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# Reading entrepreneurial power in small Gulf states: Qatar and the UAE

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## Abstract

Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have become crucial players in the Middle East North Africa regional order. Few would have expected such a transformation even 20 years ago. This paper examines the constitution of Qatari and Emirati power. It demonstrates how understanding the entrepreneurial power of states is central to explanations of growth, strength, and position in regional and global orders. The analysis argues that the entrepreneurial powerhood of Qatar and the UAE is constituted by their development narrative and pursuit of status, which is facilitated by their material capabilities and their governance style characterized by flexible autocracy.

## Keywords

Global IR, entrepreneurial power, GCC, UAE, Qatar, oil, rentier, status

Even as recently as 20 years ago, few would have expected the small states of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to be looked at as crucial players in the Middle East North Africa (MENA) regional order. Fewer still would have predicted their prominence and visibility on the global stage. How have these commodity producers been able to extend their voice beyond their niche as energy suppliers? In this article, I explore the puzzle of small, oil-wealthy, rentier states exerting entrepreneurial power in regional and global affairs. I demonstrate how entrepreneurial power in Qatar and the UAE has been facilitated by the pursuit of status, the construction of compelling development narratives, effective branding, and flexible autocratic governing.<sup>1</sup>

1. Along with analysis of policy documents and secondary sources, this research was informed by semi-structured interviews with 12 key interlocutors and numerous off-the-record meetings in Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Doha in October 2016.

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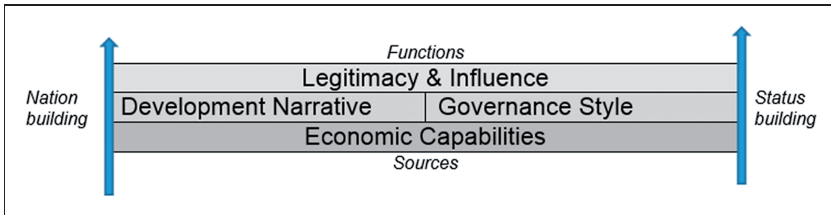
The traditional assertion that small states are confined to the margins of international relations has given way to evidence that many small states exert more influence than their size suggests.<sup>2</sup> In an era where global order is characterized more by complexity and multifaceted governance interfaces than hierarchy and unipolarity, a wider range of options exists for small nations. Some have been able to capture globalizing forces for their own benefit, and influence a multiplicity of outcomes in the international order. Using two non-Western cases, Qatar and the UAE, this article contributes to the expansion of global international relations (IR), and demonstrates that understanding entrepreneurial power across a range of places and sizes is critical to explanations of change, growth, strength, and position in regional and global orders. It also illustrates how rivalry and distributions of power within a region can impact the prospects for an entrepreneurial state.

Qatar and the UAE are two of six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and sit in the core of the world's largest oil-producing region. Qatar and the UAE are among the top nine producers by proven reserves within the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), which continues to be influential in global oil markets.<sup>3</sup> Qatar is also the largest producer and exporter of liquefied natural gas (LNG).

These states are best known for being wealthy, hydrocarbon producers, big spenders domestically and internationally, and, chiefly, for being excessively dependent on hydrocarbon rents. In fact, hydrocarbon earnings comprise 80.3% and 63.5% of fiscal revenue in Qatar and the UAE, respectively.<sup>4</sup> This dependence on fossil fuels has structured development paths and modern state-building in particular ways. Petro-fuelled development fostered rapid growth and striking change, especially following the 1973 oil boom. While nurturing a security state and a bloated public sector that functions as the chief employer of citizens, oil wealth combined with authoritarianism have allowed Qatar and the UAE to pursue mostly uninterrupted developmental agendas.

Scholarship on the region describes Qatar and the UAE as rentier states which derive their legitimacy from their accumulation and redistribution of rent resources among the domestic population. Most of these studies ignore both the agency of citizens within the state and the agency of the state in the international order.<sup>5</sup>

2. Annette Baker Fox, *The Power of Small States: Diplomacy in World War II* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959); Trygve Mathisen, *The Functions of Small States in the Strategies of the Great Powers* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1971), 181–189; Christine Ingebritsen, Iver Neumann, and Sieglinde Gstöhl, *Small States in International Relations* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012); Yee-Kuang Heng and Syed Mohammed Ad'ha Aljunied, "Can small states be more than price takers in global governance?" *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations* 21, no. 3 (2015): 435–454.
3. OPEC share of proven crude reserves, *OPEC*, 2017, [https://www.opec.org/opec\\_web/en/data\\_graphs/330.htm](https://www.opec.org/opec_web/en/data_graphs/330.htm) (accessed 4 October 2018).
4. "Economic diversification in oil-exporting Arab countries," Annual Meeting of Arab Ministers of Finance, International Monetary Fund, April 2016, <https://www.imf.org/external/np/pp/eng/2016/042916.pdf> (accessed 4 October 2018), 13.
5. Hazem Beblawi and Giacomo Luciani, *The Rentier State* (New York: Routledge, 1987); Michael L. Ross, "Does oil hinder democracy?" *World Politics* 53, no. 3 (2001): 325–361; Matthew Gray,



**Figure 1.** Entrepreneurial powerhood in the Gulf.

This is especially true of GCC countries. Energy exporters in the global political economy are not expected to engage in the international system beyond these areas, and like small states, are presumed to be price and norm takers, vulnerable states in the international order.<sup>6</sup> Conventionally, “tiny” states such as these have foreign policies “determined first of all by [a] need to survive as an independent entity.”<sup>7</sup> Today, survival extends to influence and the crafting of an entrepreneurial role.

I define entrepreneurial power as the extent to which states, regardless of size or position in regional and global hierarchies, benefit from a collection of conventional and non-conventional sources of power, and galvanize said power to pursue status, secure legitimacy, and influence outcomes in regional and global affairs. While rapid development certainly raised the visibility of Qatar and the UAE on the global stage, it is the shaping of a narrative and the building of status that have reinforced how these small, energy-rich states have engaged in entrepreneurial powerhood. Indeed, status is a “key resource.”<sup>8</sup> Status-building and nation-building in these cases are mutually constitutive.

Qatar and the UAE’s sources of power initially start with their economic capabilities and, importantly, how these are used. Resource wealth alone is insufficient. Nation-building activities domestically and status-building activities at home and abroad facilitate the ability to act entrepreneurially.

These patterns are explored in the pages that follow. First, I examine the sources and uses of power. This is followed by a discussion of how economic development stories are narrated and utilized as foundations of power in national building. I then explore the practices of national branding and status-building. Finally, the paper looks at the risks of failure in new power exercises. Examining the entrepreneurial powerhood of small states not only allows more analytic flexibility than

“A theory of ‘late rentierism’ in the Arab states of the Gulf,” Center for International and Regional Studies Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar, Occasional Paper no. 7, 2011.

6. Mary Eugenia Charles, *A Future for Small States: Overcoming Vulnerability* (London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 1997), 13–15; Heng and Aljunied, “Can small states be more than price takers”; Hassan Al-Akim, “UAE policy toward the sub-regional powers,” *Middle East Policy* 6, no. 4 (1999): 19–23; Andrew F. Cooper and Bessma Momani, “Qatar and expanded contours of small state diplomacy,” *The International Spectator* 46, no. 3 (2011): 113–128.
7. Sir Graham Boyce, “Qatar’s foreign policy,” *Asian Affairs* 44, no. 3 (2013): 367.
8. Benjamin de Carvalho and Iver B. Neumann, *Small State Status Seeking: Norway’s Quest for International Standing* (Routledge, 2014), 2.

ideas of “smallness” or middle powership, but also provides more precision in examining diverse state behaviour.

