

## THE POLITICAL COSTS OF QATAR'S WESTERN ORIENTATION

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In the span of seven weeks in fall 2011, the government of Qatar twice made international headlines for reasons that were, for the upstart Gulf emirate, highly unusual. Made prominent by its near-ubiquitous involvement in political and humanitarian crises abroad — in Darfur, Libya, Syria and even the U.S. Gulf Coast in the aftermath of 2005's Hurricane Katrina — one aspect of Qatar that receives far less scrutiny, even on its state-owned Al-Jazeera satellite network, is politics at home. Thus did speculation mount when a September 2011 salary hike of an eye-popping 60 percent for citizens working in the public sector (120 percent for those in the police and military) was followed almost immediately by another out-of-the-blue announcement: the country's first-ever parliamentary elections would be held in the second half of 2013.

Given the individualistic nature of decision making in this small city-state, observers were left to wonder about the motivations of senior leaders, in particular Emir Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani. Did the ruling family perceive a change in popular attitude belied by the placid surface of domestic politics in Qatar, the country

outwardly least affected by demands for change witnessed even in neighboring Gulf societies since the beginning of the Arab Spring? Or did the government hope mainly to head off a growing chorus of critics who noted the contrast between Qatar's ideological and material support for revolutionaries seeking to topple other nondemocratic Arab regimes, and its own lack of accountability?

Whatever the case, few disagreed that the emir was playing with house money. Pressure for political change was emanating neither from citizens nor from Western backers such as the United States, whatever the apparent contradictions. A set of public-opinion surveys by the Social and Economic Survey Research Institute (SESRI) of Qatar University revealed that, even prior to the fall announcements, confidence in government institutions among Qatari citizens had grown considerably in the wake of the Arab uprisings, while popular interest in democracy — and indeed in politics generally — had moved in the opposite direction.<sup>1</sup> And, as strategic interests had already outweighed American idealism in the case of a far more advanced reform movement in nearby Bahrain, the

chance of a U.S. push to alter the political status quo in Qatar approached zero. To boost salaries and introduce limited citizen participation in governance, then, seemed a prudent, preemptive initiative that at worst rendered Qatar's gigantic natural-gas-funded budget surplus somewhat less immense.

The question, then, is: What went wrong? Nearly a year later, not only have the government's blockbuster moves failed to provide a boost in popular approval, but a new poll conducted by SESRI in June 2012 shows that confidence in basic state institutions has receded in many cases below even pre-Arab Spring levels. Since June 2011, the percentage of Qataris who say they are "very confident" in the armed forces has dropped from 87 percent to 78 percent; confidence in the courts has decreased from 72 percent to 62 percent; and, most ironically, confidence in the Shura Council, Qatar's soon-to-be-elected advisory body, decreased from 65 percent to 54 percent, the largest relative decline for any single institution included in the survey. At the same time, deference to the state has similarly declined. When asked whether they agreed that "citizens should always support the decisions of government even if they disagree with those decisions," 42 percent strongly agreed, down from 47 percent a year earlier. What is going on?

As elsewhere in the region, a significant number of Qataris are defying the decades-old noble lie of Gulf politics: that citizens of resource-based, distributive regimes are motivated above all by economics. Home to the world's wealthiest citizens, Qatar is casually cited as the archetypical example of the way that material satisfaction begets political satisfaction and even political apathy. Yet, if the Arab Spring so far has failed to bring fundamental change to the Gulf monarchies, one still

hopes it will be credited with hastening a transformation at least in thinking about the region's politics. For, while economic issues have played a role in generating support for reform across the Arab Gulf, even more important as mobilizing forces have been matters of group identity and conflict — distinctions along the lines of sect, region, tribal versus non-tribal, and Islamist versus secular.

