with author, January 2021.

²⁶⁰ "The Gulf Cooperation Council: The First Two Years," *Arabian Gulf Digital Archives*, accessed January 2021, <https://www.agda.ae/en/catalogue/tna/fo/464/60/n/47>

²⁶¹ Matteo Legrenzi, *The GCC and the International Relations of the Gulf*. (London: I.B Tauris, 2011), 27.

²⁶² *Ibid*, 27-28.

²⁶³ Ian Parmeter, (former Australian Diplomat, Australian Embassy in Saudi Arabia), in discussion with author, January 2021.

²⁶⁴ Vikal, "Iran and the GCC: Hedging Pragmatism and Opportunism," 4.

to Saudi objections to Muslim Brotherhood members remaining in Qatar. As recalled by the former Australian diplomat:

This rattled the Saudi regime even further particularly as they were completely blindsided by it having no intelligence warning of it at all, having thought any problem would come from the Shia population in the east of the country. The seizure of the Grand Mosque worried the Saudis enormously as they were very concerned that it could be some sort of precursor to a domestic outbreak overall.²⁶⁵

Yet it was the fall of the Shah and the magnitude of the change in regime in Iran which would heighten security concerns amongst the Arab Gulf states. In the fevered regional aftermath of the twin shocks of the Iranian revolution and Iran-Iraq war,²⁶⁶ the GCC came together at speed in six months from November 1980 to May 1981,²⁶⁷ and was formally launched at an inaugural summit in Abu Dhabi.²⁶⁸ During this time, Saudi Arabia's Minister of Interior, Prince Nayef bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud, stated that "the security of each Arab Gulf State is the security of Saudi Arabia".²⁶⁹ This statement may have been reassuring to Khalifa, yet at the same time, it entrenched the reality of Qatar's dependency of Riyadh.

The Shia-led revolution also had implications for the region in the context of the Cold War, which was noted by the British in a report on the first two years of the GCC:

The end of the 'Pax Iranica' was widely regarded as having left a power vacuum in the Gulf. The Arab states there denied this at the time but did not feel that they could draw on their connections with the West and, in particular, Saudi Arabia's special relationship with the United States. The Gulf states feared that direct US military involvement in an area not far south of the Soviet Union would be seen as a direct challenge in Moscow, and thus would invite a superpower confrontation in

²⁶⁵ Ian Parmeter, (former Australian Diplomat, Australian Embassy in Saudi Arabia), in discussion with author, January 2021.

²⁶⁶ The Iran-Iraq war commenced August 1980.

²⁶⁷ This occurred after years of inconclusive discussions about (and competing visions for) a regional organisation. Debate and dissension had focused on what form such an organisation should take - whether it should prioritise political, economic, or security relations, or some combination of the three - and whether it should include Iran and Iraq. See: Kristian Ulrichsen, "The Rise and Decline of the Gulf Cooperations Council", in *Routledge Handbook of Persian Gulf Politics*, ed. Mehran Kamrava (Oxon: Routledge, 2020): 416-417.

²⁶⁸ Yoel Guzansky, "Defence Cooperation in the Arabian Gulf: The Peninsula Shield Force Put to the Test," *Middle Eastern Studies* 50, no. 4 (2014): 640-654.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 641.

the Gulf. The Gulf State's fears of such a confrontation was exacerbated by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan on Christmas Day 1979.²⁷⁰

The Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan on Christmas Day was yet another crisis in what was already a year of heightened insecurities for the Qatari state. However, deferring to the physical protections of the United States was met with some reticence as the Gulf states were wary of American intentions. This too was a mitigating factor in what would later underpin the foundations for the formation of the GCC. As stated by the British in the same report:

Although the Gulf states reproached the United States for permitting the Soviet Union to encircle them through its advance into Afghanistan, and its earlier activities in the Horn of Africa and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, they would not (except for Oman) support the use of the American Rapid Deployment Force.²⁷¹ This was because some Gulf Arabs feared that it might be used to occupy the Gulf oil fields in the event of another Arab embargo on oil supplies to the West ... Although the Gulf states may privately have welcomed the declaration of the Carter Doctrine,²⁷² they were unwilling to provide the US with the facilities needed to implement it - they demanded US protection but required it to be invisible, over the horizon.²⁷³

Amidst the ongoing disruption to the geopolitical order of the region during 1979, it was the Iranian revolution which was the decisive turning point for the Gulf states. Already a project having been discussed years earlier, the Gulf states hastened their intention to form a union for the benefit of collective security. The GCC thus became a political and security alliance that instituted a collective security framework.²⁷⁴ As reported by the British:

²⁷⁰ "The Gulf Cooperation Council: The First Two Years." *Arabian Gulf Digital Archives*, accessed November 2021, <https://www.agda.ae/en/catalogue/tna/fo/464/60/n/47>

²⁷¹ The United States Military's Rapid Deployment Force was first devised in June 1979 as a highly mobile force that could be rapidly moved to locations outside the normal overseas deployments in Europe and Korea.

²⁷² The Carter Doctrine was a policy proclaimed by President Carter in January 1980 which stated that the United States would use military force, if necessary, to defend its national interests in the Persian Gulf. It was a response to the Soviet Union's intervention in Afghanistan in 1979, and it was intended to deter the Soviet Union from seeking hegemony in the Persian Gulf region.

²⁷³ "The Gulf Cooperation Council: The First Two Years," *Arabian Gulf Digital Archives*, accessed November 2021, <https://www.agda.ae/en/catalogue/tna/fo/464/60/n/47>

²⁷⁴ Kechichian, Joseph. "The Gulf Cooperation Council: Search for Security." *Third World Quarterly* 7, no. 4 (1985): 853-881.

The Gulf states felt deeply threatened by the overthrow of the Pahlavi monarchy and by Iran's revolutionary message, incitement of Shia unrest and subversive political and terror activities. This led the Gulf states to support Iraq against Iran in the 1980–88 war, and on 25 May 1981 the Heads of State of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) announced their agreement to establish a Gulf Cooperation Council.²⁷⁵

As for Qatar, as recalled by New Zealand diplomat posted to the region shortly after the formation of the GCC, “Qatar was a wholehearted supporter”,²⁷⁶ yet it was little more than a bystander during the Iranian revolution, continued to bandwagon with the Saudis, and had little else to offer the GCC members other than solidarity. The smaller Gulf states including Qatar however remained fearful of Saudi hegemony that would result from implementing an effectively integrated defence policy. From the outset, the GCC was dominated by Saudi Arabia at the expense of other member-states. The Economist for example perceptively coined the GCC the ‘One Plus Five’ organisation.²⁷⁷ Nevertheless, the sub-regional integration project was the response by the weaker states the Gulf to potential hegemonic powers in accordance with the belief that balancing power was preferred rather than bandwagoning.²⁷⁸

Qatar had thrown its lot in behind balancing within the Saudi dominated GCC, yet the impotency of the GCC security umbrella did not go unnoticed by the United States, nor did the limitations of a greater collaboration amongst the six members. A former US diplomat to the UAE recalls that:

It wasn't until the Iran-Iraq War, the tanker war²⁷⁹ so to speak, that the United States started looking at the smaller Gulf states. It was the first time the United States realised that working with the Saudis through the Gulf states wasn't working very well. In response to the Iran-Iraq War ... the US had been pushing the smaller Gulf states to form an alliance with Saudi Arabia, which went absolutely nowhere.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁵ “The Gulf Cooperation Council: The First Two Years.” *Arabian Gulf Digital Archives*, accessed November 2021, <https://www.agda.ae/en/catalogue/tna/fo/464/60/n/47>

²⁷⁶ Geoff Randal, (former Diplomat, New Zealand Embassy in Saudi Arabia), in discussion with author, November 2020.

²⁷⁷ Kechichian, “The Gulf Cooperation Council: Search for Security,” 880.

²⁷⁸ Legrenzi, *The GCC and the International Relations of the Gulf*, 44.

²⁷⁹ The Tanker War is a term that refers to skirmishes against merchant vessels in the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz between 1984 and 1988, during the Iran–Iraq War.

²⁸⁰ US Diplomat, posted to the UAE, April 2021.

In a conversation between the US diplomat and the chief of staff of the UAE armed forces at the time, the former US diplomat recalls that the latter's comment was: "Look, we would only consider joining such an organisation if the United States and at least Britain and, hopefully, France were formal members, treaty members, of such an organisation".²⁸¹ In his recollections of this conversation, the US Diplomat noted that:

US membership of an alliance with the Gulf states was considered a 'nonstarter in Washington.' ... When the chief of staff of the UAE armed forces was asked why US membership of such an organisation was necessary, he stated to the US Diplomat that: 'Because, look, if you're going to form an organisation like NATO with the five tiny states, the weak states of the Gulf and Saudi Arabia, essentially, we're going to have the weight of Luxembourg and NATO. It's going to be five Luxembourgs and one US. We have no desire to be dominated that way by the Saudis. The Saudis will point to you, and you will reinforce Saudi domination on the small states of the Gulf.'²⁸²

In light of the Iranian revolution, the Iran-Iraq war and the inception of a Saudi dominated GCC, Qatar's pursuit of autonomy remained inconceivable as Doha defaulted to the external security protections of more powerful regional actors, and largely remained political quiescent. At the time, it suited Qatar to bandwagon with the Saudis and balance against Iran from within the newly created GCC. Much like throughout its history, the Al Thani had little choice other than to again turn to a greater power for physical protections - given the tumultuous events of 1979 and though the 1980s, this was Saudi Arabia who was backed by the United States. Albeit the case, Qatar was not completely at the mercy of the Saudis. The 1992 border dispute with Saudi Arabia provides the first evidence whereby Qatar was exposed as a nation state needing to defend its own territory from a neighbouring Arab State autonomously without the protection of the British.²⁸³

An Act of Autonomy - The 1992 Border Dispute with Saudi Arabia

The 1992 border dispute was the first time Qatar confronted and opposed Saudi Arabia signalling the beginnings of a new era in Doha's relations with Riyadh – a degree of defiance

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*

²⁸² *Ibid.*

²⁸³ Noting that Iraq never invaded Qatar, nor was this an initial intention of Saddam Hussein.

and an act of autonomy. Qatar's longstanding border dispute with the Saudis dated back over a century, and after independence, the Saudis continued to lay claim to part of the territory in southern Qatar along the shared border.²⁸⁴ As discussed in Part One of this chapter, the issue of border delineation entered the equation when the British and Saudis needed to find a middle ground resulting from the impending issue of oil concessions. Where previously the British had responsibility for Qatar's external relations up until independence, any border delineation with the Al Saud was London's official responsibility under the 1916 Treaty. This all changed once the British withdrew, leaving Qatar to take stock of all its external relations. Leading up to independence, both Ahmad and Khalifa sought to appease the Saudis knowing that Riyadh would no longer be constrained by British protestations. As such, Qatar sought to appease the Saudis by ratifying the 1965 border delineation agreed to by both the Al Thani and Al Saud. As reported by the British following independence:

The Al Thani being advised by Her Majesty's Government since 1965 against ratifying their border agreement with Saudi Arabia, Sheikh Khalifa's position was that the Government of Qatar had to look after Qatar's own interests, and one of Qatar's major interests was its relations with Saudi Arabia ... Khalifa stood firm with the British insisting that the Saudis had a right to be annoyed with the Qataris, since the Qatari Government had ratified offshore boundary agreements with Iran and Abu Dhabi, and although the Saudis had gone through all the processes of ratifying the 1965 agreement, the Qataris, from their side, had not ratified it ... Khalifa's concern was also that after British protection was withdrawn, who would then look after Qatar! ... Khalifa was also afraid that Saudi Arabia would abrogate the treaty (following Qatar's independence) and the Qataris would have to restart border negotiations all over again.²⁸⁵

In October 1992 however the border dispute erupted when an incident took place between the Qatari border patrol and a tribal contingent of the Saudi National Guard in the area where the border was contested - two²⁸⁶ Qatari soldiers and one Saudi tribal sheikh were killed²⁸⁷ - and reinforced Qatari fears about Saudi intentions. Notably, the clash happened shortly after the Gulf War, a conflict in which the Saudis were left feeling humiliated and vulnerable, and a

²⁸⁴ Gray, *Qatar: Politics and Challenges of Development*, 44.

²⁸⁵ "Record of Conversation in Doha between Sir William Luce Political Resident et al and Sheikh Ahmad bin Ali Al Thani and Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad Al Thani discussing the Abu Dhabi/Qatar border and Saudi relations." *Arabian Gulf Digital Archives*, accessed November 2021, <https://www.agda.ae/en/catalogue/tna/fco/8/1590/n/161>

²⁸⁶ Different accounts of how many were killed vary.

²⁸⁷ Gause, *Oil Monarchies: Domestic and Security Challenges in the Arab Gulf States*, 131.

conflict whereby the Qatari military had come to their assistance, albeit little more than a token assistance (analysed in the next chapter). As recalled by a former US Ambassador to Qatar who knew Hamad, the soon-to-be emir, personally well:

The first thing that the Saudis began to prosecute (after the Gulf War) were their longstanding border claims with Qatar. In 1992 there was a shooting at the border, and at one point, four Qatari border policemen were killed. All of a sudden the Bahrainis were also becoming very aggressive around the Hawar Islands, and the Saudis were backing them up (in their border claims).²⁸⁸

The day following the Saudi attack, the Qatari government ‘suspended’ the 1965 border agreement with Saudi Arabia. Following this Qatar refused to participate in ministerial meetings prepared for the December 1992 GCC summit, and threatened to withdraw troops from the GCC Peninsula Shield force in Saudi Arabia. More ominously from the Saudi viewpoint, Qatar also very publicly sought support from Iran and Iraq in the dispute.²⁸⁹ Clashes renewed in 1993 and 1994, culminating in Qatar’s refusal to sign a bilateral document on security or participate in a GCC summit.²⁹⁰ This demonstrated a shift in Qatari strategy from bandwagoning with Saudi Arabia and balancing with the GCC, to a more autonomous foreign policy posture and one of strategic hedging – a prelude to the subtle power years of Emir Hamad. This was however a matter of Qatar’s territorial integrity which it had defended vociferously in the past, not a regional matter involving various (and more powerful) actors whereby Qatar would simply bandwagon with the Saudis.

Emphasising Qatar’s determination to secure its sovereign lands was its subsequent engagement with Iran. A number of Qatari-Iranian economic deals were signed in 1992, aligning Doha more closely with Tehran than any other GCC state.²⁹¹ Saudi Arabia was particularly concerned at the increasing Iranian influence in Qatar, seeing it as part of an Iranian plan to split the GCC and challenge Saudi influence in the smaller sheikhdoms.²⁹² Interestingly, the border dispute with Saudi Arabia and Qatar’s subsequent financial agreements with Iran to enhanced its leverage *vis a vis* Saudi Arabia, and later became a strategy familiar to Qatar’s

²⁸⁸ Former US Ambassador to Qatar, in discussion with author, April 2021.

²⁸⁹ Gause, *Oil Monarchies: Domestic and Security Challenges in the Arab Gulf States*, 131.

²⁹⁰ Miroslav Zafirov, “The Qatar Crisis – Why did the Blockade Fail?,” *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 11, No. 2 (2017): 1-11.

²⁹¹ Gause, *Oil Monarchies: Domestic and Security Challenges in the Arab Gulf States*, 131.

²⁹² *Ibid*, 136.

subtle power era, particularly during the years following the 2017 blockade. Not until the example of the 1992 border dispute with Saudi Arabia did Qatar seemingly have the political courage to push back against an aggressor and risk a repercussion in pursuit of its own national interest. This autonomous foreign policy act is but one example of Qatar asserting itself regionally, engaging with other nation states contrary to the preferences of Riyadh, and was a precursor to Qatar's subtle power era and its eventual pursuit of autonomy.

Towards a Subtle Power Era – Hamad's Coup

Upon independence and largely throughout his reign, Khalifa's priority was to ensure the external security of Qatar. Independence may have been thrust upon Qatar, yet its political autonomy from Saudi Arabia was not a serious national interest objective as Khalifa sought closer ties and assurances from Riyadh for protection. As recalled by a former Australian Ambassador to Saudi Arabia: "Internationally, throughout Khalifa's reign, Qatar merely featured through the prism of Riyadh. Qatar was not at all relevant and at that stage, wasn't on anyone's map, nor was there any diplomatic or international presence".²⁹³ Therefore, in a pre-subtle power era, when it came to foreign policy and international relations, Qatar essentially bandwagoned with the Saudis. As noted by two experienced Qataris who both worked as civil servants amongst other positions: "Qatar ostensibly started its foreign policy in 1996. Before that there was no real foreign policy",²⁹⁴ as Khalifa "maintained a cautious disposition, and never took a serious²⁹⁵ decision".²⁹⁶

Towards the end of his reign, as his health failed and ennui set in, (and according to some reports alcoholism),²⁹⁷ Khalifa eventually handed over more and more responsibilities to Hamad.²⁹⁸ Khalifa had already begun to step back from governing in the late-1980s, while power and influence accrued to a younger generation of royals who wanted to accelerate the modernisation of Qatar's economy and develop its gas reserves,²⁹⁹ which eventually became

²⁹³ Ralph King, (former ambassador, Australian Embassy in Saudi Arabia), in discussion with author, April 2021.

²⁹⁴ Nayef bin Al Shamari, (former Qatar Petroleum engineer), in discussion with author, February 2021.

²⁹⁵ 'Serious decision' meaning a 'substantive decision independent of the Saudis'.

²⁹⁶ Abdulaziz Al Mahmoud, (former Qatari Airforce engineer, Al Sharq and Peninsula daily journalist, Chief editor for Al Jazeera), in discussion with author, January 2021.

²⁹⁷ Fromherz, *Qatar: Rise to Power and Influence*, 84.

²⁹⁸ Peterson, J.E. "The Nature of Succession in the Gulf," *Middle East Journal* 55, no. 4 (2001): 580-601.

²⁹⁹ Chan Sewell, "Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad Al Thani, Former Emir of Qatar, Dies age 84," *New York Times*, accessed October 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/25/world/middleeast/sheikh-khalifa-bin-hamad-al-thani-former-emir-of-qatar-dies-at-84.html>

the financial backbone of Qatar's foreign policy initiatives in the years that followed. Then on 27 June 1995, Hamad, who had already assumed a substantial amount of power, ousted his father and drove him into exile³⁰⁰ in yet another Qatari bloodless coup.³⁰¹ As recalled by a former US Ambassador to Qatar:

Sheikh Khalifa had become an absentee ruler. He'd gone off the can,³⁰² he wasn't coming back, he'd left his son in charge. They (other members of the ruling family) all went to Sheikh Khalifa and said, 'Your son is cutting us off from the public trough.' He (Khalifa) went down to remonstrate with his son and his son said, 'No, I've got this country under my control,' and Sheikh Khalifa stormed off. Sheikh Hamad called a family council that night and said, 'My dad's lost it, and he's unfit to serve'. The council agreed. Lost in the mist of history was that they didn't depose Sheikh Khalifa they made Sheikh Hamad co-emir.³⁰³

Although this was an internal Qatari matter, the shadows of the Saudis were never far from the scene, again reminding Hamad of Qatar's vulnerability to the Saudis. According to one of the same experienced civil servants: "The Saudis vehemently opposed the coup, as Riyadh's view was that a coup in one country could then lead to the second country will make a coup. It will go around".³⁰⁴ In the aftermath of the 1995 takeover, almost none of the regional actors welcomed the overthrow of Khalifa, and Doha was rife with rumours that Saudi Arabia and the UAE supported a restoration of the more conservative Khalifa.³⁰⁵ Following the coup Abu Dhabi and Saudi Arabia gave hospitality to Khalifa, and from the UAE he organised a countercoup plot (with Saudi sponsorship) to regain the throne at the beginning of 1996. However as recalled by a former US Ambassador to Qatar: "Khalifa at this point, who was desperate and not really smart, went to the Saudis for help. The Saudis saw this as an opportunity to reinstate Khalifa back in power and really bring the Qataris under their thumb. That's why they supported the coup".³⁰⁶ Khalifa however, as desperate as he was, was not an ardent fan of the Saudis as a former US Ambassador to Yemen recalls:

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*

³⁰² Meaning Sheikh Khalifa had lost his mind.

³⁰³ Former US Ambassador to Qatar, in discussion with author, April 2021.

³⁰⁴ Nayef bin Al Shamari, (former Qatar Petroleum engineer), in discussion with author, February 2021.

³⁰⁵ Kamrava, "Royal Factionalism and Political Liberalisation in Qatar," 403.

³⁰⁶ Former US Ambassador to Qatar, in discussion with author, April 2021.

Khalifa did not like the Saudis at all, and I know from personal experience. In 1994, I was the Deputy Director of the Arabian Peninsula Affairs Office in the State Department, and our new Assistant Secretary of State, who had served and knew the Gulf well, decided that he wanted to travel out to the Gulf to just meet everybody and go through the region in his new capacity ... His talking points were basically - beware of the Iranian devil. When we got to Doha, we had an audience with Sheikh Khalifa. Hamad was there as the Crown Prince at the time, and the new Assistant Secretary started going through his talking points about perfidious Iran. After a couple of minutes, Khalifa stopped him and he got extremely agitated. Khalifa said, 'Why are you talking to me about Iran?' He said, 'Iranians have never done anything to me. I have no issue with Iran!' Literally, he was beating his chest. He said, 'Talk to me about Saudi Arabia. The Saudis stole my land,' and he wouldn't stop! Khalifa was quite insane. I don't know why the Saudis thought that Khalifa was their friend, but for whatever reason, they decided that they didn't like the idea that Hamad had overthrown his father, and they were trying to manoeuvre to bring him back, which obviously didn't work.³⁰⁷

The countercoup attempt failed, and as a reaction, Hamad refused to participate in joint GCC military exercises in planned for March 1996³⁰⁸ in retaliation – the first of many remonstrating reactions over the next two decades under Hamad, signalling to the Saudis either his sense of autonomy, or *actual* autonomy. Basking in his success, Hamad swiftly moved to put his unique stamp on Qatari and regional politics, and in his first months of his *de jure* rule, he seemed to enjoy deliberately provoking his GCC allies.³⁰⁹ According to both of the same experienced former civil servants:

Hamad came to power with a very independent mentality.³¹⁰ The personality of Hamad was totally different from the personality of Khalifa. Hamad had ambitions, hoped to have a strong country and rules in the international community and regional order.³¹¹ Hamad had his own vision. He didn't want Qatar to be just a very small country that belongs to Saudi Arabia. (For the first time), Qataris felt independence from the Saudis.³¹²

³⁰⁷ Gerald Feierstein, (former ambassador, US Embassy in Sana'a), in discussion with author, January 2020.

³⁰⁸ Legrenzi, *The GCC and the International Relations of the Gulf*, 79.

³⁰⁹ Peterson, "The Nature of Succession in the Gulf," 591.

³¹⁰ Abdulaziz Al Mahmoud, (former Qatari Airforce engineer, Al Sharq and Peninsula daily journalist, Chief editor for Al Jazeera), in discussion with author, January 2021.

³¹¹ Nayef bin Al Shamari, (former Qatar Petroleum engineer), in discussion with author, February 2021.

³¹² Abdulaziz Al Mahmoud, (former Qatari Airforce engineer, Al Sharq and Peninsula daily journalist, Chief editor for Al Jazeera), in discussion with author, January 2021.

Hamad's desire for changes to Qatar's foreign policy pre-dated the 1995 coup, however it was the countercoup in 1996 which reinforced the notion that an independent Qatari foreign policy was not just desirable, it was necessary. According to a member of the ruling Al Thani family:

When Hamad came to power, we kind of knew during that time that Saudi Arabia was never a country to be trusted fully, and I don't say this in any bitter sense, I'm saying this in a very political and strategic sense, because in the past Saudi Arabia and the UAE did try to organise an attempted countercoup, and at that time the leader was Sheikh Zayid, who wanted to remove Hamad and put back the older ruler Sheikh Khalifa. So from the beginning Hamad knew Saudi was an ally you should have because strategically we do share the same economic setup, and we do share the same political setup, we both are monarchies ... but also we should not trust them fully, because ultimately they will follow their own interests, and in their interests Qatar should be under their umbrella, it should not have its own independent foreign policy away from us, their interests should be aligned with our interests ... when Hamad came to power he did think of something different for the country. He established a kind of hedging foreign policy, we don't put all of our eggs in one basket, we betting (*sic*) a lot on Saudi Arabia, but we did not (want to) alienate Iran like Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.³¹³

The countercoup may have failed, yet in the aftermath of Hamad's accession Khalifa continued to retain a fair amount of popularity and legitimacy within the Al Thanis, especially among the family's more conservative elements. Faced with potential opposition from within his own family and from other neighbouring ruling elites, Hamad's initial (political) liberalisation campaign was a way of securing much-needed internal support.³¹⁴ This led Hamad to promise political liberalisation once he assumed political power as he could not completely ignore or discount the current (of discontent) inside the ruling family.³¹⁵ (In an attempt counter this), Hamad undertook a number of significant changes, not the least of which was the creation of new institutions and offices that were staffed by his loyal supporters, including some of his sons and daughters. He also streamlined the line of succession to include only his own descendants.³¹⁶ As such, although Hamad was later credited with instituting an autonomous Qatari foreign policy, from the outset his grip on power was subject to opposition from some

³¹³ Sheikhha Haya Al Thani, (Member of Ruling Family in Qatar), in discussion with author, December 2020.

³¹⁴ Kamrava, "Royal Factionalism and Political Liberalisation in Qatar," 403.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 415.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 401.

of the conservative elements loyal to Khalifa from within Qatar, and the objections of the ruling elites across the border in Riyadh.

In brief, whilst some senior Qataris reflect on Hamad as “a visionary”,³¹⁷ the onset of Qatar’s subtle power era in the years to follow Hamad’s accession can also be linked to his decision making which was tied to his need to initially strengthen his hold on power. Therefore, with the benefit of hindsight the accession of Hamad can be considered one of three major events that heralded in the subtle power era – Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the inception of Al Jazeera six years later being the other two.³¹⁸ Following the attempted counter coup, as recalled by one of the experienced civil servants, and also a member of the ruling family: “It was the counter coup against him in 1996 that forced Hamad to have totally independent foreign policy from Saudi Arabia”,³¹⁹ and as noted above “Hamad knew that following the counter coup, Saudi Arabia was never a country to be trusted”.³²⁰ As such, with the memory of his father’s humiliation by the Saudis, and the attempted counter coup against his rule, Hamad set Qatar on a path towards autonomy and the dawning of its subtle power era.

In Summary

Over the century leading up to independence, it was courage, political shrewdness, tenacity, and a bit of luck that enabled the Al Thani to escape Bahraini rule, Ottoman power, Saudi hegemony, and British gunboats.³²¹ Qatar aligned itself with whomever it perceived would ensure the greatest chance of security, balanced against various and often simultaneous threats, deceived its allies, and strove to distinguish itself from its neighbours. Saudi Arabia was but one piece on the grand chessboard of Qatar’s eventual independence, yet an ever-present threatening one. This all took decades to unfold, yet in 1968 a shock from afar once again changed the course of history for the Al Thani. It was a decision made in London - the British would withdraw from the Gulf. For Qatar, once Britain hurriedly withdrew from east of the Suez in 1971, it had little choice but to turn again to Saudi Arabia³²² for external protection assurances, and bandwagon with a new great and powerful nation.

³¹⁷ Bashir Al Shirawi, (former ambassador, Qatari Embassy in South Africa), in discussion with author, February 2021.

³¹⁸ Both evaluated in Chapter’s Three and Four respectively.

³¹⁹ Nayef bin Al Shamari, (former Qatar Petroleum engineer), in discussion with author, February 2021.

³²⁰ Sheikha Haya Al Thani, (Member of Ruling Family in Qatar), in discussion with author, December 2020.

³²¹ Zuhlan, *The Creation of Qatar*, 137.

³²² Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar*, 165.

Independence brought a bevy of new challenges for Qatar prior to its subtle power era. In its nascent years, Qatar was nation state acknowledging of its place in the sub-Persian Gulf region, and had little choice other than to continue to pay deference to the Saudis, either bilaterally or within the auspices of the GCC. Regional upheaval across the Persian Gulf waters in Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere, all resulted in the continuity of Khalifa's submission to the ruling elites in Riyadh. With the rise to prominence of Hamad however, began a gradual change in the policymaking *zeitgeist* amongst the Al Thani leadership group.

Having borne witness to his father's humiliation at the hands of the Saudi king, Hamad sought to reorient Qatar's foreign policy, and as he gradually assumed more official responsibilities, his judgement was that Qatar *could and should* be autonomous from the Saudis. The first vestiges of this *phoenix rising from the ashes* moment was Qatar's response to the 1992 border clashes whereby it pushed back against Saudi pressure. The real *road to Damascus* event was however the attempted counter coup against Hamad in 1996 which solidified his belief that political autonomy from the Saudis was not something to be merely desired – it was a necessary pursuit for Qatar's independence. As such, not only was Qatar's political emancipation from Saudi Arabia now a national interest objective, it was also critical to Hamad's survival as emir, and was the harbinger for ambitious foreign policy strategies which heralded the beginning of Qatar's subtle power era.

CHAPTER THREE - QATAR'S SUBTLE POWER ERA

Introduction

Qatar is a nation state which sees itself as an energy producer and a peacemaker, is progressive amongst its peers, has a multi-pronged outlook towards international engagement, all whilst remaining cognisant of its history. As will be discussed below, although the subtle power era commenced in the late-1990s, the groundwork for many of the initiatives and policy changes were undertaken whilst Khalifa was in power, yet the driving force behind these changes was invariably Hamad, who can be accredited with the commencement of Qatar's successful pursuit of autonomy. Chapter Three evaluates this 'subtle power era' for Qatar and is divided into two parts. In introducing the foundations and background for this transformative era, Part One begins by evaluating the implications of the accession of Hamad as emir, and his relationship with the Saudis before and after Khalifa was deposed. This evaluation sheds light on Hamad's suspicions and mistrust of the Saudis prior to the 1995 coup, and the enmity that festered in the years that followed. Following this Part One intentionally digresses back a few years and analyses Qatar's foreign policy actions following Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, its role in assisting the Saudi and American repulsion of Iraqi forces, and Qatar/Saudi relations in the aftermath of the conflict. The evaluation of this watershed moment in regional politics aids the understanding of Hamad's shift in perception of the Saudis as a neighbouring guarantor of regional stability, and underscores not just the desire, but the necessity of broadening Qatar's physical protection and security apparatus, and the need to be more autonomous from (or less dependent on) Saudi Arabia.

Part Two is dedicated to the first of three theoretical evaluations of the four elements of subtle power in this thesis – the first being the impact the four elements of subtle power had on Qatar's pursuit of autonomy, and its relations with Saudi Arabia. Each of the four elements of subtle power, as introduced in Chapter One, are evaluated for their efficacy and relevance with respect to Qatar's eventual political emancipation from Riyadh. As will be discussed below, each of the four elements of subtle power emerged separately and at different times during Hamad's reign. Furthermore, the emergence of each element was not necessarily obvious from the outset and only became apparent following the success of a particular initiative. For example, the element of physical protection from the United States had obvious benefits for Qatar after the Americans relocated from Dammam to Al Udeid, yet the breadth and scope of the influence of

Al Jazeera, a powerful tool for the national branding element, was not apparent in 1996 when the trailblazing broadcaster was first conceived. Ultimately, what Part Two of this chapter elucidates is the impact of each of the four elements of subtle power and their impact on Qatar's gradual political emancipation from Saudi Arabia, a process that was neither rectilinear nor assured.

PART ONE - TOWARDS AUTONOMY

Emir Hamad - A Vision of Autonomy

In the years leading up to the 1995 coup, Crown Prince Hamad gained considerable experience within government³²³ having been the heir-apparent since 1977,³²⁴ and had a wide impact across development planning, the management of the oil and gas sector, and as defence minister during the Gulf War.³²⁵ A rebel and revolutionary at heart, Hamad was eager to redevelop not just Qatar's image, but more importantly its place in the region.³²⁶ Hamad's vision for securing the city-state was founded on societal, intellectual, and economic liberalisation that would set the emirate free from the extended reach of the Saudi state.³²⁷ The rise to policy-making authority of Hamad and that of his loyal offside Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani³²⁸ (HBJ) took place long before Hamad became emir. According to a former US Ambassador to Qatar, who personally knew both Khalifa and Hamad, "when Khalifa was still emir, Hamad had begun exercising more and more power as prime minister, whilst Khalifa was spending more and more time in his villa. He was absent".³²⁹ As such, the ascendancy of Hamad was a result of a gradual process of assuming the reins of power and relationship building rather than any sudden political rupture, despite the surprise of the 1995 coup.

³²³ Gray, *Qatar: Politics and Challenges of Development*, 57.

³²⁴ Fromherz, *Qatar: Rise to Power and Influence*, 84.

³²⁵ Gray, *Qatar: Politics and Challenges of Development*, 57.

³²⁶ Andreas Krieg, "The Weaponisation of Narratives Amid the Gulf Crisis," in *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, ed. Andreas Krieg (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 93.

³²⁷ Krieg, "The Weaponisation of Narratives Amid the Gulf Crisis," 93.

³²⁸ Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani, known as HBJ, was Prime Minister of Qatar from April 2007 to June 2013, and Foreign Minister from January 1992 to June 2013. HBJ is considered a long standing, loyal ally of Hamad throughout his career.

³²⁹ Former US Ambassador to Qatar, in discussion with author, April 2021.

Hamad did not assume the reins of power, he seized them much like his father had done twenty-three years earlier. Hamad did this because he felt that his father was holding back on a number of key reforms, and acting too cautiously in some areas of economic and social policy.³³⁰ Furthermore and more personally for example, rumour has it that after reading that the travel guide *Lonely Planet* described his country as ‘the dullest place on Earth’, Hamad felt compelled to transform Qatar,³³¹ had concluded that change was necessary, and decisive action was required to kick-start a number of reforms in Qatar. However, in a region synonymous with socio-political change occurring at glacial pace, Hamad’s challenge was immense. As per the recollections of the former US Ambassador: “Up until Hamad came to power, Qatar remained very much aligned with Saudi foreign policy, or under Saudi’s shadow, and that’s how they (Khalifa and his inner circle) liked it”.³³² Furthermore and according to a member of the ruling Al Thani family who reflects on Qatar’s situation when Hamad came to power:

Because being where they (Qatar) were, between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and being a small state, and not having the average³³³ resources a country needed to be completely sovereign, to be completely independent in its foreign policy, and its global ambitions, we (Qatar) didn’t really have the military capacity to do this, and obviously Saudi is a much larger military power.³³⁴

Yet almost from the outset, Hamad demonstrated a willingness to stand up to his much larger Gulf neighbour to protect the interests of his country and its ambitions.³³⁵ Hamad not only saw this through the interests of the nation state of Qatar, but also in his role as Emir of Qatar itself – a transformative and independent leader distinguishable from his father. This notion remained throughout Hamad’s tenure as emir, as a former Qatari civil servant explains:

The personality of Sheikh Hamad was totally different from the personality of Sheikh Khalifa. Sheikh Hamad had ambitions and hopes to have strong country. What made that increase in Sheikh Hamad was the coup in the beginning. The coup was against him in 1996, and forced him to have totally independent foreign policy from Saudi Arabia ... Qatar started its real foreign policy since 1996. Before that

³³⁰ Gray, *Qatar: Politics and Challenges of Development*, 47.

³³¹ Zafirov, “The Qatar Crisis – Why did the Blockade Fail?,” 2.

³³² Former US Ambassador to Qatar, in discussion with author, April 2021.

³³³ Meaning ‘adequate’.

³³⁴ Sheikha Haya Al Thani, (Member of Ruling Family in Qatar), in discussion with author, December 2020.

³³⁵ Maryah Al Dafa, “Qatar Foundation: A Civil Society Actor Responds to a Crisis,” in *The Gulf Crisis: The View from Qatar* ed. Rory Miller (Doha: Hamad bin Khalifa University Press, 2018), 71.

there was no real foreign policy. Qatar used to pay attention, or to focus on the local affairs more than international affairs.³³⁶

Although the recollections of some Qataris is that its foreign policy changed with the accession of Hamad, changes had actually been underway for years, well before the change-over in leadership that has fixated Saudi critics of Qatar ever since.

One of Qatar's earlier bold moves to step beyond the Saudi shadow for example was to establish diplomatic relations with the USSR (and China)³³⁷ in 1988, despite Saudi and American consternation.³³⁸ It was considered a decision of geopolitical necessity, and partly driven by "the hope that the Soviets would sell Qatar more sophisticated weapons",³³⁹ according to the former US Ambassador. The decision (by Hamad) to establish ties with Moscow was made despite strained ties with the United States which had resulted from Qatar's purchase of American anti-aircraft missiles from the black market.³⁴⁰ Whilst knowing the importance of the United States physical protections in the region, this is one of many examples whereby a change in foreign policy direction took place. This change evolved gradually over six years from 1989 to 1995, where the actual replacement of Khalifa as emir only formalised (this change in foreign policy), not necessarily triggering the shift.³⁴¹

The story of Qatar's modern political history is a story of the Al Thani family, and the story of Qatar's subtle power era is very much interwoven with the story of Hamad. As described by a former Qatari Ambassador to South Africa: "Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa, His Highness, the emir, the father put Qatar on the map, undoubtedly, and he was a visionary".³⁴² When Hamad came to power, he embraced a bolder approach in shaping the nation and putting Qatar on the global stage – under Hamad, Qatar's subtle power era would soon commence. He would raise Qatar's international profile through conflict mediation, sports, and broadcasting, in a way that

³³⁶ Nayef bin Al Shamari, (former Qatar Petroleum engineer), in discussion with author, February 2021.

³³⁷ Zafirov, "The Qatar Crisis – Why did the Blockade Fail?," 5.

³³⁸ "Qatar Opens Ties with Moscow at Times of Strains with US," New York Times, accessed April 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/08/02/world/qatar-opens-ties-to-moscow-at-time-of-strains-with-us.html?sec=&spon=>

³³⁹ Former US Ambassador to Qatar, in discussion with author, April 2021.

³⁴⁰ "Qatar Opens Ties with Moscow at Times of Strains with US," New York Times, accessed April 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/08/02/world/qatar-opens-ties-to-moscow-at-time-of-strains-with-us.html?sec=&spon=>

³⁴¹ Kristian Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis* (London: Hurst and Company, 2020), 30.

³⁴² Bashir Al Shirawi, (former ambassador, Qatari Embassy in South Africa), in discussion with author, February 2021.

has been characterised as ‘very much a personal vision’.³⁴³ Under Hamad, Qatar became known as a small yet powerful state, that would forge an independent path.³⁴⁴ This vision was also embraced in the narrative of the transfer of power to then 33-year-old Crown Prince Tamim following his father's abdication on 25 June 2013 (discussed in detail in Chapter Five). This move was widely reported to be the first transfer of power from father to son without a death or *coup d'état* in the modern history of the region's monarchies. The telling of this moment naturally melded into the constructed image of Qatar as a forward-looking nation, capitalising on geopolitical and economic change,³⁴⁵ a nation state ‘transformed’ during the leadership years of Hamad, a leader likened by the former US Ambassador to Qatar as “the Lee Kuan Yew³⁴⁶ of the Middle East”.³⁴⁷

The 1991 Gulf War – A Change in Dynamics for the Qatar/Saudi Relationship

When Iraq invaded and occupied Kuwait, the Qataris woke up to the cold realisation that the Saudis were not only incapable of defending themselves, but also defending the small states of the Persian Gulf. When the Saudi-led GCC Peninsula Shield Force was put to the test to protect Kuwait from the Iraqi invasion, the force simply failed to provide the desired deterrent.³⁴⁸ The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, followed by the US-led war against Iraq in 1991, was a conflict which Hamad himself had personally fought in, having led tanks against Saddam's armies, whilst knowing that Qatar could easily be next.³⁴⁹ In recalling the onset of the Gulf War, and the dawning of a new realisation for Hamad, a former US Ambassador to Qatar notes that “the only function the Saudis served was to call the Americans, and it didn't take a huge leap of logic to say, we (Qatar) can call the Americans too”.³⁵⁰ According to the former ambassador, it was at this point that Qatar realised that Saudi Arabia was incapable of defending them, and that “the humiliation of Khalifa (as described in Chapter Two) at the hand of the Saudis had

³⁴³ Crystal Ennis, “Reading the Entrepreneurial Power in Small Gulf States: Qatar and the UAE,” *International Journal* 73, no. 4, (2018): 573-595.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 583.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 583.

³⁴⁶ Lee Kuan Yew was Singapore's Prime Minister from 1959 to 1990. At the time of his appointment as prime minister, Singapore was an underdeveloped fishing village, abandoned by the British during WWII, and wedged between to greater regional powers. By the time of his retirement, Lee Kuan Yew was credited with turning Singapore into the highly educated, economic powerhouse in Southeast Asia it remains today.

³⁴⁷ Former US Ambassador to Qatar, in discussion with author, April 2021.

³⁴⁸ Sebastien Boussois, “Iran and Qatar: A Forced Rapprochement,” in *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, ed. Andrea Krieg (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 220.

³⁴⁹ Fromherz, *Qatar: Rise to Power and Influence*, xiv.

³⁵⁰ Former US Ambassador to Qatar, in discussion with author, April 2021.

ended”.³⁵¹ Although not necessarily a moment of achieving greater autonomy from the Saudis, the Gulf War was a watershed event which convinced Hamad that an alternative foreign policy posture - not simply bandwagoning and balancing - was necessary.

For Hamad, not only was the Gulf War a realisation of the need for a new reality for Qatar, but also a defining moment in the Crown Prince’s ascendancy to towards emir. Qatar’s contribution to the defeat of Saddam Hussein, its first foray into an international military theatre, “was the deployment of a mechanised armoured regiment of about 1,700 men, 20 tanks, armoured cars and stuff like that”.³⁵² This deployment was for Hamad a proud and defining moment not just for Qatar, but also for him personally, as according to the former US ambassador and a former Australian Trade Commissioner to Bahrain:

The Qatari armed forces road-marched a mechanised unit from Doha to the Saudi-Kuwaiti border without losing a single vehicle on the road.³⁵³ This heralded a historic moment for a newly independent Qatar, as Qatari tanks rolled through the streets of Khafji, (a small Saudi city a mere 20 kilometres from the Kuwaiti border), and provided fire support for Saudi National Guard units, engaging Iraqi army troops,³⁵⁴ and played an essential role in stopping the only major Iraqi counterattack.³⁵⁵

A new chapter in the history of Qatar/Saudi relations had been written - Qatar was *now* coming to the rescue of the Saudis. Despite Qatar’s contribution during the war, Doha’s relations with Riyadh did not strengthen, but to the contrary, soured, as the ruling family in Riyadh suffered the humiliation of not just being unable to protect Kuwait, but having to ask for help from the United States which was anathema to many conservative Saudis who drew pride from the kingdom as the custodian to Islam’s two holiest sites. Qatar’s contribution to the defenestration of Saddam Hussein’s forces, according to the former US Ambassador, “led to the relationship with Saudi Arabia to crash overnight into the sub-basement”,³⁵⁶ when the assumption was that assisting a fellow GCC member militarily would be welcome. Further undermining Qatar’s

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*

³⁵² *Ibid.*

³⁵³ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁴ Geoff Walls, (former Australian Trade Commissioner, Australian Embassy in Bahrain), in discussion with author, March 2021.

³⁵⁵ Former US Ambassador to Qatar, in discussion with author, April 2021.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

relations with Saudi Arabia immediately after the Gulf War was the report of a ‘friendly fire’ incident during the war,³⁵⁷ whereby a Qatari soldier allegedly shot a Saudi. The aftermath of the Gulf War saw Qatar’s profile enhanced by its success on the battlefield, albeit minimally and from a low base given its comparatively small contribution to the defeat of Iraq.

Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait had a significant impact on the Saudi psyche. The Saudis felt a great deal of humiliation of no longer being seen as a regional power capable of protecting smaller states. Furthermore, in recalling Riyadh’s battlefield performance during the Gulf War the former US Ambassador recalls that:

The Saudis had several hundred casualties ... the Iraqis who were moving faster, went right through the Saudis. The Saudi National Guard was the force in front of them, and the Iraqis went right through and came down the road. The Americans kept trying to hit the Iraqi columns but the Iraqi columns were mixed up with fleeing Saudis. They (the Iraqis) were moving too fast. Airpower wasn’t working, until they ran into the Qataris. The Qataris stopped them and fixed them (the Iraqi forces) and then the American airpower decimated them.³⁵⁸

As such, although Saudi Arabia played a leading role among the GCC states in the liberation of Kuwait in 1991, diplomatically, economically, and logistically,³⁵⁹ the ultimate outcome of two Wahhabi states fighting side by side was not mutually binding experience, but rather the opposite. According to the former US Ambassador to Qatar, the Saudi response to Qatar’s impressive battlefield contribution and assistance during the Gulf War only resulted in “more nastiness”³⁶⁰ from the Saudis.³⁶¹

As for the future of the Saudi-led GCC, Iraq’s invasion and occupation of Kuwait demonstrated the limitations of the GCC as an external security actor,³⁶² and as a result the myth of GCC self-reliance was abandoned with Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait. Not only did GCC rulers consider self-reliance a chimera, but also that building any collective security system that excluded the

³⁵⁷ Jane Kinninmont, “The Gulf Divided: The Impact of the Qatar Crisis,” Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House, accessed May 2019: 9, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2019/05/gulf-divided-impact-qatar-crisis>

³⁵⁸ Former US Ambassador to Qatar, in discussion with author, April 2021.

³⁵⁹ Sulaib and Mukhyat, “Understanding Qatar’s Foreign Policy, 1995-2017,” 8-9.

³⁶⁰ Former US Ambassador to Qatar, in discussion with author, April 2021.

³⁶¹ ‘More nastiness’ means that the Saudis would continue to agitate the Qataris in protest of its foreign policies.

³⁶² Jocelyn Mitchell, “Domestic Policy Opportunities of an International Blockade,” in *The Gulf Crisis: The View from Qatar* ed. Rory Miller (Doha: Hamad bin Khalifa University Press, 2018), 58.

United States was out of the question.³⁶³ By the time Hamad became emir, he had realised in the face of Saudi Arabia's helpless defence of its own country, that relying on Riyadh for regional security might not be the best policy. He believed that he needed a different approach. Once he became emir, Hamad resolved to chart out a new path for his country to guarantee its security and prosperity.³⁶⁴

It was during the Gulf War that Qatar first engaged and hosted international forces, a harbinger for what would later become a central component of its external security apparatus, and a return of the subtle power element of physical protection it had lost when the British departed east of Suez. During the war, according to the former Australian Trade Commissioner to Bahrain: "Qatar allowed coalition troops from Canada to use the country as an airbase to launch aircraft close to (*sic*) Close Air Protection duty, and also permitted air forces from the United States and France to cooperate in its territory. The links were there, quite strong with various countries",³⁶⁵ links to international forces which included the US, Canadian and French fighter planes flying missions from Qatar during the conflict.³⁶⁶ After the war Sheikh Khalifa joined other Arab leaders in continuing to make their country's military bases available to the American-led coalition, and signed a security pact with the United States. Qatar continued to host the Americans who years later established the forward headquarters of the United States Central Command³⁶⁷ in Qatar in 2002 - a powerful deterrent and the permanent establishment of one of the elements of Qatar's subtle power foreign policy strategies which remained intact in the years proceeding, and continues to act as a linchpin of its autonomy from Saudi Arabia (discussed further in Part Two below).

The containment of Saddam Hussein continued throughout the 1990s. The Gulf War led to a disruption of the balance of power in the Gulf, and weakened Iraq in favour of Saudi Arabia. As Iraq became more isolated from most of the GCC states during the 1991-2003 period, Qatar's fear of Saudi hegemony over the Gulf's small states increased.³⁶⁸ These fears existed during the Gulf War and continued throughout the 1990s, as according to a member of the ruling Al Thani family: "the best example is that during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, when

³⁶³ Legrenzi, *The GCC and the International Relations of the Gulf*, 75.

³⁶⁴ Bakir, "The Evolution of Turkey-Qatar Relations Amid a Growing Gulf Divide," 199.

³⁶⁵ Geoff Walls, (former Australian Trade Commissioner, Australian Embassy in Bahrain), in discussion with author, March 2021.

³⁶⁶ Chan Sewell, "Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad Al Thani, Former Emir of Qatar, Dies age 84," *New York Times*, accessed October 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/25/world/middleeast/sheikh-khalifa-bin-hamad-al-thani-former-emir-of-qatar-dies-at-84.html>

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁸ Sulaib and Mukhyat, "Understanding Qatar's Foreign Policy, 1995-2017," 8-9.

Saudi Arabia asked the UAE and Qatar if they could host their army, and both the UAE and Qatar said ‘no’ – one can only assume that if they let the Saudis in, what will ensure that they leave”.³⁶⁹ As such, although Qatar was not attacked, the Gulf War dramatically underscored the vulnerabilities of small states to the rapacious designs of larger and more powerful neighbours.³⁷⁰ With a now weakened Iraq and a Saudi Arabia unchallenged in the Arab world, Qatar feared it was in the crosshairs of the Saudis, which posed as a direct threat. This further necessitated what was slowly being put in place, that being a permanent American presence for external security guarantees. Once the presence of the United States became certain and permanent, (signalling the inception of one element of subtle power), Hamad was able to concentrate on other foreign policy strategies without the concern of external threats,³⁷¹ an important harbinger (albeit not immediate) for the eventual emergence of the other elements of Qatar’s subtle power capabilities.