By using the terminology of entrepreneurial power, we delink powerhood from place in hierarchy, and can therefore look more holistically at ways that states, regardless of economic or political size, can exercise power in the current global order. Status, of course, has to do with hierarchy. Yet by looking at it outside of this context we can speak more of a positionality as encompassing status and position in contexts where clear hierarchies are not as obvious. What I am interested in here is a discussion of the constitution of power and of actorness beyond the traditional confines of hierarchy, and whether one is a great, middle, or small power. 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 characterized by flexible autocracy. Understanding the apparent enigma of traditionally rentier states exercising entrepreneurial power advances scholarship on the current global complex through enhancing our understanding of under-researched, non-Western sites and sources of change. Moreover, it tells us more about what entrepreneurial power can look like and become as the present and future of power continues to evolve.

### **Oil wealth, status, and reading power in non-Western places**

Oil-wealthy, authoritarian states like GCC countries tend to be written off as mere oil spots—interesting to International Political Economy (IPE) scholarship only for their energy resources. There is a limited, albeit growing, body of scholarship that has begun to engage the GCC within IR/IPE.<sup>9</sup> Scholars who do examine the GCC countries’ international activities tend to have regional expertise, while broader IR scholarship rarely incorporates Gulf cases within comparative studies of power. One wonders why oil-wealthy Gulf states are frequently omitted from discussions of power, and whether this neglect is related to how such states interact in—or are perceived in—the international order, or if it stems more from Western biases about who should be taken seriously as an international actor. Smith makes this argument when he suggests that market orientalism defines the way the Gulf’s economies, like other emerging markets, have been discussed in Western discourse. Drawing from Edward Said, emerging markets can be seen as “imaginative geographies”—that is, they are “spaces that are ranked, structured, theorised, assembled, and sometimes punished in ways inseparable from earlier forms of dealing with supposedly ‘backward’ economies and peoples.”<sup>10</sup> Despite broad

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9. Matteo Legrenzi and Bessma Momani, *Shifting Geo-Economic Power of the Gulf: Oil, Finance and Institutions* (London & New York: Ashgate, 2011); Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *The Gulf States in International Political Economy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Matthew Gray, *Qatar: Politics and the Challenges of Development* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2013); David B. Roberts, *Qatar: Securing the Global Ambitions of a City-State* (London: Hurst & Company, 2017).
  10. Benjamin Smith, *Market Orientalism: Cultural Economy and the Arab Gulf States* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2015), 9.

acknowledgement that traditional analysis focused on great powers is outdated, IR scholarship continues to look at the Western world or North Atlantic for its examples and theory building.<sup>11</sup> Against this backdrop, critique of Western dominance in IR has led to calls for non-Western IR, post-Western IR, or global IR.<sup>12</sup> However, many of these new introductions remain limited to the BRICS, East Asia, or “large” states.

Writing about politics and international relations in the Middle East is always a delicate endeavour. The author needs to struggle against many prevailing discourses. Sifting through the knowledge produced on the region is crucial in discussions of power politics. As Lockman has shown, the production of Western knowledge on the region has gone hand-in-hand with the production and reproduction of power structures, influencing interpretations of the Middle East until today.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, public policy and media debates have overtaken genuine scholarly interest in the region, influencing the types of questions addressed in academic institutions. The Gulf is arguably one of the last bastions of overt orientalism, where the scholar, journalist, and local expert reproduce and reinforce certain images of the region as though these were unproblematic. Called a “glittering sandbar”<sup>14</sup> or an “adult Disneyland,”<sup>15</sup> a rising Qatar or UAE are amusements of press analysis, described as nations punching above their weight, meddling in regional affairs, or struggling to fill a power vacuum left by a less-engaged United States.<sup>16</sup> In academic analysis, the Gulf remains “traditional,”<sup>17</sup> a place where

11. David C. Kang, “Hierarchy, balancing, and empirical puzzles in Asian international relations,” *International Security* 28, no. 3 (2004): 165–180; Amitav Acharya, “Global international relations (IR) and regional worlds,” *International Studies Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (2014): 647–159.
12. Acharya, “Global international relations”; Ching-Chang Chen, “The absence of non-Western IR theory in Asia reconsidered,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 11, no. 1 (2011): 1–23; Nicolas Blarel and Niels Van Willigen, “Coalitions and foreign-policy-making: Insights from the Global South,” *European Political Science* 16, no. 4 (2016): 502–514; Oliver Stuenkel, *Post-Western World: How Emerging Powers Are Remaking Global Order* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016); Giorgio Shani, “Toward a post-Western IR: The Umma, Khalsa Panth, and critical international relations theory,” *International Studies Review* 10, no. 4 (2008): 722–734.
13. Zachary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2009).
14. Robert Fulford, “Welcome to Qatar, the sandbar nation that hearts Hamas,” *National Post*, 9 August 2014, <http://news.nationalpost.com/full-comment/robert-fulford-welcome-to-qatar-the-sandbar-nation-that-hearts-hamas> (accessed 4 October 2018).
15. Johann Hari, “The dark side of Dubai,” *The Independent*, 6 April 2009, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/johann-hari/the-dark-side-of-dubai-1664368.html> (accessed 4 October 2018).
16. Theunis Bates, “Qatar: The tiny nation that roared,” *The Week*, 21 September 2013, <http://the-week.com/articles/459776/qatar-tiny-nation-that-roared> (accessed 4 October 2018); Mark Mazzetti, C.J. Chivers, and Eric Schmitt, “Taking outside role in Syria, Qatar funnels arms to rebels,” *The New York Times*, 29 June 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/30/world/middleeast/sending-missiles-to-syrian-rebels-qatar-muscles-in.html> (accessed 4 October 2018).
17. J.E. Peterson, “The GCC states: Participation, opposition and the fraying of the social contract,” Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States, Research Paper no. 26, December 2012, [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/55258/1/Peterson\\_2012.pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/55258/1/Peterson_2012.pdf) (accessed 4 October 2018).

“sameness prevails,”<sup>18</sup> and “where a narrow circle of academic specialists” relies on “simplistic theories” of rentierism, religion, and tribalism to explain the region.<sup>19</sup> The prominence, rapid development, and growing metropolises of Abu Dhabi, Doha, and Dubai are juxtaposed against traditional clothing, culture, or religious practice. This tendency not only exoticizes the region, it obfuscates the rather mundane practices of statecraft and policymaking that occur across time and space. Thus, when interpreting and explaining power and politics of the Gulf, one must sift through a vast number of reproducing clichés that do little to advance understandings and engage our capacities for critical scholarship.

The remainder of this section sets up the discussion of entrepreneurial power in Qatar and the UAE, discussing its sources and uses through the illustration in Figure 1, introduced earlier.