In Bahrain, for instance, the Shia- and secular-led opposition has sustained a decade-long protest movement, not on a platform of socioeconomic equality, but in demand for *political* equality and other basic democratic reforms promised by King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa upon his succession in 1999. More recently, in the aftermath of the February 2011 uprising, the state has used the specter of Iranian expansionism to mobilize Sunni citizens against the opposition as an imagined Shia fifth column, polarizing society along sectarian lines and precluding resolution of the country's two-year political crisis. In Saudi Arabia, a reform movement once limited mainly to the kingdom's Shia minority sees increasing appeal among other citizens structurally excluded from the political and economic benefits enjoyed by the Najdi tribal ruling elite.<sup>2</sup> And in the United Arab Emirates, the state's ongoing security crackdown against individuals associated with the Muslim Brotherhood "has contributed to the construction of a 'them and us' mentality which never before existed" among the country's wealthy, close-knit and comparatively homogenous citizenry.<sup>3</sup> Qatar is no exception to this pattern of group-based competition.

## GROUP POLITICS

The small size and relative homogeneity of Qatar's citizenry compared to

other Gulf populations, combined with its overwhelming concentration in and around the capital, Doha, might seem to militate against the rise of identity politics. In fact, various group-based differences retain social if not political relevance, including race (a modest proportion of citizens are of African descent), ethnicity and religion (Qatar

is home to around 5,000 Arab Shia citizens in addition to a sizeable Persian community), tribal versus non-tribal

origin, and status as a naturalized versus “original” citizen. But in a country where nationals account for fewer than one in six residents, far more salient is the divide between Qataris and expatriates. Increasingly, this divide has graduated from mutual estrangement to more open conflict, and it has begun to spill over from social life into the political arena.

In the past five years alone, Qatar’s population has nearly doubled, from around 880,000 in 2006 to almost 1.7 million in 2011. Despite a high (albeit declining) birth rate and some naturalization, nationals still are thought to number only around 250,000. (That no official demographic breakdown exists speaks to the sensitivity of the issue.) Now, a half-decade of record-setting immigration has stretched the limits of Qataris’ tolerance for expatriate workers. Eight in 10 Qataris said they “would be very unhappy” to have foreigners as their neighbors, according to a 2012 SESRI survey, compared to just 42 percent of expatriate respondents. In a separate

poll in 2011, more than 93 percent of the 1,000 respondents said they would “prefer not” to have foreigners as neighbors.

Rather than a xenophobic rejection of outsiders per se, such sentiment reflects growing alarm among many citizens at what is viewed as pervasive and unchecked Western influence, both in the cultural and

political-military realms. In the first place, ordinary Qataris wish to avoid the fate of Dubai and preserve the country’s conservative,

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family-oriented culture, which features the same Wahhabi branch of Islam more closely associated with Saudi Arabia. Qatar’s deepening political and military relationship with the United States is a separate source of unease. If some Qataris no doubt welcome greater U.S. support at a time when a military showdown over Iran’s nuclear program seems always just over the horizon, others maintain a more cynical reading of American intentions.

A common view accuses the United States of using Qatar to help carry out its own regional designs, first in Libya and now in Syria. In accepting the diplomatic embrace of Washington, the argument continues, Qatar has compromised its historically amicable relations with Iran while creating new adversaries where none existed before — to say nothing of the billions of dollars spent in the process. When asked in a June 2012 survey to name “the most important problem Qatar faces today,” only 5 percent of citizens identified political issues. Yet, of these, more than

70 percent referred to Qatar's interventions abroad, which respondents faulted variously for "solving other countries' problems," "paying a lot of money for other countries," "[earning the] criticism of other Arab countries," and, most commonly, "making new enemies."

Still other Qataris, and indeed many Sunni Gulf Arabs generally, would go even further to suggest a much larger conspiracy: that the post-Iraq War record of U.S. foreign policy demonstrates a deliberate effort to empower Shii Iran as a regional counterweight to the Gulf monarchies. By this view, the perennial crises over Iran and its nuclear program are acts in an extended geopolitical drama aimed at guaranteeing lucrative arms sales and a continued military foothold in the Gulf states, the latter forced to pay for U.S. protection both in treasure and in lost autonomy.

The concern over cultural invasion has prompted several recent citizen campaigns that edged dangerously close to the limits of political expression. In January 2012, only a month after the sale of alcohol was banned for unspecified reasons at a luxury island development popular among expatriates, citizens launched an online campaign to boycott the national airline, in part because of its own sales of alcohol and pork products via a subsidiary. Later in January, Qatar University was ordered to reverse a controversial English-language instruction policy instituted in 2005, over complaints that it discriminated against nationals and created, as described in one of a series of scathing editorials in a local Arabic daily, a "devastating war" between Qatari students and "the favored sons of expats."<sup>4</sup> Over the next six months, Qatar would host no fewer than three symposia on Arabic language and culture, one organized by the university itself. Other

developments include a new dress code at Doha's largest public park, and a brigade of female volunteer cultural police who have several times accosted inappropriately clad women in shopping centers.

