

Overview of Qatar and Relevant Policy and Diplomacy Issues

At a time of significant regional uncertainty, Qatar has presented a compelling image as an outpost of stability and prosperity in the Middle East, even as Arab Spring protests reached neighboring Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. Aside from boosting the image of Qatar around the world, this stability has positioned Qatar to lead regional responses to transitioning countries in the name of “seeking Arab solutions to Arab problems.” Significantly, Qatar possessed the capability to put such words into action, as it held the rotating presidency of the Arab League in 2011-2012. Qatar has played a vital role not only in shaping the emerging narratives of protest through the Doha-based Al Jazeera media network, but also in mobilizing Arab support for the NATO-led intervention in Libya in March 2011. Qatar has nurtured a growing reputation as a “non-stop mediator” in regional diplomacy and as a rising power with international reach, giving the country a realistic claim to lie at the heart of the new Middle East.

Internally, Qatar’s farsighted decision in the early 1990s to build up its energy infrastructure has enabled Doha to exploit the country’s massive reserves of natural gas and accrue and project considerable forms of soft power. Domestic concerns focus on whether the country has attempted too much too fast and whether its foreign policy objectives risk surpassing local capabilities. The pace of development is so rapid that the Qatar National Vision 2030 (unveiled in 2008) is already out of date. Qatar’s population, for example, has more than doubled since 2006. Qatar’s emphasis on research and the expansion of intellectual capital has led to the construction of Doha’s “Education City,” which houses the Qatar Foundation, a combination of Qatar University and five U.S.-based universities.

The key challenge for Qatar’s new government under the emir, Sheik Tamin bin Hamad Al-Thani, is fiscal sustainability in the long run-up to the FIFA World Cup in 2022 — to ensure that expenditures do not soar above revenues if the latter fail to keep pace. Another is to manage Qatar’s fractious relations with neighboring Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirate as tensions over Qatar’s perceived support for political Islamists across the Middle East and North Africa run high. Finally, officials must develop robust public diplomacy skills to meet greater international scrutiny of domestic affairs, particularly as world attention on Qatar continues to increase as the World Cup draws nearer.

Potential Research Project Topics:

- Post Arab-Spring politics and regional dynamics
- Sustainability of resources (oil and gas, water, etc.)
- Health care
- Gender roles
- Transportation
- Interfaith dialogue
- Response to humanitarian crises
- The role of civil society
- Science and technology