### *Understanding sources of power in Qatar and the UAE*

Qatar and the UAE are not powers in the traditional, realist sense of large, powerful states with extensive and effective coercive, hard power. Yet their influence and reach is certainly more expansive than traditional conceptions would project. Barnett and Duval’s definition of power as “the production, in and through social relations, of effects that shape the capacities of actors to determine their circumstances and fate” informs this analysis.<sup>20</sup> Building from this, I regard entrepreneurial power as linked to a choice of behaviour that aims to shape perceptions and outcomes.<sup>21</sup> With a view of power as inclusive of various types and stemming from various sources,<sup>22</sup> a conceptualization of these small Gulf states as powerful actors in their own right is possible—even where many would expect them to be overshadowed by a much larger regional hegemon, Saudi Arabia. As petro-wealthy states, material capabilities underwrite their position and possibilities for international engagement. However, this alone is an insufficient explanation. Not all oil-wealthy nations wield influence in the same way. Rather, the entrepreneurial powerhood of these actors is also constituted by social relations, behaviour, and activities.<sup>23</sup> The novelty or innovativeness of their pursuits is crucial to the entrepreneurial characterization.

Exercises of power in Qatar and the UAE have been characterized as soft, smart, or subtle. Most realist literature assumes small states are preoccupied with their

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18. Miriam Cooke, *Tribal Modern: Branding New Nations in the Arab Gulf* (University of California Press, 2014), 5.
  19. Adam Hanieh, “A petrodollar and a dream: Any reversal of neoliberalism in the Middle East would require challenging powerful Gulf States,” *Jacobin*, 12 January 2014, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/01/a-petrodollar-and-a-dream/> (accessed 4 October 2018).
  20. Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, “Power in international politics,” *International Organization* 59, no. 1 (2005): 42.
  21. This draws from the definition articulated by Ravenhill, in this issue.
  22. Barnett and Duvall, “Power in international politics.”
  23. As Wendt suggests, the objective of constitutive theories “is to account for the properties of things by reference to the structures in virtue of which they exist.” Alexander Wendt, “On constitution and causation in international relations,” *Review of International Studies* 24, no. 5 (1998): 105.

vulnerability in the international system, and will either bandwagon or balance against larger powers. Instead, several authors show how both states pursue a policy of strategic hedging—often referring to the propensity of small states in the region to maintain cordial relations with Iran while still looking to the US as the security guarantor.<sup>24</sup> Kamrava extends this, suggesting that Qatar’s power is based on a mixture of hedging along with forming alliances and norm entrepreneurship.<sup>25</sup> He demonstrates how hedging, through policies of dominance-denial and limited balancing, serves as a way for small states to maintain security assurances against multiple threats while remaining globally engaged. He calls the combined result of US military protection, massive international investments, and active, visible diplomatic leadership achieved through “aggressive branding and diplomatic hedging” a new form of power—subtle power.<sup>26</sup> Likewise, Cooper and Momani label Qatar a smart power, arguing that it is a resilient and innovative diplomatic actor, representative of the increased flexibility afforded to small states in the current international order.<sup>27</sup> Ulrichsen uses soft, smart, and hard power in his overview of the UAE’s power politics, and like Almezaini, believes the UAE’s economic and diplomatic strength underscore its foreign policy clout.<sup>28</sup> These conceptualizations are important because they have given more agency to small states than is traditionally afforded to them. When scholarship looks at certain smaller states as objects rather than actors in the international order, we lose some insights on what makes the contemporary world “hang” together.<sup>29</sup>

Economic capabilities underwrite the entrepreneurial power of Qatar and the UAE, and allow them to construct their image and legitimacy at home and abroad. What brings them together analytically is their interest in building their status regionally and internationally, and having their development achievements and influence recognized by the international community. Callen calls Qatar’s path “the broadcaster,” and the UAE’s path “the haven.”<sup>30</sup> The primary distinction is that, while both require state-branding and policies designed to attract foreign capital, the broadcaster approach seeks to use this capital (both financial and political) to project influence externally, while the haven approach is more

24. Yoel Guzansky, “The foreign-policy tools of small powers: Strategic hedging in the Persian Gulf,” *Middle East Policy* 22, no. 1 (2015): 112–122; Mehran Kamrava, *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics* (Cornell University Press, 2013) The applicability of this has weakened with uncertainty around the reliability of the US as a partner and guarantor, and the tense relations between Abu Dhabi, Riyadh, and Tehran.

25. Kamrava, *Qatar*, 49.

26. *Ibid.*, 12.

27. Cooper and Momani, “Qatar and expanded contours of small state diplomacy.”

28. Khalid S. Almezaini, *The UAE and Foreign Policy: Foreign Aid, Identities and Interests* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 49–50; Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *The United Arab Emirates: Power, Politics and Policy-Making* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

29. Phrasing borrowed from John G. Ruggie’s influential article, “What makes the world hang together? Neo-utilitarianism and the social constructivist challenge,” *International Organization* 52, no. 4 (1998): 855–885.

30. David J. Callen, “The diversification of (in)security in 21st century UAE and Qatar: Cultivating capital, interdependence and uncertainty” (PhD dissertation, University of Arizona, 2015), <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1654441217?pq-origsite=gscholar> (accessed 4 October 2018).



concerned with internal stability and further development. Likewise, Soubrier suggests that the UAE has built a security strategy on its credibility and state-building, while Qatar pursues state-branding through international visibility.<sup>31</sup> This is a useful distinction to explain behaviour in the 1990s and 2000s, but narrows in the period since. My research revealed that the UAE leverages its reputation as a reliable partner to exert international influence. Thus, both paths look outward. It is not without consequence that the UAE has spent more decades building up its military capabilities than Qatar, which relied longer on security assurances from the US, and balanced these with partners like France.<sup>32</sup>

A combination of factors spurred the active engagement of small Gulf states like Qatar and the UAE in regional affairs. The decline of traditional regional powers like Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, which are embroiled in resolving domestic instabilities, state collapse, or wars, provided an opportunity for GCC members to intervene in domestic politics in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, American abandonment of traditional US allies like Ben Ali and Mubarak in Tunisia and Egypt during the Arab Spring, combined with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran, and the US discourse on its pivot to Asia policy during the Obama years, contributed to a perception that the US was a less-interested or less-reliable partner in areas outside counterterrorism. This heightened a sense that local actors would have to take a more active regional role to secure desired outcomes. Where the states diverge is how they leverage their reputational strengths and select the means to pursue independent foreign policy goals. The divergence has become especially apparent since 2011, when Qatar laid its bets with the regional change narrative of the Arab Spring while the UAE (like Saudi Arabia) actively reinforced a continuance of the regional status quo. Relations with the US have become even more uncertain under the Trump administration's foreign policy incoherence.

The loud rupture of diplomatic relations between Qatar and several Middle East states (culminating with the blockade of Qatar in June 2017) brought long-simmering tensions to the fore. Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have opposed many of Qatar's activities since the uprisings, rejecting what they perceive as support for the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups. Qatar views the attack as a matter of sovereignty and foreign policy autonomy.<sup>34</sup> 2017 was not the first time relations between GCC members were strained. In 2014, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain pulled their ambassadors from Doha, in a move viewed as an expression of dissatisfaction with Qatar's unwillingness to assent to Saudi and Emirati positions. In 2002, Saudi Arabia also withdrew its ambassador for a

31. Emma Soubrier, "Evolving foreign and security policies: A comparative study of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates," in Khalid S. Almezaini and Jean-Marc Rickli, *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies Before and After the Arab Spring* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 123-143.

32. *Ibid.*, 130.