In summary, the Iraqi invasion and occupation of Kuwait in 1990 was, much like the erupting blockade of Qatar in 2017, an event that reverberated through the regional politics and the international relations of the Gulf.³⁷² Much can be made of Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait with respect to the decisions later taken which shaped Qatar’s future subtle power foreign policy strategies and its pursuit of autonomy from Saudi Arabia. Not only was Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait a wakeup call for the smaller Gulf states, it altered the Qatar/Saudi security complex, undermined the efficacy of balancing within the GCC, ended the Saudi humiliation of Khalifa, and signalled to Hamad that Qatar needed to be more autonomous and self-reliant in the region, whilst at the same time relying on the United States for its physical protection.

³⁶⁹ Sheikha Haya Al Thani, (Member of Ruling Family in Qatar), in discussion with author, December 2020.

³⁷⁰ Sulaib and Mukhyat, “Understanding Qatar’s Foreign Policy, 1995-2017,” 8-9.

³⁷¹ *Ibid*, 11.

³⁷² Andreas Krieg, “Conclusion,” in *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, ed. Andreas Krieg (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 274.

PART TWO - SUBTLE POWER AND ITS IMPACT ON QATAR'S AUTONOMY

Introduction

No theory better explains Qatar's foreign policy strategies since the late-1990s than subtle power theorised by Mehran Kamrava. The four elements of Qatar's subtle power outlined in Chapter One have all contributed in varying degrees, and at various times, to Qatar's pursuit of autonomy, and at times, provoked a Saudi reaction or repercussion. Hamad's vision, to enhance the development of the Qatari state and politically emancipate it from the Saudis was according to a member of the ruling Al Thani family:

Risky for a small state. Hamad was however very ambitious, and his main goal was to put Qatar on the map - to let everyone know that Qatar was a country. From the conception of Al Jazeera, its hyperactive diplomacy, and Qatar being seen as a conflict mediator for example, Qatar was able to transition from bandwagoning towards a state strategically hedging in ways in which other countries were not able to do.³⁷³

The utilisation of the four elements of subtle power saw an end to the notion that Qatar was a political adjunct of the Saudis, and by the late-1990s, was a state transitioning to become an autonomous regional actor. However, from Riyadh's perspective, a Saudi socio-political analyst contends that Qatar's transition was, and still remains, problematic for Saudi Arabia saying that:

Qatar never clearly focused on one state. Qatar had a policy of not being 100% dedicated to one state or one position. As a result, this (*sic*) not putting their eggs all in one basket. Some states will find that problematic, especially in a region where zero-sum is the name of the game. In a region that perceives actors or relations as zero-sum, this Qatari 'half-in half-out' policy with various members or regional superpowers made it not very appealing, and created grievances with states, particularly with Saudi Arabia.³⁷⁴

³⁷³ Sheikha Haya Al Thani, (Member of Ruling Family in Qatar), in discussion with author, December 2020.

³⁷⁴ Aziz Alghashian, (Saudi socio-political analyst, Saudi National), in discussion with author, July 2021.

Part Two of this chapter is divided into four sections, with each section being dedicated to each of the four elements of subtle power, analysing the *how*, *why*, and *when* they impacted on Qatar's pursuit of autonomy and its relations with Saudi Arabia. Whilst each of the four elements of subtle power emerged at different points in time and had an incongruous evolution, the element of Diplomacy and Conflict Mediation is a hallmark feature of Qatar's subtle power foreign policy strategies which aided its pursuit of autonomy from Saudi Arabia.

Diplomacy and Conflict Mediation

A centuries-old parable that is known to nearly every Muslim is - Mohammad the Mediator.³⁷⁵ This parable immortalises the concept of conflict mediation as an attribute which can raise status and prestige, and increase the influence of those who are able to bring disputing parties together. The parable familiar to many Muslims is as follows:

One day in the early seventh century, the sacred black stone of the Kaaba in Mecca had to be moved. Four prominent men fought amongst each other over who should have the honour of moving the stone. Mohammad the prophet, stepped in with a solution. The stone should be placed on a carpet, and each of the four men would hold a corner of the carpet and move the stone together. The brilliant solution prevented war. The moral is clear: the ability to mediate conflicts in society prone to war confers status and power.³⁷⁶

As for Hamad in a modern-day Qatar, the notion that conflict mediation confers power and status was well known and executed, and became a hallmark feature of Qatar's subtle power foreign policy strategies.

Qatar under Hamad became a hub of alternative thought, new ideas and unconventional approaches to resolving conflict.³⁷⁷ The positive reputation Qatar sought to garner via diplomacy and conflict mediation, much like the purpose of national branding, was in turn reinforced by a proactive presence on the global stage.³⁷⁸ Qatar's success of branding itself through diplomacy is well known within the country, as proclaimed by a former Qatari civil servant who said that: "in 2008 and 2009, you can imagine Qatar had hosted almost five or six

³⁷⁵ Fromherz, *Qatar: Rise to Power and Influence*, xv.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁷ Krieg, "The Weaponisation of Narratives Amid the Gulf Crisis," 94.

³⁷⁸ Kamrava, *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics*, 63.

mediations in ten years, which no country in the world did the same thing. That shows you how Qatar was strong at that time”.³⁷⁹ Outside of Qatar too, and most notably in the offices of the United Nations Headquarters, according to a serving United Nations (UN) diplomat who is familiar with the Middle East: “The UN encourages fruitful efforts towards mediation, like Qatar’s hosting of Afghan parties in Doha, and things like that. Usually, our published statement reflects that”.³⁸⁰ It is this status and power through conflict mediation which Hamad and his loyal offsideer HBJ sought to achieve, and to varying degrees *did* achieve, to raise Qatar’s international profile. This seemingly outsized role for a such a small state was not serendipitous, and is largely credited to the leadership of Emir Hamad as a Qatari PhD candidate contends:

Qatar is a very active player in the international community for many reasons. Being a small state in a significantly unstable region, along with the huge capacity economically which Qatar enjoys, which is also complied (*sic*) with a proactive leadership under the Father Emir, opened the door for such big role in the region.³⁸¹

As an internationally recognised mediator, Qatar was able to broker many deals, including between Hezbollah and the Lebanese government, and between Yemen and the Houthis³⁸² - two of the more prominent examples which are analysed in this section of this chapter. Although Hamad’s projects, and the projects of the royal family as a whole, may have seemed disparate or flagrantly contradictory, they all followed a central strategy - to increase Qatar’s visibility and reputation as a place where the world’s most pressing conflicts and problems and ideas could be discussed. These international conflict mediation initiatives are even more extraordinary considering that Qatar had almost no foreign policy to speak of before Hamad.³⁸³

Qatar sought to mediate in conflicts where the Saudis had either not attempted, or not been successful. Doha also had a slight advantage over the Riyadh, as consistent with the theory of rented power, as it could engage with some non-state actors which did not trust the Saudis. One classic example is Qatar’s tactics during the Lebanon negotiations in 2008 which became

³⁷⁹ Nayef bin Al Shamari, (former Qatar Petroleum engineer), in discussion with author, February 2021.

³⁸⁰ United Nations Diplomat, posted to United Nations Headquarters in New York, in discussion with author, February 2021.

³⁸¹ Mirdef Al Qahsouti (Qatari PhD Candidate specialising in Iran-GCC Relations), email exchange with author, March 2023.

³⁸² Krieg, “The Weaponisation of Narratives Amid the Gulf Crisis,” 95.

³⁸³ Fromherz, *Qatar: Rise to Power and Influence*, xvi.

legendary. Housing all groups in the conflict at the Sheraton Hotel (in Doha), Qatar literally had control over the keys when the purse strings were not convincing enough.³⁸⁴ While the Americans had no chance of negotiating with Hezbollah, officially a terrorist group, HBJ brought together Lebanon's Prime Minister Siniora and Parliament Speaker Nahib, a senior opposition leader, for the first time in months and brokered a historic peace deal. Celebrations broke out in Lebanon with signs saying, 'We all say: Thank you Qatar'.³⁸⁵ While the Saudis generally failed in their efforts, HBJ and Qatari negotiators were able to strike an agreement, (benefiting from) having established longstanding relationships with Hezbollah and other parties in Lebanon³⁸⁶ in the past.

A second example of Qatar's successful conflict mediation strategies was its engagement in conflict resolution efforts in the intermittent war waged against the Houthi movement by the Yemeni army in the latter half of the 2000s. This preceded a failed Saudi military campaign to neutralise the Houthis in 2009-2010, which ultimately achieved the opposite of the intended objective. The Saudis not only failed to crush the (Houthi) movement, they radicalised it instead and militarised it even further, and at the same time, also reinforced the anti-Saudi outlook of the Houthis.³⁸⁷ According to a former US Ambassador to Yemen who was deployed to Sana'a at the time:

In Yemen, I think that overall, for Qatar it was mostly just establishing their brand ... They offered huge financial incentives to the two sides to try to get them to agree (to a conflict resolution mechanism) ... The Saudis were always very suspicious of Doha. They saw the Qataris as trying to intrude into what the Saudis considered to be their turf³⁸⁸ and being a front for Iran.³⁸⁹

Not only did Qatar succeed in drawing the ire of Riyadh, the former ambassador recalled an anecdote of the scornful response of the Yemeni President to Qatar's mediation:

³⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 87-88.

³⁸⁵ Fromherz, *Qatar: Rise to Power and Influence*, 87-88.

³⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 89.

³⁸⁷ Toby Matthiesen, "Renting the Casbah: Gulf States' Foreign Policy towards North Africa since the Arab Uprisings," in *The Changing Security Dynamics of the Persian Gulf*, ed. Kristian Ulrichsen (London: Hurst and Co, 2017), 46.

³⁸⁸ Meaning: The Saudi sphere of influence.

³⁸⁹ Gerald Feierstein, (former ambassador, US Embassy in Sana'a), in discussion with author, January 2020.

When I was there Hillary Clinton came on a visit as Secretary of State ... There were the general issues that we wanted to discuss with Ali Abdullah Saleh,³⁹⁰ but nothing specific. She said, ‘What should I ask him about?’ Oddly enough, there had been an article in the local press that day which said that the Qataris were coming back, and offering again to try to mediate between the Houthis and the government. I said, ‘Well, why don't you ask him about that? Is Qatar going to come back and are they going to try again?’ Which she did. Saleh exploded and went into this whole rant about Qatar, and the relationship with Iran, and the fact that they were just interfering in Yemeni affairs.³⁹¹

As such, although Qatar was able to bring conflicting parties together induced by financial windfalls, an eventual resolution to a conflict remained elusive in many cases, and this was the case in Yemen. Nevertheless, Qatar’s brand as a regional mediator continued to attract attention, on this occasion it attracted the attention of the world’s most powerful diplomat - Secretary Clinton.

The two examples Lebanon and Yemen demonstrate Qatar’s willingness to mediate in conflicts where Saudi Arabia could not, and this autonomous providence remained a source of tension between them going forwards. However, while Qatar’s attempts as a mediator were generally successful in bringing parties to the negotiating table, these efforts were more successful in defusing short-term crises than providing long-term solutions to conflicts.³⁹² The initial agreement regarding the Houthi conflict quickly broke down amid friction between the Yemeni and Qatari governments, while the 2008 Doha Agreement regarding Lebanon, whilst averting greater conflict, neglected deeper (and longer-term) issues.³⁹³ What however enabled Qatar to act as a most unlikely conflict mediator, was its perceived impartiality and its tendency to rely on its considerable financial power to bring warring parties to an agreement. With near-bottomless state coffers, Qatar ensured that mediation took place in comfortable environments within Doha,³⁹⁴ (an example of Qatar’s economic hard power producing a soft power outcome). It was Qatar’s reputation, coupled with the state’s enthusiasm and financial capacity to offer lavish accommodation and financial carrots to conflicting parties, which resulted in Qatar being invited to act as a mediator for a number of high profile peace negotiations.³⁹⁵

³⁹⁰ President of Yemen at the time.

³⁹¹ Gerald Feierstein, (former ambassador, US Embassy in Sana’a), in discussion with author, January 2020.

³⁹² Sultan Barakat, “Qatari Mediation: Between Ambition and Achievement,” (Brookings Doha Centre Analysis: Brookings Doha Centre, 2014): 24, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/qatari-mediation-between-ambition-and-achievement/>

³⁹³ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

For example, in the case of the Lebanese talks, participants were hardly unaware that Qatar was then pouring \$300 million into reconstruction projects throughout southern Lebanon.³⁹⁶ With a long history of offering humanitarian and development assistance in countries where Qatar mediated, officials were clearly comfortable upping assistance offers in order to reach an agreement.³⁹⁷ A former Qatari civil servant openly admits the significance of the financial inducements in the success of bringing conflicting Lebanese parties together by noting:

Qatar had the wealth to be a very objective mediator because it could give money, if not warring factions at least to disputed factions (*sic*). It could cool things down. There are many examples. Lebanon is one of them. Lebanon was on the fringe of civil war. It was in 2006. Qatar and intervention at that time managed to solve the problem with good financial support.³⁹⁸

In Yemen, of great interest to the Houthis, according to the group's exiled spokesperson and former member of parliament, was the Qatari pledge to finance reconstruction in their area.³⁹⁹ The International Crisis Group concluded that the core of the 2008 Doha agreement was Qatar's pledge to finance reconstruction and launch major development projects in Sa'ada,⁴⁰⁰ possibly to the tune of \$300 to \$500 million.⁴⁰¹ However, according to the former US Ambassador to Yemen "on several occasions Qatar tried to mediate between the two sides, with of course a substantial offer of development assistance to the parties if they came to a conclusion, which inevitably they didn't".⁴⁰²

Ultimately, whilst Qatar's *chequebook diplomacy* may have encourage parties to reach an agreement, it also promoted the pursuit of short-term gains over tackling the underlying roots of conflicts.⁴⁰³ Furthermore, Qatar's ability to deploy financial leverage to pressure one or both conflicting parties to accept a proposed resolution in some cases, including in Yemen, brought Qatar's neutrality into question.⁴⁰⁴ (This is discussed in greater detail in the following chapter

³⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 24.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 25.

³⁹⁸ Abdulaziz Al Mahmoud, (former Qatari Airforce engineer, Al Sharq and Peninsula daily journalist, Chief editor for Al Jazeera), in discussion with author, January 2021.

³⁹⁹ Anders Gulbrandsen, "Bridging the Gulf: Qatari Business Diplomacy and Conflict Mediation," (Washington: Digital Georgetown): 42, accessed January 2021, <https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/handle/10822/552827>

⁴⁰⁰ Sa'ada is a Houthi dominated Province in north-west Yemen bordering Saudi Arabia.

⁴⁰¹ Gulbrandsen, "Bridging the Gulf: Qatari Business Diplomacy and Conflict Mediation," 42.

⁴⁰² Gerald Feierstein, (former ambassador, US Embassy in Sana'a), in discussion with author, January 2020.

⁴⁰³ Barakat, "Qatari Mediation: Between Ambition and Achievement," 28.

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 25.

which evaluates the whether the conflict mediation element of subtle power was either undermined or weakened, and the *how*, *why*, and *when* this may have occurred). Qatar's conflict mediations may not have resulted in a lasting resolution to the conflicts in Lebanon and Yemen, yet according to a political Islamism expert: "There was a lot of criticism about how much money Qatar was splashing out on mediations that didn't necessarily have an outcome. But this was more of a public relations exercise than necessarily effective mediation",⁴⁰⁵ which *did* succeed in raising Qatar's profile and politically distancing Doha from Riyadh, achieving a degree of foreign policy autonomy.

In summary, Qatar's conflict mediation initiatives accentuated Qatar's brand and reputation as a powerbroker which could bring warring parties together. However, the growing prominence of Qatar as a conflict mediator did not go unrecognised in Riyadh as noted by a former policy officer who worked at the Saudi Royal Court who said: "The Qataris have the international recognition, the economic resources, independent foreign policy, and proven working relations with state and non-state actors, relations that even Saudi Arabia, despite its significant political and economic weight, does not have".⁴⁰⁶ Therefore and as adumbrated above, the diplomacy and conflict mediation element of subtle power, whilst not finding a permanent solution to some of the region's most intractable conflicts, *did* achieve for Qatar a greater degree of political autonomy from Saudi Arabia.

National Branding

One month after Qatar's formal independence from the United Kingdom in 1971, a diplomatic report was despatched to the British Foreign Secretary in London titled - 'The Independence of Qatar'. In this report the Political Agent in Bahrain wrote:

They (the Qataris) do not strike me as sensitive to international public opinion: they might say, with the Miller of Dee,⁴⁰⁷ that 'I care for nobody, no, not I, if nobody cares for me,'⁴⁰⁸ an attitude which may shore them up for many years, as it once

⁴⁰⁵ Courtney Freer, (Middle East Centre at the London School of Economics), in discussion with author, January 2021.

⁴⁰⁶ Jamil Sawda, (former policy officer, Saudi Royal Court), in discussion with author, November 2021.

⁴⁰⁷ 'There was a Jolly Miller Once' is a traditional folk song from the Chester area in northwest England. It is often titled 'The Miller of the Dee.' The song was originally part of Isaac Bickerstaffe's play, *Love in a Village* (1762).

⁴⁰⁸ "The Independence of Qatar," *Arabian Gulf Digital Archives*, accessed April 2021, <https://www.agda.ae/en/catalogue/tna/fco/8/1724/n/30>

preserved the former Sultan in Oman. Nor are they likely to be swayed by what passes for public opinion within Qatar.⁴⁰⁹

Since the beginning of Qatar's hyperactive national branding initiatives and investments - it can now be said that nothing could now be further from the truth from the diplomatic report, as Qatar actively promotes its image globally in various ways.

Qatar's national branding initiatives and investments are too many to list, as anything for sale that would promote Qatar is seemingly worth considering. A French football team, landmark buildings in Europe's most salubrious cities, stakes in international airlines, a luxury Italian fashion designer and a Hollywood movie studio,⁴¹⁰ just to name a few. According to a Qatar expert at Qatar University: "It's not only Qatar's mediation and humanitarian aid which has to do with Qatar wanting to brand itself as a trustworthy ally internationally",⁴¹¹ as targeted purchases and investments also seek to brand Qatar "as a normative power state like the European state model".⁴¹² There is no doubt that Qatar's investments and initiatives have propelled Qatar into the international limelight, yet one key initiative stands out more than any other in terms of Qatar's pursuit of autonomy from Saudi Arabia: the establishment of the Arab world's first independent⁴¹³ broadcaster - Al Jazeera.

According to a former Qatari diplomat and Al Jazeera Director, "1995 was the new era of this country and the new vision. The whole branding and attraction. It all started in 1995 when Hamad started ruling and the new vision started. Al Jazeera, media, Qatar Airways".⁴¹⁴ Although Hamad established a multitude of branding resources such as Qatar Airways, international sport events and several cultural and educational exchange programs with an international profile,⁴¹⁵ one of the unconventional tools that Qatar used in its foreign policy hedging strategies was the Al Jazeera satellite television network.⁴¹⁶ The trailblazing

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴¹⁰ Upton Saiidi "Qatar Boasts Massive Global Holdings," CNBC online, accessed November 2021, <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/07/03/qatar-boasts-massive-global-holdings--here-are-some-of-its-headline-assets.html>

⁴¹¹ Sheikha Noof Al Dosari, (Qatar University Department of International Affairs-Public Policy Program), email discussion with author, December 2020.

⁴¹² *Ibid.*

⁴¹³ Al Jazeera's independence as a broadcaster is consistently challenged. Author interviews in this thesis document the degree to which Al Jazeera's independence is regarded by the Al Jazeera journalists themselves.

⁴¹⁴ Abdul Aziz Al Horr, (former Qatari Diplomat and Director at Al Jazeera, Qatar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Al Jazeera), in discussion with author, November 2020.

⁴¹⁵ Cornelia Zeineddine, "Employing Nation Branding in the Middle East – The UAE and Qatar," *Management and Marketing* 12, no. 2, (2017): 208-221.

⁴¹⁶ Kamrava, *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics*, 76.

broadcaster was soon to become enormously successful in raising the profile of Qatar, propelling it from obscurity to a regional actor which shaped, and arguably made, regional events.

Launched in 1996, Al Jazeera was to ‘help put tiny Qatar on the map’ as Hamad explained at the time.⁴¹⁷ Al Jazeera was conceived for nation branding purposes, but it did not mind if the station’s broadcasts furthered its regional and global interests.⁴¹⁸ Had it not been for Al Jazeera, there would have been much greater ignorance of Qatar around the world (until the 2022 FIFA World Cup). As Al Jazeera was one of the earlier initiatives, Hamad provided a loan of QAR500 million (US\$137 million) to sustain Al Jazeera through its first five years,⁴¹⁹ and by securing its funding through loans or grants rather than direct government subsidies, Al Jazeera sought to maintain an independent editorial policy.⁴²⁰

At times there appeared to be close coordination between the Qatari government and the television channel,⁴²¹ and Al Jazeera was seen to be used as a tool of foreign policy, often to the consternation of the Saudis. According to a former policy officer of the Saudi Royal Court:

The Saudis absolutely hate the narrative that is always being pushed by Al Jazeera, and rightfully or wrongfully ... from the Saudi side, they definitely view Al Jazeera as the mouthpiece for Qatar. That is something, it’s just no-brainer.⁴²² The Saudis always view it that there is a double standard in the UN, as in the UN Human Rights and a commission or council in Geneva is that Al Jazeera is doing the bidding on behalf of Qatar ... You can see this very clearly through Al Jazeera. Through Al Jazeera, whether it’s Arabic or English, is that everyone listens to Al Jazeera and they broadcast all of these, what they call propaganda, about criticism of Saudis, so then it sticks into people’s minds, into decision makers and European’s minds.⁴²³

⁴¹⁷ Rory Miller, “Qatar, the Gulf Crisis and Small State Behavior in International Affairs,” in *The Gulf Crisis: The View from Qatar* ed. Rory Miller (Doha: Hamad bin Khalifa University Press, 2018), 92.

⁴¹⁸ Kamrava, *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics*, 78.

⁴¹⁹ Hugh Miles, *Al Jazeera: The Inside Story of the Arab News Channel that is Challenging the West* (New York: Grove Press, 2005), 347.

⁴²⁰ *Ibid*, 347.

⁴²¹ Kamrava, *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics*, 75.

⁴²² Meaning: It’s obvious.

⁴²³ Jamil Sawda, (former policy officer, Saudi Royal Court in Riyadh), in discussion with author, January 2021.

Notwithstanding the network's own vocal protestations to the contrary, the links between Al Jazeera and Qatari foreign policy - whether they actually exist or not - cannot be denied or overlooked,⁴²⁴ and will be explained in an example in Chapter Four.

Al Jazeera was, and remains, a powerful tool of Qatar's soft power and a hallmark feature of its national branding strategy. Through Al Jazeera, Qatar has projected its worldview and influence on millions of Arabs in the region (most notably during the Arab Spring also discussed in Chapter Four). The perceptions which Al Jazeera was able to ferment raised Qatar's profile internationally, and as an entity independent from Saudi influence or overtures, and as such, a significant degree of political autonomy was achieved. Although Al Jazeera's viewership totals millions per day, the success of this national branding initiative would later pale in comparison to the success of the FIFA World Cup in 2022, a tournament when held in Russia in 2018 attracted the viewership of more than half the world's population.⁴²⁵

In summary, national branding has undoubtedly put tiny Qatar on the map. Hamad inherited a nation state with a serious case of relevance deprivation – and as mentioned in Part One of this chapter, was once regarded 'the dullest place on earth'.⁴²⁶ So much has changed that the Al Thani are now actively courted by developed nations across the globe, which is no accident, as Qatar's national branding strategy has been to deliberately target economically powerful countries. This has resulted in Qatar's image being accentuated and positively enhanced, an image that is now globally distinguishable from Saudi Arabia's often murky reputation. This aligns with the analysis of a Qatar expert from Qatar University, who when asked: "How does Qatar's national branding enhance its autonomy from Saudi Arabia," responded by saying: "National branding protects Qatar's sovereignty and political identity. Qatar's national branding and national building is a strategic move for preserving the Qatari state's identity as an independent *Khaliji*⁴²⁷ state".⁴²⁸

⁴²⁴ Kamrava, *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics*, 76.

⁴²⁵ "More Than Half the World Watched Recorded-Breaking 2018 World Cup," *FIFA*, accessed December 2021, <https://www.fifa.com/tournaments/mens/worldcup/2018russia/media-releases/more-than-half-the-world-watched-record-breaking-2018-world-cup>

⁴²⁶ Zafirov, "The Qatar Crisis – Why did the Blockade Fail?," 2.

⁴²⁷ Arabic for 'Gulf' meaning an Arabic nation state of the Persian Gulf sub-region.

⁴²⁸ Sheikha Noof Al Dosari, (Qatar University Department of International Affairs-Public Policy Program), email discussion with author, December 2020.

Strategic use of the QIA

Pioneer of the global oil industry in the 1860s, John D. Rockefeller, who started off as an agricultural products merchant, is attributed with the quote: “If you want to succeed, you should strike out on new paths, rather than travel the worn paths of accepted success”.⁴²⁹ The same can be said of Hamad, who pioneered the natural gas sector in Qatar and transformed the economy. A former US Ambassador to Qatar recalls that:

Qatar wasn't terribly wealthy by current standards before gas. They invested heavily in the liquified natural gas sector. It was a huge gamble, but it paid off big time for the Qataris ... Prior to this, he (Khalifa) wasn't really running it (the economy), he was lazy and indecisive which was why the gas field wasn't developed until 1995.⁴³⁰

Qatar embraced the international gas market which allowed it to develop more substantive political and economic ties with the countries that were purchasing its Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG).⁴³¹ It also enabled Qatar to engage in a wide-ranging and ambitious foreign policy program that challenged conventional thinking about the role of small states in international relations.⁴³² After taking power Hamad basically dispensed with ritual, and began to run his almost bankrupt country like a corporation,⁴³³ and by 2005 had created QIA,⁴³⁴ one of the largest SWFs in the world. The QIA was established to manage the state's wealth and reinvest surplus energy rents at home, but especially abroad.⁴³⁵ It bankrolled many of the foreign policy initiatives of Qatar, and having personally launched so many of these initiatives around the world, Prime Minister HBJ saw it necessary to employ an assistant foreign minister whom he titled the ‘Minister for Follow-Up Affairs’.⁴³⁶

⁴²⁹ “Thoughts on the Business of Life,” Forbes Quotes, accessed October 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/quotes/5195/>

⁴³⁰ Former US Ambassador to Qatar, in discussion with author, April 2021.

⁴³¹ Steven Wright, “The Gulf Crisis and the Gulf Gas Markets: The Qatari Perspective,” in *The Gulf Crisis: The View from Qatar*, ed. Rory Miller (Doha: Hamad bin Khalifa University Press, 2018), 121.

⁴³² Wright, “The Gulf Crisis and the Gulf Gas Markets: The Qatari Perspective,” 121.

⁴³³ Gray, *Qatar: Politics and Challenges of Development*, 48.

⁴³⁴ Juergen Braunstein, “Domestic Sources of Twenty-first-century Geopolitics: Domestic Politics and Sovereign Wealth Funds in GCC Economies,” *New Political Economy* 24, no. 2, (2019): 197-217.

⁴³⁵ Gray, *Qatar: Politics and Challenges of Development*, 63.

⁴³⁶ David Roberts, “Reflecting on Qatar’s ‘Islamist’ Soft Power,” *Washington: The Brookings Institution*, (2019), 5, accessed January 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/reflecting-on-qatars-islamist-soft-power/>

When a former Qatar Petroleum engineer was asked: “Do you think the QIA is used for foreign policy or just for economic benefits?” he replied: “Yes of course, I think they have decided that our financing plan should be under our political traction.⁴³⁷ We have business in the places where we want to take advantage of it politically. Economic investment should be aligned with political investment”.⁴³⁸ Given this being so candidly admitted, and at the same time largely known in academic literature, it is therefore somewhat banal to discuss the QIA and Qatar’s foreign policy strategies. However, what is yet to be analysed, much like the other three elements of subtle power, is to what extent the strategic use of the QIA impacted on Qatar’s pursuit of autonomy from Saudi Arabia.

Although the QIA was not conceived as a foreign policy tool, it gradually made its impact in funding Qatar’s branding initiatives, and eventually as a lever in its competition with Saudi Arabia. In years to follow, the deployment of SWFs as a tool of economic statecraft (using economic means to achieve foreign policy goals) was not unique to the Gulf states, but the intensity of their use as political outreach, leverage, and increasingly in competition with each other became according to a political economist specialising on SWFs, ‘a regional trend’.⁴³⁹ According to the same political economist at the American Enterprise Institute:

The earlier investments of HBJ that were under his tenure, those were flashy, but they weren’t contested and not really seen in solving a budgetary problem which is what the PIF⁴⁴⁰ has to do. Many of the QIA’s investments were about branding, a soft power mechanism that the Gulf states have used, like the purchase of football teams and luxury brands. Qatar has been at the forefront of some of that, wanting to be recognised, to have their passports recognised, their nationality recognised, to be seen as distinct from the big brother (Saudi Arabia) next door.⁴⁴¹

Further to the notion of branding as a soft power mechanism, and lever of competition with the Saudis, a former policy officer at the Saudi Royal Court went further by stating: “The QIA

⁴³⁷ Meaning: Financial resources should fund political motivated initiatives.

⁴³⁸ Nayef bin Al Shamari, (former Qatar Petroleum engineer), in discussion with author, February 2021.

⁴³⁹ Karen Young, “What’s Yours is Mine: Gulf SWFs as a Barometer of State-Society Relations,” in *The Politics of the Rentier States of the Gulf*, Project on Middle East Political Science, 2019, 44.

⁴⁴⁰ The Public Investment Fund is Saudi Arabia’s largest SWF.

⁴⁴¹ Karen Young, (Political Economy Researcher, American Enterprise Institute), in discussion with author, November 2020.

competes with Saudi's Public Investment Fund, and it does so to enhance Qatar's image and political and economic policies".⁴⁴²

There is additional evidence to support this from a UN diplomat who is familiar with the Middle East. When asked: "Do you think the QIA is used as a foreign policy tool?" the UN diplomat emphatically replied:

Yes! When Qatar was funding something, maybe Saudi didn't want to fund it, or when Saudi was funding something, and Qatar maybe didn't want to fund it so it can have the opposite effect. You might get more money as they try and one-up⁴⁴³ each other or challenge one another. In terms of charitable international organisational giving, it's not necessarily official to have this kind of competition ... Further to this, in terms of competition between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, they're buying ports and they're wanting to expand internationally into US port zones. Buying up ports in the Horn of Africa is like a hobby now between the Emirates and Qatar, and who's getting which port in the Horn of Africa especially. You can, in a lot of these circumstances find that they follow the money and see where the influence is lying. I think that's true. That's true for anyone's foreign policy, and I think it's uniquely Qatari or Gulf.⁴⁴⁴

Another example demonstrating that even in the United Nations itself Doha and Riyadh positioned themselves competitively. The United Nations diplomat shared an anecdote by recalling:

Qatar is a member state. How a member state chooses to spend its money, including giving it to us is their business. I'll give you an example. The UN counter-terrorism office, the UN Office for Counterterrorism is its official name, received a huge, \$100 million grant from Saudi Arabia when it opened. Then, probably 18 months later, Qatar responded with a \$50 million grant to the same office.⁴⁴⁵

⁴⁴² Jamil Sawda, (former policy officer, Saudi Royal Court), in discussion with author, November 2021.

⁴⁴³ Outbid or compete to win.

⁴⁴⁴ United Nations Diplomat, posted to United Nations Headquarters in New York, in discussion with author, February 2021.

⁴⁴⁵ United Nations Diplomat, posted to United Nations Headquarters in New York, in discussion with author, February 2021.

Albeit occurring during the blockade of Qatar when bilateral relations were at their lowest point, this example again reinforces the fact that Qatar's QIA and Saudi Arabia's PIF are competitors in a spending game of one-upmanship.

Ultimately, what the strategic use of the QIA means for Qatar's pursuit of autonomy from Saudi Arabia is plain to see. The QIA, funded by ballooning hydrocarbon rents, particularly from the export of LNG, has (alongside other financial vehicles exemplifying Qatar's commercial power) enabled and facilitated Qatar's global outreach, a prospect undertaken outside of the auspices of the GCC and negligible to the consent of Saudi Arabia. This is a stark contrast to the times of Sheikh Abdullah in the 1930s who, as discussed in Chapter Two, could not meet with the Aramco⁴⁴⁶ to discuss the border delineation with the Saudis,⁴⁴⁷ or when following Qatar's independence "Saudi Arabia was the swing producer in OPEC and dictated policy for all the others".⁴⁴⁸ Therefore, what the strategic use of the QIA has meant for the other three elements of subtle power is that they are often funded or underwritten by Qatar's huge financial reserves – its economic hard power. As for the strategic use of the QIA itself, it has enhanced Qatar's profile in various economic sectors in multiple countries, and increased Qatar's importance to many of the world's most powerful economies – achieving a soft power windfall. In doing this, Qatar has acquired a degree of diplomatic leverage in the foreign policy space of its own, which at times differentiates it from Saudi Arabia, thereby achieving greater of autonomy.

Physical Protection

Three happenings between 1988 and 1992 all contributed to the shift in Qatar's foreign policy⁴⁴⁹ under Hamad - the end of the Iran-Iraq War, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, and the renewed military threat from Saudi Arabia. The latter two particularly convinced Hamad that Qatar needed to shift towards a more autonomous external security apparatus, or at least one not reliant on Saudi Arabia. This however was not a change that could occur over night. Up until the Gulf War in 1990-1991, from the perspective of the United States according to a former Australian Ambassador to Egypt: "Qatar was a bit of an afterthought" and it was "really

⁴⁴⁶ Aramco is the national Saudi oil company.

⁴⁴⁷ Under the provisions of the 1916 protection treaty with the British, Qatar could not diplomatically engage with any other nation state.

⁴⁴⁸ Geoff Randal, (former Diplomat, New Zealand Embassy in Saudi Arabia), in discussion with author, November 2020.

⁴⁴⁹ Sulaib and Mukhyat, "Understanding Qatar's Foreign Policy, 1995-2017," 11.

all about Saudi Arabia and where the others fit in”.⁴⁵⁰ As discussed previously, for Hamad this was an untenable situation. He could no longer accept that from the perspective of the West, the sub-Persian Gulf security architecture was all about Saudi Arabia and its smaller vulnerable neighbours.

Having American troops on Saudi soil however angered many Saudis citizens. Fortunately for Hamad, the United States still needed a base on the Arabian Peninsula and Qatar proved a way out of the predicament.⁴⁵¹ American troops on Saudi soil never really got off to a good start from a public diplomacy perspective as a former policy officer at the Saudi Royal Court explains:

For starters, back in 1991, the Saudi king and foreign minister were vehemently against the US toppling Saddam Hussein. The Arab world was equally against the invasion of Iraq as many viewed this as a ‘crusade’ by the West, firstly against Muslims in Afghanistan, and then against an Arab and Islamic country. There was strong opposition to this from within the Islamic world. Domestically, there was a lot of opposition from Saudi citizens and senior figures against this campaign. Saudi Arabia was in a very difficult position, as it was the birthplace of the Islam, the Saudi king was custodian of the two holy mosques, and Saudi Arabia viewed itself as the champion of the Islamic and Arab cause. Saudi Arabia could not afford to continue to be seen as sanctioning US airplanes taking off. They were also fighting religiously motivated violent extremists across the country. Put simply - the Saudis felt more comfortable with the removal of US airplanes. American forces, launching attacks from within Saudi, would have undermined the king and Saudi Arabia.⁴⁵²

The policy officer continues and offers his assessment on Qatar’s viability as a host for American forces in the Gulf by saying:

I believe it was an easier decision for Qatar to host the United States military. Qatar did not necessarily have the same cloud over its head as the Saudis did. As a smaller and wealthier nation, hosting US forces would not have carried as much risk for them as it did for the Saudis.⁴⁵³

⁴⁵⁰ Bob Bowker, (former ambassador, Australian Embassy in Egypt), February 2021.

⁴⁵¹ Fromherz, *Qatar: Rise to Power and Influence*, 23.

⁴⁵² Jamil Sawda, (former policy officer, Saudi Royal Court), in discussion with author, November 2021.

⁴⁵³ Jamil Sawda, (former policy officer, Saudi Royal Court), in discussion with author, November 2021.

As such, Qatar's close relations with the United States resulted not so much from a mutual sympathy, but rather from a pragmatic necessity of both partners who needed each other for their own security, economic and strategic interests.⁴⁵⁴ Therefore, spurred by a Defence Cooperation Agreement signed by the US and Qatar after Operation Desert Storm in 1991, Hamad authorised Qatari land for an enormous American air-force base about 20 miles outside of Doha.⁴⁵⁵ Qatar built the Al Udeid Air Base in 2000 for an estimated \$1 billion,⁴⁵⁶ and has continually contributed funding, including in 2020 when it was announced that \$1.8 billion would be appropriated for upgrading Al Udeid for the United States' ongoing military and counterterrorism operations in the Middle East and Afghanistan.⁴⁵⁷

Contributing to the long-term efficacy of the Al Udeid airbase, a former US Ambassador to Yemen explains that:

Since the establishment of Al Jazeera and Al Udeid, Qatar has dictated the narrative of the time across the entire Arab world, and shielded away from any criticism. Naturally, this was a big win for the Qataris long-term, as it created a strategic defence linkage between them and the US (something that was missing in the past), and by extension strengthened political ties. The Qataris have, and continued to use their hosting of US forces, in the past and present, as leverage to pursue their interest within the doors of Washington,⁴⁵⁸ (which further enabled an external security apparatus autonomous from Riyadh).

For Washington, the partnership with Doha was and remains a part of the traditional US policy in the post-Gulf War period to efficiently control the Middle East, and especially the Gulf region, seeking loyal allies who can help them secure the oil industry, and in general, defend the American and Western interests.⁴⁵⁹ For the GCC states including Qatar more broadly, the primacy of the US presence cannot be overstated as affirmed by a former Australian Ambassador to Egypt:

⁴⁵⁴ Ecaterina Cepoi, "Qatar: A Tool in the Offshore Balancing Policy of the USA, or just an Ambitious Arabic State in the Age of Virtual Power," *International Scientific Conference 2*, (2013): 11-19.

⁴⁵⁵ Fromherz, *Qatar: Rise to Power and Influence*, 23.

⁴⁵⁶ Kamrava, *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics*, 89.

⁴⁵⁷ Karen Deyoung and Dan Lamothe, "Qatar Plans \$1.8 Billion in Improvements to Air Base used by US Military," *Stars and Stripes*, accessed April 2020, <https://www.stripes.com/news/qatar-plans-1-8-billion-in-improvements-to-air-base-used-by-us-military-1.539198>

⁴⁵⁸ Gerald Feierstein, (former ambassador, US Embassy in Sana'a), in discussion with author, January 2020.

⁴⁵⁹ Cepoi, "Qatar, a tool in the Offshore Balancing Policy of the USA, or just an Ambitious Arabic State in the Age of Virtual Power," 12.

The Americans are still the military power in the Gulf ... no other military comes close to having what firepower the Americans can deploy, either within the region or from beyond the region. The Saudis and all the others want the Americans to be backstopping the security of the region. They don't see the Israelis, the Russians, or the Chinese as providing anything like the guarantees that they would like to have. I think it's important not to overstate the consequences of a slight reduction in the worth of the view of the United States.⁴⁶⁰

The military footprint and the purpose of the presence of the United States are well known, as are the extraordinary sums of money spent by GCC states, including Qatar, for the external security capstone of their foreign policy strategies. The United States has however, continually pushed for a degree of cooperation and interoperability amongst the GCC states, yet this has proved impossible to achieve, and is somewhat in the nature of the GCC states resulting from lingering mistrust of each other, as the former US Ambassador to Yemen explains:

When I was still in government right before I retired, we had made a big effort to try to promote a GCC-wide air defence system. There were a lot of good military reasons to do that. In fact, the geography would lend itself to having an integrated air defence system in the region. We really pressed the GCC states to do that, to cooperate on that, but they weren't willing really to go down that road mostly because they don't trust one another. The air defence system would have had the radars in Qatar, and the batteries in Saudi Arabia, something else in UAE or in Oman. It would have had some depths so that you had time to react and respond to an incoming threat. Whether the air defence project comes back or not, I don't know. Whether they're (the GCC states) ever going to be willing to talk about something like that, or they're going to insist always that they have to have their own unique standalone systems.⁴⁶¹

Somewhat unsurprisingly, surrendering a small degree of independence, or military autonomy to a fellow member state in the GCC is a bridge too far, and for Hamad, who sought autonomy from Saudi Arabia not an increased military interoperability, this was also the case.

In sum, the construction of Al Udeid airbase and the ongoing hosting of the US military has clearly aided Qatar's pursuit of autonomy from Saudi Arabia. The presence of the Americans has given Hamad a degree of 'diplomatic cover' in his pursuit of other foreign policy initiatives.

⁴⁶⁰ Bob Bowker, (former ambassador, Australian Embassy in Egypt), February 2021.

⁴⁶¹ Gerald Feierstein, (former ambassador, US Embassy in Sana'a), in discussion with author, January 2020.

It was both the launch of Al Jazeera and the growth of the Al Udeid airbase early in Hamad's tenure as emir which came to constitute sources of grievance for several of Qatar's neighbours,⁴⁶² especially Saudi Arabia. In September 2002 for example, the Saudis recalled their ambassador to Doha citing Al Jazeera's broadcasting and Qatar's closer ties to the United States, including the Al Udeid airbase.⁴⁶³ Thereafter for nearly five years there remained no Saudi Ambassador.⁴⁶⁴ The decision to withdraw its ambassador for five years motivated by opposition to Al Jazeera and the gradual shift of US military personnel from Prince Sultan airbase in Saudi Arabia to Al Udeid airbase in Qatar,⁴⁶⁵ was the first of a few iterations of what would later result in the 2017 diplomatic and economic blockade – all motivated by Qatar's autonomous foreign policy strategies.

Finally, although Qatar had achieved autonomy from Saudi Arabia through the utilisation of each of the four elements of subtle power, especially aided by the self-confidence gained from the presence of the world's greatest military force, Qatar was not immune from threats insecurity, as a former Qatari civil servant asserted years later during the Trump Presidency:

I think Qatar has no choice in terms of dealing with America. Yes, we don't trust them, and America can never be a trusted ally. Although we have the biggest military base in Qatar, but don't forget, in the beginning of the Gulf Crisis,⁴⁶⁶ President Trump had said four times that Qatar is financing terrorism. Four times, we understood here in Qatar, like a green light for Saudis and the Emirates to occupy Qatar. We will never forget that. Never forget that.⁴⁶⁷

In Summary

This chapter began by providing a contextual analysis of the onset of Qatar's subtle power era. This thesis does not identify a specific point in time, nor a particular event, which initiated this new era in Qatar's foreign policy strategies – and deliberately so. It was however the Gulf War in 1990 which sent shockwaves throughout the smaller littoral states of the Gulf, signifying that the Saudis were vulnerable to Saddam's forces and unable to protect the smaller emirates

⁴⁶² Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis*, 34.

⁴⁶³ "Saudi Ambassador Returns to Qatar after 5-yr Gap," *Reuters*, accessed January 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/article/saudi-qatar-idUSL0925349720080309>

⁴⁶⁴ Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis*, 35.

⁴⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 36.

⁴⁶⁶ Meaning the 2017 diplomatic and economic blockade of Qatar.

⁴⁶⁷ Nayef bin Al Shamari, (former Qatar Petroleum engineer), in discussion with author, February 2021.

of the GCC. Years later, with memory of the 1992 border clashes and the 1996 attempted coup against him in mind, Hamad sought to chart a new course for Qatar, one of prominence in the region and a greater autonomy from Riyadh. One of his earliest subtle power initiatives was the inception of Al Jazeera which, along with the change in Qatari leadership and the Gulf War, was the third event this thesis identifies as the beginning of a subtle power era.

This chapter evaluated the *how*, *when*, and *why* each of the four elements of subtle power impacted on Qatar's pursuit of autonomy and revealed that each of the four elements, at times reinforcing each other, and at times operating independent of one another, all aided Qatar's political emancipation from Saudi Arabia. It was the synergetic utilisation of each of the four elements which put tiny Qatar on the map, and transformed the nation state into an active regional player which could shape events in its own national interest, and importantly, achieve autonomy from Saudi Arabia. The element of diplomacy and conflict mediation raised Qatar's prestige, and differentiated it from Saudi Arabia as an autonomous actor who could do things differently. National branding raised the awareness of Qatar in the international arena as a nation state with its own unique identity. The strategic use of the QIA, constantly regenerated with hydrocarbon rents, enabled Qatar to project itself as an important global investment partner, and the physical protection of the United States provided it with external security guarantees which also enabled a degree of diplomatic cover for Doha in its otherwise ambitious foreign policy pursuits.

Whilst the four elements of subtle power may have aided Qatar's pursuit of autonomy, this came at the expense of wholesale collaborative ties with the GCC as a collective, and Saudi Arabia itself. Tensions and mistrust percolated away between Hamad and Riyadh, often in the background, and resulted in the first of three withdrawals⁴⁶⁸ of the Saudi Ambassador posted to Doha. This acrimony would boil over into outright enmity and hostility during the Arab Spring, largely as a result of Qatar's autonomous foreign policy actions during the revolutions, actions which were met with vociferous opposition in Riyadh. This as a result impacted on the utility of each of the four elements of subtle power in the years after the Arab Spring, and led to the beginning of the end of Qatar's subtle power era.

⁴⁶⁸ The Saudi Ambassador to Qatar was withdrawn from 2002 returning in 2007, in 2014 for nine months, and during the blockade commencing June 2017.

CHAPTER FOUR – THE LIMITATIONS OF SUBTLE POWER

Introduction

Chapter Four analyses Qatar's emergence as a regional actor and the impact this had of its subtle power foreign policy strategies. This chapter follows a similar format to Chapter Three and is divided into two parts. Part One of this chapter examines Qatar and its foreign policy strategies and its role as a prominent regional actor during the Arab Spring, which in turn became a watershed moment in the evolution of Qatar's subtle power. As its first⁴⁶⁹ autonomous foray into a conflict theatre, the Arab Spring was a coming of age of sorts for Qatar. It led air strikes against Ghaddafi in Libya, funded some Islamist groups in Syria, backed the Muslim Brotherhood-led government in Egypt, all whilst Al Jazeera's reporting captured the attention of the Arab street from all corners of the region. Far from the benign foreign policy years of Khalifa, Qatar had simply never in its history as come anywhere as close as it did to the front-and-centre role it played during the Arab Spring. The Arab Spring brought great benefit to Qatar at times, yet for its subtle power foreign policy strategies, it signalled the beginning of the end of an era.

Given the significance of the Arab Spring in the evolution of Qatar's autonomy and political emancipation from Saudi Arabia, Part One provides a deeper contextual analysis of Qatar's autonomous foreign policy actions by evaluating two examples in-depth and the effect they had on the four elements of subtle power. The two examples of Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and Al Jazeera's reporting which sided with revolutionaries and criticised long-term authoritarians, provides for a comprehensive understanding and context for Part Two of this chapter. Suffice it to say, these two examples are also salient in terms of Qatar's relations with Saudi Arabia, which soured significantly following the Arab Spring. By the time of the 2017 blockade as Chapter Five will elucidate, Qatar's support for political Islamists such as the Muslim Brotherhood, and Al Jazeera's reporting, remained significant concerns for the Saudis, and this was reflected in the list of thirteen demands⁴⁷⁰ which the Saudi-led quartet made that would have reportedly ended the blockade.

⁴⁶⁹ Qatar's role in the Gulf War in 1991 was through the auspices of the American led coalition, whereas Qatar's engagement of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and some Islamists in Syria during the Arab Spring for example were actions taken by Qatar alone.

⁴⁷⁰ The list of thirteen demands included that Qatar sever all ties with the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist movements in the Middle East, close the Turkish military base, downgrade diplomatic relations with Iran, close

Part Two evaluates each of the four elements of subtle power and the *how*, *why*, and *when*, each of the four elements were impacted beginning around the time of the Arab Spring. Not solely as a result of its actions during the Arab Spring, each of the four elements were impacted resulting largely from Qatar's foreign policy actions during the uprisings, but also due to other external forces and pressures, some of which are more recent and are examined in the first part of Chapter Five. Important to note is that each of the four elements suffered a setback in a varying degree, and on different occasions, and often for very different reasons. For example, the diplomacy and conflict mediation element was undermined due to Qatar's loss of perceived impartiality resulting from its interventionist actions in Libya, Egypt, and Syria, whereas the physical protection element was weakened as a result of the perception that the United States was pivoting to Asia, Obama's regional reticence, and Trump's capricious regard for existing alliances and affinity⁴⁷¹ for the Saudis. It was however Qatar's role during the Arab Spring uprisings of 2010 to 2013⁴⁷² that signalled to regional and international audiences a turning point in Qatar's foreign policy posture - that being of a nation state that was *now* a regional actor prepared to act autonomously and in its own national interests, regardless of the preferences of the Saudis.