The debate surrounding access to, and the content of, education in Qatar has assumed particular significance, precisely because it mirrors the larger tension between Western-style (and Western-operated) development and the preservation of local tradition and control. At the center of Qatar's long-term strategy to move toward a "knowledge-based economy" is Education City, a 14-square-kilometer campus with branches of six American universities, including Georgetown, Northwestern and Carnegie Mellon. Meanwhile, the country's entire pre-university educational system is a product of the U.S.-based RAND Corporation, commissioned in 2001 to overhaul Qatari schools. It is public misgivings over such Western domination — with RAND's historical ties to the U.S. military adding fuel to the fire — that has spurred wide-ranging efforts to reassert national and cultural ownership over the educational sphere.

To combat the perception of Education City as a collection of foreign enclaves, the entire entity has been rebranded in distinctly unassailable fashion. Students returning for the fall 2012 semester were welcomed back to an unfamiliar place — Hamad bin Khalifa University, in explicit honor of the emir — with individual institutions described now as "partners" and even undertaking separate orientations.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, Qatar University students returned not only to Arabic as their primary language of instruction, but to a revised and well-advertised code of "university etiquette." Meant to check the encroachment of Western dress and public behavior on

what remains a conservative, gender-segregated campus, the new rules proscribe, among other things, “fad hair styles” and otherwise “unconventional cuts.”

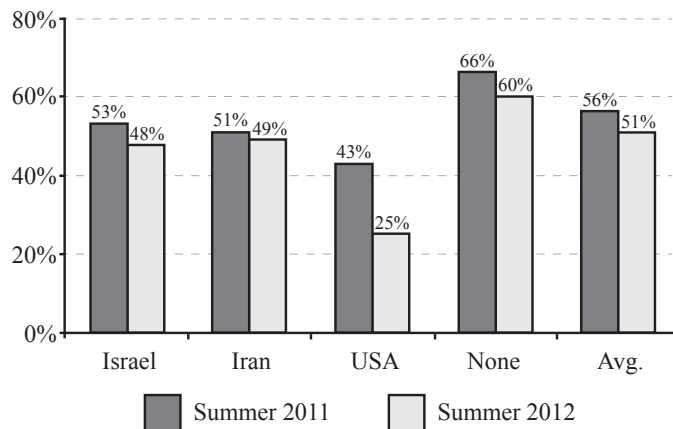
While Qatar’s deepening political and military cooperation with the United States has not been the focus of similar social activism, this is due not only to the recognized sensitivity of the subject but also to efforts to downplay the extent of the cooperation. The thousands of American personnel stationed at Al-Udeid, the largest U.S. air base in the Middle East, are situated some 40 kilometers outside of Doha, and their movements in public are restricted and inconspicuous. What is more, neither side officially acknowledges the existence of other U.S. installations, including a secret new missile-defense radar station first reported in July in *The Wall Street Journal*.<sup>6</sup>

But the burgeoning U.S.-Qatari relationship has not gone unnoticed, either domestically or internationally. In April, both the prominent Saudi-owned Al-Arabiya news network and Iran’s state-run Press TV briefly published a false report of a thwarted coup in Qatar by senior military defectors, an action ostensibly provoked by the emir’s “excessive alignment with U.S. foreign policy and breaking of Arab ranks.”<sup>7</sup> In the story, later explained as having been planted by Syrian supporters of President Bashar al-Assad, Qatar’s ruler is rescued only with the intervention of U.S. special forces, whisked away from his besieged palace in an American helicopter.<sup>8</sup>

## POLITICAL ATTITUDES

That there is growing ambivalence in Qatar over the country’s openness to and reliance upon the West, then, is clear. Yet, a more fundamental question remains: Is the heightened controversy actually related to the general shift in public opinion observed over the previous year? That is, are Qataris’ attitudes about foreign influence