33. Almezaini and Rickli, *The Small Gulf States*, 186.

34. "Sheikh Tamim: Any talks must respect Qatar sovereignty," *Al Jazeera*, 22 June 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/07/sheikh-tamim-talks-respect-qatar-sovereignty-170721184815998.html> (accessed 4 October 2018).

five-year period over Al Jazeera's coverage of the country. Saudi–Qatari tensions have a long history, no more flagrant than in the 1990s, with border skirmishes and the 1996 implication of Saudi Arabia in an attempted counter-coup against Sheikh Hamad to reinstall his father.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, it is the independent foreign policies of Sheikh Hamad that have most aggravated the Saudis. Given its regional weight, Saudi Arabia views itself as the natural GCC leader and expects others to be followers—a formulation resented by most GCC members. Indeed, the small Gulf states regularly fail to follow, and instead disrupt Saudi policy goals. That the UAE appears to be following Saudi Arabia “may not be so much following a leader as finding themselves in step with a leader because of complementary interests.”<sup>36</sup> The joint opposition to Qatar thus illuminates both a recent—but perhaps temporary—Saudi–UAE rapprochement and the underlying economic competition between the UAE and Qatar.<sup>37</sup> How competition interacts with the mobilization of sources of entrepreneurial power, and risks failure, is explored in the last sections.

### *Interpreting the uses of power*

Wedged between much larger regional actors Saudi Arabia and Iran, and accustomed to the patronage and security relationships with Great Britain and the United States, Qatar and the UAE spent the early days of modern state-building conscious of their vulnerability in the international system. They became accustomed to establishing and maintaining good relations with external actors. Particularly after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the benefits of small states increasing “their importance to as many powerful external partners as possible” became more apparent.<sup>38</sup> Global financial engagement was an ideal avenue for this. Home to small populations, Qatar and the UAE, like their GCC neighbours, have traditionally had limited absorptive capacity for oil rent reinvestment domestically, and instead have engaged their capital account—purchasing foreign assets, buying official liabilities like US treasury bills, and investing in international financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF).<sup>39</sup>

Inflated oil prices during the 2000s augmented the UAE and Qatar's further engagement in the global economy. For instance, Qatar looked to long-term LNG export agreements (particularly with the UK and China) to increase its interdependency. Both countries' oil and gas profits were often invested through official

35. Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 237–239. For more details on earlier disputes between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, see Rosemarie Said Zahlan, *The Creation of Qatar* (Taylor & Francis, 1979), 80–90.

36. Andrew Fenton Cooper, Richard A. Higgott, and Kim Richard Nossal, “Bound to follow? Leadership and followership in the Gulf conflict,” *Political Science Quarterly* 106, no. 3 (1991): 397.

37. Mehran Kamrava, “The Arab Spring and the Saudi-led counterrevolution,” *Orbis* 56, no. 1 (2012): 96–104; Karen E. Young, *The Political Economy of Energy, Finance and Security in the United Arab Emirates: Between the Majlis and the Market* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Roberts, *Qatar*.

38. Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 41.

39. Bessma Momani, “The oil-producing Gulf states, the IMF and the International Financial Crisis,” *World Economics* 10, no. 1 (2009): 15.

state investment authorities, such as Abu Dhabi's Sovereign Wealth Fund, the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (1976),<sup>40</sup> and the much younger Qatar Investment Authority (QIA) (2006). The QIA targeted high-profile investments in Europe and the EU, including Credit Suisse, the London Stock Exchange, Sainsbury's, and Nasdaq, among others.<sup>41</sup> The 2000s also saw Gulf global investments and acquisitions become the subject of widening global attention.

Foreign aid proceeded similarly. Gulf governments have gained reputations as generous donors over the past four or five decades.<sup>42</sup> Since the 1970s, the UAE has been the third largest aid donor among Arab countries. Foreign aid facilitated the UAE's prominence in the Arab League and other regional and international organizations.<sup>43</sup> Qatar and the UAE use aid as a tool to expand influence, and also allow political interests to influence aid.<sup>44</sup>

Agency is an important part of the story of small states asserting themselves globally. Forming alliances is one component, but submissive cooperation is not the only option. As Momani has shown, Gulf governments chose not to come to the rescue of the West and bolster IMF finances during the 2008 financial crisis, partly in response to local concerns that investment should increase domestically, and partly because it was clear that Gulf funding would not be reciprocated with increased voice at the IMF executive board.<sup>45</sup> That Gulf states took a less collaborative position illustrates a desire for the region to have a larger formal role in global economic governance.

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 galvanization of economic resources toward particular ends, these states 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.

## Narrating development and power

That Qatar and the UAE have developed rapidly and extraordinarily over the past several decades is by now well established.<sup>46</sup> This impressive growth has raised their

40. Rawi Abdelal, "Sovereign wealth in Abu Dhabi," *Geopolitics* 14, no. 2 (2009): 317–327.

41. Gawdat Bahgat, "Energy as a main driver of Qatari foreign policy," *Comillas Journal of International Relations*, no. 5 (2016): 27.

42. Bessma Momani and Crystal A. Ennis, "Between caution and controversy: Lessons from the Gulf Arab states as (re-)emerging donors," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 25, no. 4 (2012): 605–627.

43. Almezaini, *The UAE and Foreign Policy*, 52, 92.

44. Lina Khatib, "Qatar's foreign policy: The limits of pragmatism," *International Affairs* 89, no. 2 (2013): 417–431; Khaled Almezaini, "From identities to politics: UAE foreign aid," in Isaline Bergamaschi, Phoebe Moore, and Arlene Tickner, eds., *South-South Cooperation Beyond the Myths: Rising Donors, New Aid Practices* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 225–244.

45. Momani, "The oil-producing Gulf states."

46. See, for example, Gray, *Qatar*; Christopher M. Davidson, *The United Arab Emirates: A Study In Survival* (Lynne Rienner Pub, 2005); Ulrichsen, *The Gulf States in International Political Economy*.

respective visibility and status globally, laying the groundwork for the construction of powerful development narratives. These narratives are used to shape and build identity and status at home and abroad. We cannot, in fact, view international status-seeking as separate from the pursuit of domestic legitimation.

Part of this trajectory can be tied to active, visionary leadership that has been effective in galvanizing the bulk of the citizenry behind a shared vision and sense of nationhood. Contestation certainly exists, but as the decades move forward, citizens increasingly identify with being an Emirati or being a Qatari. The story of Emirati and Qatari development—how it was rapid, sweeping, and guided by wise leadership—is central to conceptualizations of the two countries today.

Abdulla effectively discusses how “international society is the product of nation-states’ ‘identity construction,’ constantly and actively produced through a state’s decision-making apparatus.”<sup>47</sup> He demonstrates how the leadership of Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al-Nahyan, in leading this process, was instrumental in the formation and consolidation of the Emirati federation.<sup>48</sup> Ruling elite often underline a connection between development and leadership, and take centre stage in most development stories. This is not unusual; authoritarian legitimacy globally is often tied to pivotal individuals. Nation-building coalesces around development narratives, strengthening legitimacy and fuelling international image construction used in state-branding and status-seeking activities.

The Qatari case illustrates this well. Its modern political story is a story of the Al-Thanis, and the story of Qatar’s rise is very much interweaved with a story of Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani.<sup>49</sup> When Sheikh Hamad came to power in a coup against his father in 1995, he embraced a bolder approach in shaping the nation and putting Qatar on the world map. He raised Qatar’s international profile through mediation, sports, and broadcasting, in a way that has been characterized as “very much a personal vision.”<sup>50</sup> Under Hamad, Qatar became known as a small yet powerful state that would forge an independent path. This vision was also embraced in the narrative of the transfer of power to then 33-year-old crown prince, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, following his father’s abdication on 25 June 2013. 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. Sheikh Hamad stepped aside to let his son, born at the top side of the millennial generation, rule. The telling of this moment naturally melded into the constructed image of Qatar as a forward-looking nation, capitalizing on geopolitical and geo-economic change, and responding to the demographic gravities of a region with a youth-heavy demographic profile.