PART ONE - THE ARAB SPRING

The Beginnings of the End of a Subtle Power Era

The Middle East is not unfamiliar with tumultuous events which alter the geopolitical landscape of the region. For the utility of Qatar's subtle power foreign policy strategies, the Arab Spring is preeminent in its impact on the efficacy of subtle power, as Qatar's interventionism and partisanship resulted in a loss of its hard earned perceived impartiality.

Al Jazeera and other Qatari funded media outlets, pay an unspecified sum in compensation for loss of life and damage allegedly caused by Qatari regional policies, hand over 'fugitives and wanted individuals' to the blockading states, and submit to regular monitoring for up to twelve years to ensure compliance. A thirteenth condition was that Qatar agree to the demands within ten days or the list would become invalid. See: "What are the 13 Demands Given to Qatar," *Gulf News*, June 2017, <https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/qatar/what-are-the-13-demands-given-to-qatar-1.2048118>

⁴⁷¹ Trump's first overseas visit as president was to Saudi Arabia. This is the only time a US President has chosen a country in the Middle East as their first overseas visit as president.

⁴⁷² The Arab Spring has no start and end dates. Arguably it began with the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in December 2010 and ended with the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood led government in Egypt in July 2013.

Hereon, Qatar could no longer ‘exercise influence from behind the scenes’ as Kamrava had originally posited. Although there are other reasons apart from Qatar’s foreign policy actions during the Arab Spring as to why its subtle power foreign policy strategies were undermined or weakened, it was largely Qatar’s overt, and at times autonomous, foreign policy posture during this crisis event which resulted in a *shift in the dynamic* in the way in which regional states engaged with Qatar. For example, no longer was it the case that Al Jazeera was (merely) nettlesome; it was now seen by Riyadh as actively encouraging the revolutions. Qatar was now an adversary in minds of the Saudis, as in Egypt for example, where Doha actively supported the rise of political Islamists in the form of the Mohammad Morsi-led Muslim Brotherhood government. Nevertheless, Hamad’s understanding of the role Qatar should play during the Arab Spring was not an impulsive decision and was founded on his long-held understanding of the Arab world. As such, during the Arab Spring Hamad deliberately sought to shape the course of the revolutions, knowing that the *status quo* was no longer palatable on the Arab Street.⁴⁷³

When a former US Ambassador to Qatar was asked “What really gave Hamad the impetus to attempt to emancipate Qatar from the Saudis? Was the Arab Spring a turning point?” the former ambassador, who knew Hamad well, responded by saying:

Hamad knew that the explosion is coming, and if I stick to the Saudis I’m just kicking the can down the road ...the Arab world is going to fall... it started with the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. He (Hamad) understood better than most just how the demographic pressures in other Arab countries were building up to an explosion. The Arab Spring had nothing to do with democracy. The Arab Spring had more to do with young kids getting an education and a job. I was Head of Counterterrorism for a couple of years in the State Department. I was in Egypt, and I had a conversation once with Omar Suleiman who was then Head of the Egyptian Intelligence Services, and briefly became Prime Minister. Not a nice guy, but a very smart guy. He invited me to dinner and we were talking, and he said ‘the most dangerous man in Egypt is the son of a bootblack⁴⁷⁴ who has a graduate degree in chemical engineering and is driving a taxi. If he’d become a bootblack, he’d not be a problem. If we’d given him a job as a chemical engineer, he’d not be a problem. Right now, he *is* a problem, and there’s millions of people like him in my country. There’s millions of people like him across the Arab world, and my government refuses to admit that he exists, or to do anything about him.’ *That* was Hamad’s view prior to the Arab Spring.⁴⁷⁵

⁴⁷³ The Arab Street is an expression referring to the spectrum of public opinion in the Arab world, often as opposed or contrasted by the opinions of Arab governments.

⁴⁷⁴ A bootblack is a person who polishes boots and shoes for a living.

⁴⁷⁵ Former US Ambassador to Qatar, in discussion with author, April 2021.

The catalyst of the Arab Spring was in Tunisia on 17 December 2010 when Mohamed Bouazizi, with around 200 US dollars' worth of fruits and vegetables, arrived in downtown Sidi Bouzid to begin work. Bouazizi was harassed by police to pay a bribe to continue to be able to sell his produce without a permit. After refusing to pay the bribe, his produce and scales were confiscated, and he was abused by the police. Bouazizi approached the governor's office to lodge a complaint which was refuted. Frustrated and humiliated he covered himself in gasoline and self-immolated, which in turn sparked nationwide anti-government protests that led Tunisia into crisis, and former President Ben Ali to flee to Saudi Arabia.⁴⁷⁶ This event is the oft-cited beginning of what became one of the Middle East's most conflagratory revolutionary periods - The Arab Spring.

During the weeks and months that followed, Qatar played a vital role not only in shaping the emerging narratives of protest through Al Jazeera, but also in mobilising Arab support, initially for the NATO-led intervention in Libya in March 2011, and later for the diplomatic isolation of Assad's regime in Syria.⁴⁷⁷ When protests initially broke out in Tunisia, closely followed by Egypt, Libya and other Arab countries, Hamad saw an opportunity to put a narrative into practise, to expand the Qatar's influence, and provide access to new markets across the region.⁴⁷⁸ The fact that the pool of revolutionaries eager to topple the regimes was as diverse as their often-contradictory agendas was often disregarded in Doha,⁴⁷⁹ as Hamad identified an opportunity to expand Qatar's role as a regional actor and further divest itself of Saudi Arabia.

For example, Qatar developed close relations with Egypt following the accession of Mohammed Morsi who led the Muslim Brotherhood to victory in the presidential elections of 2012. Hamad had identified an opportunity to back the winning horse. However, this put Qatar at odds with many regional leaders who feared political Islamists in their own countries. This by extension would eventually undermine Qatar's neutrality, impacting on its status as a conflict mediator, but for Hamad the rise to power of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt was a welcomed development. The former US Ambassador to Qatar recalls this when:

He (Hamad) was overjoyed at the Arab Spring. I think the relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood started then. When the Muslim Brotherhood won elections,

⁴⁷⁶ Anas Gomati, "The Libyan Revolution Undone – The Conversation Will Not Be Televised," *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, ed. Andreas Krieg, 179-198. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 181.

⁴⁷⁷ Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis*, 1.

⁴⁷⁸ Krieg, "The Weaponisation of Narratives Amid the Gulf Crisis," 98.

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 99.

they weren't too much to the Qatari's taste,⁴⁸⁰ but they won elections. The relationship with Egypt fell apart with the coup that overthrew Morsi. With Egypt and Saudi Arabia and everybody else, Qatar's relations fell apart when they overthrew Morsi.⁴⁸¹

Despite not solidifying a long-term Arab partner in the Maghreb,⁴⁸² Doha's conspicuous support for a political Islamist party signalled a *shift in the dynamic* to Riyadh, which bore the gravest indignation of the Al Saud. Riyadh had long expected Doha to acquiesce to its national interest objectives, not actively support an Islamist-led government. i.e. to remain *behind the scenes*. This was affirmed by an Al Jazeera journalist who reported from the region during the Arab Spring who said: "The Saudis felt that they had the power in that part of the world, and that Qatar was this tiny little country that should behave itself".⁴⁸³

The Arab Spring was a transformative series of events that shocked the Middle East, and signalled a turning point in Qatar's subtle power strategies. It upended regional powers, defenestrated decades old dictatorships, and terrified the Al Saud, all whilst Qatar had become an active participant in various ways such as through Al Jazeera or support for some political Islamists.⁴⁸⁴ As a participant in the Arab Spring upheaval, Qatar's foreign policy strategies bore little resemblance to the judicious utilisation of subtle power in the previous decade. As a result, Qatar's original subtle power foreign policy strategies ostensibly reached their shelf life (*circa*) the Arab Spring, largely due to actions Qatar itself took, but also due to other external forces and pressures. Qatar's subtle power capabilities did not cease at this point, only that in part Qatar's subtle power capabilities had *now* been either undermined or weakened.

As for the Saudis, Riyadh viewed the Arab Spring with scepticism. They saw the fall of strong men as a pathway for the rise of Islamist parties and leaders that would ultimately upend the region's stability, potentially affecting their own country.⁴⁸⁵ As discussed above, Qatar however saw this change as an eventual reality and tried to engage with the current of Islamist populism that rode to power in the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. Qatar believed the wave of populist revolts in the region could not be ignored or contained, and could only be

⁴⁸⁰ Meaning: Not particularly to the liking of the Qataris.

⁴⁸¹ Former US Ambassador to Qatar, in discussion with author, April 2021.

⁴⁸² The Maghreb is a region of the Arab world to the west of the Sinai Peninsula.

⁴⁸³ Sue Turton, (Arab Spring War Correspondent, Al Jazeera Doha), in discussion with author, March 2021.

⁴⁸⁴ Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis*, 1.

⁴⁸⁵ Ayman Mohyeldin, "Qatar and its Neighbours Have Been at Odds Since the Arab Spring," NBC News, accessed November 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/mideast/qatar-its-neighbors-have-been-odds-arab-spring-n768966>

moderated if they were engaged. It paved the way for Qatari leaders to engage with Islamist parties that were deemed a threat by the Saudis, Egyptians, and Emiratis.⁴⁸⁶

Hamad's response to the Arab Spring was the inverse to that of the Saudis, contrasting markedly with Qatar's bandwagoning with Riyadh under Khalifa. For example, while the Middle East began to unravel because of the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah surprised many in December 2011 by calling for greater GCC integration by forming a Gulf Union.⁴⁸⁷ However, the call for a Gulf Union never materialised into anything substantial, as Gulf leaders (such as Hamad) had valid concerns that forming such a union may pave the way for further Saudi domination of the organisation⁴⁸⁸ and a weakening of their autonomy. It is worth remembering that the GCC as an intergovernmental organisation was conceived and designed at a time of Saudi dominance, and when the smaller Gulf states had to be protected against Iranian expansionism and regional upheavals.⁴⁸⁹ During the Arab Spring however, for Qatar this was certainly not the case, fearing the revolutions less than any of its GCC brethren.

In dismissing the idea of a Gulf Union and charting its own course in during the Arab Spring, a rivalry between a Saudi-dominated bloc and Qatar emerged. This had an impact in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya⁴⁹⁰ where the rivalry played out particularly forcefully with the two camps supporting opposing sides in the civil wars. The Egyptian Revolution that began in January 2011 for example, marked a turning point for relations between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, as Doha supported the revolution that led to the Muslim Brotherhood gaining power, while Riyadh supported the Mubarak regime. Qatar simply did not perceive the revolution as a threat like the Saudis did, but rather as an opportunity.⁴⁹¹

However, contrary to its actions in Egypt and other revolutionary hotspots, Qatari actions in Bahrain took place under the collective GCC mantle, which was very different from the thrusting unilateralism that characterised some of its other Arab Spring policies. The uprisings in North Africa did not present a material or ideological threat to Qatari interests in the same way that a revolt against a fellow ruling family just twenty-five miles off Qatar's western shore

⁴⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸⁷ A Gulf Union would provide for a more robust GCC capable of shouldering the burdens of individual states and strengthening pan-Arab unity and fostering unity among member states.

⁴⁸⁸ Abdullah Baabood, "The Future of the GCC Amid the Gulf Divide," in *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, ed. Andreas Krieg, 161-178. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 165.

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁴⁹⁰ Matthiesen, "Renting the Casbah: Gulf States Foreign Policy towards North Africa since the Arab Uprisings," 47.

⁴⁹¹ Sulaib and Mukhyat, "Understanding Qatar's Foreign Policy, 1995-2017," 4.

did.⁴⁹² There is no evidence to suggest that Doha's support for Riyadh's counter-revolutionary actions in Manama was any relinquishment of autonomy, only that it is important to note that Qatar was not opposed with the Saudi position in every Arab Spring theatre.

Qatar's subtle power utility reached its zenith *circa* the Arab Spring, even though Qatar actually managed to benefit from the uprisings more than any other Arab state.⁴⁹³ It was a 'spring' that Qatar's Al Jazeera, Qatar's money, and even Qatar's military intervention helped to plant.⁴⁹⁴ Qatar reaped some of the fruit of these revolutions through favourable contracts, sovereign deals, and the intangible commodity of prestige.⁴⁹⁵ The Arab Spring and its aftermath however created an environment that was predisposed to escalating security dilemmas. As Robert Jervis⁴⁹⁶ argues, "a doubly dangerous world is one in which the offensive has the advantage, and an offensive posture is not distinguishable from a defensive one, leaving states with no way to get security without menacing others. Both conditions held in the aftermath of the Arab Spring".⁴⁹⁷

There were a number of foreign policy actions during and after the Arab Spring which culminated in the undermining or weakening of the elements of Qatar's subtle power, and this ended the notion that Qatar 'exercised influence from behind the scenes'. Its subtle power era was coming to an end. Yet as eluded to above, it was Qatar's loss of impartiality resulting from its support for political Islamists in Egypt, and Al Jazeera's partisan reporting for example, which had the most significant impact on the demise of Qatar's perceived neutrality. Not to be viewed entirely as a negative outcome, these two examples also demonstrate that Qatar was now willing to autonomously undertake foreign policy actions contrary to the national interest objectives of Saudi Arabia. It is these two examples into which this chapter now delves.

⁴⁹² Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis*, 115.

⁴⁹³ Felsch, "Qatar's Rising International Influence: A Case of Soft Power," 24.

⁴⁹⁴ Fromherz, *Qatar: Rise to Power and Influence*, xiv.

⁴⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹⁶ Academic at the Columbia's School of International and Public Affairs

⁴⁹⁷ Matthew Petti and Trita Petti, "No Clean Hands: The Interventions of Middle Eastern Powers, 2010-2020," *Washington: The Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft*, 29, accessed July 2021, <https://quincyinst.org/report/no-clean-hands-the-interventions-of-middle-eastern-powers/>

Example One - The Muslim Brotherhood

Since the 1960s Qatar has “maintained a relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood, although not an official relationship, in one form or another”.⁴⁹⁸ Relations were initially as a *Kaaba al Madiyoun* (the Kaaba for the dispossessed)⁴⁹⁹ from Nasser’s Egypt,⁵⁰⁰ then later developed towards a source of advisors staffing some of Qatar’s early bureaucracies.⁵⁰¹ In the 1950s and 1960s, Qatar also experienced an acute shortage of qualified teachers and university professors, and many of these vacancies were filled by members of the Muslim Brotherhood⁵⁰² - “the first school established in Qatar in 1957 (for example) was opened by the Muslim Brotherhood”.⁵⁰³ Cultivated over decades, these multifarious Islamist links, not only that with the Brotherhood, became exponentially valuable,⁵⁰⁴ and by the time of the Arab Spring, according to a former US Ambassador to Yemen who was posted to Sana’a at the time of the uprisings: “The Qataris were a lot more comfortable with the idea of political Islam than their neighbours”.⁵⁰⁵ As such, it was the earlier engagement with the Muslim Brotherhood pre-independence that enabled Qatar to so rapidly find support during the early days of the Arab Spring, as the longstanding links provided new diplomatic networks, and allowed tiny Qatar to play a kingmaker role, for a time at least.⁵⁰⁶

For Saudi Arabia however, any semblance of political Islamism such as the Muslim Brotherhood coming to power in the region was anathema, and perceived as a threat to the Al Saud in fear that religious zealots may assemble within the kingdom itself. These fears date back to the seizure of the Grand Mosque in 1979 which “the Saudi leadership saw as a challenge to the security and the stability of the kingdom”.⁵⁰⁷ Over the previous decade leading up to the seizure, the Al Saud had permitted a gradual loosening of religious rules. Women had been given prominent roles in the media for example, and were anchoring news programs

⁴⁹⁸ Abdul Aziz Al Horr, (former Qatari Diplomat and Director at Al Jazeera, Qatar’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Al Jazeera), in discussion with author, November 2020.

⁴⁹⁹ Krieg, “The Weaponisation of Narratives Amid the Gulf Crisis,” 94.

⁵⁰⁰ Gamal Abdel Nasser Hussein was a revolutionary who toppled the monarchy of Egypt in 1952 and ended the United Kingdom’s occupation of Egypt. Nasser instituted socialist reform in Egypt and advanced pan-Arabism which was a threat to the Saudi Kingdom. Nasser punished, jailed and/or expelled thousands of Muslim Brotherhood members whom he perceived as a threat to his reign.

⁵⁰¹ Roberts, “Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood: Pragmatism or Preference?,” 84.

⁵⁰² Zafirov, “The Qatar Crisis – Why did the Blockade Fail,” 6.

⁵⁰³ Abdul Aziz Al Horr, (former Qatari Diplomat and Director at Al Jazeera, Qatar’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Al Jazeera), in discussion with author, November 2020.

⁵⁰⁴ Roberts, “Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood: Pragmatism or Preference?,” 85.

⁵⁰⁵ Gerald Feierstein, (former ambassador, US Embassy in Sana’a), in discussion with author, January 2020.

⁵⁰⁶ Roberts, “Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood: Pragmatism or Preference?,” 85.

⁵⁰⁷ Turki Al Faisal, “Bitter Rivals: Saudi Arabia and Iran” *PBS Frontline*, February 2018, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/documentary/bitter-rivals-iran-and-saudi-arabia/transcript/>

without head coverings. Western brands, pop culture, and luxury goods flooded the country which was vehemently denounced by a fringe group of Wahhabi extremists who sought to purify Islam from what they saw as the corrupt influence of the Saudi Arabian government.⁵⁰⁸ As such, it was the seizure of the Grand Mosque in part explains Saudi Arabia's reaction to the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. The Saudi governments response to the 1979 seizure, according to a prince within the Saudi royal family, was:

Religious authority in the kingdom promoted stricter practices of Islam, whether it was in prayers, in the performance of religious duties, and social mores – meaning, for example, women had to be more veiled, if you like, than had previously been practiced ... there were some who saw Khomeini's efforts must be countered by a similar sectarian thrust from Saudi Arabia.⁵⁰⁹

Thirty years later, the popular uprising in Egypt against President Hosni Mubarak's regime in 2011 elicited divergent reactions in the Gulf. The leaders of Saudi Arabia and the UAE were concerned about the risks of a movement for revolutionary change spreading to their own region, while Qatar saw an opportunity to strengthen its regional role through supporting the Muslim Brotherhood.⁵¹⁰ Present-day Saudi decision makers had lived through the Nasser-Saudi 'Arab Cold War' period and remember this Egyptian challenge.⁵¹¹ So perhaps the main reason for getting involved so heavily in Egypt (during the Arab Spring) was the fear that a newly empowered Egypt, particularly one championing a rival ideology such as that espoused by the Muslim Brotherhood, could once again emerge and challenge Saudi-led GCC dominance in the region, and could also find support among people in the Gulf.⁵¹² As such, from the outset Qatar's enthusiastic support for the Muslim Brotherhood revolutionaries in Egypt was clearly at odds with the Saudis, and the Qataris knew this which would put their regional neutrality at risk, a neutrality which aided its subtle power strategies.

⁵⁰⁸ "Bitter Rivals: Saudi Arabia and Iran" *PBS Frontline*, February 2018, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/documentary/bitter-rivals-iran-and-saudi-arabia/transcript/>

⁵⁰⁹ Turki Al Faisal, "Bitter Rivals: Saudi Arabia and Iran" *PBS Frontline*, February 2018, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/documentary/bitter-rivals-iran-and-saudi-arabia/transcript/>

⁵¹⁰ David Butter, "Egypt and the Gulf: Allies and Rivals," (London: Chatham House): 1, accessed April 2020, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/egypt-and-gulf-allies-and-rivals>

⁵¹¹ Matthiesen, "Renting the Casbah: Gulf States' Foreign Policy towards North Africa since the Arab Uprisings," 48.

⁵¹² *Ibid.*

As noted above, the early Arab Spring protests with their emphasis on freedom, human rights, and dignity, and the separate political project of the Muslim Brotherhood, were completely anathema to the Saudis. If Egypt had become a more or less functioning democracy with a decent economic performance, this would have created a dangerous precedent for Riyadh.⁵¹³ At the same time, it would have been equally troublesome had the Muslim Brotherhood solidified its power, and been able to reshape the regional alliance system and support other Muslim Brotherhood branches across the region. The Muslim Brotherhood was probably the only organised movement that could pose a serious threat as a whole,⁵¹⁴ and it largely explains the fears of the Al Saud and their reaction to the empowerment of Muslim Brotherhood branches across the region since 2011.⁵¹⁵ The Qataris on the other hand, according to the former US Ambassador to Yemen: “didn’t seem to have that view or anxiety. They weren’t concerned about the possibility that somebody would say – if you’re the emir and you’re ruling badly, then it’s okay to replace you with somebody who’s more religiously observant”.⁵¹⁶ It was this degree of autonomy, or immunity from the fear of the Islamist revolutionaries, which facilitated Qatar’s engagement with the Muslim Brotherhood. The former US Ambassador to Yemen notes further that:

There were several reasons why the Saudi monarchy felt so strongly about the Muslim Brotherhood coming to power in Egypt. In the simplest terms, with the Muslim Brotherhood in power in Egypt, it represented a direct threat to Saudi monopoly of Islamic political control and influence, and a direct threat to their internal security. Morsi’s visit to Saudi arch-rival Iran (a Shia theocracy) in August 2012⁵¹⁷ is a case in point.⁵¹⁸

Unlike the Muslim Brotherhood, Saudi power was not based on democratic representation (including free elections) but on the principle of absolute loyalty to the king. For the Saudis – they stand for a ‘docile apolitical Islam’,⁵¹⁹ and the sooner the Morsi government was

⁵¹³ *Ibid.*

⁵¹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁵¹⁶ Gerald Feierstein, (former ambassador, US Embassy in Sana’a), in discussion with author, January 2020.

⁵¹⁷ “Visit by Egypt’s Morsi to Iran Reflects Foreign Policy Shift,” Washington Post, accessed June 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/visit-by-egypts-morsi-to-iran-reflects-foreign-policy-shift/2012/08/27/4baf4b3a-f060-11e1-b74c-84ed55e0300b_story.html

⁵¹⁸ Gerald Feierstein, (former ambassador, US Embassy in Sana’a), in discussion with author, January 2020.

⁵¹⁹ This is a direct quote from the author. This means that Saudi Arabia is not an Islamist inspired movement like the Muslim Brotherhood.

overthrown, the better⁵²⁰ - this is where the Qatar/Saudi conflagration began. Qatar's overt foreign policy actions were enthusiastically in support of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and in pursuit of its *own* national interest objectives. Qatar's support for the seemingly always beleaguered Morsi-led government was not *subtle*, nor did it seek to 'exercise influence from behind the scenes' – Qatar's foreign policy strategies appeared overt and self-assured, and were about to transition towards a new era which Chapter Five will explain.

As adumbrated above, one of Hamad's a long standing objectives was Qatar's political emancipation from Saudi Arabia, and as such, the embrace of the Muslim Brotherhood presented an opportunity to be seized upon. In the words of a former Qatari civil servant:

For the Qataris was there soft power?! Yes, Qatar supports all Islamists, Qatar has good relationship with all Islamists. That's true, but because we are Muslim nations and Qatar is saying that Islamists have more power to have influence in the societies. Secular liberal figures are not influential in our region. In order to make balance with your neighbours, you have to have soft power and Qatar thinks that Muslims, Islamists, or Muslim Brotherhood, other groups, they are part of its soft power.⁵²¹

Further to this, a political Islamism expert maintains that:

I think Qatar has been smart in terms of engaging with Islamists because they've realised that Islam is important and that you can have a global reach by backing Islamist forces. Not even just a reach within the Middle East, but within the broader Muslim world. I think they've realised this by not just engaging with Islamism or political Islamists. They can then have a presence far beyond their borders, and so they can punch above their weight, as everyone likes to say about Qatar. I think that they (Qatar) realise that this *does* give them a foothold in a lot of different areas. Also, it makes Qatar the place where a lot of religious debate happens, or at least where you have Sheikh Qaradawi's house there, he's giving sermons, people are talking about Sheikh Qaradawi. He's a global figure. He's really popular in the Wasatiyyah⁵²² movement within the Brotherhood. It does again, expand the global reach of Qatar, but also makes Qatar a venue for conversations that maybe wouldn't happen in other parts of the Gulf.⁵²³

⁵²⁰ Paul Aarts and Carolien Roelants, *Saudi Arabia: A Kingdom in Peril* (London: Hurst and Company, 2016), 121-122.

⁵²¹ Nayef bin Al Shamari, (former Qatar Petroleum engineer), in discussion with author, February 2021.

⁵²² Meaning 'moderate Islam'

⁵²³ Courtney Freer, (Middle East Centre at the London School of Economics), in discussion with author, January 2021.

Qatar's support for the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood Government was direct and tangible and desperately needed by Morsi, as upon taking power according to an Al Jazeera journalist reporting from Egypt during the Arab Spring: "Morsi struggled to cope with civil servants who were just utterly politically and culturally resistant having never worked for anyone other than Mubarak and his administration".⁵²⁴ By the time Morsi had assumed office in 2012, Egypt's need for external financial assistance had become acute. Foreign exchange reserves (excluding gold) had dwindled to \$10 billion, down from \$32.5 billion at the end of 2010. Qatar stepped in by providing Egypt with a total of \$7 billion in short-term deposits and medium-term notes,⁵²⁵ propping up Morsi's tenuous rule and solidifying Qatar as a ready-made partner of which Morsi had very few.

Morsi's victory was clearly a boon to Qatar,⁵²⁶ and consistent with the theory of rented power, engagement with a non-state actor had paid off. On a visit to Cairo in September 2012, Qatar's Prime Minister HBJ publicly announced that Qatar would invest a staggering \$18 billion in Egypt over five years. Commenting that there would be 'no limits' to Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood-ruled country which struggled to find conventional funds to balance Egypt's budget. HBJ stated that \$8 billion would be invested in an integrated power plant, natural gas, and iron steel project in Port Said, while the remaining \$10 billion would finance the construction of a tourism marina complex on the Mediterranean coastline.⁵²⁷ This financial lifeline to Morsi's government was the first time Qatar had so actively and overtly sought to prop up a regime, signalling a degree of foreign policy autonomy supported by its extensive financial resources.

Suffice to say, and only with the benefit of hindsight, the Morsi regime never had a chance of longevity which would be necessary to reform a state apparatus which was completely at odds with the doctrine of the Muslim Brotherhood. Within the depths of the structure of the Egyptian state, as noted by the Al Jazeera correspondent in Egypt:

There was a culture, there was an elite ruling class that moved its way into the civil service, into the military, that was very self-serving. It was a closed family of individuals. It was supportive of Mubarak. It was instinctively hostile to the Brotherhood, in fact, instinctively hostile to pretty much anyone outside of Mubarak and his party ... I think that these people who control the levers of power

⁵²⁴ Peter Greste, (former Al Jazeera journalist, Al Jazeera), in discussion with author, February 2021.

⁵²⁵ Butter, "Egypt and the Gulf: Allies and Rivals," 6.

⁵²⁶ *Ibid*, 5.

⁵²⁷ Kristin Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring* (London: Hurst and Company, 2014), 89.

in a lot of ways, the politicians can do more than one thing, but unless the civil servants are able to follow it through, then it doesn't get done. It's possible for the civil service to utterly disrupt what goes on. I'm not dismissing the power and influence of the generals. What I'm saying broadly, when we talk of the deep state,⁵²⁸ I don't think it was conspiratorial.⁵²⁹

The overthrow of Morsi in mid-2013 somewhat returned Egypt to the pre-Arab Spring *status quo* with a military dominated government in charge which was much preferred by the Saudis. For Qatar its interventions in Egypt may have signalled a degree of autonomy in the foreign policy space, yet it had also fermented a deep mistrust and concern of Qatar within the Saudi foreign policy establishment.

In supporting regional Islamist groups, albeit not with the intended outcomes, it enabled Qatar to carve out an independent foreign policy by moving it out of the shadow of Saudi Arabia,⁵³⁰ and provide the Qatari leadership with the chance to increase its presence in the region with the goal of countering Saudi hegemony.⁵³¹ However, Qatar's post-2011 intensification of its pro-Muslim Brotherhood strategy retrospectively seems to have been based on poor judgement, as it was inevitably going to lead to some sort of conflict with its neighbours.⁵³² It can be argued that the march towards the 2017 blockade became inexorable following Qatar's actions in Egypt during the Arab Spring. The intensification of Saudi Arabia's opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood only continued to increase following the Arab Spring according to a former policy officer working in the Saudi Royal Court a few years after the Arab Spring: "Under MBS⁵³³ and when Prince Salman⁵³⁴ came to power, there was a stronger shift towards animosity towards the Muslim Brotherhood. Stronger than at any time before. That's for a number of internal security reasons, but also geopolitical reasons and geostrategic reasons".⁵³⁵

When the long-simmering tensions resulting from Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups came to the fore, the loud rupture of diplomatic relations between

⁵²⁸ Sarah, Childress, "The Deep State: How Egypt's Shadow State Won Out," Public Broadcasting Service, accessed June 2021, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/the-deep-state-how-egypts-shadow-state-won-out/>

⁵²⁹ Peter Greste, (former Al Jazeera journalist, Al Jazeera), in discussion with author, February 2021.

⁵³⁰ Sulaib and Mukhyat, "Understanding Qatar's Foreign Policy, 1995-2017," 12.

⁵³¹ Neil Quilliam, "The Saudi Dimension: Understanding the Kingdom's Position in the Gulf Crisis," In *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, edited by Andreas Krieg, 109-126. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 110.

⁵³² Davidson, "The UAE, Qatar, and the Question of Political Islam," 86.

⁵³³ Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammad bin Salman.

⁵³⁴ Meaning King Salman at the time.

⁵³⁵ Jamil Sawda, (former policy officer, Saudi Royal Court in Riyadh), in discussion with author, January 2021.

Qatar and four Arab states culminated with the June 2017 blockade of Qatar.⁵³⁶ According to the former US Ambassador to Yemen during the Arab Spring: “Qatar’s intervention in Egypt was a proximate cause of the Anti-Qatar Coalition, the Quartet⁵³⁷ that came together in 2017”.⁵³⁸ It is worth noting here that one of the thirteen demands that would lift the blockade was the cessation of Qatar’s support for political Islamists, principally the Muslim Brotherhood. The rise to power of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt had set the stage for an ongoing security challenge for the Saudis, and one that had been supported by Qatar during the Arab Spring. During the spiteful days of the 2017 blockade for example as recalled by the former Saudi policy officer:

The Grand Mufti and the Minister of Islamic Affairs, who’s a Muslim scholar, were heavily criticising the Muslim Brotherhood and saying that it is a duty of Muslims to combat the extremist ideology ... when he was asked who does he mean by extremists, he said, ‘the Islamic State, Daesh, Al Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood’ ... this was about two years ago⁵³⁹ and it was a very clear indication to everyone what the thinking was, and how they were putting the Muslim Brotherhood at the same level as Islamic State, Daesh, Al Qaeda.⁵⁴⁰

As such, in the eyes of some Saudis leading up to and during the blockade, Qatar was affiliating with groups tantamount to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, possibly the most macabre terrorist organisation of its time.

Another demand that would lift the 2017 blockade was the closing down of Qatar’s national broadcaster, Al Jazeera, a thorn in the Saudi side since not long after its 1996 conception. For the Egyptian ‘deep state’, and by extension the Saudis, in terms of *subversion* there was little to distinguish between the Muslim Brotherhood and Al Jazeera during the Arab Spring. As recalled by a former Al Jazeera correspondent detained by the Egyptian military regime following the fall of Morsi:

I think we were in the prison cells next to the Brotherhood leadership because that’s how the Egyptians saw us. They thought that we were in the right place. They might

⁵³⁶ Ennis, “Reading the Entrepreneurial Power in Small Gulf States: Qatar and the UAE,” 580.

⁵³⁷ Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt.

⁵³⁸ Gerald Feierstein, (former ambassador, US Embassy in Sana’a), in discussion with author, January 2020.

⁵³⁹ Late 2018 or early 2019.

⁵⁴⁰ Jamil Sawda, (former policy officer, Saudi Royal Court in Riyadh), in discussion with author, January 2021.

have also put us there because they thought that we did something incriminating and that we were closer to the Brotherhood than we actually were ... across the cell directly opposite me was Saad Katatni, the speaker of the Brotherhood parliament. Upstairs and to the right was the former prime minister Hesham Qandil. We had the minister for labour, he was across in the same cell with the minister of supply. Half the Brotherhood cabinet. We (the detained Al Jazeera correspondents) had lots of conversations with the Brotherhood through that period.⁵⁴¹

For the Saudis, Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood went hand in hand with Al Jazeera's reporting during the Arab Spring, which had placed Qatar firmly on the same side as the revolutionaries. This second example of Qatar's autonomous foreign policy actions impacted on the four elements of subtle power, and the reality that it was no longer 'exercising influence from behind the scenes'.

Example Two - Al Jazeera

Much has been written about Al Jazeera, the trailblazing news broadcaster which has shaped the thoughts and views of millions of Arabs and "basically revolutionised the Arab media landscape".⁵⁴² Further to its role as a ground-breaking medium for alternative thoughts and views in the Arab world, Al Jazeera's reporting has consistently been linked to the Qatari state's foreign policy agenda. According to a cyber weaponisation expert who monitors news mediums in the Middle East:

From the outset Al Jazeera was willing to broach taboo subjects from across the region. Some of them in the foreign policy space, such as counterterrorism, the rise of Islamism, the Muslim Brotherhood, Afghanistan, and the Taliban. All these kinds of difficult subject matters had foreign relation implications for Qatar.⁵⁴³

This example of the use of Al Jazeera in the foreign policy space will show that it was often a bellwether for the degree of autonomy the Qatari state either had from Saudi Arabia, or whether

⁵⁴¹ Peter Greste, (former Al Jazeera journalist, Al Jazeera), in discussion with author, February 2021.

⁵⁴² James Dorsey, (former Middle East journalist, Wall Street Journal and New York Times), in discussion with author, December 2020.

⁵⁴³ James Shires, (Cyber Weaponisation Expert and Associate Fellow, The Hague Program for Cyber Norms and a Fellow with the Cyber Statecraft Initiative at the Atlantic Council), in discussion with author, December 2020.

its broadcasting was tempered due to geopolitical considerations. Al Jazeera, both the English and Arabic versions, were considered to be a broadcasters that listened to both sides of the story, branding themselves as impartial or neutral in their reporting, and as such extending this perception onto Qatar itself. This however changed during the Arab Spring when Al Jazeera's reporting was perceived by some Arab leaders to back the revolutionaries, thereby undermining its neutrality, a perception which impacted on Qatar's subtle power strategies.

Archetypal of Qatar's history, the launch of Al Jazeera was somewhat of a serendipitous outcome following the demise of BBC Arabic, and was conceived as an upstart broadcaster with greater degree of autonomy to report and discuss ideas from Doha that BBC Arabic in Saudi Arabia did (or could) not. According to a former US Ambassador to Qatar:

BBC Arabic was thrown off the Saudi Orbit Channel in 1995 for running interviews with Saudi dissidents ... at the time, there was a cousin of the Qatari Emir in London who had a bright idea. He sought the purchase of the BBC Arabic Service, and he sketched out the idea of what Al Jazeera would become.⁵⁴⁴

At the time, there were doubts as to whether this bright idea would last according to a former Director of Media Training at Al Jazeera who quipped that: "I thought it was too good to be true and it would close down in two or three months".⁵⁴⁵ According to the same US Ambassador mentioned above, "part of the problem was that Qatar didn't understand what it was buying",⁵⁴⁶ nor did it foresee the foreign relations implications of what was the Arab world's first free media network, one which eventually gained a global audience. According to an Australian private sector employee⁵⁴⁷ working in Doha at the time of Al Jazeera's launch:

The Saudis thought Al Jazeera wouldn't get off the ground. They were worried about Al Jazeera however, because the links with the Muslim Brotherhood were already quite apparent, as well as Qatar's moderate degree of liberalisation, which

⁵⁴⁴ Former US Ambassador to Qatar, in discussion with author, April 2021.

⁵⁴⁵ Abdul Aziz Al Horr, (former Qatari Diplomat and Director at Al Jazeera, Qatar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Al Jazeera), in discussion with author, November 2020.

⁵⁴⁶ Former US Ambassador to Qatar, in discussion with author, April 2021.

⁵⁴⁷ Geoff Walls is career Diplomat who also worked in the private sector in Qatar in the mid-1990s when Al Jazeera was launched.

included endorsement of women's suffrage and inauguration of the Roman Catholic Church.⁵⁴⁸

In touting the success of Al Jazeera, the former Director of Media Training at Al Jazeera likens the media network to “a mini-UN. Today, Al Jazeera has more reporters around the world than the BBC and CNN. They have more bureaus than three or four major news outlets put together. There are reporters from more than 55 nations working in the network of Al Jazeera”.⁵⁴⁹ Despite its exponential growth in prominence and influence, Al Jazeera's regional celebrity status did not transverse unassailed in the foreign policy and international relations spheres. For example, one of the principal reasons cited for the withdrawal of the Saudi Ambassador from Qatar in 2002, again in 2014, and for the 2017 blockade of Qatar, was Al Jazeera's partisan reporting which did not adhere to the national interest objectives of the Saudi ruling elite.

It was Al Jazeera's broadcasting during the Arab Spring, particularly in Egypt, which was a bridge too far for Saudi Arabia, whereby its reporting was described as “breathlessly pro-Muslim Brotherhood”,⁵⁵⁰ backing the revolting masses, and even going as far by opening Doha-based satellite services in Libya and Egypt, all of which incensed the Saudis. The degree of autonomy Al Jazeera exercised during the Arab Spring corresponded to the course the Qataris thought the revolutions would take. Almost as soon as the magnitude of what was developing in Egypt became apparent, the leadership in Qatar rapidly acknowledged the seismic shifts in the regional landscape and adjusted their policies accordingly.

Al Jazeera assisted this by being a focal point for audiences everywhere to share in revolutionary protest through its iconic round-the-clock coverage of the unfolding revolution in Cairo's Tahrir Square.⁵⁵¹ During the Egyptian crisis, the popularity of Al Jazeera was the “source for things going on in Tahrir Square and everywhere”,⁵⁵² and its viewing audience soared as its live streaming resulted in its viewing figures rising a colossal 2,500 per cent,⁵⁵³

⁵⁴⁸ Geoff Walls, (former Australian Trade Commissioner, Australian Embassy in Bahrain), in discussion with author, March 2021.

⁵⁴⁹ Abdul Aziz Al Horr, (former Qatari Diplomat and Director at Al Jazeera, Qatar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Al Jazeera), in discussion with author, November 2020.

⁵⁵⁰ Christopher Davidson, “The UAE, Qatar, and the Question of Political Islam,” In *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, edited by Andreas Krieg, 71-90. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 86.

⁵⁵¹ Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis*, 110.

⁵⁵² Courtney Freer, (Middle East Centre at the London School of Economics), in discussion with author, January 2021.

⁵⁵³ Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring*, 49.

giving Al Jazeera a much larger audience by that point than it did any time – it seemed as according to a renowned political Islamism expert that “everyone was watching Al Jazeera in 2010 and 2011”.⁵⁵⁴ Al Jazeera has since achieved a pan-Arab influence comparable to that of Gamal Abdul Nasser’s infamous Sawt al Arab radio broadcasts in the 1960s⁵⁵⁵ where millions of Arabs of listening age tuned into the Cairo-based Sawt al Arab radio station which ridiculed Arab monarchs and called for the overthrow of the Al Saud ruling family,⁵⁵⁶ a comparative recollection not forgotten in Riyadh.

It wasn’t until Al Jazeera began to cover the events of the Arab Spring that a different story began to emerge, initially told from the perspective of Tunisian citizens.⁵⁵⁷ Al Jazeera was not just covering the revolutions of the Arab World, it was covering the revolutions through the stories of its citizens and became a platform for revolutionary discourse to take place in ways that had never been imaged before.⁵⁵⁸ Viewers from around the world tuned into Al Jazeera to hear debates that had never been televised, and questions never publicly asked.⁵⁵⁹ In addition, Al Jazeera’s coverage of the Egyptian uprising spread transformative images of largely peaceful demonstrations defying political suppression and refusing to submit to the security regimes that had kept authoritarian leaders in power. This was immediately evident in Bahrain, where cafes that usually showed Lebanese music videos instead aired non-stop footage from the enormous demonstrations in Cairo’s Tahrir Square,⁵⁶⁰ and just days after the fall of President Mubarak in February 2011, Al Jazeera established Egyptian channel Mubasher Misr, which dedicated its coverage in favour of the Muslim Brotherhood around the clock.⁵⁶¹ During the first few giddy weeks of the Arab Spring, when for a time at least it appeared that virtually anything might be possible, it seemed that the whole world was watching Al Jazeera.⁵⁶²

The reach and scope of Al Jazeera’s autonomy and influence during the Arab Spring transcended into the corridors of power in Qatar itself. For example, a Qatar expert from Kings College in London recalls being “in the majlis of the former Qatari State Minister of Defence,

⁵⁵⁴ Courtney Freer, (Middle East Centre at the London School of Economics), in discussion with author, January 2021.

⁵⁵⁵ Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis*, 48.

⁵⁵⁶ Matthiesen, “Renting the Casbah: Gulf States’ Foreign Policy towards North Africa since the Arab Uprisings,” 48.

⁵⁵⁷ Gomati, “The Libyan Revolution Undone – The Conversation Will Not Be Televised,” 182.

⁵⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶⁰ Kristian Ulrichsen, “Links Between Domestic and Regional Security,” in *The Changing Security Dynamics of the Persian Gulf*, ed. Kristian Ulrichsen, 23-42, (London: Hurst and Co, 2017), 26-27.

⁵⁶¹ Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis*, 51.

⁵⁶² *Ibid.*, 111.

Hamad bin Ali Al Attiyah” and who asked the minister – “what are you doing in Libya? Why are you doing it?”.⁵⁶³ The Qatar expert said the response from the minister was:

Well, at the beginning of the Arab Spring, in my majlis sitting where you are, we were watching Al Jazeera, watching what was going on. We didn't know anything about Libya! We didn't know where it was on the map. We had nothing. We knew nothing ... and there was this guy on TV, Ali Al Salabi, he was speaking very eloquently, he knew what was going on, and he was based in Qatar! So, we got him to come to the majlis – and that was that!⁵⁶⁴

The Qatar expert continued by recalling:

Ali Al Salabi, this exiled preacher who had been in Qatar for years from Benghazi, because he was on Al Jazeera through all those informal networks, the Minister saw him, took him to his majlis, then gave him millions and millions of pounds/dollars or whatever and support, and it was Ali Al Salabi who knew other Al Salabis and the key militias in Libya.⁵⁶⁵

Therefore, not only did Al Jazeera have a degree of autonomy unmatched by any regional medium, it had influence in foreign policy circles at the highest level resulting from its unparalleled prominence and access to the conflict zones and participating revolutionaries.

A second example of the foreign relations implications of Al Jazeera's broadcasting can be deduced from the anecdotes shared by a globetrotting war correspondent who reported for Al Jazeera on the uprisings from the revolutionary strongholds in Libya during the Arab Spring. The Al Jazeera war correspondent said:

When I think about toiling and Benghazi, we could see Qatari flags being waved with the other flags down in the big meeting place⁵⁶⁶ ... real support for the way Qatar was helping them. Although, I was also told there was a million-dollar ransom on our heads from Gaddafi if an Al Jazeera journalist got caught. We didn't

⁵⁶³ David Roberts, (School of Security Studies at King's College London), in discussion with author, November 2020.

⁵⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶⁶ Meeting place was where rebel forces against Ghaddafi gathered.

think about maybe the rebels had thought of handing one of us over to Ghaddafi to help the money for the rest of us (i.e., finance the rebels cause). When I was with the rebels on the Eastern side, I was in Benghazi, Brega, and Ajdabiya. We would turn up to a petrol station early on, and they'd say, 'who are you from?' We'd say, 'Al Jazeera', and they wouldn't take any money for fuel and supplies. We would get free fuel. Also, a lot of times I would go to a checkpoint, and if I had a chance of being turned back the guy would go, 'You're Al Jazeera, and you come'. We were getting doors open to us for sure.⁵⁶⁷

Libya may have been an example of the potent influence of Al Jazeera, but the trailblazing broadcaster was not however free to report on any protest or conflict it saw fit, which raised questions about its impartiality yet again, and ties to Qatar's foreign policy objectives. Qatar and Al Jazeera's apparent support for the Arab uprisings did not extend to the most potentially destabilising uprising that took place in February 2011 within the GCC itself - in Bahrain - which is visible from Qatar's western shores and connected to Saudi Arabia via a causeway. Qatar's room to manoeuvre was limited by the paramount importance the Saudis placed on maintaining stability in Bahrain, primarily as part of its struggle with Iran for regional supremacy.⁵⁶⁸ Al Jazeera's prolific reporting in multiple Arab Spring theatres seemed to have no bounds, but in the case of the sensitivities of the Saudis regarding the Shia unrest in Bahrain, and its adjacent eastern province of Al Hasa where Shia constitute about a third of the population,⁵⁶⁹ Al Jazeera had its limitations. Al Jazeera's editorial board judged (or was told) that this was either a bridge too far, and not in Qatar's national interest to see the overthrow of the Al Khalifa regime, despite the decades of enmity between both ruling families of Qatar and Bahrain as noted in earlier chapters of this thesis.

Al Jazeera's reporting on the uprising in Bahrain seemed to work hand in hand with the Qatari state's response to the Shia revolt in Manama. Al Jazeera was much "more cautious in Bahrain, or reporting on the Saudis, as the Qataris needed to consider a larger geopolitical play".⁵⁷⁰ To suppress the uprising, Saudi Arabia led a GCC force into Bahrain to crush the escalating Shia revolt against the Sunni Al Khalifa ruling family. Although the vast majority of the Peninsula Shield Force was composed of members of the Saudi Arabian National Guard and policemen

⁵⁶⁷ Sue Turton, (Arab Spring War Correspondent, Al Jazeera Doha), in discussion with author, March 2021.

⁵⁶⁸ Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis*, 116.

⁵⁶⁹ "Saudi Arabia – Shia," *GlobalSecurity.org*, accessed June 2021, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/gulf/sa-shia.htm>

⁵⁷⁰ James Dorsey, (former Middle East journalist, Wall Street Journal and New York Times), in discussion with author, December 2020.

from the UAE, it also contained a small number of Qatari troops. Unlike its actions and policies in Egypt and Libya, rather than extolling the mass demonstrations for greater political representation, Qatari actions in Bahrain took place under a collective GCC mantle.

Al Jazeera's reporting in Bahrain was subdued compared to its coverage in other Arab Spring theatres. This was very different from the thrusting unilateralism that characterised some of Qatar's other Arab Spring policies.⁵⁷¹ Al Jazeera Arabic barely covered the protests in Bahrain, nor did it give much airtime to the smaller scale ones in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province or in Oman. Speaking at Chatham House in early 2012, the station's former director-general (from 2003 to 2011), acknowledged that the broadcaster had "devoted less coverage to the uprising in Bahrain than to those in Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, or Yemen, stating that this was because attitudes to the protests in Bahrain's society were politically divided on sectarian lines",⁵⁷² and also no doubt due to the extreme sensitivities of the Saudis.

During the Arab Spring, Al Jazeera stirred controversy through its no holds-barred reporting on, and unfettered analysis of, regional events.⁵⁷³ It played a vital role in shaping the emerging narratives of protest,⁵⁷⁴ and won favourable plaudits for the way it revolutionised news reporting. This enhancing the perception that Qatar was somehow different,⁵⁷⁵ and greatly strengthened the country's potent state-branding strategy in the process.⁵⁷⁶ However, when evidence of inconsistencies in Al Jazeera's reporting of the Arab Spring protests emerged, this led to renewed doubts as to the true level of its editorial independence and objectives,⁵⁷⁷ lack of genuine autonomy (such as the case in Bahrain) and a suspicion of the relationship between Al Jazeera and Qatar's ruling elite. As affirmed by the renowned political Islamism expert: "Al Jazeera's impartiality suffered a lot particularly after Mohamed Morsi, when Al Jazeera called his defenestration a coup. This was seen as one of signals of the lack of Qatar's impartiality".⁵⁷⁸ Somewhat in defence of Al Jazeera's reporting during the Egyptian revolution, a former Chief Editor of Al Jazeera English online insisted that "it was only Al Jazeera covering what's happening, and yet people thought the Qatari government is with him (Mohammad Morsi)".⁵⁷⁹

⁵⁷¹ Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring*, 115-116.

⁵⁷² Kinninmont, "The Gulf Divided: The Impact of the Qatar Crisis," 13.

⁵⁷³ Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis*, 48.

⁵⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 1.

⁵⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 3.

⁵⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 122.

⁵⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 49-50.

⁵⁷⁸ Courtney Freer, (Middle East Centre at the London School of Economics), in discussion with author, January 2021.

⁵⁷⁹ Abdulaziz Al Mahmoud, (former Qatari Airforce engineer, Al Sharq and Peninsula daily journalist, Chief editor for Al Jazeera), in discussion with author, January 2021.

Nevertheless, Al Jazeera was seen as biased in favour of Qatar and influenced events on the ground, and by extension, foreign relations between Qatar and both Egypt and Libya. As such, the corollary and consequence of these actions inevitably led to a Saudi response.