**Figure 1.** “A Great Deal of Confidence” in Government Institutions, by Threat Perception



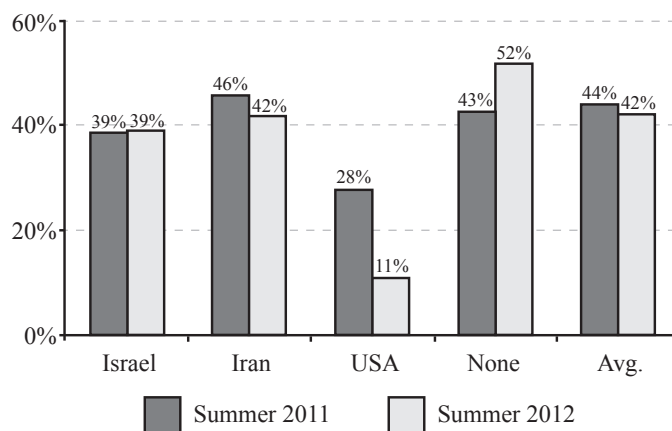
related in predictable ways to their wider political views? Are citizens who worry more about Westernization or Western involvement in domestic affairs also more likely to hold more negative orientations toward the government or to challenge its policies?

In a word, yes. Analysis of nationally representative survey data from both 2011 and 2012 demonstrates not only that such an individual-level relationship exists, but that its substantive significance has increased notably over the previous year. Qataris were asked in each poll to name, without prompting or a list, the country

they believed posed the greatest threat to Qatar. Only four answers gained more than 5 percent of responses: Israel, Iran, the United States and no country.<sup>9</sup> When one compares these answers to respondents' more general political orientations, one finds that two perceived threats stand out from the rest: the United States, and none at all.

Compared to overall averages of 56 percent in 2011 and 52 percent in 2012, confidence in government institutions among those who identified the United States was just 43 percent in 2011, and a surprising 25 percent in 2012. Even more dramatic is the discrepancy in citizens' reported political deference. When asked in 2011, 47 percent of Qataris "strongly agreed" that citizens should

**Figure 2.** "Strongly Agree" That Citizens Should Support Government Decisions Even if They Disagree with Them, by Threat Perception



always support the decisions of their government, while 42 percent "strongly agreed" in 2012. Among those who felt most threatened by the United States, however, these proportions reached only 28 percent and 11 percent, respectively. Finally, when asked in 2012 to select the top national priorities for Qatar over the next 10 years, only 28 percent of Qataris listed as their first or second choice "giving people more say in important government decisions." Among Qataris wary of the United States, more than 43 percent said the same.

In both 2011 and 2012, Qataris who named the two other common responses — Iran and Israel — held attitudes toward the government that were neither more nor less extreme than the average. By contrast, those who perceived (or claimed to perceive) no external threat at all reported significantly greater confidence in government institutions as well as higher deference to government decisions.<sup>10</sup> However, the relatively small group of citizens who identified the United States — less than 10 percent of respondents in each year — reported much more negative orientations toward the Qatari state.

There are several reasons to have confidence in these results. First, apart from being disproportionately young — 33 versus an overall average of 37 — and male, the group of citizens who perceive the United States as Qatar's greatest threat is not distinguished by some underlying social or economic characteristic(s) that might be driving the statistical association between anti-Western orientations and wider domestic political views. These citizens are neither poorer, nor less educated, nor more religious than the average Qatari, and they are not limited to a specific geographical area. A second reason for

confidence is that the same underlying associations are observed in two independent sets of data based on surveys undertaken a year apart. Finally, and perhaps most important, the relationships observed among Qatari citizens do *not* hold for expatriate residents, whether Arab or non-Arab, who participated in the same surveys. The link between anti-Western and anti-government attitudes in Qatar exists, as one should expect, only among Qatari nationals.

While these findings do not suggest the impending rise of organized political opposition in Qatar, they do help explain the state's puzzling failure to secure a political boost following two unprecedented decisions intended to operate simultaneously on the political and economic levels. In effect, the government's medicine was ill-suited to treat the condition, which is neither popular dissatisfaction with living standards *per se*,<sup>11</sup> nor a widespread desire for involvement in the quotidian stuff of everyday politics. Many Qataris simply question the direction of the socioeconomic experiment that is their country and wonder about their ultimate place in it. Such was clear even in the pointed debate sparked by the 60 percent public-sector salary hike, which citizens welcomed not on the grounds of rising costs of living, but for rectifying a perceived disparity in the value attached to Qataris and expatriates.