47. Ghaith A. Abdulla, “The making of UAE foreign policy: A ‘dynamic process model,’” *The Emirates Occasional Papers*, Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, Abu Dhabi, 2014, 7.

48. The UAE was established in 1971. Sheikh Zayed is regarded as the founding father of the federation.

49. Roberts, *Qatar*.

50. Boyce, “Qatar’s foreign policy,” 367.

Individual members of Al-Nahyan, Al-Maktoum, and Al-Thani families are well known, and written about frequently in the local press in a way that connects their activities with the progress or development of the nation. It is common to have commissioned biographies or even autobiographies sketching the history and role of a ruling personality in national development.

Institutions significant to the development of each country are frequently inseparable from members of ruling families, underlining how powerful elite agency can be under autocratic conditions. For example, the Qatar Foundation is indivisible from its patron Sheikha Moza, mother of Sheikh Tamim. Although private and non-profit in name, QF is very much a state-led organization spearheading Qatar's efforts at building itself into a regional and global leader in education, science, and cultural development.<sup>51</sup> In another sector, Mubadala, Abu Dhabi's state-owned enterprise serving as a massive investment vehicle and developer, is strongly connected with Mohamed bin Zayed, crown prince of Abu Dhabi. Although Mubadala was only established in 2002, it quickly came to be viewed as a reliable investment company, receiving AA ratings from Standard and Poor's, Moody's, and Fitch by 2008.<sup>52</sup> These represent just two examples of the many state bodies and initiatives across economic, political, and cultural spectrums, whose existence and activities are intricately tied to the ruling families of each state. The nature of the state combined with this mode of operation and embeddedness of the state in the economy facilitates both fast decision-making and implementation, unhindered by democratic deliberation.<sup>53</sup>

This high level of elite agency is coupled with widespread recitation of elite accomplishments. Without prompting, the names of ruling family members and their critical roles in various sectors and activities were frequently mentioned in interviews and informal conversations during this research. Inspiring broad consensus around the story of development aids in drawing support toward shared visions of the future. The role(s) of elites and especially rulers have become part and parcel of the story of development and how that story is communicated.

Rulers frequently use their platform to appeal to a national consciousness, encouraging individuals to work toward continued, shared development, and international status. Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim regularly speaks of the responsibilities of citizens toward the state, society, and the economy.<sup>54</sup> In his words, a citizen "bears an additional duty of advancing the work and being proud of it to realise its

51. Crystal A. Ennis, "Between trend and necessity: Top-down entrepreneurship promotion in Oman and Qatar," *The Muslim World* 105, no. 1 (2015): 116–138; Hiba Khodr, "The specialized cities of the Gulf Cooperation Council: A case study of a distinct type of policy innovation and diffusion," *Digest of Middle East Studies* 21, no. 1 (2012): 149–177.
52. Abdelal, "Sovereign wealth in Abu Dhabi," 323–324.
53. Martin Hvidt, "The Dubai model: An outline of key development-process elements in Dubai," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41, no. 3 (2009): 402–403.
54. تميم بن حمد آل ثاني, 'سمو الأمير يفتتح دور الانعقاد الرابع والأربعين لمجلس الشورى,' وكالة الأنباء القطرية, 3 November 2015, <http://www.qna.org.qa/News/15110309000012/>; "HH the Emir inaugurates Advisory Council 45th Ordinary Session," *Qatar News Agency*, 1 November 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170421024135/http://www.qna.org.qa/en-us/News/16110109240019/HH-the-Emir-Inaugurates-Advisory-Council-45th-Ordinary-Session> (accessed 4 October 2018).

mission in serving the community and the State.”<sup>55</sup> Likewise, speeches by Mohamed bin Zayed are peppered with such calls:

We are now in a new stage in which our nation is continuing to establish its position in both regional and international arenas. This stage requires every citizen to do their best and cooperate with their fellow citizens in order for our progress and development to continue and for our nation to be among the greatest in the world.<sup>56</sup>

This type of behaviour is viewed by Parkinson and Harding as part of entrepreneurial spaces (in their case, cities), where the process of economic transformation, and motivating participation in this process, are important factors for finding a place in a global economy. In such spaces, public, private and voluntary sectors develop a vision around development, “devise appropriate structures for implementing this vision and mobilise both local and non-local resources to pursue it.”<sup>57</sup>

Constructing entrepreneurialism, therefore, starts internally and spreads outward. Ruling elites intend to galvanize nationals around developmental aims, international acclaim, and ideas of citizenship as contribution and individual hard work. Highlighting the importance of “personal commitment, dedication and a strong work ethic,” the UAE’s development Vision 2021 claims that “at the heart of every Emirati’s ambition is a profound awareness of duty towards their nation.”<sup>58</sup> Kanna, writing on Dubai, suggests that “being a good neoliberal and national subject means seeing oneself as a sort of creative artist of identity, extracting useful and (allegedly) progressive aspects of ascriptive identity and reframing them through neoliberal values of entrepreneurialism, individualism, and cultural flexibility.”<sup>59</sup>

The outward angle is connected to global reputation-building and status-seeking. This, as shown later, lays the groundwork for foreign policy aspirations and interventions to be taken seriously by the international community. National image is significant for shaping how business professionals and policymakers from the world’s leading cities and nations perceive a place. Thus, international branding can be useful for supporting economic and political goals.<sup>60</sup> In the last decade or

55. “HH the Emir inaugurates Advisory Council 45th Ordinary Session.”

56. Mohamed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, “Statement by Mohamed Bin Zayed on the occasion of the 43rd anniversary of the UAE National Day,” Crown Prince Court, 1 December 2014, [https://www.cpc.gov.ae/en-us/mediacenter/Pages/Speeches\\_Details.aspx?SP\\_Id=14](https://www.cpc.gov.ae/en-us/mediacenter/Pages/Speeches_Details.aspx?SP_Id=14) (accessed 4 October 2018).

57. Michael Parkinson and Alan Harding, “European cities toward 2000: Entrepreneurialism, competition and social exclusion,” in Martin Rhodes, ed., *The Regions and the New Europe: Patterns in Core and Periphery Development* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), 67.

58. *UAE Vision 2021 Summary* (Abu Dhabi, 2010), <https://www.vision2021.ae/sites/default/files/uae-vision2021-brochure-english.pdf>, 4.

59. Ahmed Kanna, *Dubai: The City As Corporation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 151.

60. William Coombe and Jad Melki, “Global media and Brand Dubai,” *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 8, no. 1 (2012): 58–71; Khalid Hafeez et al., “The role of place branding and image in the development of sectoral clusters: The case of Dubai,” *Journal of Brand Management* 23, no. 4

two, nearly everyone with global media access would have encountered commercials advertising one or more aspect of the UAE and Qatar. 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. The active, aggressive nature of the UAE and Qatar towards building a global public image has moved the small nations from near obscurity to fame in the global public eye.<sup>61</sup>

Across both cases, efforts toward mobilizing local resources around shared visions of development and capitalist work ethic are also cautiously combined with references to a shared vision of culture, religion, and heritage. Rulers have found it important to speak to these in the face of rapid development and urban change which appears to erode all three. This is the narration of a liberal Arab society that shares norms and values with the North Atlantic, but also remains embedded within socially important ideas of heritage, culture, and faith. This balancing between the push toward hyper-modernity and ideas of cultural authenticity has become significant in shaping narratives of Gulf development.