During the Arab Spring and in the years to follow, Al Jazeera was firmly viewed as a biased broadcaster, particularly in Saudi Arabia, and a foreign policy tool of the Qatari state. This as such undermined Qatar's impartiality and weakened its subtle power posture of 'exercising influence from behind the scenes'. Confirming this was a former policy officer at the Saudi Royal Court who reflected on Al Jazeera's reporting of events during the Arab Spring and said:

When you talk to people, they see it practically as that Al Jazeera is doing its bit on behalf of Qatar, and in fact, it is a mouthpiece for Qatar and that it is having a success in moving the light away from Qatar, and shifting it towards the Emiratis and the Saudis and others in the region. Even internally in Saudi Arabia, even when I lived in Saudi Arabia, you cannot access Al Jazeera through your phone, it's blocked. The Saudis are very sensitive to any sort of criticism that is waged against them, whether it's on human rights, whether it's on security, whether it's on sectarian issues, or whether it's on politics. That is something, again, that whilst in some respects, from their point of view, they see that it's an injustice to them, that how Al Jazeera, which is a Qatar-run entity, how they push Al Jazeera to have certain narratives between the English and Arabic, but at the same time, is that they are super, super sensitive when it comes to any criticisms to them.⁵⁸⁰

The former Saudi Royal Court policy officer continues by noting that from the international perspective:

The Saudis definitely view Al Jazeera as the mouthpiece for Qatar. The Saudis always view that there is double standard in the UN. I was talking to a certain senior-ranking Saudi official, and at the same time, I was talking with a Qatari at the mission over there, it's sympathy, of course, just because we had some things that we needed to deal with them. From the Saudi side, the chief complaint was that 'Yes, we have shortcomings on human rights, on foreign workers, on this, on that, but you see, how is it that in the Human Rights Council we are heavily criticised, but yet, at the same time, Qatar is not criticised'. There is a double standard in the world. You can see this very clearly through Al Jazeera, through Al Jazeera whether it's Arabic or English, is that everyone listens to Al Jazeera and

⁵⁸⁰ Jamil Sawda, (former policy officer, Saudi Royal Court in Riyadh), in discussion with author, January 2021.

they broadcast all of these what they call propaganda about criticism of Saudis, so then it sticks into people's minds, into decision makers' and Europeans' minds.⁵⁸¹

As such, it's not just the negative press which causes Saudi contestation, but the inadvertent influencing of Western policy makers to either the detriment of the Saudis, or the absence of credit that Riyadh thinks it deserves.

In sum, Al Jazeera is a trailblazing broadcaster with an international reputation which has had an impact on Qatar's subtle power – largely positive yet not entirely. It influenced the course of the Arab Spring uprisings, has antagonised its neighbours, and revolutionised the Arab media landscape - no small feat for a broadcaster that began its life as a post-BBC Arabic thought bubble. Al Jazeera can be considered a bellwether for the degree of autonomy Qatar has from Saudi Arabia, such was the case in Egypt and Libya, and the degree of autonomy it did not have, as was the case in Bahrain. It can also be considered a bellwether for overall Saudi/Qatar relationship. For example, its coverage of the murder of Khashoggi was seemingly relentless,⁵⁸² yet its coverage of the execution of 81 men in Saudi Arabia for 'deviant beliefs', the largest number of executions in a single day in decades,⁵⁸³ was almost non-existent⁵⁸⁴ – the former occurred during the blockade, the latter just after the blockade ended. However, the fallout from Al Jazeera's broadcasting and backing of some of the revolutionaries during the Arab Spring resulted in the *entrenchment of the perception* that Qatar was a partisan regional actor prepared to support political Islamists instead of the established monarchies of the GCC. As such, this impacted on its perceived impartiality and contributed to, (amongst other factors, events and actors discussed in Part Two below) to the weakening and/or undermining of the elements of subtle power.

Finally, as for the Muslim Brotherhood and Al Jazeera (and independent journalism) in Egypt, in the ten years since the massacre in Rabaa city which followed the overthrow of Morsi, a massacre in which over a thousand peaceful demonstrators were reportedly murdered, the Al Sisi government has imprisoned more than 60,000 Egyptians, from liberal activists to anyone

⁵⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸² Rasha Salameh, "Al Jazeera's Talk Shows Treatment of the Saudi Journalist," *Vilnius University Press* 13, (2019): 46-76.

⁵⁸³ Aziz El Yaakoubi, "Saudi Arabia Executes 81 Men in one day for Terrorism, Other Offences," *Reuters*, (March 2022), <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-executes-81-men-terrorism-other-charges-spa-2022-03-12/>

⁵⁸⁴ Author observations.

connected to the Muslim Brotherhood.⁵⁸⁵ As recalled by a PBS Newshour war correspondent who reported on the Rabaa massacre from the mosques that had been converted into morgues to store the slain demonstrators:

Those were really shocking scenes at the time. It's important to remember that the Rabaa massacre is believed to have been one of the biggest ever single events of demonstrators or protesters being shot dead in the street in modern history, and in the following days and weeks, because of what happened was an increasing crackdown on protesters, Morsi supporters, and journalists. Shortly afterwards, it was as resistance kept continuing, and small protests were popping up, the Egyptian authorities actually arrested largely the entire bureau of the Al Jazeera English team at the time, which included an Australian journalist, Peter Greste. Him and his team and his bureau chief, Mohamed Fahmy, they were - they were arrested and sent to jail and effectively spent over a year in an Egyptian jail. That was a message to news organisations, to international news organisations, Americans, Europeans, that sending journalists to Egypt to investigate and report on human rights would be extremely dangerous. And what we have seen over the last decade is that it has worked.⁵⁸⁶

PART TWO - THE IMPACT ON SUBTLE POWER

Where Chapter Three analysed the impact each of the four elements of subtle power had on Qatar's pursuit of autonomy, Part Two of this chapter focuses on an analysis of the undermining or weakening of each of the four elements. This chapter of this thesis reveals that at differing times, and to various degrees, each of the four elements have been impacted either by actions Qatar itself took, or by other external forces and pressures. This contrasts with Kamrava's assessment that subtle power 'came to an end'⁵⁸⁷ with the accession of Emir Tamim. As a result of the undermining or weakening of the four elements of subtle power, it became evident that Qatar could no longer 'exercise influence from behind the scenes'. As such, Part

⁵⁸⁵ "A Look at Egypt's Struggles 10 Years After Soldiers Killed Hundreds in Rabaa Massacre," *PBS Newshour*, (August 2023), <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/a-look-at-egypts-struggles-10-years-after-soldiers-killed-hundreds-in-rabaa-massacre>

⁵⁸⁶ Jane Ferguson, "A Look at Egypt's Struggles 10 Years After Soldiers Killed Hundreds in Rabaa Massacre," *PBS Newshour*, (August 2023), <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/a-look-at-egypts-struggles-10-years-after-soldiers-killed-hundreds-in-rabaa-massacre>

⁵⁸⁷ Kamrava, "Qatari Foreign Policy and the Exercise of Subtle Power," 93.

Two of this chapter will focus solely on the *how*, *why*, and *when* each of the four elements had been either undermined or weakened, beginning with the element of Diplomacy and Conflict Mediation.

Diplomacy and Conflict Mediation

As discussed in Chapter Three, Qatar's conflict mediation initiatives may have borne mixed results for the conflicting parties, but did nonetheless raise the profile of Qatar as a one-stop-shop for regional conflict mediation considerations, and a source of post-conflict investment and reconstruction funds. Qatar's conflict mediation initiatives raised the prominence of Qatar regionally, and despite some Saudi attempts of subversion, contributed to Qatar's national identity as an autonomous and forward-thinking actor in the region. The diplomacy and conflict mediation element of Qatar's subtle power however suffered a self-inflicted wound during the Arab Spring resulting from Qatar's partisan participation in conflict theatres, and the backing of some revolutionary forces who were rising up against longstanding autocrats for greater opportunities, dignity, and respect. As such, this severely undermined one of the hallmark features of Qatar's subtle power capabilities, by turning Qatar from impartial (or neutral) conflict mediator to active conflict participant.

However, prior to the Arab Spring, it's important to note that Qatar was not universally accepted as a neutral or impartial actor in some of its conflict mediation initiatives. Qatar's intentions in Yemen for example were perceived by the Saudis with suspicion. As recalled by the former US Ambassador posted to Sana'a during Qatar's conflict mediation efforts in Yemen:

The Saudis, of course, were always very suspicious of the role that Doha was trying to play in Yemen. They saw it as the Qataris trying to basically intrude into what the Saudis considered to be their turf. There was a lot of allegations about Qatar being a front for Iran. I think Saudi suspicions played a role into what became a very hostile position about Qatar from the Saudi government ... and Yemeni President Abdulla Saleh accused Qatar of 'interfering in Yemeni affairs'.⁵⁸⁸

⁵⁸⁸ Gerald Feierstein, (former ambassador, US Embassy in Sana'a), in discussion with author, January 2020.

The former ambassador continued by recalling that during the Arab Spring:

Then the Arab Spring came to Yemen,⁵⁸⁹ and Saleh decided that he was going to focus on the Qatari role, partially because he was annoyed at the way Al Jazeera was covering the demonstrations in Yemen. Finally, Doha basically said, ‘We’re not going to participate in this GCC mediation initiative’. They (Qatar) closed their embassy. Most of the time that I was there, there was no Qatari mission in Sana’a.⁵⁹⁰

In April 2011, an embattled Saleh reacted with anger to a call for his resignation by Qatar’s prime minister and denounced Doha’s “blatant interference in Yemeni affairs” at a rally of supporters in Sana’a, adding that “the Qatari initiative is rejected, rejected, rejected. We reject what comes from Qatar or Al Jazeera”.⁵⁹¹ Therefore, in attempting to mediate a resolution to the conflict in Yemen prior to the Arab Spring, Qatar inadvertently initiated what was the beginning of the loss of its perceived impartiality, as neither the Saudis nor the Yemeni president were appreciative of Doha’s conflict mediation assistance. The notion of Qatar’s impartiality and neutrality however was significantly impacted when it came to Libya, where Qatar actively engaged in a UN-backed NATO bombing campaign.

Perhaps the most telling example of the undermining of Qatar’s element of conflict mediation was the military intervention Qatar participated in during NATO’s mission to overthrow Muammar Gaddafi under the cloak⁵⁹² of protecting Libyan civilians. Prior to the 2011 intervention, the Qatari leadership had engaged with the long-standing autocratic regime of Colonel Gaddafi⁵⁹³ on multiple issues,⁵⁹⁴ however when conditions in Libya and North Africa changed so dramatically early in 2011, Qatari policy adapted pragmatically to the new regional outlook. The rebellion that began in Benghazi in February 2011 against Gaddafi’s mercurial dictatorship of forty-two years allowed Qatar to translate into actions its ambition, not only to be an interlocutor between the Middle East and the Western world, but also a desire to be seen

⁵⁸⁹ A few weeks after Secretary Clinton arrived in late 2010 as discussed in Chapter Three.

⁵⁹⁰ Gerald Feierstein, (former ambassador, US Embassy in Sana’a), in discussion with author, January 2020.

⁵⁹¹ Kristian Ulrichsen, “Qatar and the Arab Spring,” *Open Democracy*, April 2011, www.opendemocracy.net/en/qatar-and-arab-spring.

⁵⁹² Obviously not a stated goal at the beginning of the military intervention, multiple nation states ultimately saw the operation as having a secondary goal of regime change.

⁵⁹³ Qatar’s participation in the campaign to oust Colonel Qaddafi in 2011 can at least be partially explained by the memory of the Libyan plot to blow up the GCC leaders meeting at the Doha Sheraton in 1983.

⁵⁹⁴ Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring*, 122.

as an innovative Arab actor capable of doing things differently.⁵⁹⁵ However, by shifting to a more interventionist foreign policy, Qatar became a conflicting party itself.⁵⁹⁶ Albeit the case, according to the US Ambassador to Yemen, “the reality however, was that the Qataris were on the side of the UN-supported government in Tripoli, as opposed to Emiratis, or the Egyptians, who were supporting Haftar’s⁵⁹⁷ forces”,⁵⁹⁸ thereby distancing itself from the collective GCC response expected by Riyadh.

Qatar’s initial moves paved the way for the subsequent NATO intervention,⁵⁹⁹ and once UN Security Council Resolution 1973 authorising the NATO-led intervention was passed, Hamad stated that ‘Qatar will participate in military action because we believe there must be Arab states undertaking this action, because the situation is intolerable’.⁶⁰⁰ Qatar’s overseas military engagement in Libya was not however an inconspicuous exercise of subtlety or caution. Qatar dedicated six combat jets to NATO’s disposal and engaged in combat and surveillance missions, trained hundreds of Libyan rebels in Qatar, and from April 2011 onwards, supplied rebels with European antitank missiles and rifles. In total, Qatar supplied eighteen shipments amounting to 20,000 tons of weapons to the Libyan rebels,⁶⁰¹ the first Arab country to do so.⁶⁰² This shift in power projection from ‘exerting influence from behind the scenes’ to an overt, active, and vocal supporter of interventionism in Libya was a critical moment in the undermining of Qatar’s neutrality, and by extension, the perception it was not an impartial conflict mediator.

In Egypt, in another blow to the element of diplomacy and conflict mediation, Qatar’s support for the Muslim Brotherhood was diametrically opposed to the regional responses to the Arab Spring of the other Gulf states as discussed in Part One of this chapter. As the initial uprisings of 2011 gave way to protracted, messy, and increasingly uncertain political transitions in 2012, as the Muslim Brotherhood replaced Iran as the *bête noir* of the Gulf ruling elites.⁶⁰³ This

⁵⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 123.

⁵⁹⁶ Felsch, “Qatar’s Rising International Influence: A Case of Soft Power,” 34-35.

⁵⁹⁷ Khalifa Haftar served in the Libyan army under Muammar Gaddafi and took part in the coup that brought Gaddafi to power in 1969. Haftar held a senior position in the forces which overthrew Gaddafi in 2011. Haftar has been described as Libya’s most potent warlord, having fought with and against nearly every significant faction in Libya’s conflicts and is backed by Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

⁵⁹⁸ Gerald Feierstein, (former ambassador, US Embassy in Sana’a), in discussion with author, January 2020.

⁵⁹⁹ Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring*, 123.

⁶⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 124.

⁶⁰¹ Matthiesen, “Renting the Casbah: Gulf States’ Foreign Policy towards North Africa since the Arab Uprisings,” 53.

⁶⁰² “Qatar Supplies Libyan Rebels with Anti-Tank Missiles,” *The Times*, accessed November 2021, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/qatar-supplies-libyan-rebels-with-anti-tank-missiles-6nwzqz576mj>

⁶⁰³ Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring*, 154.

environment of greater questioning and outright scepticism of Qatari objectives also focused on Qatar's myriad and intensifying investments in Egypt, including the offer to supply the state with LNG during the hot summer months,⁶⁰⁴ and a vague and never-defined \$18 billion five-year pledge made in 2012.⁶⁰⁵ Qatar's divergence from the norms of its neutrality in conflict mediation, to a nation state supportive of the uprisings (in Egypt) undermined its impartiality, particularly by supporting political Islamists such as the Muslim Brotherhood, and this in turn became the principal source of Saudi disputation with Qatar. However, this was not always the perception of people in Qatar, as according to a Qatari PhD candidate:

In general, Qatar has proven its impartiality and sincere willingness to help throughout mediations that Qatar has achieved ... Qatar stood for humanity and a nations rights' against the oppressive regimes, and this standing never violated Qatar's approach according to International Law. That role started from advice that Qatari leaders offered many times prior to the Arab Spring. On the other hand, Qatar's humanitarian and economic support never stopped to those countries, regardless of who were in the leadership positions. For example, Qatar sent five LNG batched (*sic*) to Egypt after the January revolution – three of them were in the time of military council's ruling time (i.e. not only supplied to the Morsi-led Muslim Brotherhood government).⁶⁰⁶

Adding fuel to the fire was Al Jazeera, a second principal source of Saudi contestation, which unreservedly took sides during the Arab uprisings, as an Al Jazeera war correspondent who reported from Egypt at the time recalls: "During the revolution, people were incredibly grateful for Al Jazeera staying on air. The Muslim Brotherhood was relying on Al Jazeera Arabic to keep telling the story".⁶⁰⁷

As adumbrated above, the first major implication of Qatar's policy responses to the Arab Spring was the effect on the country's carefully constructed reputation of impartiality that underpinned its diplomatic mediation and peace-building efforts,⁶⁰⁸ a reputation unique regionally and arguably the hallmark element of Qatar's subtle power utility. Qatar's reputation as a relatively honest and neutral broker was undermined by the Qatari leadership's post-2011

⁶⁰⁴ Roberts, *Securing the Global Ambitions of a City-State*, 129.

⁶⁰⁵ Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring*, 156.

⁶⁰⁶ Mirdef Al Qahsouti (Qatari PhD Candidate specialising in Iran-GCC Relations), email exchange with author, March 2023.

⁶⁰⁷ Sue Turton, (Arab Spring War Correspondent, Al Jazeera Doha), in discussion with author, March 2021.

⁶⁰⁸ Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring*, 150.

turn toward an activist and interventionist foreign policy,⁶⁰⁹ and since the Arab Spring, there have been no conflict mediation initiatives of ‘regional significance’,⁶¹⁰ nor between prominent regional Arab actors,⁶¹¹ and none of which have come close to Qatar’s (partial) success in Lebanon which elevated its status in the Middle East.

In sum, the loss of Qatar’s perceived impartiality was impacted significantly by its interventionism in Libya, active backing of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and general outlook towards the Arab Spring revolutions, and as such, instilled a new and lingering suspicion of Qatar amongst the Saudi ruling elite. This suspicion was later metastasised regionally, as was the case in Bamako, Mali, where rumours persisted in 2012 of Qatari involvement in the Islamist takeover of northern Mali.⁶¹² Although the Arab Spring provided the Qatari leadership with the chance to increase its presence in the region, deepen ties with key countries and counter Saudi hegemony,⁶¹³ the outcome remains that the self-inflicted wounds on Qatar’s impartiality have not recovered in full to pre-Arab Spring times, and as such, have undermined this subtle power element.

National Branding

Since being awarded the hosting rights to the FIFA World Cup in 2022 (hereinafter ‘the World Cup’) in December 2010, Qatar’s national brand has taken a battering of criticism from regional and international actors. Having found itself on the semi-constant defensive, Qatar’s national branding element of its subtle power strategies have thus been weakened. Although Doha has responded to alleviate reputational damage, this chapter finds that Qatar has experienced *soft power - soft disempowerment*, which is defined as, “actions, inactions, and/or policies of a state that ultimately upsets, offends, or alienates others, leading to a loss of credibility and attractiveness, and brings so much attention to the country whereby its vulnerabilities are

⁶⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶¹⁰ Since the Arab Spring, Qatar has aided the release of two bishops abducted in Syria in 2013 and nine Lebanese hostages in a separate exchange, mediated between Libyan Toubou and Tuareg tribes in 2015, and facilitated a resolution between Chadian parties in 2022. Qatar was not absent on the conflict mediation scene, but these initiatives are of far less regional significance compared to the resolutions achieved in Lebanon, Sudan and Yemen prior to the Arab Spring.

⁶¹¹ Qatar ‘facilitated’ negotiations between the Taliban and the United States which culminated in the US withdrawal of its forces from Afghanistan in 2021. Neither party can be considered ‘regional’ and neither is of Arabic heritage. Although Qatar’s role resulted in a significant foreign policy win for Qatar, the facilitation of the talks between the United States and the Taliban differs from its pre-Arab Spring mediations efforts as will be discussed in Chapter Five.

⁶¹² Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring*, 151.

⁶¹³ Quilliam, “The Saudi Dimension: Understanding the Kingdom’s Position in the Gulf Crisis,” 110.

closely monitored by international actors”.⁶¹⁴ The most prominent example of Qatar’s soft power - soft disempowerment surrounds the reputational damage endured internationally stemming from the bad publicity of the kafala system⁶¹⁵ and Qatar’s treatment of migrant workers building stadiums for the World Cup, and allegations Qatar bribed its way into winning the World Cup hosting rights themselves.

Winning the hosting rights for the World Cup was an astonishing boon for Qatar. The real effect of being awarded the hosting rights however brought Qatar mainly negative international attention in the context of human rights violations, and therefore has at best caused mixed impacts on its image.⁶¹⁶ Amnesty International reported in a comprehensive document⁶¹⁷ titled ‘The Dark Side of Migration’ exploitations and abuses of migrant construction and domestic workers that included forced labour, the confiscation of migrant workers’ passports, restrictions of movement and wage reductions or even no payments at all.⁶¹⁸ British tabloid *The Guardian* also admonished Qatar with claims that “more than 6,500 migrant workers from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka have died in Qatar since it won the right to host the World Cup”.⁶¹⁹ (This was a claim *The Guardian*’s author later admitted was dubious as “there is no real medical understanding of the deaths”.⁶²⁰)

As if to drive the point home, it was not Qatari aid to the victims of two devastating earthquakes in Nepal in 2015 that made headlines but the refusal of contractors working on World Cup-related projects to grant Nepalese labourers compassion leave to return home to attend funerals or visit relatives.⁶²¹ The portrait of Qatar that emerged from a review of responses and media coverage in 2015 pictured a nation that treats migrant workers, the majority of its population,

⁶¹⁴ Brannagan and Giulianotti “The Soft Power – Soft Disempowerment Nexus: The Case of Qatar,” 1152.

⁶¹⁵ Kafala translates as ‘sponsorship’ and references that a foreign worker’s residence and employment are directly tied to their sponsor, or kafeel. The kafala system is widely used in the Middle East and often associated with human rights abuses.

⁶¹⁶ Felsch, “Qatar’s Rising International Influence: A Case of Soft Power,” 31.

⁶¹⁷ “The Dark Side of Migration: Spotlight on Qatar’s Construction Sector Ahead of the World Cup,” *Amnesty International* (London: Amnesty International, (2013), accessed November 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/MDE22/010/2013/en/>

⁶¹⁸ Felsch, “Qatar’s Rising International Influence: A Case of Soft Power,” 30.

⁶¹⁹ Pete Pattison and Niamh McIntyre, “Revealed: 6,500 Migrant Workers Have Died in Qatar Since World Cup Awarded,” *The Guardian*, accessed November 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/feb/23/revealed-migrant-worker-deaths-qatar-fifa-world-cup-2022>

⁶²⁰ Pete Pattison, “Report Reveals More Than 6,500 Migrant Workers Have Died in Qatar’s World Cup Prep,” interview by Scott Simon, *Weekend Edition Saturday*, NPR, February 2021, audio, <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/27/972056906/report-reveals-more-than-6-500-migrant-workers-have-died-in-qatars-world-cup-pre>

⁶²¹ James Dorsey, “A Shrewd Financial Investor, Qatar Boasts Dismal Return on Investment in Soft Power,” ResearchGate, accessed May 2021, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/277130191_A_shrewd_financial_investor_Qatar_boasts_dismal_return_on_investment_in_soft_power

as subhuman. Qatar increasingly became the target of audiences like soccer fans and the corporate sponsors that it had hoped to charm.⁶²² Qatar may have astounded the international football community by winning the race to host the World Cup, hitting a peak in its name recognition and confidence,⁶²³ but this was a short-lived zenith in Qatar's national branding life cycle due to the effect of soft power – soft disempowerment stemming from negative media attention.

On top of this negative media attention emanating from Qatar's treatment of migrant workers were constant accusations of bribery and corruption surrounding the successful bid to host the World Cup. Qatar began to experience soft power – soft disempowerment almost immediately after being awarded the hosting rights resulting from allegations which purported to reveal that Qatar had breached FIFA rules by systematically bribing key political and sporting officials in order to win favour.⁶²⁴ One example of this is a report in the British tabloid *The Telegraph* in 2014, which alleged that a deal was signed by QatarGas⁶²⁵ to supply Thailand with two million tonnes of LNG which had influenced the Thai Football Association's vote.⁶²⁶ *The Telegraph* then ran a sustained anti-Qatar program for years to follow, even accusing World Cup organisers of paying the Taliban 'millions' for construction equipment to build stadiums.⁶²⁷ It transpired however, that the people who owned *The Telegraph* were, according to a renowned Qatar watcher and academic, "basically bidding rivals with the Qataris for investments in London",⁶²⁸ a claim also reported by online publisher *Middle East Eye*.⁶²⁹ The Saudis too had been trying to elicit support for bribery allegations according to a Middle East cyber weaponisation expert who said:

⁶²² *Ibid.*

⁶²³ Kristian Ulrichsen, "Perceptions and Divisions in Security and Defence Structures in Arab Gulf States," In *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, edited by Andreas Krieg, 19-36, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 28

⁶²⁴ Brannagan and Giulianotti "The Soft Power – Soft Disempowerment Nexus: The Case of Qatar," 1153.

⁶²⁵ Now a part of Qatar Energy.

⁶²⁶ Ross Griffin, "National identity, social legacy and Qatar 2022: The Cultural Ramifications of FIFA's first Arab World Cup," *Soccer and Society* 20, no. 7-8 (2019): 1000-1013.

⁶²⁷ Joe Wallen, "How the Taliban Helped Build the Stadiums for the Qatar World Cup," *The Telegraph*, November 2022, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/terror-and-security/how-taliban-helped-build-stadiums-qatar-world-cup/>

⁶²⁸ Matthew Gray, (Wasada University), in discussion with author, June 2020.

⁶²⁹ Rori Donaghy, "Was a London Property Dispute Behind a Telegraph Campaign Against Qatar?," *Middle East Eye*, accessed June 2021, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/was-london-property-dispute-behind-telegraph-campaign-against-qatar>

In terms of the disinformation around this,⁶³⁰ one of the examples might be the Qatari Leaks website,⁶³¹ which is generally anti-Qatar stuff and that covers a lot about bribery allegations for the World Cup ... and on the Saudi Twitter sphere there's a lot of government-aligned influences. There's a lot of bot accounts as well. They are generally very anti-Qatar and will promote on Twitter any story that is anti-Qatar.⁶³²

Even ten years after the crucial vote awarding Qatar the hosting rights, allegations continued to emerge. A second example is when in April 2020, a US Department of Justice indictment was released which alleged representatives working for Qatar bribed FIFA executive committee officials to swing votes.⁶³³ US Treasury officials had also previously turned their focus on Qatar and described Abdulrahman Al Nuaimi, a former president of the Qatar Football Association, as a major financier of Al Qaeda and its regional affiliates, promoting humanitarian causes on the one hand while supporting extremist groups on the other.⁶³⁴ Another recent allegation against Qatar published by *The Guardian* in 2019 claimed that FIFA faced calls to investigate a secret \$100 million TV deal⁶³⁵ offered to Al Jazeera three weeks before the hosting rights were announced.⁶³⁶

The soft power - soft disempowerment experienced by Qatar in the wake of the migrant workers and corruption allegations is not all of Qatar's own making. The Saudis also played their part in tightening the screws on Qatar, as the negative media attention swirling Doha's hosting of the World Cup didn't end at the treatment of migrant workers or allegations of bribery. Saudi Arabia for example, actively supported the beoutQ⁶³⁷ pirate TV operation, which is according to the cyber weaponisation expert was "a contest between Qatar and Saudi Arabia

⁶³⁰ Meaning the smear campaign against Qatar and the World Cup

⁶³¹ Qatari Leaks is an anti-Qatar website, <https://qatarileaks.com/en>

⁶³² James Shires, (Cyber Weaponisation Expert and Associate Fellow, The Hague Program for Cyber Norms and a Fellow with the Cyber Statecraft Initiative at the Atlantic Council), in discussion with author, December 2020.

⁶³³ "Qatar Denies Allegations of Corruption in World Cup 2022 bid," *Al Jazeera English*, accessed April 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/qatar-denies-allegations-corruption-world-cup-2022-bid-200407183122573.html>

⁶³⁴ Ulrichsen, "Links Between Domestic and Regional Security," 37.

⁶³⁵ Sean Ingle, "FIFA Facing Urgent Calls to Investigate Qatar World Cup Bid Claims," *The Guardian*, accessed November 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2019/mar/10/qatar-fifa-world-cup-2022-damian-collins>

⁶³⁶ Azman Abdul Hamid, "A Game of Jealousy - Qatar Hits Back at Critics Over 2022 World Cup," *New Straits Times*, accessed April 2020, <https://www.nst.com.my/sports/football/2019/03/472462/game-jealousy-qatar-hits-back-critics-over-2022-world-cup>

⁶³⁷ BeoutQ was a pirate pay television broadcaster that operated in Saudi Arabia between August 2017 and August 2019. The service primarily simulcasted the programmes of Qatari broadcaster beIN Sports. BeoutQ began operations after Saudi Arabia blocked beIN Media Group from offering its services in the country; the action stemmed from the blockade.

in terms of projecting information power to the US and Europe especially”.⁶³⁸ The World Trade Organisation eventually ruled that Saudi government officials, including Saud Al Qahtani⁶³⁹ who was the General Supervisor of the Centre for Studies and Media Affairs, publicly promoted beoutQ which stole and broadcasted the content of Qatari sport network beIN Media Group, and sold it as its own.⁶⁴⁰ Yet despite this, the Saudi smear campaign continued, and since the 2017 blockade, the Saudis have employed public relations firms in the United States and used social media platforms to lambast Qatar to garner international support to weaken Qatar’s brand.⁶⁴¹ A Saudi national and socio-political analyst contends that: “One of the motivations behind the Saudi smear campaign was that the Saudis would like to show that they have the Islamic culture, the real Islam, the real Arab tradition. They’re trying to compete over what is the Islamic culture ... and how it’s really practiced”.⁶⁴²

On top of this, during the blockade the Quartet tried to put pressure on Qatar demanding that if they give up the tournament - an unlikely scenario - they would lift their sanctions,⁶⁴³ or that the Gulf states could ease their regional blockade of Qatar if the latter allowed them to host matches during the World Cup, a proposal floated whilst FIFA mulled over the decision to expand the tournament from 32 to 48 teams - a proposal eventually scrapped.⁶⁴⁴ The Saudi national believes this was true when he said:

One of the things that was said in Riyadh is that, if I remember correctly, they wouldn’t mind sharing some of these things (the World Cup). It was discussed. I remember hearing about it. But you realise that ‘Hell no, they’re (Qatar) not going to share this.’ I don’t think any country will not want to share the World Cup.⁶⁴⁵

⁶³⁸ James Shires, (Cyber Weaponisation Expert and Associate Fellow, The Hague Program for Cyber Norms and a Fellow with the Cyber Statecraft Initiative at the Atlantic Council), in discussion with author, December 2020.

⁶³⁹ Saud Al Qahtani has been a close adviser of MBS, and, according to the US intelligence community, was one of the Saudi officials behind the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

⁶⁴⁰ “Saudi State Behind beoutQ Piracy TV Operation: WTO Ruling,” *Al Jazeera*, accessed November 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2020/6/16/saudi-state-behind-beoutq-piracy-tv-operation-wto-ruling>

⁶⁴¹ Francois Chauvancy, *The Qatar Blockade: The Failed Offensive: Information Warfare, Games of Influence, Economic Standoff*. (Paris: Hermann Editeurs, 2019), 17.

⁶⁴² Aziz Alghashian, (Saudi socio-political analyst, Saudi National), in discussion with author, July 2021.

⁶⁴³ Jack Pitt-Brooke, “Qatar Hits Back at Attempt to Take 2022 World Cup Away Blaming Concerns of Petty Jealousy,” *The Independent*, accessed April 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/sport/football/international/qatar-hits-back-at-attempt-by-diplomatic-rivals-to-take-2022-world-cup-away-a7994661.html>

⁶⁴⁴ Amandla Thomas-Johnson, “UAE Says World Cup Could Ease Gulf Tensions if Qatar Shares Hosting,” *Middle East Eye*, accessed April 2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/uae-says-world-cup-could-ease-gulf-tensions-if-qatar-shares-hosting>

⁶⁴⁵ Aziz Alghashian, (Saudi socio-political analyst, Saudi National), in discussion with author, July 2021.

As such and as mentioned above, the soft power - soft disempowerment Qatar experienced was not all of its own making, nevertheless, the national branding element had been weakened having come under a sustained and multipronged attack from various actors.

Ultimately, Qatar was no longer getting the same bang for the billions of dollars it invested in what was fundamentally a pillar of its overall security and defence policy.⁶⁴⁶ The international attention Qatar received resulting from the World Cup drew both attention to Qatar enhancing its national branding initiatives, but at the same time inflicted soft power - soft disempowerment (projecting) Qatar as a state which is accused of failing to uphold international conventions, or standards on global development.⁶⁴⁷ This chapter has found that the unintended consequences of Qatar's soft power - soft disempowerment was the element of national branding which was undermined, loosening another spoke in wheel of Qatar's subtle power foreign policy strategies.

Strategic use of the QIA

The concept of 'what security is' has undergone a transformative shift, as the end of the Cold War led to a scholarly widening and deepening of security studies, as the discipline moved beyond a traditional military and state-centric focus.⁶⁴⁸ This coincided with the proliferation of a notable juggernaut of Gulf states' political economies – SWFs. Since the early 2000s, they have operated intermestically⁶⁴⁹ as financial vehicles for strategic overseas investments, and domestic development and diversification projects in their states of origin. However, these financial vehicles of the hydrocarbon-rich Gulf states have not operated without scrutiny, and this is particularly the case for the QIA. The added scrutiny of the investments of the QIA has resulted in the weakening of this third element of subtle power as examples below will show.

Discussion of foreign direct investments by GCC-based entities hit global headlines following the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) that erupted in 2007. Through the ensuing global economic collapse, as fears of further downturn cast a spotlight on Western company balance sheets,

⁶⁴⁶ James Dorsey, "A Shrewd Financial Investor, Qatar Boasts Dismal Return on Investment in Soft Power."

⁶⁴⁷ Brannagan and Giulianotti "The Soft Power – Soft Disempowerment Nexus: The Case of Qatar," 1151.

⁶⁴⁸ Kristian Ulrichsen, "Introduction," in *The Changing Security Dynamics of the Persian Gulf*, ed. Kristian Ulrichsen, 1-22, (London: Hurst and Co, 2017), 10.

⁶⁴⁹ Intermestic is defined as 'an interpenetration of foreign and domestic issues such that national governments increasingly operated in spaces defined by the intersection of internal and external security'. See: Ulrichsen, "Introduction," 10.

many large corporations turned towards the GCC as a potential source of capital,⁶⁵⁰ and came to count Gulf investors among their largest shareholders.⁶⁵¹ This was not a new phenomenon, much like when Citibank needed capital infusion to overcome the problems brought by the United States East Coast real estate collapse of the early 1990s, it turned to the Al Saud for help.⁶⁵² In recalling even earlier times, dollar deposits of oil-exporting countries began flowing towards the Eurodollar markets started in the mid-1960s, and increased following the beginning of the petrodollar influx which emerged in 1973-1974 right after the end of the Arab-Israeli Yom Kippur War⁶⁵³ - Arab oil money is therefore no stranger to the Western financial sector. However, when SWFs from China and the Persian Gulf injected more than \$21 billion into two financial sector firms⁶⁵⁴ during the GFC, they set off alarm bells in Washington,⁶⁵⁵ as the political establishment feared foreign influence and boardroom monopoly over some of America's largest banks. As such, the investment power of international SWFs, including those from the GCC, began to experience a soft power - soft disempowerment of their own, despite their value to the ailing economies of the West.⁶⁵⁶

As for the QIA, in France for example the backlash against Qatari investments was being spearheaded at the elite level among far-right politicians who were particularly incensed about Qatar's plans to invest in *banlieues* – suburbs on the fringes of French cities for low-income residents. Marine Le Pen, leader of the far-right party the Front National who scored about 20% of the votes in the 2017 presidential elections, labelled Qatari investment plans as an 'Islamic Trojan Horse',⁶⁵⁷ despite the potential for increased housing availability for France's poorer populations (many of whom are Muslim). In a communique titled 'French Islamic Trojan Horse,' Marine Le Pen wrote:

These investments are in no way for humanitarian reasons, they are political and religious. It is a major political mistake to accept this, and it will come at the price

⁶⁵⁰ Adam Hanieh, *Money Markets and Monarchies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 47.

⁶⁵¹ Adam Hanieh, *Capitalism and Class in the Gulf Arab States* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 97.

⁶⁵² Gause, *Oil Monarchies: Domestic and Security Challenges in the Arab Gulf States*, 180.

⁶⁵³ Christopher Kopper, "The Recycling of Petrodollars," *Revue d'économie financière* 9, no.1, (2009): 39-48.

⁶⁵⁴ Citigroup and Merrill Lynch.

⁶⁵⁵ Ian Bremmer, "The Return of State Capitalism," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 50, no. 3, (2008): 55-64.

⁶⁵⁶ It is worth noting that the IMF Managing Director at the time strongly praised the SWFs of the GCC for their role in stabilising the global economy during the GFC by being a source of capital.

⁶⁵⁷ Saskya Vandoorne, "Controversy Over Qatar's Plan to Help Deprived French Suburbs," *CNN Online* accessed November 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2012/09/28/world/europe/france-qatar-disadvantaged-suburbs-funding/index.html>

of our independence, not only in our country but also in the context of our international policy.⁶⁵⁸

Therefore, despite Qatar's good intentions, this proposed investment brought an anti-Qatar backlash at the highest levels in French politics.

Although, perhaps the most famous, or infamous, example of the politically motivated jitters of a GCC investment was the aborted attempt by Dubai Ports World to acquire ports in the United States in 2006, which stands out as an example of a blocked investment that was effectively enforced without economic justification. The decision was based solely on adversarial political motivations,⁶⁵⁹ naively generated by Islamophobia and the international reach of terrorism, which a political economist at the American Enterprise Institute regarded as "blatantly racist".⁶⁶⁰ A former US Ambassador to Yemen reaffirmed this by saying:

It was really political and Islamic. There is really no justification for it. That was just kind of a domestic political issue here in the US, which is unfortunate because it did setback relationship with the Emiratis for a bit. I think everybody got over it but that was a bad thing. Sovereign wealth funds, I think people here love them, and they just want them to invest here.⁶⁶¹

As for negative and Islamophobic comments in US political circles, several Bush administration security officials had concerns that terrorists would infiltrate seaports through a Dubai owned entrepot, with one US security official for example quoted by the Washington Times as saying, "letting a Middle Eastern company manage key ports would be like putting the fox in charge of the hen house".⁶⁶²

Even in the Middle East, Qatar and its investments vehicles, particularly the QIA and its subsidiaries, were not immune from the sort of backlash and suspicions it experience in

⁶⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵⁹ El Kharouf, Farouk; Al Qudsi, Sulayman; Obeid, Shifa. "The Gulf Corporation Council Sovereign Wealth Funds: Are They Instruments for Economic Diversification or Political Tools," *Asian Economic Papers* 9, no. 1 (2010): 124-151.

⁶⁶⁰ Karen Young, (Political Economy Researcher, American Enterprise Institute), in discussion with author, November 2020.

⁶⁶¹ Gerald Feierstein, (former ambassador, US Embassy in Sana'a), in discussion with author, January 2020.

⁶⁶² "Security Fears About Infiltration by Terrorists," *Washington Times*, accessed November 2021, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2006/feb/22/20060222-122115-8912r/>

Western media, when there were for example grumblings against Qatar for purchasing the downfall of Gadhafi amongst others,⁶⁶³ and accusations that Qatar's role in the Libyan intervention was based mainly on oil and securing national interests.⁶⁶⁴ In Egypt at the time of the Arab Spring, somewhat incredulously, rumours continued to swirl amongst locals that Qatar might purchase the Suez Canal despite numerous denials from both governments.⁶⁶⁵ Another example of the suspicion of the QIA regionally is when Dubai suffered the indignity of being bailed out by its oil-rich neighbouring emirate Abu Dhabi with \$20 billion during the GFC after the bursting of the speculative real estate bubble.⁶⁶⁶ To some extent Qatar benefitted from the difficulties faced by Dubai, as QIA's reputation was enhanced as a potentially safer investment partner.⁶⁶⁷ Therefore, by virtue of being more financially resilient, competition between Qatar and Dubai was heightened, riling against the Emiratis. This does not suggest that this element of subtle power has necessarily been weakened, only that another front opened up in regional competition amongst member states of the GCC.

Whilst the strategic use of the QIA sought to garner soft power via branding and currying the favour of investment recipients and Western policymakers, it has brought Qatar negative attention, criticism, and concern within some Western governments of an Islamic takeover. This negative attention and wariness of the power and influence of the QIA has weakened this element of subtle power, as the QIA can no longer exert influence from behind the scenes. Although the impact of the scrutiny and wariness experienced by the QIA is not akin to the impact of the loss of impartiality undermining the element of diplomacy and conflict mediation, it remains the case that this element of subtle power has experienced soft power - soft disempowerment of its own, and has therefore been weakened.

Physical Protection

Despite all that has transpired in the Middle East and the United States since the election of Obama and Trump, Washington's support for Qatar shows no sign of ending (given an

⁶⁶³ Osman Antwi-Boateng, "The Rise of Qatar as a Soft Power and the Challenges," *European Scientific Journal* 9, no. 10 (2013): 39-51.

⁶⁶⁴ Abdulaziz Al Horr, Ghalia Al Thani, Evren Tok and Hany Besada "Qatar's Global Local Nexus: From Soft to Nested Power?," in *Policy Making in a Transformative State: The Case of Qatar*, ed. Evren Tok, Lolwah Alkhater and Leslie Pal (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 359.

⁶⁶⁵ Antwi-Boateng, "The Rise of Qatar as a Soft Power and the Challenges," 49.

⁶⁶⁶ "UAE Abu Dhabi to Roll Over \$20 Billion of Dubai's Debt," *Reuters*, accessed November 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-emirates-dubai-debt-idUSBREA2F0EQ20140316>

⁶⁶⁷ Gray, *Qatar: Politics and Challenges of Development*, 75.

erroneous Trump tweet or two). A former US Ambassador to Yemen is also of this view and stated that “Qatar’s support at Al Udeid has been fantastic”.⁶⁶⁸ As such, from the outset it is important to note that there is no evidence to suggest that the American military forces at Al Udeid are going to be relocated, nor is the US abandoning the Persian Gulf. However, wholesale trust and reliance on the United States has recently been questionable following the Obama administration’s reticence during the Arab Spring, pivot to Asia comments, and rapprochement with Iran. The Trump administration did not remedy these concerns with its isolationist proclivities, incoherent foreign policy messaging and capricious support for existing alliances such as NATO,⁶⁶⁹ or the Kurdish allied forces in Syria⁶⁷⁰ - and none of this has gone unnoticed by the Arab states of the Gulf.

As for Qatar, beginning with Obama the perception of the United States became skittish as a long-term provider of external security despite the presence of the United States’ forward operating base at Al Udeid - a mere 30 kilometres outside of Doha. Obama was perceived as tentative in engaging militarily in the Middle East, and his focus drifting towards Asia, and a reproachment with Iran. Trump’s tenure as president at times alarmed the Qataris with his accusatory tweets and inflammatory blustering about terrorism and his America First policies. Moreover, it was Trump’s first international visit as president which was to Saudi Arabia where he was showered with praise and fanfare. This put Qatar firmly on the backfoot and heightened its concerns about America’s commitment to its external security, thus undermining confidence in their longstanding relationship with the US and this fourth element of subtle power.

(i) Obama

After eight taxing years under George W. Bush, the 2009 speech Obama gave in Cairo was meant to propose a stark shift and a new beginning. For a foreign policy speech that the White House had made clear was the most important of the newly elected president, Obama would speak directly to Arabs, and in the Arab world’s most populous country. It is difficult to think of another speech that captured the boundless optimism and sense of possibility that Obama embodied in his first days in office. Following Obama’s presidency, the Cairo speech is

⁶⁶⁸ Gerald Feierstein, (former ambassador, US Embassy in Sana’a), in discussion with author, January 2020.

⁶⁶⁹ “Trump Says US May Abandon Automatic Protections for NATO Countries,” *BBC Online*, accessed November 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-36852805>

⁶⁷⁰ Ben Hubbard, “Abandoned by US in Syria, Kurds Find New Ally in American Foe,” *New York Times*, (2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/13/world/middleeast/syria-turkey-invasion-isis.html>

discussed, if at all, as a symbol of the gap between what the Obama administration might have been, and what it actually was.⁶⁷¹ Most notably, it was the Obama administration's response to the Arab Spring which erupted halfway through his first term that signalled not just the start of the end, but arguably the finality of the optimism the Cairo speech instilled in the Arab populations of the Middle East.

To make matters more uncertain for the Arab states of the Gulf, there was a rising of uncertainty about the future role of the United States in the Middle East following the Obama administration's 2011 pivot towards Asia⁶⁷² declaration. This led to some Middle East leaders to worry that it would result in a military drawdown in the Middle East. Whilst Obama's pivot policy set in train a new direction in policy in the Middle East, and did not lead to military drawdown, yet it did however set in motion a process of political disengagement,⁶⁷³ as the focus of the United States did not necessarily shift, but seemingly took on greater dimensions. As a former US Ambassador to Yemen notes: "I think that the general impression was that the US was not as steadfast as a partner as it had been in the past when Obama talked about pivoting to Asia. That would have been a clear signal that perhaps US attention was waning".⁶⁷⁴ Saudi intelligence chief Turki Al Faisal responded that Obama's real goal was a pivot to Iran, and complained: "We were America's best friends in the Arab world for 50 years".⁶⁷⁵ This was the beginning of the unprecedented strains on the relations between the GCC states and the US over the course of the Obama presidency.⁶⁷⁶

Obama's rapprochement with Iran was a second source of significant concern for the Arab states of the Gulf. The former US Ambassador contends that:

There was the whole issue of the Iran nuclear negotiations, and the interview that Obama gave to the Atlantic magazine, where he talked about how Saudi Arabia and Iran needed to learn how to share the region. Also, the statement that most of the problems that these states were experiencing were the result of internal policies, not external. There were a number of things that, in all fairness, if you were sitting in Riyadh, you would look at it and say - well this guy is not committed to us ...

⁶⁷¹ Shadi Hamid, "Obama's Good Intentions in the Middle East Meant Nothing," *The Brookings Institute*, accessed April 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/01/23/obamas-good-intentions-in-the-middle-east-meant-nothing/>

⁶⁷² Kristian Ulrichsen, "Links Between Domestic and Regional Security, 38.

⁶⁷³ Quilliam, "The Saudi Dimension: Understanding the Kingdom's Position in the Gulf Crisis," 115.

⁶⁷⁴ Gerald Feierstein, (former ambassador, US Embassy in Sana'a), in discussion with author, January 2020.

⁶⁷⁵ Colbert King, "Saudi Arabia is No Friend to the United States," *Washington Post*, accessed November 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/saudi-arabia-is-no-friend-to-the-united-states/2015/05/29/64f24bac-0588-11e5-8bda-c7b4e9a8f7ac_story.html

⁶⁷⁶ Kristian Ulrichsen, "Links Between Domestic and Regional Security, 38.

The concern in Riyadh was that the Obama administration wanted to develop a relationship with Iran and that was going to come at their expense. That we're willing to negotiate away their vital security interests in exchange for rebuilding our relationship with Tehran.⁶⁷⁷

A third example of the reliability of the United States under Obama was the withdrawal of support for the embattled Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak at the start of the Arab Spring. If not to add insult to injury, most Arab rulers viewed Obama as *willing* to embrace grassroots-driven revolutions that eventually led to the ascendancy of a Muslim Brotherhood-led government.⁶⁷⁸ Gulf states had assumed that Mubarak would be protected through the close strategic relationship that Egypt had established with the US over the previous three decades. The willingness of Obama to let matters take their course, and in effect to recommend that Mubarak should step aside, prompted a reassessment by Gulf rulers of their own previous assumptions about supposed security guarantees from the US.⁶⁷⁹ Angry at Obama, Saudi officials for example accused the US of discarding Mubarak like 'a used Kleenex'.⁶⁸⁰ This was affirmed by a former Qatari civil servant who said: "Obama was very reluctant to show strong support for Mubarak, for intervening in Syria, and he let some of the Arab Spring revolutions take their course".⁶⁸¹ As such, the fall of Mubarak in Egypt was a wake-up call for the Gulf Arab states, that being that traditional Western support could no longer be taken for granted and that more efforts would have to be invested in managing their strategic alliances, while at the same time taking care of their own security.⁶⁸²

Finally, the failure to take military action against the Assad regime in Syria following the 2013 use of chemical weapons was greeted with dismay in the GCC capitals.⁶⁸³ The 'red-line threat' by the Obama administration, albeit achieving their stated goals in removing chemical weapons

⁶⁷⁷ Gerald Feierstein, (former ambassador, US Embassy in Sana'a), in discussion with author, January 2020.

⁶⁷⁸ Butter, "Egypt and the Gulf: Allies and Rivals," 4.

⁶⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸⁰ Giorgio Cafiero, "The 'Trump Factor' in the Gulf Divide," in *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, ed. Andreas Krieg, 127-144, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 128.

⁶⁸¹ Abdulaziz Al Mahmoud, (former Qatari Airforce engineer, Al Sharq and Peninsula daily journalist, Chief editor for Al Jazeera), in discussion with author, January 2021.

⁶⁸² Jean-Marc Rickli, "The Political Rationale and Implications of the United Arab Emirates' Military Involvement in Libya," in *Political Rationale and International Consequences of the War in Libya*, eds. Dag Henriksen and Ann Karin Larsen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 148.