### **PORTENDING THE FUTURE?**

Unfortunately for those concerned about the social and cultural impact of foreigners in Qatar, it seems destined only to increase over the coming decade. The country will require hordes of new migrant laborers to complete a planned \$250 billion worth of construction and infrastructure projects in time to host its prized 2022 FIFA World Cup.<sup>12</sup> In turn, a fresh cadre

of white-collar workers must be recruited to manage and operate the gargantuan project, to say nothing of preparations for and execution of the actual month-long event itself. The implications of this ongoing transformation are not limited to the social realm. Traffic congestion, already identified by both citizens and expatriates as the country's single greatest problem,<sup>13</sup> cannot but worsen, a planned new underground train system notwithstanding.

Already an entire new city, Lusail, is under construction along the coast north of Doha. It is thought to be in part a solution to another World Cup problem: the arrival of hundreds of thousands of football fans. They will expect — as will the tournament's official sponsor, Anheuser-Busch InBev — to be able to consume alcohol and otherwise behave like the sorts of fans willing to follow their teams across the world. This party crowd, it is anticipated, will be concentrated in Lusail, a comfortable 15 kilometers removed from the rest of the population. But there remains the far thornier issue of serving alcohol at competition venues. In January 2012, FIFA set a deliberate precedent — and one that did not go unnoticed among Qataris — when it demanded that Brazil, the 2014 World Cup host, set aside a legal ban on alcohol at sports venues, saying it “won't negotiate” on its “right to sell beer” at events.<sup>14</sup> Having just instituted its own ban on public consumption outside of a select number of Western hotels, Qatar's leadership is likely to face a similar showdown, either with FIFA or with conservatives in society and, indeed, within its own ranks.<sup>15</sup>

On the political-military front the outlook is similar. Not least because its continued economic viability depends upon a massive natural-gas field it shares with the Islamic Republic, Qatar has long

maintained peaceful, even amicable, relations with Iran, to the annoyance of U.S. policy makers. Now, as tensions among Iran, the West and the Arab Gulf states intensify, the situation is likely to move toward the reverse, with Iran viewing Qatar's strengthening ties with the United States with mounting suspicion. At the same time, Qatar and Iran are on rival sides of an entrenched conflict in Syria. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia is pushing members of the Gulf Cooperation Council toward closer political and military union for the express purpose of countering the perceived external and internal threat from Iran, which it accuses of fomenting political unrest among Shia in Bahrain, in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province and elsewhere. Finally, Iran has repeatedly threatened to retaliate against American military targets in the Gulf in the event of an attack on its nuclear facilities. This makes U.S. resources deployed ostensibly to protect against the Iranian threat — including the aforementioned missile-defense radar station whose existence was recently leaked to the press — at once an asset and a liability for Qatar and other Gulf host countries.

In the end, however, the question is simply one of numbers. More telling

than Qatar's defense cooperation with the United States is a recent deal with another Western power. In July 2012, the news magazine *Der Spiegel* reported that Qatar was in the market for 200 German tanks at an estimated cost of \$2.5 billion.<sup>16</sup> For Qatar's 8,500-strong army, the purchase would represent one tank for every 42.5 soldiers. Lacking the sheer manpower to maintain an adequate defensive force of its own, Qatar has taken out an expensive insurance policy with Western governments, one it will be loath to forfeit on account of public grumbling or ambivalence.

Qatar's leadership thus faces a delicate dilemma. The seeming lesson of the past year — learned from citizens' fights for more equal wages, campaigns against alcohol and English-language hegemony, and other popular drives — amounts to the following: find a few hundred like-minded citizens, and one stands a good chance of influencing public policy.<sup>17</sup> So far, the state has been able to strike a balance between the sensitivities of nationals and the liberties enjoyed by other residents. But there is no guarantee that the next matter of public concern will allow the same political flexibility.