With the embrace of these narratives, “state status-seeking has a direct and positive bearing on that state’s domestic legitimation.”<sup>62</sup> Is this, then, just another tool for autocratic, yet developmental, regimes to secure regime longevity? It does ring peculiar that autocratic states supposedly shaped by the rentier social contract would stress reforms, developments, and liberal portrayals in the international arena that may give mixed messages on individual empowerment in the domestic one. Jones views this behaviour in the UAE as a form of liberal social engineering in an illiberal state. According to her, “a new symbolism is being devised and projected to the people, and lavish state spectacles are proclaiming these changes to the world.”<sup>63</sup>

This fits with findings of scholarship on small-state status-seeking, which suggest that status-seeking is both “a sub-category of state identity politics” and a way that a state locates itself on the global political map.<sup>64</sup> It should not only be understood as a means of capturing agendas, or in the case of the Gulf states, prolonging authoritarianism. Rather these processes operate symbiotically, whereby domestic narratives interact with status-seeking ones at the global level, to paint a particular developmental image—states with open economies, forward-looking leaders, and dynamic societies pursuing globalization and growth while remaining rooted in tradition.

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(2016): 383–402; Simon Anholt, “Why brand? Some practical considerations for nation branding,” *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 2, no. 2 (2006): 97–107.

61. Coombe and Melki, “Global media and Brand Dubai.”

62. Carvalho and Neumann, *Small State Status Seeking*, 5.

63. Calvert W. Jones, “Seeing like an autocrat: Liberal social engineering in an illiberal state,” *Perspectives on Politics* 13, no. 1 (2015): 27.

64. Carvalho and Neumann, *Small State Status Seeking*, 5.

## Building the national brand and making an international mark

Status-building and national branding allow the state to explain itself to the world, as well as re-imagine its own position and identity at home.<sup>65</sup> Development narratives domestically and positioning and marketing globally are deeply intertwined in the making of entrepreneurial power. Qatar and the UAE have challenged usual assumptions of small states' options, by pursuing and sometimes achieving both autonomy and influence.<sup>66</sup> Both strive to escape the shadow of Saudi Arabia, although they have gone through periods of bandwagoning with it—most illustratively Qatar before Sheikh Hamad, and the UAE today (at least temporarily) mending fences in its joint opposition to Qatari regional activities. As Figure 1 illustrates, nation-building and status-building work together to facilitate influence in regional and global policy spaces. The goals include achieving legitimacy and influence. The course is two-pronged.

1. Establish status through image of reliability.
2. Leverage status for desired outcomes.

Alongside these, status competition and alternative foreign policy visions between these actors have given rise to attempts at undermining the legitimacy or status of the other. This section shows the interconnection between national brand-making and international mark-making.

Part of establishing status through an image of reliability is achieved by heightening the attractiveness of domestic markets to foreign and domestic capital. Creating enclaves for easy foreign investment and business activities—special economic zones—has been instrumental. These free zones are essentially special regulatory spaces whereby foreign companies can establish operations in an infrastructure-ready, tax-free, and tariff-free environment that allows full foreign ownership. Free zones were pioneered in the region by Dubai with the Jebel Ali Free Zone in the mid-1980s, but have expanded to include Dubai International Financial Centre, Dubai Media City, and Dubai Internet City, among others.<sup>67</sup> Free zones in Doha include Qatar Science and Technology Park, and the quasi-free zone Qatar Financial Centre.

Opportunities for consumption-driven economic activities are another dimension of national branding. The concept of “brand as nation” offers “a modicum of control in an uncertain, fast-paced, and competitive global marketplace” that entails “living the brand,” and forms “a consumerist form of nationalism.”<sup>68</sup> This includes increasing domestic consumption and entertainment—the

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65. Sue Curry Jansen, “Designer nations: Neo-liberal nation branding – Brand Estonia,” *Social Identities* 14, no. 1 (2008): 122.

66. Soubrier, “Evolving foreign and security policies,” 125.

67. Christopher Davidson, “The emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai: Contrasting roles in the international system,” *Asian Affairs* 38, no. 1 (2007): 39–40.

68. Zala Volcic and Mark Andrejevic, “Nation branding in the era of commercial nationalism,” *International Journal of Communication* 5 (2011): 603.



development of large retail spaces (ever-expanding and multiplying malls), restaurants, and places for cultural consumption, including museums and opera houses that feature domestic and foreign entertainment and exhibits.

The practice of joining elite clubs of global governance and raising visibility in important global issue areas is a feature of shaping an image of Emirati and Qatari entrepreneurial powerhood. Energy governance, aviation, and high-profile investments and political engagements have been central. Larson and Schevenchko show how states “may improve their status by joining elite clubs, trying to best the dominant states, or achieving pre-eminence outside the arena of geopolitical competition.”<sup>69</sup> Qatar and the UAE frequently pursue activities like these which heighten their status as contributing members of international society, and bring forms of prestige.<sup>70</sup>

Two examples in energy governance include Abu Dhabi’s selection as the permanent seat of the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) in 2009, and Doha becoming host to the Gas Exporting Countries Forum.<sup>71</sup> The vote on IRENA headquarters was significant to the UAE, involved substantial lobbying, and followed an official proposal from its previous competitor for hosting rights, Germany.<sup>72</sup> Renewables and climate change have received a lot of attention. Despite alternative energy potential, the region’s primacy in fossil fuels makes this appear a peculiar focus.<sup>73</sup> All Gulf states except Saudi Arabia signed the COP21 Paris Agreement with other UN members in April 2016. Emirati news reported that the UAE was the first Gulf state to ratify COP21 in September 2016, an act that was brought up in numerous exchanges with interlocutors.<sup>74</sup> UN records, however, place Kuwait’s ratification ahead of the UAE’s.<sup>75</sup> Qatar’s ratification followed later, on 23 June 2017. Qatar appears to be the first of GCC and OPEC members to craft a climate change policy. This occurred in the context of hosting COP18 in November 2012, and was part of an “ambitious ‘state branding’ programme.”<sup>76</sup>

69. Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, “Status seekers: Chinese and Russian responses to U.S. primacy,” *International Security* 34, no. 4 (2010): 67.
70. Li-Chen Sim, “Re-branding Abu Dhabi: From oil giant to energy titan,” *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 8, no. 1 (2012): 95; Mehran Kamrava, “Mediation and Qatari foreign policy,” *The Middle East Journal* 65, no. 4 (2011): 555.
71. Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring*.
72. The UAE allegedly visited over 100 countries and committed USD 135 million in assistance to the new organization. Mari Luomi, “Abu Dhabi’s alternative – Energy initiatives: Seizing climate-change opportunities,” *Middle East Policy* 16, no. 4 (2009): 113–114; Sim, “Re-branding Abu Dhabi,” 90–91.
73. Faris Al Sulayman, “The obstacles facing renewables in the Gulf,” *Gulf Affairs*, Summer 2016, 9–11; Katarina Uherova Hasbani, “Dubai: An inspiration for green economy transition in the Gulf,” *Gulf Affairs*, Summer 2016, 12–16.
74. Nadeem Hanif, “UAE a ‘positive example for Gulf countries’ after agreeing to ratify Paris Climate Agreement,” 6 September 2016, <https://www.thenational.ae/uae/environment/uae-a-positive-example-for-gulf-countries-after-agreeing-to-ratify-paris-climate-agreement-1.226338> (accessed 4 October 2018).
75. “Paris Agreement – Status of ratification,” United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 12 December 2016, [http://unfccc.int/paris\\_agreement/items/9444.php](http://unfccc.int/paris_agreement/items/9444.php) (accessed 4 October 2018).
76. Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Small States with a Big Role: Qatar and the United Arab Emirates in the Wake of the Arab Spring* (Durham: HH Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammad al-Sabah Publication Series,

A focus on excellence in aviation facilitates the UAE and Qatar's roles as pivot points between East and West, and further entrenches their centrality—especially the UAE's—as a regional logistics hub. These states are home to Emirates, Etihad, and Qatar Airways, which have been called “the three most dynamic airlines of the early twenty-first century.”<sup>77</sup> They are leading competitors to North American and European airlines, providing improved connectivity between West and East, and meeting positive customer service reviews.