⁶⁸³ Kristian Ulrichsen, "Links Between Domestic and Regional Security," 39.

whilst avoiding military confrontation with Assad, left a residual sense of reticence emanating from Washington in the GCC. The former Qatari civil servant regrettably recalls that:

Obama never did anything. The people are still gassed, are still getting killed. To kill them with gas, to kill them with exploded barrels, it's the same thing, it's death. If you notice now, the Americans are just controlling the oil wells in Eastern Syria and leaving everybody to die. They don't mind, they don't care, really. Personally, I think America has lost a lot since the Syrian war. They lost a lot in Iraq when they handed Iraq to Iran.⁶⁸⁴

(ii) Trump

A second unreliable president in a row was another contributing factor to the concerns of the reliability of a long-term commitment of the United States to the region. Trump's unexpected victory in the 2016 presidential election presented US allies, partners, and foes alike with a dramatic turning point in US domestic and foreign policy priorities.⁶⁸⁵ This was due in part to the incoherence of Trump during the long presidential campaign and the volatility of his early months in office.⁶⁸⁶ Whilst the GCC states were glad to see the back of the Obama administration and welcomed Trump's initial opposition to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the tenets of US policymaking towards the Persian Gulf were far from clear.⁶⁸⁷

By late 2016, with Trump being elected US President, UAE Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed (MBZ) saw himself in a position powerful enough to translate his long nurtured narratives into geopolitical action. Instead of undermining Qatar rhetorically, the UAE now felt that Qatar could be muted once and for all.⁶⁸⁸ As such, there is a solid reason to conclude that Trump was likely the most important game-changing variable that led Riyadh and Abu Dhabi's decision to blockade a fellow and founding GCC member. As one Qatar expert⁶⁸⁹ argues: "The

⁶⁸⁴ Abdulaziz Al Mahmoud, (former Qatari Airforce engineer, Al Sharq and Peninsula daily journalist, Chief editor for Al Jazeera), in discussion with author, January 2021.

⁶⁸⁵ Ulrichsen, "Introduction," 7-8.

⁶⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸⁸ Krieg, "The Weaponisation of Narratives Amid the Gulf Crisis," 108.

⁶⁸⁹ Andreas Krieg, "One Year On, Trump Remains the Cause Of – and Solution To – The Qatar Crisis," *Middle East Eye*, accessed January 2022, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/one-year-trump-remains-cause-and-solution-qatar-crisis>

US has been the Qatar crisis centre of gravity from the beginning”,⁶⁹⁰ and according to Steve Bannon,⁶⁹¹ “Trump’s visit to Riyadh was the catalyst for the siege”⁶⁹² on Qatar.⁶⁹³ A Qatari national and academic reaffirmed this by saying:

There is a mutual understanding between Trump and the Saudis. This understanding is supported by using Saudi money. A businessman like Trump won’t be able to refuse boosting his image as the saviour of US economy. Economic and political interests made it possible for not only the Saudis but also UAE to influence Trump’s position toward Qatar back in 2017.⁶⁹⁴

The reckless and inflammatory language used by Trump in his tweets in support of Saudi and Emirati actions against Qatar in June 2017 offered an early indication of the unpredictability likely to dominate US policy towards the region during his presidency.⁶⁹⁵ The Qatari civil servant noted that:

Trump was supportive of Saudi Arabia and UAE invading Qatar following the blockade. What kind of trust do you think people in this region will have! To be frank, it’s (the Trump administration) more of a gang mentality than a government mentality. This is how I see it ... Now, Kushner was in the region, and he was happy seeing everybody shaking hands with everybody. Why? It is because Trump was afraid that Qatar might raise a case against him when he is out of the office.⁶⁹⁶

Further to this, the Qatari national and academic contends that “it is noteworthy to see how US acted in regard to the blockade leaders’ role against Qatar. What everybody is mostly certain of is that Trump gave the green light for the blockade”.⁶⁹⁷

⁶⁹⁰ Cafiero, “The ‘Trump Factor’ in the Gulf Divide,” 127-128.

⁶⁹¹ Trump’s Presidential advisor.

⁶⁹² “Steve Bannon Says Trumps Saudi Visit Started Qatar Crisis,” *Middle East Eye*, accessed November 2021, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/fr/news/steve-bannon-says-trumps-visit-saudi-sparked-qatar-blockade-1719031821>

⁶⁹³ Cafiero, “The ‘Trump Factor’ in the Gulf Divide,” 137.

⁶⁹⁴ Sheikha Noof Al Dosari, (Qatar University Department of International Affairs-Public Policy Program), email discussion with author, December 2020.

⁶⁹⁵ Ulrichsen, “Introduction,” 9.

⁶⁹⁶ Abdulaziz Al Mahmoud, (former Qatari Airforce engineer, Al Sharq and Peninsula daily journalist, Chief editor for Al Jazeera), in discussion with author, January 2021.

⁶⁹⁷ Sheikha Noof Al Dosari, (Qatar University Department of International Affairs-Public Policy Program), email discussion with author, December 2020.

Soon after the controversial tweets in favour of the blockade, Trump completely changed his stance on the Qatar crisis. He not only quickly stopped accusing the Qatar of sponsoring terrorism and extremism, but also expressed gratitude to Emir Tamim for supporting America's struggle against terrorism, and agreed to a \$12 billion fighter jet deal with Doha – all that only a number of days after his negative tweets about Qatar.⁶⁹⁸ According to the Qatari national and academic:

In July 2019, Trump's relationship with Qatar took a different turn when Trump had a meeting with the Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim. The relationship between both leaders became better. Trump said in this meeting as reported by Al Jazeera 'the investments that you make in the United States, one of the largest in the world, are very much appreciated'.⁶⁹⁹ In a more globalised world, economic partnerships define who can be your ally, but not necessarily your friend.⁷⁰⁰

In summary, Matthew and Trita Petti of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft capture the reliability of the United States by writing:

US partners have relied on Washington to adjudicate their disputes and defeat their enemies, but in the chaos that followed the Arab Spring these states became increasingly convinced that they could rely only on themselves. While some have argued that the post-Arab Spring disorder was the result of a US abdication of leadership, the previous US attempts to reshape the Middle Eastern order were actually the cause of the breakdown.⁷⁰¹

Therefore, much like its neighbouring Arab states, Qatar's sense of reliability on the protections of the United States continued to be of concern, and for this fourth element of subtle power, these concerns translated into a weakening of this element of subtle power.

⁶⁹⁸ Cafiero, "The 'Trump Factor' in the Gulf Divide," 139.

⁶⁹⁹ "Qatar's Emir Meets Trump to Discuss Economy and Security," *Al Jazeera*, accessed November 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/7/9/qatars-emir-meets-trump-to-discuss-economy-and-security>

⁷⁰⁰ Sheikha Noof Al Dosari, (Qatar University Department of International Affairs-Public Policy Program), email discussion with author, December 2020.

⁷⁰¹ Petti and Petti, "No Clean Hands: The Interventions of Middle Eastern Powers, 2010-2020," 26-27.

In Summary

In 2017 Kamrava declared that Qatar's subtle power (era) had "come to an end".⁷⁰² He wrote that:

No form of power lasts forever, and subtle power is no exception. From the late-1990s to 2013 during the reign of Hamad, Qatar positioned itself to actively exert and benefit from subtle power. When Hamad retired and stepped down from power in June 2013, his son and successor, Tamim, began pursuing a deliberately different foreign policy strategy that both reoriented his country's international relations, and slowly put an end to its subtle power.⁷⁰³

Although Kamrava said that the accession of Tamim "slowly put an end of Qatar's subtle power",⁷⁰⁴ this chapter found otherwise. Subtle power did not meet its ultimate demise, only that each of the four elements had been either undermined or weakened in various degrees, and at differing times.

The contextual analysis of Part One of this chapter identified that Qatar's foreign policy actions during the tumultuous events of Arab Spring brought about the ultimate demise of *an era* (only), and era whereby Qatar could no longer 'exercise influence from behind the scenes' – yet the four elements of subtle power did not atrophy, as they continued in their existence albeit in a new era. The principal cause for the end of the first subtle power era can be surmised by a renowned Qatar expert who said:

The cathartic regional impact of the Arab Spring in 2011, and the very different policy responses to it in the Gulf capitals, undermined the basic elements of a common threat perception that had underpinned the GCC since its formation. Qatar, on the one side, and Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE, on the other, came to see each other as primary sources of threat.⁷⁰⁵

⁷⁰² Kamrava, "Qatari Foreign Policy and the Exercise of Subtle Power," 123.

⁷⁰³ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁷⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰⁵ Ulrichsen, "The Rise and Decline of the Gulf Cooperations Council", 416.

Part One began by identifying that one of the principal threats to Saudi Arabia and its allied neighbours was the rolling coverage of the Al Jazeera media group which spread the message of the revolutionaries, and galvanised protestors elsewhere, as the Arab Spring demonstrations spilled across the region.⁷⁰⁶ The second principal threat identified in Part One was Qatar's support for some political Islamist actors throughout the region, especially the Morsi-led Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt which resulted in its first democratically elected president – a development which was anathema to the Saudis. These two sources of Saudi contestation, amongst other actions Qatar took during the Arab Spring, signalled to regional and international audiences that Qatar was now an active and *autonomous* regional actor. This dynamic shift away from the perception that Qatar was a compliant member of a united GCC front resulted in the undermining or weakening of each of the four elements of subtle power.

In brief, the efficacy of the element of diplomacy and conflict mediation was undermined as a result of the loss of Qatar's perceived neutrality due to its partisan actions during the Arab Spring. National branding came under sustained attack on multiple fronts causing soft power – soft disempowerment. The strategic use of the QIA, although not experiencing a setback tantamount to the two aforementioned elements, increasingly experienced a greater international scrutiny. Finally, the element of physical protection was impacted by Qatar's wariness of the trust and reliability of its security guarantor, and two American presidents who were regarded as either reticent and 'pivoting' away from the region (Obama), or capricious, dismissive of existing alliances, and too close to the Saudis (Trump). Where this chapter found that each of the four elements had been impacted in varying degrees, this thesis contends that subtle power did not however 'come to an end' – the four elements were successfully reinvigorated to adapt to the changing geopolitical environment in the region, and continued to be utilised in a new era - a *late subtle power* era - to which this thesis now turns.

⁷⁰⁶ Russell Lucas, "The Persian Gulf Monarchies and the Arab Spring", in *Beyond the Arab Spring: The Evolving Ruling Bargain in the Middle East*, ed. Mehran Kamrava (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 316.

CHAPTER FIVE – QATAR’S LATE SUBTLE POWER ERA

Introduction

The Middle East fluctuates between various geopolitical trends, seemingly unable to free itself from the grip of national interests, despite the prevalence of mutual interests.⁷⁰⁷ For Qatar and Saudi Arabia, the mutual benefits are many, and longstanding, yet much to the consternation of the Saudis, during the Arab Spring Qatar remained the most active participant in the ongoing geopolitical transformation in the Arab world.⁷⁰⁸ Yet it was the combination of Qatar’s leading role in the revolutions, the apparent US pivot away from the region, advent of civil wars in Syria, Libya, and later Yemen, success of Islamist parties in Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt and sustained protests in Bahrain that all heightened the Saudi sense of vulnerability.⁷⁰⁹ The ruling elite in Riyadh viewed Doha, as not only a full member of the enemy camp, but also the state that was doing the most to elevate any previous existential threat to the Saudi kingdom posed by political Islam into a veritable, more imminent threat.⁷¹⁰

During and after Arab Spring,⁷¹¹ Saudi Arabia and the UAE devised regional interventionist policies designed to reassert authoritarian control and outflank the participatory openings of 2011,⁷¹² and became increasingly counterrevolutionary, taking action where possible to reverse the effects of the revolutions.⁷¹³ Riyadh’s resurgent foreign policy posture was driven by a discourse of nationalism which emerged with the rise to power of MBS, a towering figure both literally and figuratively, and a leader not to shy away from confronting the Qataris on matters of national importance to Saudi Arabia. This by extension threatening Qatar’s hard earned autonomy commencing during the subtle power era, and dawned the beginnings of what would emerge as a *late subtle power era* for Qatar’s foreign policy strategies – an era whereby Qatar could no longer ‘exercise influence from behind the scenes’.

⁷⁰⁷ Chauvancy, *The Qatar Blockade: The Failed Offensive. Information Warfare, Game of Influence, Economic Standoff*, 17.

⁷⁰⁸ Cepoi, “Qatar, a Tool in the Offshore Balancing Policy of the USA, or just an Ambitious Arabic State in the Age of Virtual Power,” 11.

⁷⁰⁹ Neil Quilliam, “The Saudi Dimension: Understanding the Kingdom’s Position in the Gulf Crisis” in *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, ed. Andreas Krieg (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) 116.

⁷¹⁰ Christopher Davidson, “The UAE, Qatar, and the Question of Political Islam,” in *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, ed. Andreas Krieg (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) 86.

⁷¹¹ There is no specific end date to the Arab Spring, yet the overthrow of Mohamed Morsi in mid-2013 was a significant reversal of the momentum of the Arab Spring revolutions.

⁷¹² Ulrichsen, “Perceptions and Divisions in Security and Defense Structures in Arab Gulf States;” 19.

⁷¹³ Krieg, “The Weaponisation of Narratives Amid the Gulf Crisis,” 100.

The final chapter of this thesis is divided into three parts which all contribute to the emphasis the aftermath of the Arab Spring and the blockade had on Qatar's subtle power and its pursuit of autonomy. A late subtle power era had by now commenced, and as this Chapter will elucidate, was a test for Qatar's leadership in its adjustment to the new and emerging geopolitical dynamics of the region. Part One of this chapter begins by assessing the role and impact that generational leadership in both Doha and Riyadh had on Qatar's subtle power strategies. Initially discussed is the accession of Tamim who inherited the throne at a time when the Arab Spring was in its final throes, and who assumed power when the four elements of subtle power had already been either undermined or weakened as the previous chapter revealed. The second leader is MBS whose meteoric rise to power culminated in his appointment as Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia just weeks after the blockade commenced. As heir apparent to the kingdom, MBS would take a more proactive stance against Qatar's autonomous posture which further reinforced the realities of this new era for subtle power. The final section of Part One examines what is considered to be the first iteration of the blockade - the 2014 withdrawal of ambassadors from Qatar led by Saudi Arabia. This event had an impact on the *zeitgeist* of subtle power, further exemplifying that a new era for Qatar's foreign policy strategies had begun, as its subtle power actions would now be countered with retaliatory repercussions from more than one neighbour.

Part Two of this chapter is dedicated to an evaluation of the immediate leadup to the blockade through to its eventual end. In this evaluation, Part Two analyses the blockade through the premise of this thesis, that being the role and impact of subtle power and Qatar's autonomy from Saudi Arabia. For example, on the day of the blockade Qatar feared for its existence, as rumours swirled about a Saudi invasion which would have resulted in a complete abrogation of autonomy, despite the mainstay of the element of physical protection. Another example of many includes the Saudi and Emirati smear campaign against Qatar designed to damage its reputation before World Cup, which in turn, undermined the element of national branding, and forced Qatar to *protect* its profile (not simply promote). Ultimately however as Part Two will discuss, Qatar emerged from the blockade an emboldened national state having preserved its political autonomy from the Saudi Arabia - a welcomed outcome in which the four elements of late subtle power played a role.

The final part of this chapter follows a similar structure to the previous two chapters by analysing the four elements of subtle power individually yet in a late subtle power era. Each of the four elements are examined in isolation to elucidate the theoretical changes to Kamrava's

original conceptions. In doing this, Part Three will provide examples to explain the *how*, *why*, and *when* each of the four elements have changed, and their readapted/readjusted role in the aftermath of the Arab Spring through to the end of the blockade. This final part also analyses the impact that the four elements of late subtle power had on not just Qatar's pursuit of autonomy, but also on the *preservation* of its autonomy during the three and a half year long diplomatic and economic siege. Qatar's late subtle power response to the blockade saw a surge in new tactics, relationships, and policies in Doha which when all examined *universum* reveal that Qatar's foreign policy strategies had irrevocably entered a new era.

PART ONE - TOWARDS A LATE SUBTLE POWER ERA

Leaders in a Late Subtle Power Era

One of the distinguishing features of a late subtle power era is that of generational leadership change in both Qatar and Saudi Arabia, and the response of the leaders to the new geopolitical realities of the Middle East. The changing geopolitical environment of the region following the Arab Spring is duly noted by Kamrava who wrote that: "The regional context had already begun to change by the time the chief architects of the Qatar's subtle power departed from the scene in 2013. The 2011 Arab uprisings jolted the Saudi leadership into action, prompting them to take the lead in a counter-revolution of sorts to reverse the tide of the Arab Spring".⁷¹⁴ However, given this new geopolitical reality, where Kamrava previously stated in 2017 that "when Tamim (became emir, he) began pursuing a deliberately different foreign policy strategy that slowly put an end to its subtle power",⁷¹⁵ this thesis finds otherwise.

Initially, Tamim's approach was to "not actively pursue policies that fostered subtle power",⁷¹⁶ yet the structures and mechanics underpinning Qatar's foreign policy strategies remained, and were soon to be reoriented towards a late subtle power era. The fundamental approach of MBS also differed from that of his octogenarian⁷¹⁷ father, and was focused on reinvigorating Saudi foreign policy in order to reinstate its status as a powerful and dominate actor, and to later counter what MBS perceived as a continuation of Qatar's nettlesome subtle power intentions.

⁷¹⁴ Kamrava, "Qatari Foreign Policy and the Exercise of Subtle Power," 123.

⁷¹⁵ *Ibid*, 93.

⁷¹⁶ *Ibid*, 123.

⁷¹⁷ King Salman was 77 when Tamim became emir, and 81 when MBS became crown prince.

As such, the accession of Tamim and rise to power of MBS did not see an end to subtle power *per se*. It was however another contributing factor reaffirming the beginning of a new era for Qatar's foreign policy strategies, its pursuit of autonomy, and its relations with Saudi Arabia.

(i) *Tamim*

After gradually preparing his successor over the course of two years by involving him in the nation's most important issues, Hamad announced his abdication on 25 June 2013, making his son the youngest head of state in the Arab world at just 33 years old.⁷¹⁸ Tamim was the first potentate of Qatari territory to be appointed, rather than inheriting power upon the death of a ruling sheikh or having seized power in a coup. This in itself was Hamad's final transformative act, as a peaceful handover of power is a rarity for the Gulf, where most rulers stay in place for decades, normally until they die.⁷¹⁹ What was considered a shrewd move, Hamad's abdication was in line with the exceptional developments unfolding in the Arab world, and it shored up Qatar's credibility and soft power⁷²⁰ following what the Saudis considered as Qatar's recent dissidence in the many theatres of the Arab Spring.

Tamim, a graduate of the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst, already had considerable strategic experience for a young head of state.⁷²¹ Tamim had appeared publicly with his father (as early as) 2001 to take part in the negotiations launched between Qatar and Saudi Arabia to resolve their existing border dispute.⁷²² In the years that followed, Tamim had subsequently been given considerable opportunity to build his experience and profile, including as chair of the board of directors for the World Cup, in Qatari diplomatic initiatives over Libya during the 2011 rebellion and the NATO air strikes, and in working on Qatar's 2011-2016 national development strategy.⁷²³ (Upon accession) however, Tamim did not change tack abruptly, not least as this would have been seen as a repudiation of his father's policies, something that was all but impossible given the foundational and formative nature of Hamad's rule.⁷²⁴

⁷¹⁸ Chauvancy, "*The Qatar Blockade: The Failed Offensive. Information Warfare, Game of Influence, Economic Standoff*," 132.

⁷¹⁹ "Qatari Emir Sheikh Hamad Hands Power to His Son," BBC News Online, accessed November 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-23026870>

⁷²⁰ Bakir, "The Evolution of Turkey-Qatar Relations Amid a Growing Gulf Divide," 204.

⁷²¹ Chauvancy, "*The Qatar Blockade: The Failed Offensive. Information Warfare, Game of Influence, Economic Standoff*," 7.

⁷²² *Ibid*, 131.

⁷²³ Gray, *Qatar: Politics and Challenges of Development*, 60.

⁷²⁴ Roberts, "Reflecting on Qatar's 'Islamist' Soft Power," 6.

Although no longer officially the emir, many high-level decisions continued to occur within the family, and Hamad remained a powerful presence, directing and intervening behind the scenes when necessary.⁷²⁵ When a former Australian Ambassador to Saudi Arabia was asked? “When you were in Riyadh in 2015, was Hamad still pulling the strings from behind the scenes, or is Tamim really in control?” The former ambassador responded by saying:

I’ve heard that too, I don’t know for sure. The young guy (Tamim) is clearly the face of Qatari foreign policy, and the Qatari ruler is independent, and he’s been leading it and standing up to the Saudis. However you often read that in Saudi press, it’s really the old man (Hamad) who is still controlling it the country.⁷²⁶

Tamim did not have to shore up internal support for his leadership with the upper echelons of the Al Thani ruling family as was the case with his father, yet he did however face significant challenges of his own. Tamim was confronted with the need to adapt Qatar’s foreign policy strategies to contend with the challenge of attempting to ease fractured relations with Saudi Arabia, and the emergence of a sense of hyper-nationalism emanating from Riyadh – a facet of the late subtle power era. Additionally, the Saudis did not recognise Tamim’s accession as the peaceful transfer of power in which it was portrayed. According to a Saudi national and socio-political analyst, Riyadh’s perception was that: “Tamim was, especially during the Gulf crisis of 2017, always looked at as this person who overthrew this father. This very disobedient immoral son who – who, could do such a thing as overthrow his father”!⁷²⁷ Therefore, by virtue of being progressive, Tamim’s accession drew the ire of Riyadh despite his rise to power being a purely internal Qatari matter.

Tamim’s appointment as emir was somewhat of a baptism of fire having taken power during the Arab Spring, and it was less than two weeks after his accession when Tamim faced a significant setback in his regional influence. The military coup in Egypt in July 2013, backed by Saudi Arabia, toppled the country’s first democratically elected president in its history, as the Minister of Defence, Abdul-Fattah Al Sisi, took power afterwards. The success of the coup in Egypt gave the counterrevolutionary axis led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE a major regional

⁷²⁵ Fromherz, *Qatar: Rise to Power and Influence*, xiii.

⁷²⁶ Ralph King, (former ambassador, Australian Embassy in Saudi Arabia), in discussion with author, April 2021.

⁷²⁷ Aziz Alghashian, (Saudi socio-political analyst, Saudi national), in discussion with author, July 2021.

boost.⁷²⁸ The coup however was a major setback for Qatar that had invested much in terms of political capital and state largesse into the hope of an ongoing Morsi-led government, which would have been a second political Islamist ally (along with Turkey⁷²⁹) in power in the region. Despite continuing on the path charted during the Arab Spring, that being not just engaging with some political Islamist groups, but supporting Islamist political parties and governments, the door still remained ajar for Tamim and a post-Arab Spring rapprochement with the Saudis. For example, on the anniversary of Tamim's accession in June 2014, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia congratulated him on his 12 months in power, and a few weeks later, warmly welcomed him to a visit to the Saudi capital⁷³⁰ despite the recent withdrawal of the troika of ambassadors from Doha (discussed in the next section).

Although seemingly a tentative start from the shadow of his father, following the weathering of the blockade Tamim's popularity soared, and his grip on power tightened. As a former Qatari Ambassador to South Africa recalls:

Now His Highness Sheikh Tamim is a young leader and is very high⁷³¹ for him now (*sic*), especially after the unfortunate event with the blockade in Qatar. You can see the independence and autonomous thinking processes in His Highness Sheikh Tamim now following the blockade. He's not disengaging. He's a bold man and always asking the other brotherly countries, sisterly countries, 'Come, reach out, and we will reach out,' and has shown shrewdness in surviving the blockade in terms of resiliency. Nobody expected him to perform unexpectedly⁷³² (*sic*) to be honest.⁷³³

It was the blockade which cemented Tamim's stature in the country, and as the days went on, Qatar was increasingly seen to be withstanding Saudi pressure. The further the blockade wore on, the longer it seemed that Qatar was not seeking a greater autonomy from Saudi Arabia, autonomy was being thrust upon it, as a groundswell of national pride and nationalism reached

⁷²⁸ Bakir, "The Evolution of Turkey-Qatar Relations Amid a Growing Gulf Divide," 204.

⁷²⁹ The Republic of Turkey was not founded as a theocracy, but under current President Erdogan it has been increasingly Islamist leaning. The author further acknowledges that Turkey has changed its name to *Turkiye* during the preparation for the thesis.

⁷³⁰ Nussaibah Younis, "The Rise of ISIS and Persian Gulf Security," in *The Changing Security Dynamics of the Persian Gulf*, ed. Kristian Ulrichsen, (London: Hurst and Co, 2017), 117.

⁷³¹ Meaning his popularity and grip on power are both 'very high.'

⁷³² Meaning Tamim's management of the 2017 blockade was 'unexpectedly' very good.

⁷³³ Bashir Al Shirawi, (former ambassador, Qatari Embassy in South Africa), in discussion with author, February 2021.

fever pitch in Doha.⁷³⁴ A former Al Jazeera Director and Qatari diplomat, recalls this by rejoicing:

Yeeesss oh my god oh my god! Throughout the blockade, and especially at the beginning, the way the country has acted in securing the inside and outside, speaking out, stressing that our sovereignty is a red line. We can put anything on the table, but sovereignty is not negotiable. We are an independent country and the whole nation felt the pride and supported the government. We are extremely happy with the consistency of this government protecting the independency and sovereignty of the country. The whole generations (*sic*) of the country are feeling this.⁷³⁵

No better example of the burgeoning groundswell of nationalism Qataris were embracing was the proliferation of the image of Tamim himself adorning buildings, clothing, bumper stickers, and even the bottom of a swimming pool.⁷³⁶ After the beginning of the blockade, citizens and expatriates used the poster named ‘Tamim Al Majd’⁷³⁷ to express their support for Tamim and the Qatari government. By the first national day in December 2017 following the blockade, as recalled by a Qatari national: “People were just celebrating the nation and you could see flags and emir pictures everywhere”.⁷³⁸ As such, much like what was occurring across the border in Saudi Arabia, a new sense of nationalism began to emerge in another GCC country which drove Qatar irrevocably into a late subtle power era, and the need of a greater awareness of its own security as an independent nation state autonomous from Saudi Arabia. Ultimately, it was arguably Saudi pressure which propelled Tamim to the lofty heights he enjoyed months after the blockade started relieving him of the purview of his father.

In brief, the geopolitical environment in the Persian Gulf which confronted Tamim in his earlier years as emir differed significantly from that of the beginning of his father’s reign, and the foreign policy strategies utilised by both Hamad and Tamim differed equally as well. Where Hamad saw an opportunity to expand Qatar’s role in the region and ‘exercise influence from behind the scenes,’ Tamim was not afforded such initial anonymity, and entered the fray in a

⁷³⁴ Much like in Saudi Arabia, hyper-nationalism is a facet of the late subtle power era.

⁷³⁵ Abdul Aziz Al Horr, (former Qatari Diplomat and Director at Al Jazeera, Qatar’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Al Jazeera), in discussion with author, November 2020.

⁷³⁶ “QU Unveils Underwater Version of Tamim Al Majd Mural,” Qatar Tribune, accessed December 2021, <https://www.qatar-tribune.com/news-details/id/80369>

⁷³⁷ Meaning ‘Tamim the Glorious’.

⁷³⁸ Author email exchange with Mr Abdulla Al Etaibi, Qatari national and academic.

more competitive geopolitical environment, one where Qatar was increasingly viewed by some GCC members as a pariah. The increased rise in nationalism in the Gulf region and the changing geopolitical environment were all accentuated by the rise to power of the first grandson of Ibn Saud to lead Saudi Arabia - Mohammad bin Salman - a Saudi leader befitting the rise of nationalism in a late subtle power era.

(ii) - Mohammad bin Salman

The second of two generational changes in leadership in the Persian Gulf⁷³⁹ resulted in the ascendancy of MBS to crown prince in Saudi Arabia, second in charge behind his father King Salman. The replacement of Crown Prince Nayef with MBS resulted in a resurgent and assertive Saudi foreign policy, and the emergence of a sense of Saudi nationalism unknown in the kingdom's history. The rapid rise to power of MBS had implications for Qatar as it is arguably the case that the blockade may not have happened if MBS had not become crown prince. The choice of appointing MBS as heir apparent came as a surprise to many, as "little was known about MBS, or why his father favoured him"⁷⁴⁰ - the seventh of ten sons.

MBS was born in 1985 and grew up in Riyadh where his father was governor for more than fifty years. According to the former director of Saudi Intelligence, where "most young royals study abroad at some point, MBS did not, and remained in Riyadh by his father's side through high school and college."⁷⁴¹ Once he graduated, he was employed by his father, working and I assume learning from that work, when his father was the governor".⁷⁴² In an interview with a PBS Frontline correspondent, a long time Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) staffer said:

I understand that the crown prince and the king have spent an awful lot of time together, and they have a similar way of looking at the world. The king appeared to groom him to share his view on issues such as corruption, the duties of the royal family, and the responsibilities to sustain the Al Saud Kingdom.⁷⁴³

⁷³⁹ The author notes the death of Sultan Qaboos of Oman, and the appointment of his son as ruler. This is however outside the scope of relevance to this thesis.

⁷⁴⁰ Norman Roule, "The Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia," interview by Martin Smith, *Frontline*, Public Broadcasting Service, December 2018, video, <https://www.pbs.org/video/crown-prince-saudi-arabia-1jt2ey/>

⁷⁴¹ Turki Al Faisal, "The Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia," interview by Martin Smith, *Frontline*, Public Broadcasting Service, December 2018, video, <https://www.pbs.org/video/crown-prince-saudi-arabia-1jt2ey/>
⁷⁴² *Ibid.*

⁷⁴³ Norman Roule, "The Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia," interview by Martin Smith, *Frontline*, Public Broadcasting Service, December 2018, video, <https://www.pbs.org/video/crown-prince-saudi-arabia-1jt2ey/>

This as such was the reason behind the rise of MBS, who harboured liberalising ambitions for the Saudi economy, and a foreign policy disposition which would not sit idle and perfunctorily witness Qatar's ambitions and transformation.

Following the Arab Spring, King Salman and MBS decisively shifted Saudi foreign policy from cautious diplomacy and behind-the-scenes manoeuvring, to a more interventionist doctrine.⁷⁴⁴ Saudi foreign policies shifted away from petrodollar diplomacy towards an unprecedented form of direct activism in the regional maelstrom of the post-Arab Spring landscape.⁷⁴⁵ Germany's foreign intelligence agency, in an unusual public statement, voiced this concern in December 2015 reporting that: "Saudi Arabia was becoming impulsive in its foreign policy as MBS began to assert himself".⁷⁴⁶ This included Saudi assistance for the coup that overthrew the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt, yet the Saudi government did not stop at supporting the coup in that brought General Al Sisi to power. In its new anti-terrorist legislation in February 2014, the Muslim Brotherhood was defined as a terrorist organisation, and in the following month, Saudi Arabia led a troika of countries which included the UAE and Bahrain in recalling their ambassadors from Qatar. This brash move was to force Doha to abandon its extremely friendly relations with the Muslim Brotherhood,⁷⁴⁷ and became regarded as the first iteration of what would become the most serious crisis in the GCC since Saddam's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 - the 2017 blockade.

It was this atmosphere of Saudi greatness and dominance, and vociferous animosity towards Qatar's previous actions, which distinguishes the geopolitical dynamics of the late subtle power era from its predecessor. MBS was persuaded that Qatar's policy in the region was inimical to Saudi interests because it supported groups opposed to the kingdom, maintained close relations with Iran, and sponsored Al Jazeera which he deemed anti-Saudi and pro-Muslim Brotherhood. Although Saudi Arabia had long complained about Qatar's foreign policy, which resulted in the diplomatic spat of 2002 and again in 2014, the emergence of MBS as *de facto* leader brought with it a desire for action rather than diplomacy.⁷⁴⁸ MBS not only wanted to push firmly into the twenty-first century, but he also wanted to lead his country into his old age. This required

⁷⁴⁴ Madawi Al Rasheed, "King Salman and his Son: Winning the USA, Losing the Rest," in *Salman's Legacy: The Dilemmas of a New Era in Saudi Arabia*, ed. Madawi Al Rasheed (London: Hurst and Company, 2020), 250.

⁷⁴⁵ Ulrichsen, "Introduction," 18.

⁷⁴⁶ "German Spy Agency Warns of Saudi Shift to 'Impulsive' Policies," *Reuters*, accessed September 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-germany-warning-idUSKBN0TL10020151202>

⁷⁴⁷ Aarts and Roelants, *Saudi Arabia: A Kingdom in Peril*, 122-123.

⁷⁴⁸ Quilliam, "The Saudi Dimension: Understanding the Kingdom's Position in the Gulf Crisis," 112.

major social and economic transformations, and in order to achieve this, he mobilised popular support behind him.⁷⁴⁹ MBS cultivated a much stronger sense of Saudi nationalism, especially among the kingdom's youthful population, and developed a new narrative of Saudi exceptionalism, and foreign policy adventures that were in part intended to stoke national pride.⁷⁵⁰

For example, when speaking at the Future Investment Initiative session in 2018 titled 'How Visionary Leadership Will Transform the Arab World into a Global Economic Powerhouse',⁷⁵¹ MBS said:

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, in the next five years, will be completely transformed. The next moment in the world, in the next thirty years, is the Middle East's moment. This is the war of the Saudis, it's my personal war that I'm waging. I do not want to leave this life before I see the Middle East at the forefront as a global power. And I am 100% sure this goal will be achieved.⁷⁵²

This rhetoric was not without qualification, as MBS led an interventionist war in Yemen against the Iranian backed Houthis, a war outside Saudi borders the type of which it had never waged before. When the same PBS Frontline correspondent was asked: "Why were young people so enthusiastic about MBS and the war in Yemen?" The correspondent, who had interviewed MBS on a few occasions said:

Saudi Arabia had moved at such a glacial pace in the past, now here was a young guy who came in and said, 'We're going to do this, it's just going to take a little bit of time.' I think that was tremendously appealing to many Saudis, to many young Saudis, perhaps not thinking very hard, or not being very well versed on previous forays into Yemen, that haven't gone very well for Saudi Arabia, historically. There was always a lot of hand wringing about Iran, and here was a guy who was going to come in and he was going to kick ass. I think they liked that. First it was Yemen, then it was the blockade. I just think they, (the Saudi public), wanted action. He was an action hero. He was a guy that they knew played video games. There were

⁷⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁷⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵¹ Mohammad bin Salman, "Saudi Arabia Will Be Transformed in 5 Years," TradeArabia, accessed January 2022, http://www.tradearabia.com/news/BANK_346787.html

⁷⁵² Mohammad bin Salman, "The Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia," interview by Martin Smith, *Frontline*, Public Broadcasting Service, December 2018, video, <https://www.pbs.org/video/crown-prince-saudi-arabia-1jt2ey/>

stories about him and his brother enjoying video games. There were even some video games made up showing him as a cartoon character invading, driving a jet.⁷⁵³

In the background of the tragic war in Yemen was the Trump administration, providing muted diplomatic cover and military armaments to the Saudis far superior to that of the Houthis. According to the PSB Frontline correspondent: “When Trump had just been elected in America, MBS was very excited. At that point, there was a lot of talk about change”.⁷⁵⁴ Trump’s first overseas visit was to Saudi Arabia, the first time a US President had ever chosen the Middle East as his first port of call, and on this trip Trump “agreed to an arms deal worth over \$100 billion”.⁷⁵⁵ In discussing the relationship MBS managed to foster with Trump, a CIA analyst of twenty-nine years’ experience said: “To give credit to Mohammed bin Salman, of his many sought-after accomplishments, the grooming and wooing of Donald Trump has to be pretty close to the top”.⁷⁵⁶ Affirming this was the PBS Frontline correspondent. When asked: “What excited MBS about Trump when you were there?” He recalled:

He (Trump) was a friend. Yet I cautioned him and said, ‘I don’t really want to be partisan’, but I said to MBS, ‘well, he’s an idiot.’ He (MBS) shrugged as if to say, ‘yes, but he’s our idiot’. That’s the way I interpreted it, and then he bounded across the office with great enthusiasm to pick up a small tchotchke⁷⁵⁷ that had been sent to him by the White House. I guess the White House was sending these things to all people around the world, a little plexiglass thing, a little memento. He was very, very excited because he saw the Obama relationship as a very awkward, tortured relationship, and here was a guy who they were certain would be their friend. That’s what I picked up.⁷⁵⁸

From the Saudi perspective, a Saudi national and socio-political analyst noticed this shift in Saudi identity under MBS and said that:

⁷⁵³ Martin Smith, (Executive Producer of Frontline, Public Broadcasting Service), in discussion with author, July 2021.

⁷⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵⁵ Martin Smith, “The Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia,” *Frontline*, Public Broadcasting Service, December 2018, video, <https://www.pbs.org/video/crown-prince-saudi-arabia-1jt2ey/>

⁷⁵⁶ Norman Roule, “The Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia,” interview by Martin Smith, *Frontline*, Public Broadcasting Service, December 2018, video, <https://www.pbs.org/video/crown-prince-saudi-arabia-1jt2ey/>

⁷⁵⁷ A trinket, or a small object that is decorative rather than strictly functional.

⁷⁵⁸ Martin Smith, (Executive Producer of Frontline, Public Broadcasting Service), in discussion with author, July 2021.

The 1980s and 1990s, it was part of Islamic at times. I think, during the accession of King Salman and the crown prince, it was clear to me that that's when you start to see a clear Saudi nationalism, especially the war on the Houthis. That was a separating factor between a very assertive Saudi foreign policy, from a more hesitant regional and foreign policy. That made people think, 'Yes, this is the new Saudi. Saudi is now taking its own fate in its own hands'. All of a sudden you start to see this illumination of Saudi nationalism. That's when you start to see a clear Saudi nationalism taking place. Moreover, one of the factors, but I don't think it was a very fundamental factor, but Iran in 2016, when the Saudi embassy was targeted and burned in Iran, the cutting of the ties, it made Saudi nationalism even more (*sic*). It poured fuel on the fire. That's when you started to see a very vicious form of nationalism.⁷⁵⁹

This was the sense of nationalism that swept through some GCC members, on the streets, the Twittersphere, and amongst policy makers. Within the Gulf, Saudi nationalism and its assertive policies have fractured the GCC, with two countries - Qatar and Oman - choosing to break ranks with Riyadh over several issues, from Iran to the role of Islamist movements in the Arab world.⁷⁶⁰ The new Saudi regional assertiveness is evidenced no better than by the blockade of Qatar which embarrassed Riyadh's international partners and forced many of them to choose sides in a new Gulf conflict that did not correspond with their own national interests.⁷⁶¹ This suggested that the foreign policy of Salman and MBS was based on a single doctrine - 'establishing the supremacy of Saudi Arabia to make it the sole arbiter of Arab affairs, and the main point of entry for all international powers into the region'.⁷⁶² For Qatar, this impacted on its autonomous foreign policy ambitions. During the Arab Spring Qatar could seek to 'punch above its weight'⁷⁶³ as the familiar refrain suggests, but following the ascendancy of MBS, it was now the case that if Qatar sought to extend its reach beyond its grasp, it would risk the wrath of Riyadh – such was the nature of a late subtle power era – and the 2014 withdrawal of ambassadors is testament to this.

⁷⁵⁹ Aziz Alghashian, (Saudi socio-political analyst, Saudi national), in discussion with author, July 2021.

⁷⁶⁰ Al Rasheed, "King Salman and his Son: Winning the USA, Losing the Rest," 236.

⁷⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶² *Ibid.*

⁷⁶³ Mehran Kamrava, "How Tiny Qatar Punches Above its Weight," *NPR*, December 2013, <https://www.wfyi.org/news/articles/how-tiny-qatar-punches-above-its-weight>

Saudi Repercussions in a Late Subtle Power Era – A Prelude to the Blockade

Where the prospects of greater economic integration and unity had previously been the prevailing *zeitgeist* within the GCC, in a post-Arab Spring Middle East, Saudi Arabia no longer perceived Qatar as merely a delinquent and nettlesome neighbour, but now as a serious threat to its internal stability and its ability to influence in the region. As a result of Qatar's actions during the uprisings especially, there was now less tolerance amongst the ruling elite in Riyadh for Doha's autonomous foreign policy actions. This dynamic shift in threat perception is yet another facet of what distinguishes late subtle power from its predecessor. Going forwards, Qatar would now be perceived as an existential threat in Riyadh due to its past support of some political Islamists and other democratic revolutionaries. For the Saudis, this too was a new era, one whereby a reaction to Qatar's autonomous foreign policy strategies required more convincing repercussions, and this began with the 2014 Saudi-led withdrawal of a troika⁷⁶⁴ of ambassadors.

Whilst tensions brewed in the Gulf in the late-1990s and early-2000s, they failed to end entirely. A major incident occurred in 2002 when Riyadh recalled its ambassador from Doha after Al Jazeera broadcasted strong anti-Saudi rhetoric. It was not until 2008 that relations slowly began to mend, a dynamic that endured (at an official diplomatic level) for another six years.⁷⁶⁵ Yet the 2014 withdrawal of a troika of ambassadors from Qatar was a greater escalation involving half of the GCC membership, a first for the colloquially known 'Club of Kings'. Nevertheless, the escalation of the Saudi-led reaction in partnership with two fellow GCC members signalled yet another turning point in the evolution of Qatar's foreign policy strategies – Qatar was not perceived as a participatory member of an organisation striving for greater economic integration, it was being condemned by half of its members.

The 2014 dispute was a consequence of a long-standing political issues Riyadh and Abu Dhabi had with Doha, both of whom had been sympathetic to the counter-coup attempt against Hamad in 1996. Where Hamad's conviction was that Saudi Arabia was the primary threat to Qatar's sovereignty and his own leadership,⁷⁶⁶ it was within less than 12 months of Tamim's accession that he was reminded of the same, and was faced with his first significant foreign policy challenge from Riyadh. The withdrawal of ambassadors in 2014 was according to many,

⁷⁶⁴ Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE.

⁷⁶⁵ Zafirov, "The Qatar Crisis – Why did the Blockade Fail?," 5.

⁷⁶⁶ Gerd Nonneman, "The Qatar Crisis Through the Lens of Foreign Policy Analysis," In *The Gulf Crisis: The View from Qatar*, edited by Rory Miller, 98-108. (Doha: Hamad bin Khalifa University Press, 2018), 103.

including a Qatari national and member of the ruling family, the first iteration of an even more serious rift - the 2017 blockade. The Qatari national and member of the ruling family said:

He (Hamad) had established a kind of hedging foreign policy, yet the Saudis wanted to be a hegemonic power in this region, and this did cause a lot of tension which came to play during the Arab Spring, and it did lead I believe to the 2014 cutting of diplomatic ties, what eventually became referred to as the first iteration of the 2017 blockade.⁷⁶⁷

This was also the analysis of a Qatari based political economy academic who said that:

The 2014 experience was viewed as a signal that the key issues had only been papered over, and that they would resurface in the future. From the discussions and engagement I have had, this has certainly been confirmed to be the case. However, there appeared to have been uncertainty as to what course any future confrontation would take.⁷⁶⁸

The 2014 spat was only a withdrawal of ambassadors, and did not include an economic embargo, yet the rift left the GCC in disarray, and in hindsight, was only a precursor to the blockade three years later.⁷⁶⁹ This was confirmed by a former Australia Ambassador to Saudi Arabia who was posted to Riyadh in the year following the diplomatic hiatus who said: “2014 was the first iteration of the blockade”.⁷⁷⁰ When asked: “Did you get any sense from officials or your contacts in Riyadh in 2015 that the dispute was resolved, or were there ongoing tensions with Qatar?” The former ambassador replied: “Only very limited atmospherics. There were

⁷⁶⁷ Sheikha Haya Al Thani, (Member of Ruling Family in Qatar), in discussion with author, December 2020.

⁷⁶⁸ Steven Wright, (Political Economy Researcher, Qatar University), email correspondence with author, December 2021.

⁷⁶⁹ In November 2013 the Emir of Kuwait, Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad Al Sabah, met first with Tamim in Doha before they travelled together on to the Saudi capital. While state media reports spoke dryly of the leaders discussing “the latest regional and international developments of common concern,” the Dubai-based *Gulf News* was more forthright, as it alleged (in March 2014) that at the November meeting, Tamim had been “told to change Qatar’s ways and bring the country in line with the rest of the GCC with regards to regional issues”. See: “Emir Sheikh Tamim: Regional Meetings,” *Gulf States Newsletter* no. 959, *Baker Institute*, November 2013, www.bakerinstitute.org/media/files/Research/caf0ca38/GSN_959.pdf. and, “UAE, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain Recall Their Ambassadors from Qatar,” *Gulf News*, March 2014, <https://gulfnews.com/uae/government/uae-saudi-arabia-and-bahrain-recall-their-ambassadors-from-qatar-1.1299586>

⁷⁷⁰ Ralph King, (former ambassador, Australian Embassy in Saudi Arabia), in discussion with author, April 2021.

those first set of conditions, which were put on Qatar about how it should behave”.⁷⁷¹ These ‘conditions’ went deliberately unmet by the Qataris, as this would have been an abrogation of autonomy. However, the conditions were not abandoned, and sat in abeyance until June 2017 when they emerged as a list of thirteen demands made of Qatar that, if met, would end the blockade.

A Qatari national and academic also contends that the lingering of unresolved matters of 2014 contributed to the blockade. When asked: “What were the political relations with Riyadh like in the weeks or months before the blockade?” The Qatari national deferred immediately to the 2014 crisis and said:

Everything was good in the Qatari-Saudi relations before the blockade, and there was not a single sign about a conflict. Nevertheless, I expected a conflict between them because the real causes of the 2014 rift were still there. I remember in my first semester teaching; I was teaching a course called ‘Special Topics’ and I chose to focus on Foreign Policy Analysis of the Gulf region. During the course, I discussed the possibility of a conflict in the GCC based on what I saw (Islamists – Al Jazeera - independent foreign policy of Qatar) and heard from some friends in MOFA,⁷⁷² plus Qatar’s moves toward more defensive cooperation with Turkey from 2014 to 2016. So, you could always tell there was a problem coming. The crisis was over, but the causes were still there. So, my thinking was, get ready for a new crisis within five years, I expect”.⁷⁷³

The three states that withdrew their ambassadors from Doha cited Qatar’s continued support for groups threatening the security and stability of the GCC.⁷⁷⁴ This was contrary to Qatar’s perspective which saw its relations with political Islamism as an opportunity to bolster its power and influence in the region.⁷⁷⁵ As such, it was Qatar’s relations with political Islamism and autonomous outreach to actors which were at odds with the secular and centralised monarchies of the GCC – all of which was at the heart of the 2014 crisis. This dispute signalled to Qatar an important moment in its pursuit of autonomy from Saudi Arabia, a shift in dynamics for its subtle power strategies, and an overall reassessment of Qatar’s exposure to its interdependency with GCC members built upon over more than thirty years.

⁷⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷² Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

⁷⁷³ Author email exchange with Mr. Abdulla Al Etaibi, Qatari national and academic.

⁷⁷⁴ Younis, “The Rise of ISIS and Persian Gulf Security,” 113.

⁷⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

As noted above, while the 2014 withdrawal of ambassadors did not extend to a maritime, air, and land embargo, it was clear that it prompted contingency planning by the Qatari government for such a possibility, regardless of how remote. Such contingency planning (would have) varied in sophistication across various arms of government, but it was sufficient to recognise that the threat of a trade embargo existed.⁷⁷⁶ In response, Qatar began preparing for such an unlikely event, including contingency planning by Qatar Airways for alternative airspace through which to traverse, a closer relationship with Iran and Turkey, and logistically in the seas, with the streamlining of the construction of Port Hamad for receivables, large enough that the existing port Qatar relied upon, that in the UAE, would no longer be needed.⁷⁷⁷ Hoping for the best and planning for the worst was now necessary in a post-Arab Spring (late subtle power) era marred by suspicions, fear, and mistrust.

This contingency planning and the notion of a growing distancing of relations with some GCC members became necessary resulting from the 2014 withdrawal of ambassadors. For example, when discussing the impact of the withdrawal of ambassadors, and then later the blockade on preparations for the World Cup, the Qatari national and member of the ruling family said: “I think there was some contingency planning (after 2014). A lot of our construction supplies came from Saudi Arabia at that time, so World Cup projects were halted for a short amount of time”.⁷⁷⁸ The construction of the port may have begun in 2010, but its importance to Qatar would have been underlined following the 2014 crisis. The strategic significance of the port was that it heralded the end of reliance on ports in the UAE for shipments of goods to Qatar.⁷⁷⁹ When the 2017 embargo closed off access for some Qatari shipping to and from Doha, it was fortunate that by December 2016 Hamad Port became operational, relieving the Qatari economy of more severe shortages.⁷⁸⁰ Amidst other logistical contingency planning, Hamad Port proved critical during the blockade in maintaining stockpiles of perishable goods in supermarkets to maintain public confidence, as their absence would constitute visible indicators to the public of the impact of the disruption (the blockade had) on logistics.⁷⁸¹ As alluded to above, in a new era for Qatar’s foreign policy strategies, greater integration with the GCC tapered off to be replaced by the primacy of self-sufficiency.