<sup>1</sup> Justin Gengler, "Qatar's Ambivalent Democratization," The Mideast Channel, *Foreign Policy*, November 1, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Gwenn Okruhlik, "Rentier Wealth, Unruly Law, and the Rise of Opposition: The Political Economy of Oil States," *Comparative Politics* 31(1999): 295-315.

<sup>3</sup> Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "The UAE: Holding Back the Tide," *Open Democracy*, August 5, 2012. See also Christopher M. Davidson, "The United Arab Emirates: Frontiers of the Arab Spring," *Open Democracy*, September 8, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Maryam al-Khatir, "*jami'at qatar: ahashafan wa su'an kilatin?! (Qatar University: Bad to Worse?!),*" *Al-Sharq [The East]*, May 21, 2012.



<sup>5</sup> “Hamad bin Khalifa University,” Qatar Foundation website, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Adam Entous and Julian Barnes, “Pentagon Bulks Up Defenses in the Gulf,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 17, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Omar Chatriwala, “Regional Media Spread Reports of Fake Qatar Coup Attempt,” *Doha News*, April 16, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Even more direct in its implication was a widely-circulated cartoon that appeared in Russia’s English-language outlet RT amid clashes at the UN Security Council over a response to escalating violence in Syria. A riff on Tom and Jerry, Qatar is depicted as a puny, belligerent cat whose tail is held by a giant, resting U.S. bulldog. See “Qatar Versus Russia: When Size Does Not Matter,” RT, December 6, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Notably, Saudi Arabia, with whom relations have thawed recently following more than a decade of tension, accounted for only about 1 percent of responses. See, for example, Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi, “How Saudi Arabia and Qatar Became Friends Again,” The Mideast Channel, *Foreign Policy*, July 21, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Although it is not of primary interest here, one might hypothesize two possible explanations for this relationship. First, it may be simply that greater feelings of external security translate into more positive attitudes toward the state as provider of that security. Alternatively, the relationship may result in part or in whole from a selection effect, whereby citizens who are oriented more positively toward the government are also less likely to acknowledge the existence of external threats so as to avoid being understood as critical of its diplomacy or foreign policy.

<sup>11</sup> In a SESRI survey conducted on the eve of the Arab Spring in December 2010, a full 83 percent of Qataris reported being more than “satisfied” (greater than 5 on a 1-10 scale) with the financial situation of their household.

<sup>12</sup> Andy Sambidge, “Qatar Projects Worth \$250bn, Says Research Group,” *Arabian Business*, April 22.

<sup>13</sup> According to a June 2012 SESRI survey. More than 20 percent of Qataris and 30 percent of expatriates named excessive traffic and inadequate infrastructure as Qatar’s biggest problem.

<sup>14</sup> “Beer ‘must be sold’ at Brazil World Cup, says FIFA,” BBC News, January 19, 2012.

<sup>15</sup> That international sporting events are used as pretexts for pressing political and moral agendas is a common observation among Qataris and other Gulf Arabs. The International Olympic Committee’s new requirement of female participation among competing nations — with which both Qatar and Saudi Arabia ultimately complied, sending their first-ever female athletes to the 2012 London games — is seen as the most recent evidence.

<sup>16</sup> Alexandra Hudson, “Qatar Wants to Buy Up to 200 Tanks from Germany — Paper,” *Reuters*, July 29, 2012.

<sup>17</sup> The newfound boldness of some citizens can be observed in the latest such campaign: a monthly 5,000 QR (around \$1,400) government salary for non-working Qatari women. One op-ed in promotion of the initiative begins, “We demand the allocation of salaries for housewives for our belief in the greatness of their work and endurance of many difficulties in the education of sons and daughters who are considered as the pillars and great wealth of Qatar.” It continues, “I thank those who contributed to this campaign and I wish all readers, writers and journalists to participate with us very effectively to take our voice to the largest number of people.” See “Salary Campaign for Housewives,” *Peninsula*, August 8, 2012.

Even more recently and of more substantive significance, a group of citizens led by a well-known academic has published an unprecedented book outlining a comprehensive (if respectfully articulated) vision for social, economic and political change. These Qataris for Reform describe themselves as promoting a “collective voice for reform in Qatar.” See Abdel Fattah Madi, “Qatari Activists Publish Blueprint for Reform,” *Al-Monitor*, October 13, 2012.