Being concerned with gaining status, with domestic economic gain, and with changing outcomes sometimes appear to be separate goals. However, the means through which the three are pursued in these cases often reinforce each other. Status functions as “a key driver in the policies of small states in the everyday life of international society,”<sup>78</sup> and economic and status gains strengthen possibilities in foreign policy and exercises in entrepreneurial power. Like Young suggests, the “blending of economic liberalism, political authoritarianism and activist foreign policy makes for a volatile political identity, underlining the multiple processes of state-building that are taking place.”<sup>79</sup>

The overlaps in significant issue areas between the UAE and Qatar are no accident. A number of Gulf states “are competing for nation brand hegemony in the region,” with Dubai becoming the most successful at securing mostly positive messages.<sup>80</sup> This is at least partially attributable to official and active branding, hiring PR and lobbying firms for the purpose of influencing US public opinion and policy, and establishing a policy presence in Washington through funding think tanks and launching their own.<sup>81</sup> Such resources are regularly mobilized in the pursuit of particular foreign policy goals. For example, UAE lobbying was reportedly influential in stymieing Canada's bid for a UN Security Council seat in 2010 after relations between the two soured following a row over airline routes.<sup>82</sup> In 2017, Sudan was reportedly removed from Trump's travel ban after active Emirati lobbying in Washington.<sup>83</sup> Both the UAE and Qatar have been utilizing PR firms

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2012), 4–5. <https://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/alsabah/al-SabahPaperUlrichsenno3.pdf> (accessed 4 October 2018).

77. Ulrichsen, *Small States with a Big Role*, 7.

78. Carvalho and Neumann, *Small State Status Seeking*, 1.

79. Young, *The Political Economy of Energy, Finance and Security*, 114.

80. Robert Govers, “Brand Dubai and its competitors in the Middle East: An image and reputation analysis,” *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 8, no. 1 (2012): 48.

81. Yasin Al-Yasin and Ali A. Dashti, “Foreign countries and U.S. public relations firms: The case of three Persian Gulf states,” *Journal of Promotion Management* 14, no. 3–4 (2009): 355–374; Eric Lipton, Brooke Williams, and Nicholas Confessore, “Foreign powers buy influence at think tanks,” *The New York Times*, 6 September 2014, [https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/07/us/politics/foreign-powers-buy-influence-at-think-tanks.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/07/us/politics/foreign-powers-buy-influence-at-think-tanks.html?_r=0) (accessed 4 October 2018); Julian Pecquet, “Qatar spends big to counter charges of lax stance on terror,” *Al-Monitor*, 29 August 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/lobbying/qatar> (accessed 4 October 2018).

82. “UAE lobbied against Canada's UN bid,” *CBC News*, 14 October 2010, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/u-a-e-lobbied-against-canada-s-un-bid-1.915941> (accessed 4 October 2018).

83. Ryan Grim and Alex Emmons, “How Sudan got off Donald Trump's latest travel ban list,” *The Intercept*, 25 September 2017, <https://theintercept.com/2017/09/25/sudan-trump-travel-ban-uae-yemen/> (accessed 4 October 2018).

and lobbying to improve their image in Western countries since 9/11. These activities increased through the financial boom of the 2000s, and were amplified again to garner support for their contrasting positions on regional affairs since the Arab uprisings.<sup>84</sup>

The UAE has been especially effective in using its wealth to forge an international reputation and progressive label. Dubai, one of the small but better known of the seven emirates that make up the UAE, pioneered state-branding. Through a “centralised and hyper-entrepreneurial approach,” Dubai sought to establish its image as “the 21st century global city.”<sup>85</sup> Winning the bid to host World Expo 2020 was viewed as validation that it had achieved this. Brand Dubai, “the creative arm of Government of Dubai Media Office,” characterizes Dubai as cosmopolitan, multicultural, and business-friendly.<sup>86</sup> The UAE’s aggressive branding activities intensified further in the spring of 2017, when Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid launched the UAE Soft Power council—basically an official PR council staffed with cabinet members—aimed at reinforcing “the country’s status and reputation in the world.”<sup>87</sup> This appears to be working. In conversations with foreign embassies and actors in the UAE, several interlocutors mentioned that the UAE is viewed as the voice in the region most closely aligned with European norms. The UAE is considered the party to call for foreign actors seeking consultation on events in the region. Particularly since the Arab Spring, the UAE has been vocal on anti-terrorism and the need for a strong hand and stability in the region.

Although Qatar’s branding has seemed less successful than the UAE’s post-2012, three forms of public diplomacy in the previous two decades raised the country’s global profile and provided opportunities for exercising entrepreneurial power. First, Qatar’s cultural, educational, and media activities positioned it strategically on the region’s cultural map. Al Jazeera’s dominance of the Arab media landscape since its establishment in 1996 until the 2011 uprisings, and the renown of its English network during and since, have been significant factors; so much so that Cooper and Momani label Al Jazeera “Qatar’s most impressive diplomatic achievement.”<sup>88</sup> These accomplishments raised the ire of Saudi Arabia, as they highlighted Qatar’s potential as a political rival.<sup>89</sup> Indeed, Al Jazeera’s image decline in the region since 2012 perhaps highlights the vulnerabilities of soft power instruments.

84. Al-Yasin and Dashti, “Foreign countries and U.S. public relations firms”; Momani and Ennis, “Between caution and controversy.”

85. Michele Acuto, “High-rise Dubai urban entrepreneurialism and the technology of symbolic power,” *Cities* 27, no. 4 (2010): 272.

86. “What we do,” *Brand Dubai*, <http://www.branddubai.com/indexen.php/> (accessed 4 October 2018).

87. “Dubai ruler launches council to enhance UAE’s reputation,” *Arabian Business*, 29 April 2017, <http://www.arabianbusiness.com/dubai-ruler-launches-council-enhance-uae-s-reputation-672323.html> (accessed 4 October 2018).

88. Khatib, “Qatar’s foreign policy,” 425–429; Cooper and Momani, “Qatar and expanded contours of small state diplomacy,” 122.