⁷⁷⁶ Steven Wright, “The Political Economy of the Gulf Divide,” in *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, ed. Andreas Krieg, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 147.

⁷⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁷⁷⁸ Sheikha Haya Al Thani, (Member of Ruling Family in Qatar), in discussion with author, December 2020.

⁷⁷⁹ Wright, “The Political Economy of the Gulf Divide,” 151.

⁷⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 152.

Furthermore, whilst new logistical infrastructure streamlining from 2014 onwards allowed Qatar to adopt new supply lines, and later lessen the actual impact of the blockade, financial reserves held by the state also allowed it to maintain the stability of the Qatari Riyal peg to the United States dollar, which was one of the more acute threats Qatar faced in 2017 given the implications of a revaluation.⁷⁸² Although “there was no indication that a potential risk to the currency was identified on the horizon after the 2014 experience, nor was there any indication that financial reserves or a financial contingency were being developed since that date to help with any future possible confrontation”,⁷⁸³ needless to say, if it were not for Qatar’s healthy balance sheet, the impact of the blockade would have been much more severe.

The withdrawal of ambassadors had lasting implications for Qatar’s foreign policy strategies, supporting further evidence that subtle power had entered a new era. According to a long-time Middle East journalist and analyst:

The Qatari’s strategy was basically, certainly post-1995, based on soft power as the mainstay of its security and defence policy. If you look at arms purchases, you talk to the major defence companies, it’s only in 2014 that Qatar started to look at serious military purchases. That was with the first conflict, the withdrawal of the ambassadors. The same has happened on ballistic missiles. Now they’re buying hardware, which they weren’t before 2014. They’re primarily dependent on Western technology, yet they know the West no longer is by definition, a reliable ally. Which doesn’t mean that they’re going to move away from the West, but they have an interest in keeping or garnering brownie points⁷⁸⁴ in various camps.⁷⁸⁵

Al Jazeera, often a bellwether for Qatar/Saudi relations, also changed tack in recognition of the withdrawal of ambassadors according to the member of the ruling family who said:

I don’t think Al Jazeera Arabic is a balanced broadcaster. If you look at AJ after the 2014 severing of diplomatic ties, you will see AJ is very anti-Emirati and anti-Saudi, maybe not anti, but they highlighted the news that does not paint the UAE and Saudis in a good light. After 2014, they highlighted the bad news, but after the

⁷⁸² *Ibid*, 159.

⁷⁸³ Steven Wright, (Political Economy Researcher, Qatar University), email correspondence with author, December 2021.

⁷⁸⁴ Brownie Points is a colloquial term to describe winning favour incrementally.

⁷⁸⁵ James Dorsey, (former Middle East journalist, Wall Street Journal and New York Times), in discussion with author, December 2020.

ties were reinstated, they stopped really airing news that was bad for the UAE and the Saudis.⁷⁸⁶

As such, much like the example of Al Jazeera in Chapter Four contends, although there is no explicit evidence to prove Al Jazeera is directly influenced by the Qatari ruling elite, the anecdotal and circumstantial evidence suggests otherwise.

The 2014 diplomatic crisis was seemingly resolved with the signature of two consecutive Riyadh Agreements later in the year between Qatar and its neighbours.⁷⁸⁷ This event however jolted subtle power further into its new era, an era whereby Saudi repercussions would be more severe and involve other participating GCC states. Ultimately, the partial reconciliation led to the return of the ambassadors at an important time, as the Gulf leaders sought to close ranks in the face of the alarming territorial advances made by Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in parts of the region.⁷⁸⁸ The Jeddah Communique as it was termed that was issued in September 2014, and which was signed by all GCC states (amongst other Arab states), confirmed that participating states had agreed to join in the many aspects of a coordinated military campaign against ISIS. The Jeddah Communique even emphasised that the role played by regional states would be crucial to the success of this effort.⁷⁸⁹ Analogous to previous events such as the departure of the British from the Persian Gulf in 1971, the 1980-88 Iran/Iraq war, the 1990-91 Gulf War, the Arab monarchies of the Gulf came together in unity to confront the threat of ISIS. For Qatar and Tamim, this was not so much a post-2014 acquiescence to Saudi demands and a partial abrogation of autonomy, but more a practical way of mending fences following the 2014 diplomatic crisis. This, however, was not to last.

⁷⁸⁶ Sheikha Haya Al Thani, (Member of Ruling Family in Qatar), in discussion with author, December 2020.

⁷⁸⁷ Andreas Krieg, "Introduction," in *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, ed. Andreas Krieg (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 3.

⁷⁸⁸ Butter, "Egypt and the Gulf: Allies and Rivals," 21.

⁷⁸⁹ Younis, "The Rise of ISIS and Persian Gulf Security," 117.

PART TWO - THE BLOCKADE

Introduction

By the time of the 2017 blockade Qatar had achieved outright political autonomy from Saudi Arabia, exemplified not least by its foreign policy actions during the Arab Spring, a peaceful transfer of power, and a growing number of bilateral international partnerships. The question posed by the blockade however was - could this autonomy hold, and what would it mean for Qatar's subtle power? The blockade sent shockwaves throughout the country as local Qataris feared military incursion, and an abrupt end to their sovereignty. As reported by *The Intercept*, according to the President of Crisis Group and Middle East advisor to Obama: "There is little doubt that senior Qatari officials with whom I spoke were convinced - or at least acted as if they were convinced - that Saudi Arabia and the UAE had been planning a military attack on their country".⁷⁹⁰ This was all whilst Trump was tweeting incendiary comments in support of the blockade such as: "So good to see the Saudi Arabia visit with the King and fifty countries already paying off. They said they would take a hard line on funding extremism, and all reference was pointing to Qatar. Perhaps this will be the beginning of the end to the horror of terrorism".⁷⁹¹ In the days following the blockade, there was little doubt that Qatar's autonomy was at serious risk, and this further propelled the elements of subtle power into a new era of not only aiding Qatar's pursuit of autonomy, but protection of the pre-blockade *status quo* assiduously built upon since Hamad's accession.

The blockade, otherwise known as the Gulf Crisis, is well documented in academic literature, as is the lead up to the blockade, Qatar's response to the list of thirteen demands made of it that would end the blockade, and the concluding agreements which brought the crisis to an end in January 2021. Part Two of this chapter will not revisit this work, yet will contribute to the analysis of the 'before and after' of the blockade through the premise of this thesis, that being by analysing the role of subtle power during this event - the gravest crisis that Qatar had ever faced - and the *how*, *why*, and *when* each of the four elements of subtle power were impacted in what was irrevocably by now a late subtle power era. Examples such as the impact on the element of physical protection resulting from the reliability of the United States, the

⁷⁹⁰ Alex Emmons, "Saudi Arabia Planned to Invade Qatar Last Summer. Rex Tillerson's Efforts to Stop it May Have Cost Him His Job," *The Intercept*, accessed December 2021, <https://theintercept.com/2018/08/01/rex-tillerson-qatar-saudi-uae/>

⁷⁹¹ Joshua Geltzer, "What Trump's Qatar Tweets Revealed," *The Atlantic*, accessed December 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/06/trump-qatar-saudi-arabia-terrorism-corker/529479/>

galvanising of regional blocs in support of or against the blockade which pitted Qatar as a victim and adversary alike, and the viability of hosting the World Cup, all led to the reality of a new era for Qatar's regional and international relations. Whilst the Saudis mused about constructing a canal along its shared border with Qatar, which would confer 'geographic autonomy' on Qatar by turning it into an island, the blockade event ended what had been a *quasi*-transitory phase for subtle power. As of 5 June 2017, an inexorable era of late subtle power was now underway.

The Lead Up to the Blockade

As many excuses or rational justifications may be used to explain how the crisis started, its roots can be traced to two important factors. First is the fact that Qatar had become a little too different and distinguished for the comfort of its hegemonic neighbour that expects homogeneity on every level possible; and secondly, the rise of MBS whose ambitious quest for power required him to search for a potential symbolic enemy to target.⁷⁹² Targeting Qatar may or may not have been so important on the strategic level, but it was critically important from the perspective of MBS as an ambitious narcissist⁷⁹³ who can only thrive by turning a neighbour characterised by minor differences into a symbolic enemy.⁷⁹⁴ As described above, the rise in nationalism particularly in Saudi Arabia was one of a few external driving forces behind the shift towards a late subtle power era. However, regardless of the zealous ambitions of the soon-to-be Saudi Crown Prince, according to a Qatari national and academic: "What everybody was mostly certain about, was that Trump gave the green light the blockade".⁷⁹⁵

The underlining 'rational' political reasons for the blockade had arguably been percolating since the 2014 diplomatic spat where ambassadors from three countries were withdrawn from Qatar. Although each and every one of the thirteen demands⁷⁹⁶ may have been frustrating to Qatar's neighbours, these were issues that had persisted for decades, and no new developments justified triggering a major crisis, imposing an embargo, and even preparing for the military

⁷⁹² Mohammed Al Hashemi, "Bitter Brethren: Freud's Narcissism of Minor Difference and the Gulf Divide," in *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, ed. Andreas Krieg (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 69.

⁷⁹³ Direct quote from author above – Al Hashemi.

⁷⁹⁴ Mohammed Al Hashemi, "Bitter Brethren: Freud's Narcissism of Minor Difference and the Gulf Divide," in *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, ed. Andreas Krieg (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 69.

⁷⁹⁵ Sheikha Noof Al Dosari, (Qatar University Department of International Affairs-Public Policy Program), email discussion with author, December 2020.

⁷⁹⁶ Colin Dwyer, "Neighboring Nations Hit Qatar with 13-Point List of Demands," NPR Online, accessed December 2021, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/06/23/534079045/neighboring-arab-nations-slap-qatar-with-13-point-list-of-demands>

invasion of another state.⁷⁹⁷ The real reason is actually much simpler and quite straightforward, and it is at the core of a matter of control and power relations, i.e. the geopolitical architecture of the Arab states of the Gulf,⁷⁹⁸ something MBS had great ambitions for as discussed in Part One of this chapter. Case in point being that MBS can no doubt take some of the credit for aiding Qatar's transition to a late subtle power era.

All this aside, the blockade was undoubtedly a shock to the Qatari people and its economy, as in the immediate days after the blockade, fear of Saudi invasion loomed. The blockade itself may have been a shock, but it was not necessarily considered inconceivable, as per the recollections of two senior Western diplomats. For example, leading up to the blockade, a former Australian Ambassador to Riyadh recalls that:

I was in Bahrain when the announcement happened. I returned to Riyadh two days later. The Saudis to whom I spoke, i.e. officials and businesspeople, all seemed to think it was inevitable that something would and should happen to Qatar - but that's what you'd expect in a place where there's no free media and debate on such matters is limited. The blockade decision did seem to have been taken suddenly, and by a very limited number of people.⁷⁹⁹

Further to this, as per the recollections and observations of a former Australian Trade Commissioner to the region and serving Executive Director at the Global Green Growth Institute:⁸⁰⁰

It's actually very interesting because I had a little bit to do with Qatar when I was working with the Global Green Growth Institute. One of the things we were interested in doing in Qatar was working on agriculture. They were very interested because at that stage, as their economy had developed pretty much in the same mistaken basis being that all you needed was trade, and they can import everything they needed. Then of course, by this stage, there was no blockade, but they were beginning to get a bit wary. They were thinking maybe we should be producing

⁷⁹⁷ Al Hashemi, "Bitter Brethren: Freud's Narcissism of Minor Difference and the Gulf Divide," 62.

⁷⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹⁹ Ralph King, (former ambassador, Australian Embassy in Saudi Arabia) email correspondence with author, April 2021.

⁸⁰⁰ The Global Green Growth Institute is a treaty-based inter-governmental international development organisation with the aims to promote green growth characterised by a balance of economic growth and environmental sustainability.

some of our own food. They had all sorts of plans then for agriculture and revegetation. Since the blockade, they've actually been doing that in earnest.⁸⁰¹

The fear of a potential Saudi foreign policy retaliation was reaffirmed by member of the Qatari ruling family who was asked: "The blockade happened so quickly, do you think there was contingency planning?" She replied: "Yes, I think there was some contingency planning".⁸⁰² Much like the contingency planning considered after the 2014 withdrawal of ambassadors mentioned above, the Qataris were wary of their reliance on Saudi Arabia in terms of food supply. This in itself was another aspect emphasising the realities of a new (late subtle power) era for Qatar – the diversification of partners away from the GCC *to preserve autonomy*, not necessarily a greater economic integration with them. The over reliance on Saudi Arabia for food imports became poignantly clear after the blockade when milk supplies ran dry for example, which was a visible and daily reminder of the impact of the blockade itself, as is discussed in the next section.

The lead up to blockade was a manifestation of more than cross border animosity. Qatar's principal security guarantor was now led by Trump, who as discussed in Chapter Four, was the second of two circumspect presidents, but the of first genuine cause for concern to the Qataris. Trump's perfidy started almost certainly without the knowledge of Doha well before the blockade, when Qatar's Minister of Finance rebuffed an investment opportunity sought by Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law and (minion) Middle East advisor. Rebuffing the invitation to invest in this project before the rise to power of Trump inadvertently put Qatar at odds with the Kushner who would later establish a warm and working relationship with MBS, both of whom reportedly sent WhatsApp messages to each other discussing foreign policy matters.⁸⁰³ As reported by Just Security and NBC:

When the Kushner Companies purchased 666 Fifth Avenue in midtown Manhattan in early 2007 for a record-breaking price of \$1.8 billion, it was supposed to be a centre of their real estate portfolio. Instead, the Kushners have struggled to cover their debt on the troubled building since shortly after its purchase on the eve of the

⁸⁰¹ Howard Bamsey, former Australia Trade Commissioner, Australian Embassy in Saudi Arabia), March 2021.

⁸⁰² Sheikha Haya Al Thani, (Member of Ruling Family in Qatar), in discussion with author, December 2020.

⁸⁰³ Eliza Relman, "Jared Kushner reportedly used WhatsApp to chat with Mohammed bin Salman, who may have used the same app to hack Jeff Bezos," Business Insider, accessed February 2023, <https://www.businessinsider.com/jared-kushner-reportedly-used-whatsapp-mohammed-bin-salman-2020-1>

financial crisis.⁸⁰⁴ As Trump was running for President, the Kushners were pitching to Qatari investors to help bail out the building.⁸⁰⁵ One of the meetings Kushner reportedly held with HBJ was in Trump Tower during the presidential transition in December 2016.⁸⁰⁶ HBJ initially agreed to invest at least \$500 million, but the deal ultimately fell through when the Kushners failed to raise the rest of the funding from other sources. Following this, and just weeks after Jared Kushner's father Charles reportedly failed to reach a deal with Qatar's Minister of Finance, Kushner, in his capacity as a senior adviser to then President Trump, reportedly played a central role in supporting a blockade of Qatar by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.⁸⁰⁷ Some top Qatari government officials believe that the White House's position on the blockade may have been a form of retaliation driven by Kushner who was sour about the failed deal, according to multiple people familiar with the matter.⁸⁰⁸

Insofar as Qatar had secured the protections of the United States in the construction of Al Udeid, the failure to invest in Manhattan property likely contributed to (albeit incredulously) American support for the blockade. The final piece of the puzzle enabling the blockade to occur was undoubtedly the Trump administration, as a former advisor to Trump recalls: "I don't think it's just by happenstance that two weeks after that summit (Trump's visit to Riyadh) you saw the blockade on Qatar".⁸⁰⁹

The lead up to the blockade is as multifaceted as it is lengthy, as are the causes for the blockade which date back to the prior to the Arab Spring. Riyadh had longstanding objections to some of Qatar's subtle power actions which percolated away, such as the relocation of the United States military from Dammam to Al Udeid (physical protection), Al Jazeera's reporting (national branding) and conflict mediation attempts in Yemen (diplomacy and conflict mediation) – and not to forget Qatar's ongoing relations with the Muslim Brotherhood. The first iteration of the blockade, as discussed in Part One of this chapter, led to concerns amongst some Qataris that a repeat of the 2014 withdrawal of ambassadors was possible – even a retaliatory action of greater consequences. In the lead up to the blockade, Qatar's autonomy

⁸⁰⁴ Ryan Goodman, and Julia Brooks, "Timeline on Jared Kushner, Qatar, 666 Fifth Avenue and US Foreign Policy," Just Security, accessed December 2020, <https://www.justsecurity.org/69094/timeline-on-jared-kushner-qatar-666-fifth-avenue-and-white-house-policy/>

⁸⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰⁶ Carol Lee and Robert Windrem, "Mueller Team Asking if Kushner Foreign Business Ties Influenced Trump Policy," NBC News Online, accessed December 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/mueller-team-asking-if-kushner-foreign-business-ties-influenced-trump-n852681>

⁸⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰⁹ Steve Bannon, "Countering Violent Extremism: Qatar, Iran, and the Muslim Brotherhood," interview by Ambassador Hussein Haqqani, *The Hudson Institute*, October 2017, <https://www.hudson.org/events/1475-countering-violent-extremism-qatar-iran-and-the-muslim-brotherhood102017>

was not under any perceived threat. However, on the day of the blockade, that perception was turned upside-down when Qatar's actual sovereignty, not just its autonomy, faced its most serious threat in decades. In response to the most significant challenge to its autonomy Qatar had faced in decades, further aspects and facets of a late subtle power era emerged consolidating an irrevocable shift in Qatar's foreign policy posture.

Life in a Late Subtle Power Era

Where the Arab Spring can be considered the beginning of the end of the subtle power era, the day of the blockade signalled an immutable turning point whereby Qatar's foreign policy strategies were thrust into a late subtle power era. Up until the day of the blockade, no single event since independence in 1971 could be considered as deleterious to Qatar's political autonomy and threatening to its actual sovereignty. On the day of the blockade rumours swirled about whether the Saudis would invade, and either annex territory that some Saudis had always considered their own, or topple Tamim and replace him with an emir more compliant and acquiescent to Saudi demands. These fears were not unfounded, as a former Qatari diplomat recalls: "When they blockaded Qatar, that was an act of war against Qatar, we learnt from the Kuwaiti mediator and Mr Trump that they wanted to militarily invade Qatar, and that was really shocking news for all Qataris when we learned this".⁸¹⁰ If a fellow GCC nation state had followed through with the invasion of a brotherly member, this would have constituted one of the most tumultuous days in the modern history of the Middle East. Furthermore, not only had the GCC failed to protect one of its member states, it didn't even express an opinion on the matter, creating a crisis of confidence in its ability to act collectively or to rein in individual members.⁸¹¹

For Qatar, the blockade was an instant reminder of the might and regional influence of Saudi Arabia and the fragility of its autonomy, as on the day of the blockade many Arab countries chose not to line up behind Qatar like they did in their support the Kuwaitis following Saddam Hussein's 1990 invasion. The regional dominance of Saudi Arabia was not unknown to other Arab states, so when it came to garnering regional support for its own defence, Qatar found itself subordinate to the Saudi influence that loomed over other countries in the region, and a subsidiary to Trump's preferred Arab friend in Riyadh. Although an autonomous nation state

⁸¹⁰ Abdul Aziz Al Horr, (former Qatari Diplomat and Director at Al Jazeera, Qatar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Al Jazeera), in discussion with author, November 2020.

⁸¹¹ Ulrichsen, "The Rise and Decline of the Gulf Cooperations Council", 416.

of its own prior to the blockade, Qatar could not compete with the diplomatic outreach of the Saudis, as six⁸¹² other nation states cut diplomatic ties with Doha, and three⁸¹³ downgraded them.⁸¹⁴ As such, despite Qatar's regional diplomatic outreach, conflict mediation initiatives, infrastructure and energy sector investments, and humanitarian gestures in the years preceding, the blockade demonstrated to Doha that although it had achieved Hamad's stated goal of political emancipation from Saudi Arabia, this did not translate into autonomy *universum* from Saudi Arabia as the scope of Riyadh's diplomatic influence had proved.

(i) The Day of the Blockade

The blockade not only impacted on the political autonomy of Qatar on a macro level, but also on a micro and personal level, as Qatari people directly felt the immediate impacts of the economic embargo. The expulsion of Qatari citizens from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE, and the ordering home of those countries' nationals from Qatar also meant that the crisis had an instant impact on the lives of families and individuals, including students coming to the end of the academic year, and Qataris performing Umrah at the Grand Mosque in Mecca, as well as forcibly separating people from schools, jobs, and businesses.⁸¹⁵ Unsure of what might come next, the first consideration of all Qataris was getting through the next day or two, as supplies from Saudi Arabia ground to a halt. A former Qatari civil servant recalls his apprehension and said that:

When we woke up that morning, we had no water, we had no food, nothing. Medicine, there was nothing. Even lens for our glasses, we couldn't go to any shop and buy lens for anything (*sic*) ... As soon as the blockade happened, we didn't have even water. The water that we drink, it comes from Saudi Arabia, or it comes from the UAE. Food comes from Jordan. Vegetables, it goes through Saudi Arabia

⁸¹² Yemen, Eastern Government of Libya, Maldives, Mauritania, Comoros, and Senegal.

⁸¹³ Jordan, Djibouti, and Chad.

⁸¹⁴ Whilst several other states initially joined the Quartet in cutting or downgrading ties, temporarily in most cases, the most prominent were Senegal (which restored diplomatic relations in August 2017), Chad (which sent its ambassador back to Doha in February 2018), and Jordan (whose downgrade of ties was reversed in June 2018). See: Naser Al Wasmi and Taimur Khan, "Deadline for Qataris to Leave UAE has Passed," *The National*, June 2017, www.thenational.ae/world/deadline-for-qataris-to-leave-uae-has-passed-1.50934.

⁸¹⁵ "Families Ripped Apart, Freedom of Expression under Attack Amid Political Dispute in Gulf," *Amnesty International*, June 2017, www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/06/families-ripped-apart-freedom-of-expression-under-attack-amid-political-dispute-in-gulf

roads. Anything comes from Jebel Ali ships in the UAE. We didn't even pay attention enlarging our port⁸¹⁶ because Jebel Ali port was doing that role for us.⁸¹⁷

Although Qatar was able to ameliorate the immediate consideration of the supply of consumables *post haste*, one of the ongoing impacts throughout the blockade on was on freedom of movement of the Qatari people, as the blockade split families of mixed nationality apart divided by an international border. Although not a matter related directly to the machinations of geopolitics or the foreign policy strategies of the conflicting states, the impact of the blockade on individual members of a family in this late subtle power era was unprecedented in intra-GCC relations. A report by Human Rights Watch researched and detailed this impact by recording that:

Entire families stretched across four countries are now forcibly separated: parents from children, wives from husbands, sisters from brothers. In countries where family relations and lineages are of utmost importance, the political crisis appeared to be tearing apart the social fabric. As well as splitting families, the embargo has also shone a spotlight on the legal discrimination against women that predates the crisis. Though women do not have the same rights as men to pass nationality to their children, this was a less visible problem – many families of mixed Gulf nationalities could come and go within the states with almost the same privileges as citizens. In Qatar, children of Qatari fathers receive nationality automatically, and children of Qatari mothers and foreign fathers can apply for citizenship (only) if they meet a set of strict conditions.⁸¹⁸

As such, on the day of the blockade, the threat to the sovereignty of the nation state of Qatar was obvious, yet the examples of food security and the breakup of families provide two of the many examples of the significant destabilisation of individual autonomy and liberty on the Qatari people at a micro and personal level.

⁸¹⁶ Quote from author (Al Mahmoud) contradicts the facts.

⁸¹⁷ Abdulaziz Al Mahmoud, (former Qatari Airforce engineer, Al Sharq and Peninsula daily journalist, Chief editor for Al Jazeera), in discussion with author, January 2021.

⁸¹⁸ Rothna Begam, "Gulf Crisis Shows How Discrimination Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, UAE and Qatar Tears Families Apart," Human Rights Watch, accessed December 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/07/21/gulf-crisis-shows-how-discrimination-saudi-arabia-bahrain-uae-and-qatar-tears#>

A member of the ruling family also recalls the day of the blockade, and with the benefit of hindsight, acknowledges that although Qatar's foreign policy strategies were the harbinger for the blockade, they were justified and the right course of action Hamad had taken the country.

The blockade did really prove that Qatar's foreign policy, and its hedging foreign policy, really did benefit us during the blockade, because when they cut us off, all we really had in terms of airspace was Iran. And the food that we had, I remember very well, on June fifth there was no food in the supermarkets, because the majority of our food and milk came from Saudi Arabia, and the next day there were some Iranian products, Iranian milk, it was strange because suddenly I was looking at Farsi, and that really did help us, that proved to us that we were right. When I say 'we' I am taking about the leaders. They were right not to put all our eggs in the Saudi Arabian basket, because in the end they did cut us off, and just imagine if we *did* alienate Iran, and we had completely put all our bets in Saudi Arabia, and they *did* cut us off, we would not be able to fly above Iranian airspace, Iran would not come to our aid.⁸¹⁹

Another Qatari national recalls the fear and panic on the day of the blockade. When asked: "What did you feel on the day of the blockade? What concerned you the most?" The Qatari national said:

I remember it was in Ramadan and I just finished Sohor⁸²⁰ and was enjoying some sweets. All of a sudden, news about cutting everything with Qatar. It sounded really bad to my family. I remember my mum was super shocked and dad was so frustrated. I also remember the shock in my university classes. Students were looking for someone to make them feel relaxed. They kept asking when this will end as if I know Khaliji politics?! The crisis started to push people against government and timing played a key role, it was in Ramadan. During this month people spend so much money on food and around 70 to 80% of food supply comes from Saudi Arabia. So there was fear in the street in the first two days. I remember going to supermarkets and there was no food, people just took everything out of fear. Personally, I did not think much about the blockade until I saw the demands because I felt things are real. Moreover, I had my Master's graduation in July and with demands and news about invasion I had to cancel all my plans and stayed in Doha in case of emergency.⁸²¹

⁸¹⁹ Sheikha Haya Al Thani, (Member of Ruling Family in Qatar), in discussion with author, December 2020.

⁸²⁰ Sohor is the last meal eaten by Muslims before fasting from dawn to sunset during the month of Ramadan.

⁸²¹ Author email exchange with Mr Abdulla Al Etaibi, Qatari national and academic.

The day of the blockade changed Qatar as a nation state and the Qatari people themselves. At a macro level Qatar was reminded that the grand designs of the Saudis were not resigned - Saudi Arabia under the leadership of an ambitious MBS could, and would flex its diplomatic muscle, and even consider invasion. This curtailed Qatar's autonomy immediately, and tested its subtle power strategies, as the protections from the United States simply weren't enough. This also signalled another change towards a late subtle power era which distinguishes it from its predecessor - Qatar's existing partners and allies weren't enough in an era whereby it 'no longer exercised influence from behind the scenes'. In a post-blockade late-subtle power era, Qatar immediately strengthened the diversification of its partnerships, initially leaning on Iran for access to its airspace, and with Turkey who within days flew in thousands more military personnel to Qatar to shore up support for its ally, and would later become a diplomatic companion and increasingly preferred destination for some of Qatar's financial investment vehicles (as is discussed in Part Three of this chapter).

At a micro level, the day of the blockade changed the Qatari people too, recognising now that a greater autonomy from Saudi Arabia was needed immediately, not just for food security, but also in terms of a greater sense of nationalism and self-reliance. As such, the day of the blockade prompted significant change in Qatar in mindsets of policymakers and its people alike, reminding Qataris of the realities of their ongoing journey in pursuit of autonomy. As for the four elements of Qatar's late subtle power foreign policy strategies (discussed in detail in Part Three of this chapter), albeit gradually being reconfigured or reinvigorated in a post-Arab Spring geopolitical environment, their readaptation accelerated following the day of the blockade.

(ii) Surviving the Blockade – A Test of Qatar's Autonomy

In the months that followed the heat did not go out of the dispute, as the Saudis continued their line of diplomatic attack. At a speech at the United Nations General Assembly three months after the blockade started for example, MBS said: "Doha's practice of financial support to terror is unacceptable, so is providing safe havens to those who violated the law and should be brought to justice".⁸²² A year later, in interview with Martin Smith, Adel Al Jubeir, Saudi Foreign Minister at the time, iterated Riyadh's position by saying: "The Qataris have pushed

⁸²² Joyce Karam, "Saudi Foreign Minister Condemns Qatar for Supporting Terrorism at the UN," The National News, accessed December 2021, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/the-americas/saudi-foreign-minister-condemns-qatar-for-supporting-terrorism-at-un-1.661047>

incitement and extremism through their media platforms in order to destabilise countries. This is why we are saying to the Qataris, enough is enough. This has got to stop if you want to have normal relations with us”.⁸²³ For Qatar, suffering the day of the blockade may have been one thing, but surviving the blockade was another matter as Saudi attempts at subjugation did not abate. Despite the relentless Saudi pressure, Qatar survived the blockade, and in doing so increased its self-reliance as the examples below will explain. This greater self-reliance resulted in tangible outcomes that reinforced its autonomy from its neighbours, not just politically, but also in a more practical and logistical sense.

In the previous section, food security was noted as an immediate concern on the day of the blockade, and a sector whereby Qatar’s autonomy from the Saudis needed to be reinforced. Narrowing in on the example of milk, immediately following the blockade there was no longer any fresh milk as this had previously been sourced from Saudi Arabia. To alleviate this supply chain disruption, one that visibly reminded Qataris daily of the impact of the blockade, Qatar’s state owned dairy company Baladna sought to airlift dairy cows into the country, and by July 2017 reported that: “The first batch of cattle imported to Qatar from Germany, the Netherlands, the United States, and Australia as part of a plan to provide 30 to 35 percent of the country’s milk needs has arrived”.⁸²⁴ This policy of greater self-reliance proved to be a success as, “by April 2018 Baladna was supplying the entire dairy market in Qatar”.⁸²⁵ As such, albeit the supply of a product external from the geopolitical considerations behind the blockade, this was one of many measures, however simple, that reinforced Qatar’s self-reliance, gave a degree of solace to its nationals, and by extension enhanced its autonomy from Saudi Arabia.

Importantly, for local Qataris this was a practical and visible example of Qatar’s ability to survive the blockade, and this aided confidence in Tamim’s handling on the crisis. This was the view of a Qatari national who when asked: “What were the most important actions Qatar undertook in the first few days or weeks to withstand the blockade?” Replied: “Qatar focused on food supply and World Cup construction. Flights carrying cows from Australia, products from Turkey, Iran, UK, France, Germany, Russia, Ukraine, Italy, Poland, etc. were a priority to the government to ease the crisis on its people”.⁸²⁶ Securing the provision of locally supplied

⁸²³ Adel Al Jubeir, “The Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia,” interview by Martin Smith, *Frontline*, Public Broadcasting Service, December 2018, video, <https://www.pbs.org/video/crown-prince-saudi-arabia-1jt2ey/>

⁸²⁴ Baladna Press Release, “The First Batch of Cows Arrive in Doha via Qatar Airways,” Official Baladna Website, accessed December 2021, <https://baladna.com/the-first-batches-of-imported-cows-arrive-in-doha-via-qatar-airways/>

⁸²⁵ Chris McCullough, “Baladna to Meet Total Dairy Demand,” Dairy Global, accessed December 2021, <https://www.dairyglobal.net/dairy/milking/baladna-farm-to-meet-total-dairy-demand-qatar/>

⁸²⁶ Author email exchange with Mr Abdulla Al Etaibi, Qatari national and academic.

milk was one practical measure that Qatar took to enhance its autonomy and instil confidence in the Qatari population, yet there was one proposal by the Saudis which exposed the reality that Qatar could not control and determine its entire response to surviving the blockade – that being turning Qatar into an island.

Qatar's autonomy from Saudi Arabia was about to go further than it had ever thought possible, by the Saudi plan to turn the Qatari peninsula into an island, and there was little if anything Qatar could do about it, even under International Law.⁸²⁷ Announced by the Saudi newspaper *Sabq* in April 2018 and confirmed by the Saudi King's cabinet counsellor via social networks, the Salwa Canal would have been built completely on Saudi territory one kilometre from its border with the Qatar peninsula.⁸²⁸ For the remaining land attached to Qatar, which would have been one kilometre wide, the plan was to convert it into a military zone and nuclear waste management facility.⁸²⁹ If realised, the construction of the Salwa Canal would have resulted in a serious (and possibly permanent) disintegration of relations, and one that simply could not be easily wound back by a resolution of the dispute.

For the blockading quartet, the Salwa Canal was not a shallow threat, as summed up by comments made on Twitter by the UAE State Minister for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash who reportedly said: "It won't do to wipe out years of plotting, betrayal, and backstabbing with a simple signature. Now that the choices are dead serious, it is time for Qatar to set its indecisiveness aside and seriously consider the principles for the solution and the demands of the four countries".⁸³⁰ The proposed Salwa Canal had nothing to do with advancing maritime navigation as was the stated intention, but rather for changing Qatar's geography and isolating it.⁸³¹ If realised, the Salwa Canal would have changed the concept of Qatari autonomy irrespective of the degree of self-reliance Qatar gradually achieved in surviving the blockade, and would have been an ever-present reminder of Saudi Arabia's dominance in their bilateral relations.

The blockade was uncompromising and unforgiving in its application – even 9,000 Qatari camels were not immune from the embargo and forced out of Saudi Arabia with just 36 hours'

⁸²⁷ Tamsamani, "The Salwa Canal and the Island of Qatar." 168.

⁸²⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸²⁹ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁸³⁰ "Salwa Canal is a Warning to Doha," *The Arab Weekly*, accessed December 2021, <https://theArabweekly.com/salwa-canal-warning-doha>

⁸³¹ Tamsamani, "The Salwa Canal and the Island of Qatar," 168.

notice.⁸³² However, two of the four members of the blockading quartet could not impose the economic embargo *ab omni parte*, as both the UAE and Egypt still needed Qatar for their own national interest objectives, and as the two examples below will show, the blockade was in fact applied selectively, albeit not often. The supply of natural gas from Qatar to the UAE, which the Emiratis were dependent on for a sizable percentage of their electricity consumption is the first example, and the ongoing presence of Egyptian migrant labourers in Qatar, a nation dependant on remittances from indentured labours, support the evidence of this reality. It is therefore a case in point whereby two of the four members of the blockading quartet did not themselves have complete autonomy from Doha.

Qatar unwaveringly continued its exportation of natural gas through the Dolphin Energy pipeline to the UAE, even exporting LNG via ship (in an approved breach of the maritime embargo) in April 2019 when the pipeline connecting the two energy markets malfunctioned and broke down.⁸³³ A member of the Qatari ruling family was asked about this apparent contradiction and replied: “It is pretty interesting, it’s funny as they abandoned all their other treaties with Qatar, but they kept that treaty because they are very dependent on our LNG. Even in that treaty it is for a very cheap price Qatar gave the UAE, which is completely not market price”.⁸³⁴ When asked about the benefit for Qatar in its continuation of natural gas exports to the UAE, with knowledge of the minimal value of the Emirati gas market compared to Qatar’s overall volume of exports, the ruling family member said:

If Qatar did that they would shut down Dubai completely, and I think during that time of the blockade, a lot of Western countries were seeing how the Emiratis and Saudis were behaving, and they would keep it in the back of their minds thinking that - ‘well these countries are not to be trusted in terms of international agreements we make with them because they can just change their minds at any time and go back on all these long standing treaties’. Qatar didn’t want to seem that way because it does have an international reputation to uphold and it kind of wanted to act as the big man.⁸³⁵ If you betray all these agreements between us we will keep our end of the agreement just so reputationally you can rely on us.⁸³⁶

⁸³² “Camels Expulsion: Saudi Arabia Should be Held Accountable, Owners Say,” *Gulf Times Online*, <https://www.gulf-times.com/story/558202/Camels-expulsion-Saudi-should-be-held-accountable->

⁸³³ “Qatar Ships LNG after Dolphin Pipeline Outage,” Al Jazeera, accessed December 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/5/19/qatar-ships-lng-to-uae-after-dolphin-pipeline-outage-report>

⁸³⁴ Sheikha Haya Al Thani, (Member of Ruling Family in Qatar), in discussion with author, December 2020.

⁸³⁵ Meaning more mature and reliable.

⁸³⁶ Sheikha Haya Al Thani, (Member of Ruling Family in Qatar), in discussion with author, December 2020.

As such, this demonstrated two things: Qatar could withstand one aspect of the blockade by virtue of the fact the Emiratis needed Qatari natural gas, and by extension, Qatar was partially autonomous from the blockading quartet due to the importance of its natural gas sector. Albeit the case, other rational reasons existed for Qatar's continual supply of natural gas to the UAE (some of which then goes on to Oman). Despite its leading position in the global LNG market, Doha faced competition from new exporters such as the United States and Australia, thus making it reluctant to take any action that may compromise these important strategic and economic relationships forged in the signing of existing supply contracts.⁸³⁷

A second example of the selective application of the blockade was the ongoing presence of 300,000 Egyptian labourers in Qatar, despite Cairo being one of the principal drivers of the blockade.⁸³⁸ It was the case however that many foreign workers were stranded by the blockade, including a reported 100,000 Egyptians who initially had no means of returning to their country because of Egypt's suspension of travel to and from Qatar.⁸³⁹ When asked about this second apparent contradiction, the ruling family member replied:

Yes there are Egyptians remaining in Qatar, but I don't think he (Al Sisi) can repatriate those citizens only because of Egypt's economic conditions. He can bring them back, but where would they be working? The reason why they're here is because they're struggling to find jobs in Egypt. I speak to many Egyptians in Doha, and they're not really focused on politics to be honest, they're just focused on their jobs and their livelihoods. They can be pro-Sisi or anti-Sisi, but I would never know because they don't talk about it.⁸⁴⁰

This too is an example of where the blockade was applied selectively, further exemplifying the reality that Egypt was not autonomous from its need of Qatar, a contradiction of the optics of the blockade.

There exists ample literature on how Qatar survived the blockade, yet what Part Two of this chapter has illuminated is the degree of autonomy Qatar either had or didn't have at various times during the Gulf crisis. Leading up to the blockade, Qatar had continued to exercise its

⁸³⁷ Zafirov, "The Qatar Crisis – Why did the Blockade Fail?," 6.

⁸³⁸ Taha Sakr, "Fate of 300,000 Expats in Qatar Still Unknown," Egypt Independent Online, accessed November 2021, <https://www.egyptindependent.com/qatar-egyptian-expats/>

⁸³⁹ Amr Salahi, "GCC Crisis Explained: Why is Qatar Under Blockade by Saudi Arabia and its Allies," The New Arab Online, accessed December 2021, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/news/explainer-why-qatar-under-blockade-saudi-arabia>

⁸⁴⁰ Sheikha Haya Al Thani, (Member of Ruling Family in Qatar), in discussion with author, December 2020.

subtle power foreign policies largely as it saw fit exemplifying a self-confidence in its autonomy from Saudi Arabia. On the day of the blockade however, rumours of Saudi invasion swirled around Doha, and fears of an abrogation of not just autonomy but *sovereignty* to the Saudis were abound. Ultimately Qatar survived the blockade, and as discussed below, perceptions on both side of the Salwa crossing was that it had ‘won’⁸⁴¹ the dispute. The blockade ended with the Qatari state and its roughly 300,000 citizens feeling proud and emboldened, and with a greater sense of autonomy from Saudi Arabia than it had ever had in its fifty years of independence. It is this final event in the evolution of a late subtle power era to which this chapter now turns.

(iii) The End of the Blockade

Writing for Al Jazeera a day after the Al Ula Agreement was signed in January 2021 which officially ended the blockade, a world-renowned Qatar specialist wrote:

It remains to be seen whether the lifting of the blockade fully equates to an ending of the rift in the Gulf or corresponds more to a bilateral reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Qatar ... What has made this crisis different from previous disagreements is that it went far beyond the confines of a political dispute among elites to hit directly on families and individuals who endured years of separation and often vituperative finger-pointing and name-calling on social media. The social legacy of the Qatar blockade is likely to be the hardest issue to resolve.⁸⁴²

Once the dust had settled on the opening months of the blockade, and the economic embargo and frozen diplomacy became somewhat of the *status quo*, and there was a sense that Qatar had the upper hand. A few months before the end of the blockade, former Qatari diplomat said:

We are very proud of this (withstanding the blockade). If the blockade ends there will be terms and conditions. So, it’s not like we are desperate to end the blockade at any price – there will be terms and conditions ... Terms and conditions to the Saudis will be negotiated on the table. We are equal parties here. It’s not because they started the blockade, they can end it like this! We have to have assurances, there are prices for this, we have to make sure that this will not happen again if this

⁸⁴¹ Jamil Sawda, (former policy officer, Saudi Royal Court in Riyadh), in discussion with author, January 2021.

⁸⁴² Kristian Ulrichsen, “Has the GCC Crisis Been Resolved?,” Al Jazeera, accessed January 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/1/6/the-gcc-after-Al-ula>

is ended soon. And all these things have been communicated through Kuwait and any other mediator.⁸⁴³

As such, the bullish optimism of Qatar particularly following the election of Biden forebode the reality that Qatar was on the right side of history, and its autonomy from Saudi Arabia would be not only preserved, but enhanced.

From the Saudi perspective, upon the end of the blockade, a former policy officer who had worked in the Saudi Royal Court admits that Qatar did in fact “win” the dispute and reflects:

When for instance, the blockade against Qatar happened, a lot of pundits came out and political commentators came out and said, ‘The Saudis are going to win’. Even the Saudis and the advisors to the Saudis came out and said, ‘Well, this will only last a couple of months because inherently the Qataris are going to be choked. They’re going to accede to everything’. Well, they did not. Not only that, but in fact they won, and I deliberately say won, they won the narrative when it came to policymakers in the UN, when it came to policymakers in the EU, when it came to policymakers even in Congress, maybe not with the Trump administration, but definitely with Congress, with Democrats and even Conservatives, that they were the victim here. They (Qatar) had a lot of things that they could offer to global stability, that what is happening at the moment is not favourable. This actually worked for their advantage, and it was against the Saudis because if you look behind the scenes at the thinking in the US in Washington or in international organisations, such as the UN or the EU or even the OECD, they much more favour the Qataris, and the Qatari narrative of what had happened about why the blockade has happened, about who the victim was in all of this, and what is the way forward.⁸⁴⁴

Ultimately, Qatar may have ‘won’ the 2017 blockade, and in doing such not just preserved but enhanced its autonomy from Saudi Arabia, but its *anonymity* was long gone. Due to actions Qatar had taken during the Arab Spring, the soft power - soft disempowerment it had experienced, new leaders and the rise in nationalism, the 2014 diplomatic dispute, and the blockade itself, Qatar could no longer continue to ‘exercise influence from behind the scenes’. This in turn did not mean that the four elements of subtle power could no longer be utilised. To the contrary, Qatar continued to employ similar strategies up until the end of the blockade

⁸⁴³ Abdul Aziz Al Horr, (former Qatari Diplomat and Director at Al Jazeera, Qatar’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Al Jazeera), in discussion with author, November 2020.

⁸⁴⁴ Jamil Sawda, (former policy officer, Saudi Royal Court in Riyadh), in discussion with author, January 2021.

despite the geopolitical and security architecture of the region having markedly changed. As such, and as a result of the aforementioned, these events and changes necessitated a contemporary revision of the four elements underpinning the theory of subtle power.

PART THREE – THE ELEMENTS OF LATE SUBTLE POWER

Introduction

Given the regional upheavals of the Arab Spring and the changing geopolitical dynamics in its aftermath, this study found that a contemporary revision of the theory of subtle power was necessary to better explain Qatar's foreign policy strategies. This explanation of the four elements of late subtle power follows the analysis of the impact that Qatar's role during the Arab Spring and the blockade had on Qatar's relations with Saudi Arabia, an impact whereby its autonomy from Riyadh touched either end of the pendulum - from fearing invasion on the day of the blockade, to an emboldened nation state politically emancipated once again several months later. This final part of Chapter Five introduces and elucidates the four elements of what this thesis terms as late subtle power, a revision of Kamrava's original theory in a new era whereby Qatar could no longer 'exercise influence from behind the scenes'. Whilst each of the four elements have retained their nomenclature, they have had to (re)adapt, and have since become overt and competitive in response to Qatar's past foreign policy actions, its growing prominence regionally and internationally, and other external forces and pressures.⁸⁴⁵

Diplomacy and Conflict Mediation

There are two distinguishing features of this element of late subtle power which differentiates it from its predecessor. The first is, as elucidated in Chapter Four, is the loss of impartiality that resulted from Qatar's foreign policy actions of the past, particularly those during the Arab Spring, which led to the demise of the element of diplomacy and conflict mediation. The second distinguishing feature is that as Qatar was now no longer fully trusted to mediate between two Arab actors, alternative conflict mediation participants were required to revive this once

⁸⁴⁵ A chart of the differences between late subtle power and its predecessor can be found at the end of this chapter.

previously influential component of Qatar's foreign policy strategies. This occurred via Doha's facilitation of talks between the United States and the Taliban and resulted in a diplomatic boon for Qatar. As this salient example below will show, this significant conflict mediation initiative produced soft power windfalls for Qatar resulting in the elevation of its status to major non-NATO ally of the US and principal interlocutor with the Taliban.

(i) The Demise of Diplomacy and Conflict Mediation

Qatar's regional conflict mediation initiatives in the years after the Arab Spring did not realise the same regional standing tantamount to that of its past initiatives. This event was a *Road to Damascus* event for Qatar, whereby its neutrality and perceived impartiality were undermined which resulted in the partial demise of this element of subtle power. Although remaining a feature of its foreign policy strategies, in the immediate aftermath of the revolutions Qatar's conflict mediations initiatives were few and of little regional significance whilst other actors in the region sought to step in to fill this void – this is one of the two factors distinguishing this element late subtle power from its predecessor. After the Arab Spring Qatar aided the release of two bishops abducted in Syria in 2013 and nine Lebanese hostages in a separate exchange,⁸⁴⁶ mediated between Libyan Toubou and Tuareg tribes in 2015, and facilitated a resolution between Chadian parties in 2022.⁸⁴⁷ These more recent conflict mediation initiatives however did not yield the same degree of regional status and prestige compared to Qatar's mediation in Lebanon in 2008 which had 'regional and international significance and wider ramifications'.⁸⁴⁸ It is absence of the regional 'soft power windfall' component *within* this element of late subtle power which distinguishes it from its predecessor.

According to a United Nations diplomat familiar with Middle East conflict mediations affairs, Qatar's potential to mediate a resolution between Saudi Arabia and the Houthi-led forces in Sana'a for example was not likely.⁸⁴⁹ This however was largely a result of the complexities of the situation in Yemen, the realities of the changing geopolitical dynamics in the region, and

⁸⁴⁶ "Maronite Head Asks Qatar Help to Free Syria Bishops," *Ahram Online*, last modified October 2013, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/0/84714/World/0/Maronite-head-asks-Qatar-help-to-free-Syria-bishop.aspx>

⁸⁴⁷ "Doha Peace Agreement in Chad... New Success for Qatar in International Mediation, Conflict resolution," *Qatar News Agency*, 8 August 2022, <https://www.qna.org.qa/en/News-Area/News/2022-08/08/0053-doha-peace-agreement-in-chad-new-success-for-qatar-in-international-mediation,-conflict-resolution>

⁸⁴⁸ Alistair Lyon, "Qatar Pulls Off Mediation Coup in Lebanon Crisis", *Reuters*, 23 May 2008, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-lebanon-qatar-analysis-idUKL2274043520080522>

⁸⁴⁹ This is paraphrased to reflect the context of the conversation and not a direct quote.

the fact that all GCC nation states are entangled socially, politically, and historically in Yemen with none of them being perceived as neutral mediators. The UN diplomat said that:

We'll never understand the intentions of Qatari leadership. We have to remember that things have changed dramatically since the beginning of the year (2021) in terms of the Gulf relationships. Obviously, there's a difference in opinion about the political modalities pushed by MBZ⁸⁵⁰ and MBS on one hand, and Qatar on the other. We have to be careful, very careful in the example of Yemen, it's extremely complicated. It's more than this side or that side, there's tribal alliances. There's family connections. It's not straightforward. I wouldn't overestimate Qatar's role, and I wouldn't suddenly compare it to other Gulf countries who are active in Yemen. I definitely wouldn't necessarily put a great deal of credence into what you may have read about Houthi-Qatari relationships, but then the money that does go through Yemen, and the recent US sanctions on Houthi will free up this Qatari money because of the banks operating in Yemen, operate out of Sana'a, and Sana'a is controlled by Houthis.⁸⁵¹

As such, in a late subtle power era Qatar was no longer considered the region's principal go-to mediator. This is also evident in the increased number of Middle Eastern countries seeking to benefit from mediation. Whilst not a new foreign policy phenomenon to some Gulf states, perhaps having recognised the successes of Qatar in years preceding, other Arab nation states have sought to capitalise on this element of subtle power. Oman for example has been recognised as a key mediator in the Gulf and the wider Middle East - the successful completion of the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, in particular, firmly cemented its reputation as a peacemaker.⁸⁵² Iraq has hosted talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia to ease tensions between Tehran and the Gulf states, all whilst the Saudis are seeking an end to the war in Yemen.⁸⁵³ The UAE has offered to mediate between Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt to encourage an enduring middle ground over the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam.⁸⁵⁴ As for Saudi Arabia, whose mediation efforts have been an enduring central feature of the Kingdom's foreign policy, it has

⁸⁵⁰ Mohammad bin Zahid, President of the UAE.

⁸⁵¹ United Nations Diplomat, posted to United Nations Headquarters in New York, in discussion with author, February 2021.

⁸⁵² James Worrall, "Switzerland of Arabia: Omani Foreign Policy and Mediation Efforts in the Middle East", *Italian Journal of International Affairs* 56, No.4 (2021): 134-150.

⁸⁵³ "Iran welcomes Iraqi mediation with Gulf States – Ambassador", *Reuters*, April 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-welcomes-iraqi-mediation-with-gulf-states-ambassador-2021-04-20/>

⁸⁵⁴ Samuel Ramani, "UAE offers to mediate Nile Dam dispute in name of Red Sea Security," *Al-Monitor*, May 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/05/uae-offers-mediate-nile-dam-dispute-name-red-sea-security>

emerged as a surprising mediator between the Ukraine and Russia, even brokering a prisoner-swap.⁸⁵⁵

(ii) The Revival of Conflict Mediation

A second distinguishing feature of late subtle power is that the only conflict mediation initiative of any noteworthiness⁸⁵⁶ since the Arab Spring was Qatar's facilitation of the US negotiations with the Taliban - neither of which are Arab nor Middle Eastern countries. Importantly, Qatar's role in facilitating the US and Afghan withdrawal talks was not an exercise purely about the revival of this element of subtle power, nor to solely produce a soft power outcome. This had an active component of relationship strengthening – that being partnership building with Trump more precisely. Now that the epicentre of Middle East⁸⁵⁷ in a blockade environment was *quasi*-divided into two camps, one aligned behind the Saudis (which at times included Trump), and some others not, the onus was on Qatar to strengthen its hand with its long-time external security guarantor. This was also the view of a war correspondent who reported from Kabul before, during, and after the fall of the Afghan Government who said:

In one way, Qatar's role in Afghanistan can be seen in terms of regional competition with the UAE, although Afghanistan was not as important as other countries with ports. The Qataris saw an opportunity to be in a place where they can work with the big players – the US and NATO – and not just be in the room, but own the room. The connection with the Taliban was seen as strategically important.⁸⁵⁸

As was well reported, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan did not go to plan to say the least, and the Taliban took hold of the country with lightning speed. This did not signal however the end of Qatar's conflict mediation role, as shortly after the fall of the Afghan government, Qatar's Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani visited Kabul and met Mullah Mohammad Hassan Akhund, the acting prime minister in the Taliban's new government. It

⁸⁵⁵ "Saudi Arabia's Mediation in the Ukraine War", *Gulf International Forum*, October 2022, <https://gulfif.org/saudi-arabias-mediation-in-the-ukraine-war/>

⁸⁵⁶ The author notes that this is a subjective term and contends that a soft power windfall is a component of a successful conflict mediation initiative, and one that is 'notable' achieves a degree of 'status and prestige'.

⁸⁵⁷ The Levant and the Arabian Peninsula.

⁸⁵⁸ Jane Ferguson, (PBS Newshour Special Correspondent in Kabul, Afghanistan), in discussion with author, June 2023.

was the highest-level visit by an official since the United States military withdrawal from Afghanistan, which included meetings with the Taliban's foreign minister and his deputy.⁸⁵⁹ In an interview with CNN at the time of the evacuation of Americans and other foreigners, as reported by Al Jazeera, Qatar's foreign minister said:

Qatar is working as an 'impartial mediator' in dealings with the Taliban, while aiding ongoing evacuations of foreign nationals and vulnerable Afghans from the country. You need to engage, you need to agree on a peaceful resolution over there, a format of power sharing that (*sic*) everybody is represented, this is what Qatar is standing for. We remained an impartial mediator throughout this process, and we maintain contact with all the parties which have now helped us in supporting foreign citizens who are living there in Afghanistan.⁸⁶⁰

At this point, Qatar's role as conflict resolution facilitator quickly adapted to seize the opportunity as principal interlocutor between Taliban-ruled Afghanistan and not just the United States, but any country seeking to engage with the Taliban directly or through unofficial backchannels. At the time, Qatar's foreign minister made this point in interview with CNN by saying: "Right now, we are trying to facilitate the movement of the people from their places to the airport, and taking full responsibility for them, taking them to the airport, and ensuring their safety throughout the way".⁸⁶¹ This preceded the arrival of a technical team which arrived from Doha to reopen Kabul airport to receive (humanitarian) aid⁸⁶² and facilitate the evacuation of foreigners. Within days of the Taliban taking control, a Qatar Airways flight departed from Kabul airport, the first since the American withdrawal, and carried more than one hundred passengers including citizens of the United States and several other Western nations. This achievement was not lost on Qatar's foreign minister who said in the same interview: "We managed to fly the first plane with passengers just an hour ago" whilst thanking the Taliban for helping reopen the airport.⁸⁶³

⁸⁵⁹ "Qatar Foreign Minister in Afghanistan in First High-Level Visit," Al Jazeera Online, accessed September 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/12/qatars-foreign-minister-visits-afghanistans>

⁸⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶¹ "Qatar is an Impartial Mediator Amid Afghanistan Evacuations: FM," Al Jazeera Online, accessed August 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/23/qatar-facilitating-movement-of-evacuees-to-kabul-airport-fm>

⁸⁶² Ted Regencia, Mersiha Gadzo and Umut Uras, "Kabul Airport Reopens to Receive Aid: Qatar envoy," Al Jazeera Online, accessed September 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/4/us-seen-funding-afghan-humanitarian-aid-but-not-the-taliban>

⁸⁶³ "Afghanistan: First Flight from Taliban-Controlled Kabul Lands in Doha," Deutsche Welle Online, accessed September 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/afghanistan-first-flight-from-taliban-controlled-kabul-lands-in-doha/a-59133437>

However, despite the positive public diplomacy of the foreign minister, Qatar's operational relations with the Taliban were not as collaborative or nonchalant as officially portrayed according to the same war correspondent, who said:

For the Qataris, they found it increasingly impossible to work with the Taliban who were obsessed with control and sovereignty. When Qatar Airways flights landed at Kabul (not long after the Taliban took control) the Qatari special forces were there, but also Talibs. In my view, I think the Qataris were surprised at how bad the Taliban are at diplomacy. When I left Kabul in November 2021, the Qataris had there embassy in the Serena Hotel, the only hotel of any significance in Kabul. They would stay in the hotel, eat breakfast, or go to the gym, and I wasn't sure if their staff were there when I left. The Taliban were impossible to work with, and I think there was a falling out with the Taliban.⁸⁶⁴

Nevertheless, after a decades-long policy of hosting various dubious and non-recognised actors, Qatar's role in the US withdrawal from Afghanistan was a diplomatic boon, securing for Doha a newfound status as an international conduit with the Taliban – something few countries would want or could achieve. Three years in the making,⁸⁶⁵ Qatar's perseverance paid off handsomely, as it positioned itself as the key interlocutor for other countries in their liaison with a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. This prospect was put to Kamrava in light of the new doctrine of conflict mediation in a late subtle power era, who was asked: "Has Qatar positioned itself as an interlocutor between the Western world and Afghanistan?" He replied:

Absolutely. They did know they would become an interlocutor, and the reason they did is because of the way that Qatar engages in mediation, it demands a seat at the table. This is one of the added benefits of hedging whereby when you talk to everybody and when you try and make sure that you have as many friends as possible, and as few enemies as possible, and you talk to people who don't always talk to each other, one of the added benefits is that you become a strategic interlocutor when and if needed. This is a huge advantage of hedging because, by virtue of maintaining open lines of communication with very different actors, you have given yourself the added strategic advantage of if needed, being able to talk to them and being able to act as an intermediary.⁸⁶⁶

⁸⁶⁴ Jane Ferguson, (PBS Newshour Special Correspondent in Kabul, Afghanistan), in discussion with author, June 2023.

⁸⁶⁵ The author notes that the Taliban opened an office in Doha in 2013 on the condition that it was not for official purposes.

⁸⁶⁶ Mehran Kamrava, (Director of the Centre for International and Regional Studies, Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service in Qatar), in discussion with author, December 2021.

As late subtle power exists in a post-Arab Spring geopolitical environment, the implications of Qatar's conflict mediation extended beyond the branding benefits and soft power windfalls it had sought in the past. The element of conflict mediation was now used strategically in competition with other nation states. This prospect was put to Kamrava when he was asked: "Was there some strategic blindsiding of the Saudis there on the part of the Qataris? Is this a new part of their diplomacy?" Kamrava replied:

That's a really good question. I am not sure if it was a deliberate effort to blindside the Saudis, rather than an unintentional goal they scored against the Saudis. I should say, incidentally, an overwhelming majority of the embassies, at least the ones I've had dealings with, they've relocated from Kabul to Doha. The ambassador or the senior staff came here, the Australians, the Japanese, the Americans, the Koreans, and I don't know if they're still here, and I don't know if they're still operating from here, the Kabul embassies, but they all did come here and they relocated. The ones I mentioned, the four, Americans, Japanese, South Koreans, and Australians, embassy staff or ambassadors told me that they were here. Qatar really regained its footing as a diplomatic heavyweight in a sense. Ultimately however, I think a lot of it they lucked out, rather than deliberately trying to outplay others in diplomacy.⁸⁶⁷

Qatar's role in the facilitation of talks between the United States and the Taliban had further benefit in restoring a greater degree of normalcy and confidence in the overall bilateral relationship between Washington and Doha. As noted in Chapter Four, Trump's tweets, and at times general disregard (or knowledge) of existing alliances and partnerships had left the Qatari leadership and some of its citizens wary of his administration's reliability. The Biden administration however, together with the success of the hosting of the US/Taliban talks aided, according to a Qatari PhD Candidate, a 'rebalancing' of relations:

Qatar's conflict mediation enhances its 'reputational security'. Simply being a mediator or even a facilitator isn't a bad thing as you can always be a part of the solution, without being a part of the problem. The drivers behind Qatar being a good mediator are plenty. The US had already decided to end the war in Afghanistan, and if Qatar can help US to do that it is in fact a positive thing for

⁸⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

Qatar's foreign policy, and actually helped Qatar balance the shift in American relations with Qatar created by White House under Trump's leadership.⁸⁶⁸

The success of Qatar's role in aiding the US withdrawal from Afghanistan was not without its detractors however, as when the Taliban took power, it appeared to many observers that they got everything they wanted without having to make any meaningful concessions. Whilst acknowledging Qatar's 'reputation as a reliable partner', according to the Atlantic Council:

Qatar's Afghan policy yielded mixed results. On the one hand, it significantly helped Doha cement its status as an ascendant regional power and reputation as a reliable partner for the US and Europe. On the other hand, it highlighted the structural constraints hindering Doha's ambitions to emerge as regional grand mediator. Qatar was unable to pressure the Taliban into making meaningful concessions while the Taliban took back Kabul and got the US to withdraw its troops. Whether the sound diplomatic capital Qatar built in Afghanistan over a decade will continue to pay dividends mostly depends on Doha's capacity to retain its status as an all-weather mediator.⁸⁶⁹

In summary, rather than reminisce on what might have been if Qatar continued to exercise influence from behind the scenes, its re-emergence on the conflict mediation scene more than signalled to a post-Arab Spring Middle East that Qatar had not lost the spring in its step when it came to conflict mediation. Qatar's conflict mediation facilitation between the United States and the Taliban revived this element of subtle power to a point whereby following the ignominious American withdrawal from Kabul, Doha almost immediately became the sole interlocutor for Western nations and the Taliban, from humanitarian aid, repatriation of nationals, and providing consular services for Americans in Kabul.⁸⁷⁰ Where conflict mediation in a subtle power era negotiated a resolution between two parties in a civil war in an Arab state for branding and soft power purposes, in a late subtle power era this is not possible due to

⁸⁶⁸ Mirdef Al Qahsouti (Qatari PhD Candidate specialising in Iran-GCC Relations), email exchange with author, March 2023.

⁸⁶⁹ Leonardo Mazzucco and Kristian Alexander, "Saudi Arabia and Qatar are Cooperating with the Taliban. But their Approaches to Afghanistan are Different," *Atlantic Council*, January 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/saudi-arabia-and-qatar-are-cooperating-with-the-taliban-but-their-approaches-to-afghanistan-are-different/>

⁸⁷⁰ "Qatar Agrees to Represent the US in Afghanistan Following the US Embassy Closure," CNBC Online, accessed November 2021, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/11/12/qatar-agrees-to-represent-the-us-in-afghanistan-following-the-us-embassy-closure.html>

Qatar's loss of its perceived impartiality. The revival of the element of diplomacy and conflict mediation is a foreign policy strategy which has proven to serve Qatar well once again, and in the case of the US negotiations with the Taliban, strategically aided Tamim in strengthening his relationship with the officials in the United States which in turn conferred Qatar with the status of major non-NATO ally.

National Branding

On 13 July 1870, a cleverly edited dispatch from Prussian chancellor Otto von Bismarck elicited indignation within Europe and the mobilisation of French and Prussian public opinion - following its release, France declared war of Prussia. Neither emperor wanted confrontation, but Bismarck's manipulation of information on the one hand, and popular pressure on the other, led unavoidably to conflict. The information attack suffered by Qatar on 23 May 2017, shares much in common with this historic example, excepting the armed conflict.⁸⁷¹ On this date, the Qatar News Agency (QNA) was hacked and an alleged speech made by Tamim was released which purported to have extolled Shia Iran's power, criticised the American administration at length, and presented Hamas as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.⁸⁷² This is but one example of many of the realities faced by Qatar and its national branding strategies in a post-Arab Spring geopolitical environment. To counter such attacks on its image such as the one on the QNA which preceded the blockade, in an era of late subtle power, Qatar has had to not so much promote its brand, but *protect* it from attacks on multiple and simultaneous fronts. It is this such reality which distinguishes the element of national branding in a late subtle power era from its predecessor, and the rapid weaponisation of the digital world is an important case in point.

Where social media had once aided the messaging of Arab Spring revolutionaries, a distinguishing feature of a late subtle power era has been the widespread use of this medium as a foreign policy tool of attack. Authoritarian regimes such as Saudi Arabia have increasingly

⁸⁷¹ Francois Chauvancy, "*The Qatar Blockade: The Failed Offensive. Information Warfare, Game of Influence, Economic Standoff*," (Paris: Hermann Editeurs, 2018) 151.

⁸⁷² Chauvancy, "*The Qatar Blockade: The Failed Offensive. Information Warfare, Game of Influence, Economic Standoff*," 11.

used social media to clamp down on dissent, or to disseminate messaging either in support of their own regimes or to smear the image of adversaries. According to a subject matter expert:

The world of digital authoritarianism is where digital harassment, surveillance, and disinformation are used in an attempt to control human behaviour. Digital authoritarianism is the ‘use of digital information technology by authoritarian regimes to surveil, repress, and manipulate domestic and foreign populations’. It includes a wide gamut of repressive techniques, including ‘surveillance, censorship, social manipulation and harassment, cyber-attacks, internet shutdowns, and targeted persecution against online users’. An increasingly worrying component of social media manipulation is disinformation and misinformation; terms often used interchangeably to describe attempts to manipulate public opinion or give the illusion of public support for specific issues.⁸⁷³

As revealed in Chapter Four, Qatar was the victim of negative media attention and soft power - soft disempowerment⁸⁷⁴ well before the blockade on several fronts, largely by the targeting of the centrepiece of Qatar’s national branding portfolio - the World Cup. Initially this was the work of Yousef Al Otaiba, the UAE Ambassador to the US, who dedicated significant financial means to this end,⁸⁷⁵ and by 2014, many countries were leading an intense lobbying campaign against Qatar. The UAE had hired a public relations firm The Camstoll Group, founded by a former US Treasury Department official responsible for Middle Eastern relations, to raise awareness of Qatar’s financing of terrorist groups,⁸⁷⁶ and by 2017, the notion of Qatar conjured up an image of a two-faced ally.⁸⁷⁷ As such, no longer could Qatar market itself positively to a Western audience *per se*. Qatar’s hard earned image of a rapidly developing nation state had to be protected from attack, which is at the core of the readaptation of its national branding strategies in a late subtle power era.

⁸⁷³ Marc Owen Jones, “How Digital Authoritarianism has Permeated the Middle East,” *Middle East Eye*, August 2022, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/middle-east-digital-authoritarianism-permeated-how>

⁸⁷⁴ Soft power – soft disempowerment can be described as “actions, inactions and/or policies of a state that ultimately upsets, offends or alienates others, leading to a loss of credibility and attractiveness, and brings so much attention to the country whereby its vulnerabilities are closely monitored by international actors.” See: Brannagan and Giulianotti, “The Soft Power – Soft Disempowerment Nexus: The Case of Qatar,” 1139-1157.

⁸⁷⁵ Chauvancy, “*The Qatar Blockade: The Failed Offensive. Information Warfare, Game of Influence, Economic Standoff*,” 161.

⁸⁷⁶ David Kirkpatrick, “Qatar’s Support of Islamists Alienates Allies Near and Far” *New York Times*, accessed September 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/08/world/middleeast/qatars-support-of-extremists-alienates-allies-near-and-far.html>

⁸⁷⁷ Chauvancy, “*The Qatar Blockade: The Failed Offensive. Information Warfare, Game of Influence, Economic Standoff*,” 163.

The attacks on Qatar's brand were brought about by the realisation in the Gulf of the power, reach, and instantaneous impact of social media following the Arab Spring. According to a cyber weaponisation expert:

After the Arab Spring you have a recognition of what they (some nation states) see as the threats of social media, and then in addition you begin to see the turn towards cyber operations as influencing other states, by exposing them or shaping them in lots of different ways. We know that leaks through the Chelsea Manning Wikileaks dump, then Edward Snowden in 2013 clearly had a big impact on US diplomacy in the Gulf states. Then the Saudi cables were a massive one as well, and that was due to 'hack-and-leak' operations. I believe through being at the target end of these leak operations that these states realised that they could be used offensively. They could be used to help achieve foreign policy goals. And I think you do really see that come to the fore in the 2017 crisis with the hacking operation attributed to the UAE just before the blockade. That's why I think the realisation that these tools could be used in that way probably occurred in the couple of years beforehand.⁸⁷⁸

It was the election of Trump which heralded a watershed moment for Qatar in terms of its brand protection necessities, albeit a moment unrealised until the blockade itself. The close ties between Kushner and Al Otaiba (following Trump's unexpected win) further allowed the UAE to influence Washington's strategy in the Middle East. It is difficult to ignore the influence of Trump's perception of Qatar and the blockade, and that of his son-in-law and Middle East advisor.⁸⁷⁹ With years of experience, the UAE had developed a sophisticated strategy of influence that aimed to alter American political decision makers' perceptions of Middle Eastern matters.⁸⁸⁰ This by extension, dawned a late subtle power reality for Qatar's national branding strategies, whereby control, access, and the dissemination of information were increasingly used to influence narratives and project power. According to the cyber weaponisation expert:

You do see two tracks here really. You see the Gulf states trying to source capabilities from the large defence companies with which they have a strong relationship, like Booz Allen Hamilton, Raytheon, BAE Systems, but also going to smaller niche companies who only do this digital surveillance or hacking technologies. Smaller upstart companies were trying to compete against these big defence companies in selling these hacking technologies. The Gulf states, including

⁸⁷⁸ James Shires, (Cyber Weaponisation Expert and Associate Fellow, The Hague Program for Cyber Norms and a Fellow with the Cyber Statecraft Initiative at the Atlantic Council), in discussion with author, December 2020.

⁸⁷⁹ Chauvancy, "*The Qatar Blockade: The Failed Offensive. Information Warfare, Game of Influence, Economic Standoff*," 162.

⁸⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 163.

Qatar, were looking to get access to these capabilities and to buy them from US defence companies. It's really useful for the defence companies themselves because they can add it on to existing arms sales.⁸⁸¹

As noted above, public relations companies and lobbyists had laid the groundwork for the negative attacks on Qatar, but Twitter, where Saudi Arabia has the highest penetration of any country in the world,⁸⁸² was also used and exploited against Qatar. Millions of fake Arabic-language accounts were created prior to Trump's May 2017 visit to Riyadh and began posting anti-Iranian rhetoric whilst praising Trump, as the framework for accusing Qatar (and for the blockade) was laid. Qatar was labelled a vassal of Iran, and criticised for its ties with the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas. Four days before the cyber-attack on the QNA, the hashtag 'Qatar is a bankroller of terror' trended on Twitter to back this campaign with information (or disinformation).⁸⁸³ Even more recently, and in the face of the global COVID-19 crisis, and nearing the third anniversary of the blockade, fake news about a coup in Qatar made the rounds on Twitter, promoted by Saudi-linked bots and trolls, despite calls for a collective response to the pandemic in the Gulf. No longer could Qatar simply 'out brand' the attacks. A late subtle power response was critical to win the information war, a response which would draw on familiar, yet revitalised, elements of subtle power in pursuit of a successful outcome.

Qatar's response strategy would draw on diplomacy, economics, and influence. Prior to mid-2017, Qatar had already spent \$1.5 billion on this strategy of influence. Lobbyists were recruited to seduce Trump, whilst countering the long running Saudi-UAE campaign in the United States. In 2018, Qatar engaged the services of Brian Ballard, a major lobbyist in Washington who had played a significant role for Trump's electoral campaign. This lobbying naturally went hand-in-hand with economic investments in the United States. Qatar also recruited 21 other lobbyists including Nicolas Muzin, former advisor to Ted Cruz, who successfully organised visits for representatives of Jewish-American and conservative organisations to Qatar for discussions about the reality of Hamas' financing by Qatar.⁸⁸⁴

⁸⁸¹ James Shires, (Cyber Weaponisation Expert and Associate Fellow, The Hague Program for Cyber Norms and a Fellow with the Cyber Statecraft Initiative at the Atlantic Council), in discussion with author, December 2020.

⁸⁸² Andreas Krieg, "Amid Coronavirus Crisis, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi are Pushing Fake News," *Middle East Eye*, accessed May 2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/coronavirus-crisis-when-gulf-unity-needed-riyadh-and-abu-dhabi-are-pushing-fake-news>

⁸⁸³ Chauvancy, "*The Qatar Blockade: The Failed Offensive. Information Warfare, Game of Influence, Economic Standoff*;" 156.

⁸⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 208.

Separately, and several years in the making, Qatar concluded an agreement with the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in November 2017 in order to put to rest the United Nations' complaints about its infringements on migrant workers' rights, most of whom were employed in the construction of infrastructure for the World Cup.⁸⁸⁵ Qatar was no doubt on the defensive, and the best form of counterattack was an offensive strategy of brand protection to dispel the negative media and fearmongering, and dissuade adversaries from attempting to inflict further soft power - soft disempowerment on Qatar. The days of unabashed national branding initiatives were over as Qatar's national branding strategy morphed into a defensive brand protection strategy.

In countering the attacks on its brand, Qatar's response to the scrutiny it has received regarding the treatment of migrant labour is a case in point. Next to the Olympics, the FIFA World Cup brings unrivalled and often unwanted scrutiny of host nations that can either carry on as normal - hoping when the show gets underway the focus will turn to the sport - or respond. On several fronts, Qatar has done the latter. The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) points to the significant changes made to Qatar's labour laws. According to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and a media release from the ITUC, its General Secretary Sharan Burrow said:

Ten years ago we were absolutely in opposition to this country's lack of labour laws, so we campaigned for five years to say to the government you must change your laws.⁸⁸⁶ In Qatar, progress is being made – from the transparency of data that identifies risks for workers and practical recommendations from training of workers on risks, to enforcement of penalties for non-compliance by employers. The culture being established in Qatar to openly report accidents underpins strong safety measures in the workplace.⁸⁸⁷ Qatar responded in kind and is now the only Gulf nation to have scrapped the widely used Kafala system under which migrant workers are sponsored by employers who provide travel, accommodation, and low wages.⁸⁸⁸

⁸⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 210.

⁸⁸⁶ Tracey Holmes, "Can Qatar Reshape Its Image on the Back of the 2022 FIFA World Cup," *ABC News Online*, accessed November 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-11-21/can-qatar-reshape-image-on-the-back-of-world-cup/100636396>

⁸⁸⁷ "New Era of Transparency for the ILO and Qatar in Support of Workers' Rights", *International Trade Union Confederation*, accessed February 2023, <https://www.ituc-csi.org/new-era-of-transparency-for-the>

⁸⁸⁸ Tracey Holmes, "Can Qatar Reshape Its Image on the Back of the 2022 FIFA World Cup," *ABC News Online*, accessed November 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-11-21/can-qatar-reshape-image-on-the-back-of-world-cup/100636396>

Further evidence supports this as when an official from the European Parliament's intergroup on sports praised Qatar's 'positive reform' following a visit to the Gulf state, as an independent report that surveyed migrant workers in Qatar noted major improvements to address concerns. When asked if the World Cup is "helping to improve human rights and labour conditions in Qatar," 95% of migrants responded with "yes" and 5% said "no".⁸⁸⁹ As reported by Al Jazeera, according to a statement released by Qatar's Ministry of Labour, and in citing an ILO report as substantiating evidence:

No other country has come so far on labour reform in such a short amount of time, but we acknowledge that there is more work to be done. As Qatar has continuously stated and as the ILO report confirms, figures reported in media on migrant worker fatalities have been wildly misleading. The government has been transparent about the health of our foreign population, and in reality, levels of mortality in Qatar are on par with wider demographics globally. Still, improving the health and well-being of foreign workers remains a top priority. The ILO report points to a 'significant decline' in the rate of occupational injuries over time, demonstrating our strong labour reform legislation and the success of our implementation mechanisms. Qatar is also proud to note that there has been a 'drastic decline' in heat-stress related disorders, thanks in large part to heat stress legislation adopted in May 2021.⁸⁹⁰

A further aspect to the element of national branding in a late subtle power era is the development of Qatar itself becoming the source of branding. Over the years since being awarded the hosting rights to the World Cup, Qatar's national branding branched out to what can be termed as 'expertise power' - that is, 'the symbolic power and real influence that comes with being an expert state in a highly sought after area.'⁸⁹¹ In a late subtle power era, the audience for the branding looks towards Qatar, opposed to in the past whereby Qatar would seek an audience externally. Like Cuba in the field of medicine, or Finland in the industry of telecommunications, for Qatar, athlete development, rehabilitation, and sports security, as well as the effective staging of sporting events, act as vehicles through which the state seeks to become the go-to destination for expertise, best-practice advice, and progression (something

⁸⁸⁹ Asmahan Qarjouli, "Qatar is Listening: EU Officials Praise Positive Migrant Worker Reforms," *Doha News*, accessed September 2021, <https://www.dohanews.co/qatar-is-listening-eu-officials-praise-positive-migrant-worker-rights-reforms/>

⁸⁹⁰ "Qatar Welcomes ILO Report Despite Admitted Data Gaps," *Al Jazeera Online*, accessed November 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/20/ilo-says-50-workers-died-in-qatar-in-2020-finds-data-gaps>

⁸⁹¹ Brannagan and Reiche, *Qatar and the 2022 FIFA World Cup*, 72.

the Saudis simply do not have).⁸⁹² As per the views of Brannagan and Reiche, the former being one of the two theorists behind the concept of soft power – soft disempowerment:

The overall outcome of these (national branding) investments was linked to Qatar's desire to raise awareness of its existence and nowadays, and more importantly following the blockade, symbolically cement its right to sovereign independence. For Qatar, so too was the need to emerge from the political and cultural shadow of Saudi Arabia, and to educate the global audience on who and where Qatar is and, in doing so, showcase that the state is an independent actor in its own right. Through this Qatar joined others such as Singapore and Hong Kong which has shown a great deal of 'creative agency' and innovation by consciously being proactive in taking advantage of what the global information society has to offer, and in doing so, actively come to challenge the realist construction of what 'small' states are able to achieve in and amongst the international system.⁸⁹³

Over time, this has translated into a *capacity of power* for Qatar, and this was disseminated through its rapidly expanding global sports media network called beIN (formally Al Jazeera Sport). This information medium provided Qatar with a compelling platform through which to subtly disseminate its soft power message *en masse*, and within the highly networked world of today, control over the distribution of information had become a form of power in itself.⁸⁹⁴ For example, Qatar's controlling position in this regard was demonstrated in 2020, when the Saudi attempt to purchase English football team Newcastle United was blocked by the Premier League, due in part to the Saudi's domestic ban on beIN - one of the Premier League's key broadcasters. It wasn't until Saudis lifted their ban on beIN broadcasts in 2021 that the Premier League finally gave the green light⁸⁹⁵ for the purchase of Newcastle United to be completed.⁸⁹⁶

Extolling the concept that the element of national branding has matured towards a late subtle power era, and Qatar is itself an endogenous source of branding was Kamrava, who is a resident of Doha himself and said:

⁸⁹² *Ibid.*

⁸⁹³ *Ibid.*, 75-76.

⁸⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁸⁹⁵ Tony Evans, "Newcastle: Saudi-backed Takeover Nears Completion After Broadcast Dispute Settled", *The Independent*, accessed February 2023, <https://www.independent.co.uk/sport/football/newcastle-takeover-saudi-arabia-broadcast-b1933612.html>

⁸⁹⁶ Brannagan and Reiche, *Qatar and the 2022 FIFA World Cup*, 69.

When somebody comes here for a one-week trip, they can't help but to be impressed, they're full of laudatory praises for the place. I speak from experience in terms of people who've come here for short visits, and they've just been overwhelmed by what they see because many didn't really know what to expect. Branding is a process and it's not static. Over time, surely there are nuances to this process in terms of the points of emphasis, your target audience, what it is you want to emphasise, and the purpose of that branding. Ten years ago, hardly anyone could point to Qatar on a map. Today, things are different.⁸⁹⁷

In summary, much like conflict mediation, the national branding element of subtle power has undergone substantial change forced upon it by a competitive post-Arab Spring geopolitical environment. Qatar's brand has come under sustained attack on multiple fronts, some arguably justified in terms of the need to reform migrant labour laws, yet on many other occasions, simply an attack to smear Qatar's reputation and influence audiences such as the Trump administration, FIFA, or Western football fans themselves. In response Qatar has employed public relations firms in Europe and the United States, responded to Amnesty International and ILO reports, and sought out cyber technologies of its own in defence of its brand. None of this would have been possible without substantial financial resources at its disposal, and this is where the subtle power element of the strategic use of the QIA too has had to readapt to meet the challenges of a late subtle power era - a more competitive era whereby all the of the GCC SWFs are increasingly diversifying their investment portfolios, especially into Chinese and East Asian markets.

Strategic use of the QIA

Unsurprisingly, the strategic use of the QIA continues to be a critical component of Qatar's foreign policy strategies. This element of late subtle power produces economic hard power, which in turn results in either a hard, soft, or smart power outcome, all whilst underwriting the utility of the other three elements. In simpler terms, without the ballooning natural gas rents Qatar has earned particularly since the turn of the millennium, subtle power may not have existed. As discussed in Chapter Three, since its inception in 2005, the QIA been used by the Qatari state to strategically curry the favour of Western governments seeking an injection of foreign capital, or used to procure high profile purchases to market Qatar to Western audiences.

⁸⁹⁷ Mehran Kamrava, (Director of the Centre for International and Regional Studies, Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service in Qatar), in discussion with author, December 2021.

This however has gradually changed. QIA investment strategies have had to mature, as some purchases brought negative attention to Qatar. Furthermore, in a post-Arab Spring geopolitical environment competition in the Gulf has increased pitting the QIA against other wealthy states' SWFs in a dollar-for-dollar spending competition for partners and regional influence. This is also the view of a political economist who specialises on the study of SWFs who said:

More recently, Qatar has used its purse power to seal political alliances, from Turkey to Russia and has made investment commitments that are clearly for political motivations. Since June 2017 with the embargo of Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt, the rising tide of patriotism and nationalism has inoculated Doha against any public resentment for bad investment decisions made in the name of political solidarity.⁸⁹⁸

These are the conditions which distinguish this third element of late subtle power from its predecessor. There now exists an aspect of competitiveness in the investment targets of the SWFs beyond the more symmetric politics of investment prior to the Arab Spring. This thesis does not suggest that SWFs are not focused on a commercial return, only that in a late subtle power era, geopolitics is now an important consideration as the prevailing mantra of intra-GCC economic integration has now been left in abeyance.

In discussing this situation Kamrava was asked: "How has Qatar's use of the QIA and its investment strategies differed since the Arab Spring, 2014, and the blockade? How has this element changed from when subtle power was first conceived? What's new about the way Qatar invests?" Kamrava responded providing a nuanced analysis, yet acknowledged the political and competitive considerations:

Nowadays, my sense is that whatever change there might be now, is purely out of commercial considerations and reasons of competition, rather than mostly (internal and branding) political considerations. From what I understand, the QIA is much more interested in investments that have a more robust return, rather than investments that are in showcase projects such as iconic buildings or iconic real estate for example. I think now, my understanding is investment is more to sustain rentierism rather than as a tool of branding. I think Qatar had some learning on the job to do, because they were quite brash in their investments, and they got so

⁸⁹⁸ Young, "What's Yours is Mine: Gulf SWFs as a Barometer of State-Society Relations," 49.

excited at buying these showcase trophies. It's like someone who engages in ostentatious consumption and the neighbours don't like it".⁸⁹⁹

When asked: "Is this in competition with the Emiratis and the Saudis, that being that they all want to have a little piece of Knightsbridge in London?" Kamrava responded by highlighting the shift away from the QIAs previously brash and conspicuous branding purchases by saying:

I'm not sure to what extent that was competition, or just excitement of showing off what you have. I'll never forget, last time I was in Paris, I took the metro and got out at the Arc de Triomphe. I came out and the first thing I see is this sculpture painted in the Qatari flag right there in Champ-Elysees, and there is this big, beautiful, historic building with the big Qatari flag, not even their embassy, just some property they own. I think they have done some learning since then and they were taken aback. They realised that this was poor public relations and they have become more professional investment bankers.⁹⁰⁰

Reaffirming the maturity of the QIA was a Qatari national and Qatar University lecturer who was asked: "Do you believe the QIA invests differently now when compared to ten years ago? Are investments targeting new international partners or targeting different sectors?" He responded and said:

Of course. Things are different now. You currently see the US looking at the East (i.e. Asia). So Qatar tries to have better relations with new partners, especially during the Gulf crisis. Qatar invests hugely in Russia now, which was not the case few years ago. I think there are pillars for Qatar's investment like the US, France, Germany, and Turkey. No matter what happens in Turkey they spend more. This has to do with UAE and Qatar competition.⁹⁰¹

There are multiple examples to evidence the new geopolitical environment in which the QIA operates, and that this third element of subtle power has matured, or changed tack, to respond to a late subtle power era. One such example of interest is Qatar's investment in east coast ports

⁸⁹⁹ Mehran Kamrava, (Director of the Centre for International and Regional Studies, Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service in Qatar), in discussion with author, December 2021.

⁹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰¹ Author email exchange with Mr Abdulla Al Etaibi, Qatari national and academic (December 2021)

in the United States. Not just because this is a targeted investment in infrastructure which complements the Biden administration's \$1.2 trillion infrastructure plan,⁹⁰² but also because this investment has succeeded where Dubai Ports World's proposed investment in US ports in 2006 failed, and inflicted negative media attention on the Emiratis.⁹⁰³ As reported by Reuters:

Qatar plans to invest at least \$10 billion in US ports and has approached international banks for financing help, in an infrastructure spending spree that reflects the Gulf country's deepening ties with Washington. Until this investment Qatar currently had minimal holdings in overseas ports until 2020, when the state's commercial ports operator, QTerminals, purchased the Turkish port of Akdeniz, and entered into an agreement to develop the Black Sea port of Olvia in Ukraine.⁹⁰⁴

Notably, the Reuters report cites political relations between the United States and the change of administration from Trump to Biden as part of the investments' success. Reuters notes that:

Relations between the United States and Qatar have deepened after the small, wealthy Gulf monarchy forged close ties with the Taliban, playing a key role in the talks that led to the 2020 deal for the US troop pull-out from Afghanistan this year. Washington and Doha also signed an accord in November for Qatar to represent US diplomatic interests in Afghanistan.⁹⁰⁵

In the same report, Reuters quotes Michael Frodl, a US-based adviser on projects including maritime security, commerce, and infrastructure, who is familiar with Qatar's strategy, and said: "Things would have been more advanced if it was not for the previous Trump administration, which was closely aligned with the Saudis".⁹⁰⁶ As such, it can be argued that the reinvigoration of the element of conflict mediation in a late subtle power era has facilitated,

⁹⁰² Katie Lobosco and Tami Luhby, "Here's What's in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Package," *CNN Online*, accessed November 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/07/28/politics/infrastructure-bill-explained/index.html>

⁹⁰³ Farouk El-Kharouf, Sulayman Al Qudsi and Shifa Obeid, "The Gulf Corporation Council Sovereign Wealth Funds: Are They Instruments for Economic Diversification or Political Tools," *Asian Economic Papers* 9, no. 1 (2010): 137-138.

⁹⁰⁴ Jonathan Saul, Marwa Rashad and Davide Barbuscia, "Qatar Targets \$10 Billion of Investments in US Ports," *Reuters*, accessed December 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/europe/exclusive-qatar-targets-10-billion-investments-us-ports-sources-2021-12-21/>

⁹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

or perhaps rewarded, the QIA with the opportunity to invest in critical US infrastructure, no doubt much to the chagrin of the Emiratis who failed a decade or so earlier.

A second example of the readaptation of the strategic use of the QIA in a post-Arab Spring geopolitical environment was Qatar's burgeoning investment portfolio in Turkey, a nation state led by a government of increasingly political Islamist leanings. As discussed previously, Turkey was one of the first countries to come to the political and military aid of Qatar within the first few hours of the blockade, and arguably Qatar's most vocal political lifeline.⁹⁰⁷ It was Ankara's strident support in lockstep with Doha that solidified Turkey's support of Qatar, and this in turn directed the QIA towards greater ties with its ardent ally. As reported by Al Jazeera:

Qatar was already the second-largest foreign investor in Turkey, with major stakes in banking, shipping, retail, and the financial sector. Turkish traders say it dramatically went up when Qatar endured a three-and-a-half-year blockade. While Turkey and Qatar have had significant bilateral trade for years, the volume of that exchange dramatically picked up as a result of the blockade. In 2013 bilateral trade was valued at just \$643 million, but by 2018 had gone up to \$1.63 billion. With some \$33.2 billion in foreign direct investments in Turkey, Qatar became the second-largest single investor in the country.⁹⁰⁸

The Al Jazeera reporter continues by noting:

Qatar's investments are now spread over diverse sectors in Turkey. Qatar Holdings has a 42 percent stake, worth nearly \$1 billion, in Istinye Park, one of Istanbul's largest shopping malls. The QIA has a 10 percent stake in Borsa Istanbul, Turkey's largest stock exchange. The Doha-based beIN Media Group owns Digiturk, one of Turkey's largest sports and entertainment broadcasters. The Qatar National Bank owns Turkey's Finansbank, and other Qatari firms have major stakes in some of Turkey's largest banks as well. Importantly, since 2020, Qatar has also been providing \$15 billion in currency swaps for Turkey, a crucial lifeline given the volatility of the Turkish lira, which crashed in November and has lost roughly 45 percent of its value that year.⁹⁰⁹

⁹⁰⁷ Interestingly in 1893 the Ottomans imposed a sea and land blockade of their own on the Al Thani to punish Jassim bin Mohammad for failing to meet with the Ottoman *vali* (delegate). See: Zahlan, *The Creation of Qatar*, 53.

⁹⁰⁸ Umar Farooq, "Turkish Firms Eye Boon in Deepening Bilateral Ties with Qatar," *Al Jazeera Online*, accessed December 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/10/hlturkish-firms-eye-boon-in-deepening-bilaterAl-ties-with-qatar>

⁹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

Undoubtedly, the value of the Turkish alliance to the Qataris was poignantly evident in the immediate aftermath of the blockade, and in reward, this has been reflected by Doha's strategic use of the QIA (amongst other financial vehicles and investment platforms), and the role it played in investing in Turkey and propping up its ailing currency. This example supports evidence that Qatar, through its strategic use of the QIA, in an economically competitive late subtle power era, seeks to secure partners to align with its own bloc which is times at odds with the Saudis.

This was reaffirmed by a former Qatari diplomat who notes the importance of Qatar's burgeoning alliance with Turkey following the blockade, by reflecting on the geopolitical environment in which the alliance continues to strengthen. The thoughts and views of the diplomat offered in late-2020 provide additional supporting evidence to explain that the QIA operates in a competitive late subtle power environment. Expressing an emboldened temperament the former diplomat said:

Our relationship with Turkey is a very strategic relationship. It's military, it's economic, infrastructure, media, education - it's a very high-level strategic relationship. When we establish a strategic relationship with countries, we don't think about what Saudis or UAE think of this. The main question is 'what is the benefit in this relationship'. If we are confident that this relationship will benefit both countries - we will just pursue. This is part of our sovereignty, so whether Saudis or UAE like it or dislike it, this is irrelevant. This is not something that we ask ourselves about whether somebody will like or not. The main question is why we do this! What is the benefit? For the military part, we have a military agreement with the US, with the UK, with France, and with Turkey and maybe in the future with somebody else. If we think it's good for Qatar, we do it based on our calculations, and we have the sovereignty to do this.⁹¹⁰

Noteworthy was the confidence with which the former diplomat spoke exemplifying not just the growing sense of nationalism of the Qataris, but also the sense that Qatar has been strengthened by withstanding the Saudi led blockade.

There exists further evidence, particularly since the blockade, that the strategic use of the QIA operates in a late subtle power era, an era whereby a diversification of international partners

⁹¹⁰ Abdul Aziz Al Horr, (former Qatari Diplomat and Director at Al Jazeera, Qatar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Al Jazeera), in discussion with author, November 2020.

and a sense of greater political and economic resilience are highly sought after. In response to the blockade, Qatar focused on making itself a more attractive partner for Western and Asian countries, including liberalising its economy⁹¹¹ and making new international investments to shore up existing alliances and nurturing new ones. Over the subsequent months following the blockade, Qatar concluded agreements with shipping lines from key Asian markets, including China, India, and South Korea to establish new routes between Doha and their major ports. Qatar Airways has also managed to establish new routes, and in March 2019 it acquired a 25 percent stake in Moscow's Vnukovo International Airport, Russia's third largest airport, having bought a similar stake in St. Petersburg airport in 2016.⁹¹² The Qatari leadership also responded to the attempt to isolate it by forging a slew of new longer-term natural gas agreements with partners worldwide, including China, Japan, and Britain, to demonstrate that Qatar remained open for business.⁹¹³

An additional aspect distinguishing this third element from its predecessor, similar to the element of national branding, is that the Qatar state itself has become a destination for foreign investment. This shift in the element of the strategic use of the QIA can be best exemplified by the focus on sports investment after Qatar won the hosting rights to the World Cup. In the past, Qatar invested in overseas property developments to attract attention – i.e. investments heading outwards. Since the World Cup, in a late subtle power era, a greater flow of inwards investments has commenced, and this fed into its staging of the World Cup in a number of ways. Much like Qatar's 'expertise power' in sports rehabilitation *et al* noted in the previous section, Qatar's acquisition of sporting properties, and sponsorship of high profile teams and events have all acted as additional assets in its drive to globally raise awareness of its existence, and complement the World Cup by acting as constant signals of Qatar's foreign policy independence.⁹¹⁴ As a result, by actively pursuing new international markets, Qatar has gained a soft power windfall by enticing the economies of other countries.⁹¹⁵ For example, UK and German companies have fallen over themselves in their pursuit of winning World Cup related infrastructure projects,⁹¹⁶ and in 2013 soon-to-be British Prime Minister Boris Johnson

⁹¹¹ Jane Kinninmont, "The Gulf Divided: The Impact of the Qatar Crisis," Middle East and North Africa Programme, *Chatham House*, accessed May 2019: 24, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2019/05/gulf-divided-impact-qatar-crisis>

⁹¹² *Ibid.*

⁹¹³ Kristian Ulrichsen, "Why is Qatar leaving OPEC," *New York Times*, accessed December 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/10/opinion/qatar-leaving-opec-saudi-arabia-blockade-failure.html>

⁹¹⁴ Brannagan and Reiche, *Qatar and the 2022 FIFA World Cup*, 67.

⁹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 67-68.

foreshadowed his intentions in his 800-word hagiography on Qatar titled: ‘We Can’t Afford to Ignore Our Dynamic Friends in the East’:

This is a society in the throes of an astonishing and dynamic modernisation over the past ten years. The opportunities for Britain are enormous. The Qataris are wearing M&S underwear beneath their kanduras. They are eating in Gordon Ramsay’s restaurants. They are driving Land Rovers and phoning with Vodafone – and last year the UK exported goods worth a record £1.3 billion to Qatar alone; not bad for a place with only 1.8 million people.⁹¹⁷ It was a joy to hear the natives speak spontaneously of their affection for Britain. I lost count of the number of times I was told: ‘London is my second home’. It is an extraordinary fact that it is now the Commonwealth countries, so long neglected by the UK, that are turning into the powerhouses of the future. We have more friends than we sometimes imagine.⁹¹⁸

In summary, there is a fine line in recognising the nuances between the original and more contemporaneous element of the strategic use of the QIA that exists in a late subtle power era. The first of the two distinguishing factors is that the QIA has matured in its investment strategies, focusing less on showcase properties for the benefit of branding Qatar, to a strategy geared towards commercially sound and politically motivated investments. As noted by Kamrava above: “Some of (its past) investments have resulted in poor public relations, and Qatar has had some learning to do to refine its strategy. QIA investments should now be viewed, through a prism of commercial considerations and reasons of competition”.⁹¹⁹ A second and important distinguishing factor is the geopolitics of the region. Qatar has deliberately sought to diversify its portfolio of international partnerships in the sectors of energy, finance, aviation, and shipping. It has also sought to strengthen or expand existing partnerships to ensure a greater resilience, as was the case with the investments in US infrastructure and the propping up of the Turkish lira. These investments and change in strategic tack pale in comparison however to the lengths and breadths the Qataris went to

⁹¹⁷ The author notes that Boris Johnson did not recognise the population of Qatar, nor the number of actual Qatari nationals.

⁹¹⁸ Boris Johnson, “We Can’t Afford to Ignore Our Dynamic Friends in the East”, *Boris-Johnson.com*, accessed February 2023, <https://www.boris-johnson.com/2013/04/21/we-cant-afford-to-ignore-our-dynamic-friends-in-the-east/>

⁹¹⁹ Mehran Kamrava, (Director of the Centre for International and Regional Studies, Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service in Qatar), in discussion with author, December 2021.

following the blockade in either their reaffirmation and/or strengthening of military alliances and partnerships with Western powers to shore up the element of physical protection.

Physical Protection

When considering the concept of the element of physical security in a late subtle power era, one thing remains the same for Qatar regardless of the degree of their political autonomy, that being that “for all small states, but particularly those in the Persian Gulf, they feel a dependence on an outside security provider, an outside guarantor”.⁹²⁰ This was the case in 1916 when Abdullah signed a protection treaty with the British, 1968 when all nine littoral emirates pleaded with the British to stay, and has remained the case ever since. Since the inception of Al Udeid in the early 2000s, the physical security provided by the United States has been the backbone of Qatar’s external security apparatus and has provided it a degree of diplomatic and security cover, initially liberalising Hamad in his foreign policy pursuits, right through to the blockade era (barring an erroneous Trump tweet or two).

Yet, as discussed in Chapter Four, the reliability of the United States has continued to be called into question, even under the Biden administration, as a renowned Qatar expert noted almost a year after the blockade ended:

Perceptions matter whether or not they’re rooted in a cold, cold reality. And the perception is very clear that the US is not as committed to the Gulf as it used to be in the views of many people in decision-making authority in the region. From the Saudi point of view, they now see Obama, Trump, and Biden – three successive presidents – taking decisions that signify to some extent an abandonment.⁹²¹

Despite the more recent wariness of US reliability amongst the Gulf monarchs, the relationship between Doha and Washington under both the presidencies of Bush and Obama developed largely along a teleological path. It was a relationship that continuously served both countries well. This mutual understanding however, as evidenced by Qatar’s blockade policies, underwent a redressing due to an easily seduced President Trump, an inexperienced White

⁹²⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹²¹ Kristian Ulrichsen, “US Pulls Missile Defences in Saudi Arabia Amid Yemen Attacks,” *Al Jazeera Online*, accessed September 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/11/us-pulls-missile-defences-in-saudi-arabia-amid-yemen-attacks>

House administration, and Trump's capricious messaging and dismissive regard for existing alliances. It was ostensibly the Trump presidency and the 2017 blockade which can be considered the harbinger for the shunting of this element into a late subtle power era. In discussing this change Kamrava said:

During the Trump administration, the sense was that the primary security provider was unreliable. This was also at a time when the Emiratis were launching a very aggressive campaign to get Al Udeid transferred to the UAE. They were offering all sorts of incentives and encouragement to the Americans to leave Qatar and go to the UAE, relocate to the UAE. One of the things that the Qataris did was to diversify their security providers.⁹²²

This is where late subtle power emerges as a contemporaneous explanation of the element of physical security - Qatar's physical security response to the Trump presidency and the blockade.

Needless to say, the election of Trump surprised the Arab states of the Gulf. Sufficiently distanced from the Arab Spring, Trump's pro-Saudi positioning was however reassuring to a part of the Arab world subject for centuries to competing foreign influences and reeling from internal upheavals.⁹²³ In his first overseas visit as president, Trump visited Riyadh and met with King Salman with whom he shared a common belief in transactional relationships. Their common outlook was based on the assumption that in both business and politics, money is the only cherished currency that has the potential to solve almost all problems, from terrorism to failing economies.⁹²⁴ In the early days of Trump's presidency, the Saudis were leading the charm offensive race, leaving a diplomatically idle Qatar assuming Al Udeid was enough. As recalled by Kamrava who lived in Doha at the time:

The sense of worry and fear here in Doha when Trump was in office was quite palpable. You had the American president going to the White House garden in a press conference with some European president, literally wagging his finger and saying, 'knock it off, they support terrorism, we're telling them to knock it off'. I know the wife of a minister at the time who was sitting and crying saying: 'How

⁹²² Mehran Kamrava, (Director of the Centre for International and Regional Studies, Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service in Qatar), in discussion with author, December 2021.

⁹²³ Chauvancy, "*The Qatar Blockade: The Failed Offensive. Information Warfare, Game of Influence, Economic Standoff*;" 21.

⁹²⁴ Al Rasheed, "King Salman and his Son: Winning the USA, Losing the Rest," 240.

could the Americans do this to us? How could they talk to us like this?’ That sense of abandonment was quite pervasive among Qataris, therefore they needed to bring in others that would help provide security.⁹²⁵

This is exactly what the Qataris did, but they were not alone in the Gulf in noticing Trump’s transactional *modus operandi*, nor his capricious foreign policy demeanour which seemingly required a constant nurturing, to either assure the favour of Washington, or perhaps deflect Trump’s attention to a less generous ally (NATO members a case in point).⁹²⁶ In response, and adding weight to the evidence that the subtle power element of physical security had to be reinforced in a late subtle power era, was Qatar’s near exponential growth in the procurement of military armaments and hardware from not just from the United States, but also other powerful Western suppliers.

As documented by world leading military procurement research institute, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute:

Between the periods 2009-13 and 2014-18, the volume of Qatar’s arms imports increased by 225 percent, the latter period falling into the post-Arab Spring and blockade period. The US was the largest arms supplier to Qatar in 2014-18, followed by Germany. Deliveries included nine Patriot PAC-3 air and missile defence systems from the US, 62 Leopard-2 tanks from Germany, and short-range ballistic missiles from China. In the same period, a number of contracts for even larger volumes were signed for arms from all branches of the armed forces. Among these were orders for 36 F-15QA combat aircraft from the US, 24 Typhoon combat aircraft from the UK and 36 Rafale combat aircraft from France. Once these aircraft have been delivered, by around 2025, Qatar will have 96 advanced combat aircraft, equipped with cruise missiles and other guided weapons. These will replace Qatar’s current fleet (as of 2018) of only 12 combat aircraft, an increase of eight-fold. Other major procurements include four frigates from Italy, 490 armoured vehicles from France and 641 armoured vehicles from Turkey.⁹²⁷

⁹²⁵ Mehran Kamrava, (Director of the Centre for International and Regional Studies, Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service in Qatar), in discussion with author, December 2021.

⁹²⁶ Throughout his presidency, Trump consistently lambasted NATO allies, often during a joint press conference in an attempt to humiliate them into action, insisting that they commit more funding to the alliance.

⁹²⁷ Pieter Wezeman and Alexandra Kuimova, “Military Spending and Arms Imports by Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE,” *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, accessed May 2019, <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2019/sipri-fact-sheets/military-spending-and-arms-imports-iran-saudi-arabia-qatar-and-uae>

Even if these estimates were close to the mark, given “the transparency of military spending in Qatar is almost non-existent”,⁹²⁸ it still signals a significant build-up of military equipment, all at a time when there was no hard evidence to suggest Al Udeid was going anywhere.

Multiple other examples of Qatar’s military procurements during the blockade included the 2017 multibillion-dollar deal to purchase new fighter jets from France. This purchase had obvious political and diplomatic dimensions,⁹²⁹ as it was followed up with a visit by President Macron to French soldiers at the Al Udeid airbase to sign deals worth €12 billion Euros.⁹³⁰ In Britain, Prime Minister Theresa May singled out Qatar as an important trading partner for the UK in a post-Brexit world, and signed an MoU aimed to deepen cooperation between governments and businesses ‘across a wide range of vital areas’.⁹³¹ In return, amongst other non-military promises of investment, London signed a statement of intent with Doha in late-2017 to supply 24 Typhoon jets and a package of missile and laser-guided bombs, worth a total of £6 billion pounds, and in mid-2018 a UK-Qatar Joint Typhoon Squadron was set-up making Qatar the only nation with which the UK had such an intimate military relationship outside of NATO.⁹³²

During the blockade, the extent of Qatar’s military procurements seemingly had no bounds. The mid-2018 proposed purchase of the Russian S-400 missile battery system is a salient example of the hyperactivity of Qatar’s military procurement in a late subtle power era, a proposed purchase that was never actually going to happen. This purchase would not have further secured Qatar from Saudi Arabia, would have displeased the United States (to say the least given the ruckus the Turks caused with their S-400 purchase), and would not have enticed the Russians to attempt to consolidate any military presence in Qatar (the Americans wouldn’t allow it either way). Yet the seemingly peculiar example of this proposed purchase is another example of what distinguishes the existing element of physical security from its more contemporaneous revision. This was an overt and competitive overture to test the waters across the border with Riyadh. Although evidence to support this claim is anecdotal only, the proposed S-400 purchase was to demonstrate Qatar’s autonomy and self-confidence to the Saudis, much like the decision to leave OPEC was aimed at reinforcing Qatar’s autonomy from its Persian

⁹²⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹²⁹ Al Horr, Tok, and Gegoshidze, “Rethinking Soft Power in the Post-Blockade Times: The Case of Qatar,” 329-350.

⁹³⁰ Jeremias Kettner, “Making Sense of Europe’s Response to the Gulf Crisis,” in *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, ed. Andreas Krieg (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 257.

⁹³¹ *Ibid.*, 262-263.

⁹³² *Ibid.*

Gulf neighbours, exemplifying the failure of the blockade and (the attempted) return of Qatar to a Saudi-led regional fold.⁹³³

Like the other four elements of late subtle power, there exist multiple examples of supporting evidence to substantiate an explanation of a more contemporaneous version of subtle power. Qatar's role as interlocutor between the United States and the Taliban, as discussed above, served as more than a reinvigoration of its conflict mediation status, and a bridgehead to invest in US ports, but also as a reinvestment in the US alliance, which paid off handsomely. In Afghanistan, where Qatar "saved our butts" according to a former congressman and Navy SEAL officer, Doha spearheaded the evacuation of 124,000 Americans, Afghans, and other third-country nationals following the Taliban's takeover. Further solidifying Qatar's importance to the United States in a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan was the relocation of the US diplomatic presence in Kabul to Doha, which allowed the United States, according to a life member of the US Council on Foreign Relations, to conduct "over the horizon counter-terror operations and to manage one of our most daunting foreign policy challenges".⁹³⁴ The member of the US Council on Foreign Relations noted further that:

As the US looks at Middle East regional policy anew, through the more grown-up realist prism of viewing nations in a less all-or-nothing manner, it will be important to see that the US – Qatari relationship already has served the United States, and as we (the United States) seek to more adroitly defend our interests, and manage conflict in one of the world's most challenging regions, we surely will need to make use of Qatar's good offices in the future.⁹³⁵

In recognising the opportunity Qatar found itself in, that being to reinvigorate the US relationship in such a way that Washington *needed* Doha, Tamim and his foreign minister got to work with their own charm offensive of the American public. In an inaugural address to his nation's first democratically elected legislature in October 2021, only weeks after the Taliban takeover of Kabul, Tamim spoke of a "foreign policy commensurate with Qatar's size,

⁹³³ Kristian Ulrichsen, "Why is Qatar leaving OPEC," New York Times, accessed December 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/10/opinion/qatar-leaving-opec-saudi-arabia-blockade-failure.html>

⁹³⁴ John Hulsman, "The US Counts on Qatar to Look Out for its Interests in the Middle East," The Hill, accessed August 2021, <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/580387-the-us-counts-on-qatar-to-look-out-for-its-interests-in-the-middle>

⁹³⁵ *Ibid.*

geographical location and wealth” squeezed between great regional powers - Saudi Arabia and Iran. For these practical reasons, Tamim said:

We do not seek to compete with or emulate anyone, but rather to carve out our own niche through an adherence to dialogue as an alternative to wars, and the option of mediation in resolving conflicts ... this partnership, between Qatar and the United States is for us the most important strategic relationship that we have with any other country in the world.⁹³⁶

Complementing this rhetoric was the serving US Secretary of State only a month later when he announced that Qatar would be America’s “protecting power in Afghanistan”,⁹³⁷ - a full turn of events since Trump’s finger wagging in the White House garden.

As noted above, up until the Al Ula summit which brought an end to the blockade, there existed no evidence that the United States would relocate Al Udeid from Qatar, despite the best efforts of the Emiratis. Yet in a late subtle power era, merely hosting an American military base simply would not suffice going forwards, not least in the minds of the ruling elite in Doha given their experience with Trump and the blockade. This is precisely what distinguishes the element of physical security in a late subtle power era from its predecessor - a multipronged and well-rounded relationship with Washington, an exponential expansion of an indigenous military force, and a diversification of powerful allies and partners from France to Russia. All this, not in pursuit of autonomy, but to preserve it.

In Summary

Where the initial iteration of subtle power previously explained Qatar’s foreign policy strategies from the late-1990s to the Arab Spring, this thesis found that a revision of the theory was necessitated resulting from the new geopolitical environment in the sub-Persian Gulf region, generational leadership changes, the rise of nationalism, and most importantly, the blockade. Late subtle power is therefore a unique contribution to academic thought, a collation of observations and research which now best explains the power capabilities and foreign policy

⁹³⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹³⁷ Antony Blinken, “Qatar to be US Protecting Power in Afghanistan,” audio and visual, Reuters, accessed January 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/video/watch/qatar-to-be-us-protecting-power-in-afgha-idOVF3AT1S1?edition-redirect=in>

strategies of Qatar. However, time will tell if this revised theory holds, as like the original theory of subtle power, this dissertation's contemporaneous version will be subject to a region prone to geopolitical flux.

With respect to the post-blockade *status quo* and ongoing viability of late subtle power, writing for Al Jazeera on the date of the fourth anniversary of the of the start of the blockade, a Qatar expert wrote:

The way the 43-month blockade started, and the way it ended, reflect significant broader changes in the regional and international outlook since 2017. From beginning to end, the blockade of Qatar was a textbook study of a regional crisis in the age of Trump and the weakening of the rules-based international order. (Since the end of Trump), Biden and others on his team have expressed scepticism about the region, and especially the reliability of Saudi Arabia and MBS as a responsible partner. It was, therefore, hardly surprising that the transition from Trump to Biden also saw the ending of a blockade that would likely never have happened under any other president. While the precise details of the Al Ula agreement (ending the blockade) have not been disclosed, there are grounds for cautious optimism that the process of reconciliation is more durable than after the signing of the Riyadh Agreement which ended a 2014 diplomatic standoff, and which failed to prevent the subsequent rupture in 2017. However, the blockade of Qatar was the longest rift in the history of the GCC, and the damage done to the social fabric of the 'Gulf house' may take longer to repair, as memories of the bitterness and rancour on media and social media platforms could linger. For the time being and the foreseeable future, all parties to the blockade are likely to establish a *modus vivendi* at least until the regional or international context changes again.⁹³⁸

Cautious optimism at best, cynicism at worst, the outlook post-Al Ula and the efficacy of late subtle power remains at the behest of regional actors and events. Much like all theoretical explanations of Qatar's foreign policy strategies since its independence - bandwagoning, balancing, strategic hedging, and nuances of soft and hard power - late subtle power may have its detractors and revisionists. Nevertheless, in the months following Al Ula, cynicism dominated. As per the thoughts and predictions of one Qatari academic: "Now the crisis is over, but the causes are still there. So, get ready for a new crisis within five years I expect".⁹³⁹

⁹³⁸ Kristian Ulrichsen, "Analysis: Has the Gulf Reconciled After the Qatar Blockade?," Al Jazeera Online, accessed June 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2021/6/5/has-the-gulf-reconciled-after-the-end-of-the-qatar-blockade>

⁹³⁹ Author email exchange with Mr Abdulla Al Etaibi, Qatari national and academic.

Across the Gulf waters the sentiments are the same according to an Iranian academic⁹⁴⁰ who said: “The Al Ula summit will not be the end of these issues. I see many, many intra-GCC issues coming to light in the years ahead and they will be more profound”.⁹⁴¹ The voices are many including the Director of the MENA⁹⁴² Centre in Washington who wrote: “Although the siege of Doha has ended, the root causes of the four-year split remain unresolved. The relations that Qatar has fostered with Iran and Turkey are also seen as deeply problematic, while Al Jazeera’s reporting continues to upset the UAE and Bahrain”.⁹⁴³ As such, the blockade may have ended, but much like this dissertation’s revision of the theory of subtle power, the *status quo* is likely to be disrupted once again.

Therefore, much like its first iteration, late subtle power is the revision of a theory held in trust, and subject to the geopolitical events and the actors who shape them in the Arab states of the Gulf. As for the elements themselves, they have been reconfigured, or readapted, to the new security dynamics of the sub-Persian Gulf region. The element of diplomacy and conflict mediation was revived by Qatar’s facilitation of talks between the United States and the Taliban which resulted in a diplomatic boon for Doha. National branding, where previously promoting Qatar to a global audience, has readapted to also *protect* Qatar’s image as it came under sustained attack and affected by soft power – soft disempowerment. The strategic use of the QIA has matured, and now seeks both commercial *and* politically motivated investments in a more competitive and adversarial intra-GCC investment climate, and the reconfiguration of the element of physical protection has resulted in Qatar’s diversification of security partners and sources of military procurements, instead of ostensibly relying on the United States.

⁹⁴⁰ Mehran Haghiri is an Iranian national who worked with in Iran at the time of the blockade and assisted in the administrative preparations of the Iranian state to assist Qatar with provisions and logistics in response to the blockade.

⁹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴² Middle East and North Africa

⁹⁴³ Khalid Al Jaber, “The Continuation of the Division in the GCC Following the Al Ula Summit,” Gulf International Forum, accessed July 2021, <https://gulcif.org/following-the-Al-ula-summit-a-continuing-division-in-the-gcc/>

ANNEX 1.0

Subtle Power	Late Subtle Power
<p>Conflict Mediation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceived neutrality and impartiality. • Persuasive conflict resolution incentives. • Greater regional significance/impact of mediation initiatives. • More often between important Arab actors. 	<p>Conflict Mediation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undermined neutrality and impartiality. • Suspicion of Qatar’s motives. • Some mediation initiatives had little regional impact. • Between minor Arab actors or non-Arab actors.
<p>National Branding</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hyperactive promotion for recognition. • Little international criticism of Qatar. • Qatar’s brand receives little criticism. • Less competitive branding environment. 	<p>National Branding</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maturing to consider a targeted audience. • Implications of soft power – soft disempowerment. • Qatar’s need to protect its brand. • Competition for attention, especially before World Cup.
<p>Strategic Use of the QIA</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investments welcomed without political suspicions. • Less adversarial GCC environment. • GCC economic integration project remained a work in progress. 	<p>Strategic Use of the QIA</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political fears of influence of GCC investments. • Adversarial and competitive GCC environment. • GCC economic integration project stalled.
<p>Physical Protection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overwhelming reliance on United States protections. • Trust and reliability of the United States. • Smaller indigenous military force. 	<p>Physical Protection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broadening of military partners and procurements. • Concerns about Trump presidency, relationship with MBS. • Rapid expansion of Qatari military apparatus post-blockade.

CONCLUSION

So rarely has a country of so few seemed to change so quickly over such a short period of time. Qatar's rise from economically devastated backwater to the world's richest nation state per capita in a matter of decades appears unprecedented.⁹⁴⁴ At the apex of this remarkable transformation was the desire for Qatar to politically emancipate itself from its historically superior neighbour - Saudi Arabia. Qatar's pursuit of autonomy was neither rectilinear, followed a teleological path, nor in fact assured. Furthermore, although Doha had achieved outright political autonomy from Riyadh around the time of the Arab Spring, Qatar's sovereignty was feared to be at risk of being dissolved in the first 48 hours that followed the 5 June 2017 diplomatic and economic blockade. However, after the initial shock caused by the scale and severity of the blockade, Qatar quickly moved out of survival mode and succeeded in achieving its primary objective - protecting its sovereignty and retaining political and economic autonomy.⁹⁴⁵ Needless to say, Qatar *did* in fact achieve political autonomy from Saudi Arabia, and the research of this thesis has found that each of the four elements of subtle power aided this pursuit in varying degrees.

The Transferability of the Elements of Subtle Power

Albeit a theory formulated to explain the foreign policy strategies of one nation state alone, subtle power and each of its four elements have transferability when considering the autonomy of other nation states, generally small states. No single state has utilised all four of the elements in such a way that Qatar has done, yet one or more of the elements is applicable to many nation states in either their pursuit of autonomy, preservation of autonomy, or the outright physical protection of their sovereignty. Without considering the theoretical study of the *how*, *why*, and *when* each of the four elements have been applicable to all nation states, the conclusion of this thesis offers an insight into the generalisability of each of the four elements, and provides examples to explain the contribution this thesis makes to existing literature on the theoretical study of power and its relationship to a nation state's autonomy.

⁹⁴⁴ Fromherz, *Qatar: Rise to Power and Influence*, 1.

⁹⁴⁵ Rory Miller, "Qatar, the Gulf Crisis and Small State Behavior in International Affairs," 96.

Beginning with **Conflict Mediation and Diplomacy**, examples of the generalisability of a nation state achieving greater autonomy from another resulting from its conflict mediation initiatives are few, yet at the same time there are examples of a small state enhancing its status through conflict mediation - this is turn aided its soft power capacities and relevance in the international system. One example of the soft power windfall that conflict mediators have gained is that of the celebrity status of the Norwegian diplomats who facilitated the Oslo peace process.⁹⁴⁶ Other examples include New Zealand's self-proclaimed role as a South Pacific mediator following its success in the Bougainville conflict. A third is the 'behaviour' of the Swiss government which created a myth around its role in bringing together the Algerian independence movement and the French government to a peace agreement.⁹⁴⁷ Albeit examples of conflict mediation which enhanced a nation states prestige, this too was the case of Qatar's conflict mediation initiatives which raised its status as a small state that did things differently, and a small state that was (once) perceived as neutral in international relations. It is this such perceived impartiality which differentiated Qatar from Saudi Arabia, much like other small states have sought to do so from their larger neighbours, such as Singapore.

In Singapore, neutrality was pronounced as a de facto key foreign policy orientation, most notably with respect to the competitive tensions between the US and China. Due to its neutrality credentials, Singapore was able to serve as venue for talks and negotiations between the US and North Korea in 2018, as well as between China's leader Xi Jinping and Taiwan's leader Ma Ying-Jeou in 2015. In the words of Singapore's Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan in 2022, "the key to this is our neutrality ... we will not act on behalf of any other power".⁹⁴⁸ It is this neutrality that has enabled Singapore to expand its network of alliances in the world economy and to raise its weight in international affairs.⁹⁴⁹ Back in 2009 the architect of Singapore's modernisation, Lee Kuan Yew, who served as inaugural Prime Minister from 1959 to 1990 remarked:

Small countries have little power to alter the region, let alone the world. A small country must seek a maximum number of friends, while maintaining the freedom

⁹⁴⁶ Jacob Bercovitch and Gerald Schneider, "Who Mediates? The Political Economy of International Conflict Management," *Journal of Peace Research* 37, no.2 (2000): 145-165.

⁹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁹⁴⁸ Vivian Balakrishnan, "Diplomacy Begins at Home: Vivian Balakrishnan" *People's Action Party* (2019) <https://www.pap.org.sg/news/diplomacy-begins-at-home-vivian-balakrishnan/>

⁹⁴⁹ Yaroslav Lissovlik, "Small Countries as Key Agents in Peace Mediation," *Valdaiclub* (2022) <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/small-countries-as-key-agents-in-peace-mediation/>

to be itself as a sovereign and independent nation. We must make ourselves relevant so that other countries have an interest in our continued survival and prosperity as a sovereign and independent nation.⁹⁵⁰

As such, the generalisability of the element of conflict mediation and diplomacy, and the causal relationship to a small states' autonomy exists in other regions around the world, and the example of Singapore is a salient one given its position upon independence - a small state, a former British dominion, and wedged between the two larger countries⁹⁵¹ - much like Qatar's experience upon independence.

As for the second element of subtle power and the transferability of this dissertations findings on Qatar's pursuit of autonomy, the element of **National Branding** too is applicable in the generalisability of this study, and Singapore again is an analogous example. Singapore has actively sought to brand itself for a concept of autonomy, not necessarily for autonomy from a greater power, but by seeking to make itself relevant on the international stage as noted by its former prime minster mentioned above. As Tan emphasises in *Singapore: Identity, Brand, Power*:

Contemporary Singapore is simultaneously a small postcolonial multicultural nation state and a cosmopolitan global city. To manage fundamental contradictions, the state takes the lead in authoring the national narrative. This is partly an internal process of nation building, but it is also achieved through more commercially motivated and outward facing efforts at nation and city branding.⁹⁵²

Another example is Dubai. Albeit not a nation state *per se*, Dubai has branded itself as the epicentre of tourism and high finance in the Persian Gulf, and as such has differentiated itself from the UAE's centre of political power, the oil-rich emirate of Abu Dhabi. This was not for the purposes of pursuing political autonomy from Abu Dhabi, yet to promote itself as a destination for investment and tourism, and to carve out an autonomous characteristic of itself from that of its brethren neighbour. In accomplishing this, Dubai has captured a greater share

⁹⁵⁰ Yvonne Guo and Woo Jun Jie, "The Secrets to Small State Survival", *The Strait Times* (2013) <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/the-secrets-to-small-state-survival>

⁹⁵¹ Malaysia and Indonesia.

⁹⁵² Kenneth Tan, *Singapore: Identity, Brand, Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 2.

of the world's attention on the UAE, more than any of the UAE's seven emirates, thus achieving a degree of recognisable autonomy. Further to Dubai's branding successes, the UAE itself too is a branding success which has also achieved a degree of autonomy from Saudi Arabia, and as noted in the following section of this conclusion, is considered one of two nation states to be able to wield *entrepreneurial power* as noted by its theorist who remarked that:

Successful branding, especially in Dubai, has not only been a boon for traditional clusters like trade, tourism, and logistics, but has had a positive spill-over effect on other sectors.⁹⁵³ ... Indeed, Qatar and the UAE, despite being small, unlikely actors, have been able to assert their voice in a wide range of global engagements. Through a combination of diplomacy, branding, and the galvanisation of economic resources toward particular ends, Qatar and the UAE have wielded entrepreneurial power in a variety of fora. The two have accomplished this in the shadow of a much larger regional player, Saudi Arabia, and in spite of a recurrent rivalry with each other.⁹⁵⁴

In the study of the transferability of the elements of subtle power, the **Strategic use of the QIA** provides multiple examples of a nation state achieving greater autonomy in its foreign policy pursuits within the international system. Yet no more salient examples exist than within the GCC states themselves. Nation states in the Gulf region, now with vast reserves of wealth invested in their SWFs, have transformed from actors which have emerged from operating in an international system whereby their policies were largely reactions to the proclivities of the US and USSR, to one where their power is now dispersed towards other industrial states. (Given this financial clout), they can now originate international exchange both politically, economically, and militarily as major actors in the international arena.⁹⁵⁵ As a result of the enormity of the reserves these funds have amassed, the ability these countries now have to act autonomously in the international arena has been enhanced - especially for the smaller Gulf states.

Yet as per the examples in Chapter Four on soft power – soft disempowerment and Qatar and the World Cup, the international relations ramifications of some SWF investments are not

⁹⁵³ Ennis, "Reading the Entrepreneurial Power in Small Gulf States: Qatar and the UAE," 586.

⁹⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 582.

⁹⁵⁵ Kathryn Lavelle, "Sovereign Wealth Funds and Foreign Policy", in *The Oxford Handbook of Sovereign Wealth Funds*, ed. Douglas Cumming, Geoffrey Wood, Igor Filatotchev and Juliane Reinecke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 192.

exclusive to the QIA alone. For example, Singapore has received a large amount of attention in the literature regarding its two major SWFs. Much like in Qatar, the business interests of the state and the ruling family are nearly indistinguishable from each other,⁹⁵⁶ and inextricably linked to politics and foreign relations. An example of this is when Temasek, one of Singapore's two larger funds, purchased Thai telecommunications giant Shin Corporation from a Thai family which resulted in a series of diplomatic problems.⁹⁵⁷ This was considered to be one of the factors in the 2006 coup against Thai leadership, because many citizens of Thailand felt that the sale transferred a national Thai asset to foreigners.⁹⁵⁸

As such, whilst this dissertation has found that the strategic use of a SWF can aid a nation state's pursuit of autonomy, those particularly of the Gulf region can also experience a degree of soft power - soft disempowerment, or suffer a diplomatic rupture like Singapore from an investment by one of their state sponsored funds. (A second example of soft power – soft disempowerment cited in Chapter Four was the aborted attempt by Dubai Ports World to acquire ports in the United States in 2006 – a decision that was based solely on adversarial political motivations).⁹⁵⁹ Therefore, in considering the theoretical transferability of this third element of subtle power there are two original contributions of from this study to consider - one being that the use of SWFs in foreign relations can garner a greater autonomy for their host countries, the other being it can cause the negative outcome of soft power – soft disempowerment.

The final element of subtle power with a degree of generalisability for other nation states pursuing a greater autonomy, particularly small states, is **Physical Protection**. At the core of this element is not only the actual physical protection a military from a great power can provide, but the diplomatic scope a small state is conferred with given the deterrence factor the presence of the military force that a greater power provides. As noted in Chapter Three, the presence of the United States military at Al Udeid gave Qatar a greater confidence that it could act autonomously, and need not fear (as much) the repercussions of Saudi Arabia like did in the first two decades of its independence. This is similarly the case for Hong Kong following the end of WWII and the rise of the Communist Party in China. As noted by Man and Lun:

⁹⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 190.

⁹⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 191.

⁹⁵⁸ *Ibid*.

⁹⁵⁹ El-Kharouf, Al Qudsi and Obeid, "The Gulf Corporation Council Sovereign Wealth Funds: Are They Instruments for Economic Diversification or Political Tools," 137-138.

The real defence of Hong Kong was not in the strength of the garrison, but in the realisation by the Chinese that an attack (on Hong Kong) would precipitate a full-scale war.⁹⁶⁰ ... Although Chinese decision-makers never seriously contemplated taking Hong Kong by force, the colony was seen as a potential flashpoint by both blocs⁹⁶¹ of the Cold War and remained as a military base for British and American forces.⁹⁶²

Similarly this has been the case for the preservation of South Korea's autonomy, and actual existence, as the United States has long been the closest friend and ally of Korea,⁹⁶³ (and later South Korea).⁹⁶⁴ In the late-nineteenth century, Korea (under the Chosun dynasty) expected the Americans to serve as a benign protector. Surrounded by major powers - China, Japan, and Russia - and unable to ensure its own survival and independence from their imperial designs, Korea sought protection from the US.⁹⁶⁵ In 1948, two separate Korean states were created and went to war from 1950-53. South Korea was saved from the invading North Koreans with a massive military intervention from the US.⁹⁶⁶ The US later provided generous economic aid to South Korea and served as the largest market for South Korean exports, which undoubtedly contributed to its rapid economic growth in the 1960s to 1980s.⁹⁶⁷ South Korea may be one of many examples over time and around the world of the benefits of the element of physical protection, yet like Qatar and Singapore, its existence began as a small state with limited autonomy in the international system, and wedged between greater powers in its immediate region with little chance to defend itself.

The Theoretical Study of the Dynamics of Power

The generalisability (or transferability) of this dissertations contemporary revision of subtle power adds to a body of existing literature on the theoretical study of the dynamics of power

⁹⁶⁰ Kwong Chi Man and Tsoi You Lun, *Eastern Frontier: A Military History of Hong Kong, 1840-1970*, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2014), 235.

⁹⁶¹ The blocs allied to the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

⁹⁶² Man and Lun, *Eastern Frontier: A Military History of Hong Kong, 1840-1970*, 259.

⁹⁶³ The author at this point is referring to a pre-WWII era when the two Koreas were one country under Japanese rule.

⁹⁶⁴ Tae-Hwan Kwak and Seung-Ho Joo, *The United States and the Korean Peninsula in the 21st Century*, (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2006), 39.

⁹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

by 1), studying how theories of power can change, and 2), how new theories can emerge to complement the existing. This study on *how forms of power change* is a more recent study than that of the study of power itself, and traces its origins back to Nye's introduction of the theory of smart power which was a refinement of the explanation of the dual use of both hard and soft power. This earlier revision of a 'power theory' was necessitated from circumstances when neither hard nor soft power alone could explain a nation states attempts to influence another, and whereby the use of both hard and soft power were evident.

In his seminal study imploring the United States to consider the greater use of soft power in an era overly concerned with post-9/11 terrorism, Nye conceptualised the theory of smart power writing that:

Like the challenge of the Cold War, this one (the war against terrorism) cannot be met by military power alone. That is why it is so essential that Americans - and others - better understand and apply soft power ... Smart power is neither hard nor soft. It is both.⁹⁶⁸ Smart power means learning better how to combine our hard and soft power.⁹⁶⁹

Five years later Nye refined his original conceptualisation of smart power by writing:

Smart power is a term I developed in 2003 to counter the misperception that soft power alone can produce effective foreign policy. By complementing its military and economic might with greater investments in its soft power, the United States can rebuild the framework it needs to tackle tough global challenges. That would be true smart power.⁹⁷⁰

The example of smart power above is an earlier case of what would become a growing body of academic literature which was increasingly dedicated to the theoretical study of the dynamics of power. As one of its original power theorists⁹⁷¹ in the discipline of International

⁹⁶⁸ Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004), xiii.

⁹⁶⁹ Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004), 32.

⁹⁷⁰ Joseph Nye, "Get Smart: Combining Hard and Soft Power," *Foreign Affairs* 88, No. 4 (2009), 163.

⁹⁷¹ Dahl is considered the first theorist of the study power, yet his work focused on the discipline of Behavioural Sciences. Lukes was a political and social theorist and introduced the concept of 'the three faces of power', which was conceived to explain power in International Relations. Both Dahl and Lukes' work was focused on the

Relations, Nye had recognised that the theoretical study of power in its nature would require a revision of its original concepts.

As such, given the early realisation that a theory of power may likely need a revision following its conceptualisation, this dissertation has contributed to existing literature on the theoretical study of the dynamics of power in its revision of the theory of subtle power. More specifically, and focusing on Chapter Four to begin with, this thesis found a causal link between the utilisation of power *per se* and the actual efficacy of the utility of power – for example, Qatar’s use of hard power during the Arab Spring affected its perceived neutrality, and by extension, impacted the elements of subtle power. This dissertation’s finding that the use of a form of power can affect the utility of other forms of power has theoretical transferability when considering the foreign policy actions of other nation states.

An initial example of how the use of one form of power can affect the efficacy of another form of power is the excessive use of (or over reliance on) military hard power by the United States in Iraq from 2003 onwards which undermined its soft power. In an article by Nossel who is credited with first using the term ‘smart power’, not necessarily conceptualising the academic theory, Nossel analysed the ‘aggressive unilateralism’ of the Bush administration in a post-9/11 world and its effect on America’s soft power. Nossel argued that the conservative strategy in combating terrorism did not unite the global community behind the American cause, and arguably undermined the primacy of American soft power. In *Smart Power: Reclaiming Liberal Internationalism*, Nossel suggested to progressive lawmakers that they consider a ‘smart(er) use of power’ by writing:

After September 11, conservatives adopted the trappings of liberal internationalism, entangling the rhetoric of human rights and democracy in a strategy of aggressive unilateralism. Progressives must advance a foreign policy that focuses on the smart use of power to promote US interests through a stable grid of allies, institutions, and norms. Such an approach would rally the world behind US goals.⁹⁷²

individual, not necessarily on a nation state as an entity which could project power. For these reasons Nye is considered the first theorist of power in International Relations as his work focused specifically on the role of the United States and its power capacities as a nation state.

⁹⁷² Suzanne Nossel, “Smart Power: Reclaiming Liberal Internationalism,” *Foreign Affairs Magazine*, (2004) <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2004-03-01/smart-power>

Nossel foresaw the Bush administration's misplaced primacy of the use of military hard power in a post-9/11 United States as an impediment to a more effective utilisation of power, that being a distraction from the utility of a combination of hard and soft power as noted above, and how America's soft power was affected by its use of military hard power. This resulted in one form of power being affected by another. This was similarly the case with the evolution of subtle power, whereby as this thesis has found for example, the unforeseen consequence of the overuse (or overly successful use) of the element of national branding which resulted in Qatar experiencing soft power – soft disempowerment.

Further to the post-9/11 example of the excessive use of military hard power is that of economic hard power, which can also impact on a nation states soft power. For example, where the International Liberal Order and the post-WWII economic structures are built around Western concepts of democracy, liberty, and free trade, others see this economic hard power as a form of subjugation, undermining the soft power windfall the aforementioned structures portend. For example, former Prime Minister of Malaysia Mahathir bin Mohamad railed against the 'neo-colonialism' of the West following the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 which crippled the economies of some countries around the world, especially in Southeast Asia. This occurred when capital flight resulted in the depreciation of the value of some countries' currencies, crippling their capacity to repay foreign debt - debt that was largely owed to Western institutions. In turn, what was thrust upon some Asian countries were Structural Adjustment Programs which were designed to better align their countries' economies with the more liberalised and well-practised economies of the West. In the aftermath of the Asian Financial Crisis Mahathir bin Mohamad said:

Once communism was defeated, then capitalism could expand and show its true self. In the old days you needed to conquer a country with military force, and then you could control that country. Today it is not necessary at all. You can destabilise a country, make it poor, and then make it request for help, and for the help that is given, you gain control over the policies of the country, and when you gain control over the policies of a country, effectively you have colonised that country.⁹⁷³

⁹⁷³ Mahathir bin Mohamad, "Episode Three: The New Rules of the Game," Transcript of the 'The Commanding Heights,' *PBS*, accessed April 2023, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/commandingheights/shared/minitext/tr_show03.html

As such, by virtue of the global pre-eminence of the Western conceived economic institutions and their norms and practices, the perception of some Southeast Asian countries of the United States, and to a lesser extent some European countries, was one of ‘neo-colonialism’, which impacted on the attractiveness of the West – i.e. its soft power.

Drawing back on the original conceptualisation of hard power, that being both economic and military, the theoretical study of dynamics of power has in the past borne the formulation of *new theories of power which have emerged from the existing*. Sticky power, entrepreneurial power, and soft power – soft disempowerment are three such examples. Beginning with sticky power, although not a revision of economic hard power in the same way late subtle power is a revision of its predecessor, sticky power is a nuance of economic hard power yet with somewhat conspiratorial or surreptitious connotations or overtures. This as such alludes to an impact on a countries soft power. In formulating this nuance of economic hard power, concomitant to Mahathir bin Mohamad’s aforementioned denunciation of Western overreach and domination, Mead, the theorist behind sticky power explains that:

The United States built its sticky power on two foundations: An international monetary system and free trade.⁹⁷⁴ ... Economic power can be thought of as sticky power, which comprises a set of economic institutions and policies that attracts others toward US influence and then traps them in it. Together with soft power, military and sticky power sustain US hegemony.⁹⁷⁵

The second example of a theory of power developing out of an existing power concept is entrepreneurial power. Both Qatar and the United Arab Emirates are cited as examples of small states which exercise this form of power. This theory of power by Ennis is largely borne out of economic hard power, or more precisely, without abundant hydrocarbon rents neither Qatar nor the UAE could have garnered such a capacity to exercise entrepreneurial power, which Ennis defines as:

Qatar and the UAE’s sources of power initially start with their economic capabilities and, importantly, how these are used. Resource wealth alone is

⁹⁷⁴ Walter Mead, “America’s Sticky Power,” *Foreign Policy Magazine*, (2009) <https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/10/29/americas-sticky-power/>

⁹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

insufficient. Nation-building activities domestically and status-building activities at home and abroad facilitate the ability to act entrepreneurially.⁹⁷⁶ This analysis thus suggests the entrepreneurial powerhood of Qatar and the UAE is constituted by their development narrative and pursuit of status, which are facilitated by their material capabilities and their governance style characterised by flexible autocracy.⁹⁷⁷

Therefore, entrepreneurial power is a second example of a theory of power that is derived from an existing theory, or perhaps developed from the reliance on a theoretical precondition - that being economic hard power. This is similarly the case with late subtle power, which has emerged as a contemporary revision of its predecessor - reliant on the precondition of the existing four elements of subtle power.

Finally, where the post-WWII international system was thought to attract nation states to becoming modern and developed global actors, a form of attraction therefore an example of soft power, what has at times occurred, was the reversal of power capacities following the use of power in the international system. As this thesis has discussed, Brannagan and Giulianotti have termed this phenomenon the theory soft power - soft disempowerment which too is a theory of power (or disempowerment) developed from a nation states use of another form of power. Again, the United States is a helpful example as globalisation for example has been perceived as the imposition of Western values, culture, and practices onto otherwise conservative, traditional, and/or pious nation states. This in turn undermined the United States' capacity to influence. Although not a small state like Qatar, the United States, and its far reaching projection of its culture and socio-political norms and practices, are at times rejected by some nation states around the world as they see westernisation, or globalisation, and the International Liberal Order as 'Americanisation'. As noted by Qureshi in *The Americanisation of the World Trade Order*, as a result of the supremacy of its potential to project its cultural and socio-political norms and practices, the soft power capacities of the United States have experienced a similar phenomenon of soft power - soft disempowerment. Qureshi writes that:

There is no denying that the United States has made a positive contribution to the development of the international economic system since the inception of the Bretton Woods institutions post-WWII. Americanisation is not to be equated with

⁹⁷⁶ Ennis, "Reading the Entrepreneurial Power in Small Gulf States: Qatar and the UAE," 575.

⁹⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 576.

globalisation itself, rather it refers to a possible consequence of it. However, Americanisation is not only the process of cultural transplantation through trade in goods and services - it is also the indoctrination of American analysis of foreign trade practices, the imparting of 'American values' as conditions for access to its market, and the integration of American foreign policy with foreign trade.⁹⁷⁸

Reaffirming the concept that the dominance of America's soft power can result in soft power - soft disempowerment is Al Nakib, who in *Modernity and the Arab Gulf States*⁹⁷⁹ cites Fox, Mourtada-Sabbah, and al-Mutawa who claim that: "While the Gulf societies are fairly receptive to the material benefits of globalisation, on the other hand they deliberately cushion themselves from the negative aspects of market penetration into social life and ideology".⁹⁸⁰ Al Nakib continues by citing Exell who remarks that:

Rather than seeing globalisation as a positive process that results in cultural hybridity, 'conservative elements' in the Gulf are concerned with the loss of local, Islamic values as their countries become enmeshed in a global systems, and a younger generation who have no memory of pre-oil lifestyles, and who inhabit a wealthy, elite, anglophile, cosmopolitan world.⁹⁸¹

Therefore the projection of soft power through the benefits and positive results of globalisation can produce a degree of soft power - soft disempowerment. This is similarly the case with Qatar's experience as this thesis revealed in Chapter Four, whereby a projection of power can in itself impact on the efficacy or utility of that form of power.

In Summary

This thesis has contributed two important and original findings to the theoretical study of power - the first being the transferability of the four elements of subtle power. Whilst this conclusion notes that each of the four elements of subtle power have a theoretical generalisability for other

⁹⁷⁸ Asif Qureshi, *The Americanisation of the World Trade Order*, (Milton Park: Routledge, 2022)

⁹⁷⁹ Farah Al Nakib, "Modernity and the Arab Gulf States," 58.

⁹⁸⁰ Fox, Mourtada-Sabbah and Al-Mutawa, "The Arab Gulf Region: Traditionalism, Globalized, or Globalization Traditionalized?," 6.

⁹⁸¹ Exell, *Modernity and the Museum in the Arabian Peninsula*, 68.

nation states, it remains important to iterate that no country other than Qatar has utilised all four of the elements in pursuit of autonomy from a greater power. This is unsurprisingly the case as the theory of subtle power, now late subtle power, was conceived to provide a theoretical explanation for a single nation state with an eclectic foreign policy unlike any other - Qatar. However, as noted in the first section of the conclusion, this thesis has found that the generalisability of the elements of subtle power are in fact applicable to many other nation states. This contributes to existing literature by providing theoretical foundation for an explanation of the foreign policy actions of other nation states, actions which are tantamount or synonymous with the elements of subtle power. This original contribution adds to existing literature on the understanding of the relationship between the utility of power and a nation states' autonomy from either a greater power, or within the international system.

As for the theoretical study of the dynamics of power, this thesis has contributed to the body of existing literature that has previously examined 1) how theories of power can change, and 2) how new theories can emerge out of the existing. Much like this thesis has revealed with subtle power, theories of power can change over time - they do not simply cease to be applicable in explaining a nation state's power and capacity to influence. Theories of power can evolve and reinvent themselves, such as smart power, and this is largely a consequence of the use of that form of power itself. Secondly, the use of one form of power can also lead to the development of new theories which seek to describe the evolution of a nation states capabilities, or explain its past actions, such was the case with the formation of the theories of sticky power, entrepreneurial power, and soft power – soft disempowerment.

What next for late subtle power...

In the eighteen months following the temporal scope of this thesis⁹⁸² (and the Al Ula Agreement), the outlook for the viability of the theory of late subtle power remains cautiously optimistic as each of the four elements continue to be central to Qatar's foreign policy strategies. Although they are no longer utilised for the purpose of pursuing autonomy, the four elements continue to serve the maintenance Qatar's regional and international partnerships and the expansion of its global outreach – the hosting of talks between US and Venezuelan officials

⁹⁸² Qatar's independence in 1971 to the end of the blockade in 2021.

in June 2023,⁹⁸³ and the late-2022 securing of China's longest ever LNG supply agreement⁹⁸⁴ giving it a stake in Qatar's security, two examples of many. As such, and in a late subtle power era, Qatar is now not to be considered as a *subtle* actor, nor can it be considered a nation state 'punching above its weight'⁹⁸⁵ as the familiar refrain suggests. Best exemplifying this was the triumph of the World Cup in December 2022 which launched Qatar into the homes of five billion viewers⁹⁸⁶ ensuring that the once 'dullest place on earth'⁹⁸⁷ was now a household name and desirable destination for world-class footballers, prime ministers and presidents, energy sector executives, tourists, and a destination even frequented by members of the Taliban. Few nation states have achieved such success in such a short space of time, transitioning from an obscure nation state to regional actor and global player. Essential to this transformation were the four elements of Qatar's subtle power foreign policy strategies.

As noted in the first section of the conclusion, this thesis has found that there exists a transferability of each of the four elements of subtle power when seeking to explain the foreign policy actions of other nation states, particularly small states. An interesting analogy to consider in finalising this thesis is that in a post-Al Ula Saudi Arabia, there too exists examples of the transferability of (late) subtle power which in turn further reinforces the viability and transferability of this theory. For example, whilst Saudi Arabia has historically been considered a mediator in the Middle East, the element of **Conflict Mediation** too has been a feature of Saudi foreign policy since Al Ula, as MBS secured the release of foreign fighters in Ukraine in September 2022, and by doing so according to a Qatar analyst, "presented himself as capable of playing the role of regional statesman in a way that counters the narrative of the crown prince as an impulsive and disruptive actor".⁹⁸⁸ As for **National Branding**, Riyadh's hyper-motivated sports and tourism drive continues to strive ahead with surprisingly success with recent purchases of Newcastle United in the English Premier League,⁹⁸⁹ the formation of LIV Golf

⁹⁸³ Juan Diego Quesada, "United States and Venezuela Hold Secret Meeting in Qatar," *El Pais*, June 2023, https://english.elpais.com/international/2023-06-30/united-states-and-venezuela-hold-secret-meeting-in-qatar.html?outputType=amp&utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email

⁹⁸⁴ Walid Ahmed, "China Seals One of the Biggest LNG Deals Ever With Qatar," *Bloomberg*, November 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-11-21/china-s-sinopec-signs-long-term-lng-supply-deal-with-qatar#xj4y7vzkg>

⁹⁸⁵ Kamrava, "How Tiny Qatar Punches Above its Weight."

⁹⁸⁶ Brad Adgate, "The 2022 FIFA Men's World Cup: By the Numbers," *Forbes*, November 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/bradadgate/2022/11/14/the-2022-fifa-mens-world-cup-by-the-numbers/?sh=971cfcb2c25c>

⁹⁸⁷ Zafirov, "The Qatar Crisis – Why did the Blockade Fail?," 2.

⁹⁸⁸ Kristian Ulrichsen, "Analysis: Saudi Prince's Ukraine Mediation Signals 'Useful' Russia ties, Analysts Say," *Reuters*, September 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/saudi-princes-ukraine-mediation-signals-useful-russia-ties-analysts-2022-09-23/>

⁹⁸⁹ "Saudi Arabia-Led Consortium Completes Newcastle United Takeover," *Al Jazeera*, October 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/7/saudi-arabia-led-consortium-completes-newcastle-united-takeover>

which has since amalgamated the PGA,⁹⁹⁰ and the signing of Christian Ronaldo to a Saudi football club⁹⁹¹ amongst other notable football stars. The **Strategic use of a SWF** and the element of **Physical Protection** have also featured in Saudi foreign policy. In mid-2022 under the directive of MBS, the PIF invested \$2 Billion in Jared Kushner's private equity firm accompanied by a very generous management fee.⁹⁹² This suggests that the PIF is being used to keep Trump and his cohort on side whilst MBS calmly waits out the Biden presidency.

Finally, the outlook for Qatar's relations with the (former) blockading quartet too remains cautiously optimistic, as diplomatic relations have been restored between Saudi Arabia,⁹⁹³ the UAE,⁹⁹⁴ and Egypt,⁹⁹⁵ and with Bahrain seeking to do the same in the near future.⁹⁹⁶ There was also little by way of cross-border accusations from Riyadh or social media attacks from familiar sources during the World Cup which was once a feature of regional relations during the diplomatic hiatus. At the same time, Al Jazeera, a bellwether for Qatar/Saudi relations, has tempered its commentary on Saudi Arabia which can exemplified by the constrained reporting on the execution of 81 mostly-Shia Saudis in May 2022⁹⁹⁷ - a record number in one day - which got far less attention than the murder of Kamal Khashoggi during the blockade. Since Al Ula, Doha has also asked some members of the Muslim Brotherhood to leave Qatar,⁹⁹⁸ gesturing to Riyadh a willingness to acknowledge *and act* upon some of Saudi Arabia's most sensitive grievances. All this signals a continuation of cooperation in the sub-Persian Gulf region, at

⁹⁹⁰ Leonard Armato, "LIV Golf and PGA Merger Begins a New Era in Golf and Sportswashing," *Forbes*, June 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/leonardarmato/2023/06/28/liv-golf-and-pga-merger-begins-a-new-era-in-golf-and-sportswashing/?sh=59af52e34ae0>

⁹⁹¹ Nadeen Ebrahim, "Why Christian Ronaldo's Move to Saudi Arabia Means So Much for the Gulf Monarch's Sporting Ambitions," *CNN*, January 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/01/06/football/ronaldo-saudi-soccer-sport-mime-intl/index.html>

⁹⁹² Timothy O'Brien, "How Did Jared Kushner Get \$2 Billion From the Saudis?," *Bloomberg*, April 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2022-04-11/how-did-jared-kushner-get-2-billion-from-the-saudis>

⁹⁹³ "Qatar Appoints First Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Since Rift," *Al Jazeera*, August 2011, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/11/qatar-appoints-first-ambassador-to-saudi-arabia-since-rift>

⁹⁹⁴ "Qatar and UAE Embassies Resume Work Monday," *Reuters*, June 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/qatar-uae-embassies-resume-work-monday-qatar-foreign-ministry-2023-06-19/>

⁹⁹⁵ Amr Emam, "Egypt, Qatar Appoint Mutual Ambassadors," *Al-Monitor*, August 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/08/egypt-qatar-appoint-mutual-ambassadors>

⁹⁹⁶ Ibrahim Khazen, "Qatar Says Working to Reopen Embassy in Bahrain, Appoint Ambassador to UAE," *Anadolu Agency*, June 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/qatar-says-working-to-reopen-embassy-in-bahrain-appoint-ambassador-to-uae/2927748>

⁹⁹⁷ "Saudi Arabia Executes 81 People in a Single Day," *Al Jazeera*, March 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/12/saudi-arabia-executes-81-people-in-a-single-day>

⁹⁹⁸ Alba Sanz, "Qatar Turns its Back on the Muslim Brotherhood," *Atalayar*, February 2022, <https://www.atalayar.com/en/articulo/politics/qatar-turns-its-back-muslim-brotherhood/20220225124852155267.html>

least in the short term, in what is now firmly a late subtle power era in the evolution of Qatar's foreign policy strategies.

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