89. Khatib, “Qatar’s foreign policy,” 425.

Second, Qatar's engagement in sport through pursuing the right to host the FIFA 2022 World Cup illustrates its desire to be recognized as "a truly global sporting destination."<sup>90</sup> Its pursuit of these goals began earlier, and includes highly-publicized investments and event hosting. For instance, Qatar Sports Investment Group purchased Paris Saint-Germain (PSG), and secured Qatari sponsorship of FC Barcelona (first through Qatar Foundation, then Qatar Airways). Significantly, Qatar has hosted major global sporting events, including the 2006 Asian Games and the 2011 Asian Cup football tournament.<sup>91</sup> It is, however, the World Cup win that has been the focus of negative attention, raising global attentiveness to the human rights abuses inherent in the international labour-recruiting networks and domestic sponsorship system. Thus, one of the risks of these forms of diplomatic engagement or soft power mechanisms is what Brannagan and Giulianiotti call "soft disempowerment."<sup>92</sup> More recently, Qatar made headlines for facilitating the most expensive player transfer in football history, securing one of the most recognizable figures for PSG.<sup>93</sup> Such moves can also be viewed as forms of diplomacy, projecting a business-as-usual image to assuage fears of investors and political allies over the effects of the regional blockade.

Qatar's third area of public diplomacy occurs in prominent mediation efforts and humanitarian aid. Its active foreign policy under Sheikh Hamad was characterized by a willingness and ability to insert itself as a mediator into wider regional conflicts.<sup>94</sup> It often coupled economic diplomacy with parallel mediation efforts, as seen in Palestine, Lebanon, and Somalia.<sup>95</sup> Not only was Qatar willing to serve as a mediator, it had a practice of developing ties with various global and regional actors and rivals, including neighbouring GCC countries, Iran, Israel, Hezbollah, Hamas, and the US. This behaviour allowed Qatar to position itself as an impartial peace broker, but was also controversial.<sup>96</sup> Qatar's reputation for impartiality and its practice of making itself a useful ally to Western partners facilitated its status as a

90. Paul Michael Brannagan and Richard Giulianiotti, "Soft power and soft disempowerment: Qatar, global sport and football's 2022 World Cup finals," *Leisure Studies* 34, no. 6 (2015): 703.
91. Brannagan and Giulianiotti, "Soft power and soft disempowerment"; James M. Dorsey, "How Qatar is its own worst enemy," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 32, no. 3 (2015): 422-439.
92. Brannagan and Giulianiotti, "Soft power and soft disempowerment."
93. Motez Bishara, "European soccer feels force of PSG and Qatar's 'soft power,'" *CNN*, 1 September 2017, <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/09/01/football/soft-power-and-football-mega-transfers-psg-neymar-mbappe-qatar/index.html> (accessed 4 October 2018).
94. Khatib, "Qatar's foreign policy"; Kamrava, "Mediation."
95. Stig Jarle Hansen, ed., *Religion, Prestige and Windows of Opportunity? (Qatari Peace-Making and Foreign Policy Engagement)*, vol. 48, Noragric Working Paper, Norwegian University of Life Sciences, 2013, [http://www.umb.no/statisk/noragric/publications/working\\_papers/working\\_paper\\_no\\_48.pdf](http://www.umb.no/statisk/noragric/publications/working_papers/working_paper_no_48.pdf) (accessed 4 October 2018).
96. Cooper and Momani, "Qatar and expanded contours of small state diplomacy." Moves such as hosting a Taliban embassy in 2013 were criticized heavily by the UAE and Saudi Arabia as abetting Islamists. However, not only was this move linked to US efforts to quietly facilitate peace talks, reports reveal that the UAE competed to host the Taliban and were displeased the embassy went to Doha instead. David Kilpatrick, "Persian Gulf rivals competed to host Taliban, leaked emails show," *The New York Times*, 31 July 2017, <https://mobile.nytimes.com/2017/07/31/world/middleeast/uae-qatar-taliban-emails.html> (accessed 4 October 2018).

mediator. That Qatar chose sides in many of the Arab uprisings was interpreted as a sharp break from its previous policy, and undermined its reputation as mediator.<sup>97</sup>

By demonstrating the various innovations available to states from a diplomatic toolbox, these three aspects hint toward entrepreneurial powerhood. They also underline the risks of soft disempowerment. The possibility of reputation recovery exists, provided the state is equipped with a powerful development narrative and an effective branding strategy. In Neumann and de Carvalho's view, while ambitious small states may masquerade as something larger than they are, they are "simply seeking to be acknowledged as a *good power*."<sup>98</sup> This can be viewed as a form of social mobility in state relations. The emulation of "values and practices of the higher-status group with the goal of gaining admission into elite clubs"<sup>99</sup> is status-seeking and competitive behaviour. This is evident in the UAE's positioning as a liberal, anti-Islamist partner in the region. Similarly, Qatar's involvement in political and humanitarian crises abroad, including aid to Darfur and the US Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina; mediation across the Horn of Africa, in Lebanon and Palestine; and military intervention or support in Libya and Syria, is illustrative of its desire to be not only a global citizen but also a globally important crisis responder—as peace-maker, humanitarian donor, or security if need be. Kamrava suggests that Qatar's behaviour as a "good global citizen" is linked to its subtle power.<sup>100</sup>

Wishing to be perceived as a good power underlies some of the competitive behaviours within UAE–Qatari relations. Each state has resorted to attempts to discredit the other's status as a good power or partner in international affairs, and, by default, enhance its own status. Disagreements on the direction of outcomes in the post-2011 MENA context made this apparent, with the UAE regularly differentiating itself from Qatar as the seeker of stability. Qatar, in contrast, positioned itself as a supporter of regional change, as represented by larger popular engagement and the backing of actors like the Muslim Brotherhood. Both have actively engaged in media and the US think tank environment—with Qatar arguing that the Muslim Brotherhood's variety of political Islam was the region's best chance toward democratization, and the UAE vigorously supporting the thesis that the Brotherhood is a major threat to regional stability. Since the 2017 blockade, information warfare between the rivals has become very pronounced.

### **New territory: Flirting with failure in new power exercises**

In the seven years since the onset of the Arab uprisings, the roles of Qatar and the UAE in shaping outcomes in the MENA have continued to evolve. Balancing between the pursuit of change and the pursuit of status quo, these two countries have had ebbs and flows in the rivalry between them, and with Saudi Arabia. Both countries have developed assertive regional policies toward political

97. Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring*, 151.

98. Carvalho and Neumann, *Small State Status Seeking*, 2.

99. Larson and Shevchenko, "Status seekers," 67.

100. Kamrava, *Qatar*, 63.

change, and, together with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, have backed fellow monarchical regimes in the region through the GCC.

In the early days of the Arab uprisings, Qatar projected its influence relatively successfully through its use of broadcast, by joining international coalitions like in Libya, and by endorsing oppositional groups it viewed as the most likely future power-holders. Both Qatar and the UAE followed Saudi's lead in intervening in Bahrain to crush the uprising in 2011. Meanwhile, the UAE capitalized on its reputation as a safe haven, and began attracting even more regional capital from less stable neighbours.<sup>101</sup> It too participated in the Libyan intervention, and across regional conflicts moved decisively against political Islam. Although Qatar under the new Emir initially seemed to be moving more quietly than under his father, many did not expect this to last. In the words of two separate Emirati interlocutors, "Just wait, Qatar will be back!" At the time, this seemed to be an expression of the belief that Qatar would return to its bolder foreign policy activities. In light of the recent blockade, it could be interpreted as a view that Qatar would once again bear the brunt of regional ire.

It is evident that branding does not always work as planned, especially in a competitive environment. This was illustrated by the reaction to several of Qatar's foreign policy interventions, and in continued negative press over Qatar's winning bid to host the FIFA 2022 World Cup. The bid has been embroiled in controversy, ranging from corruption allegations to a heightened outcry over the treatment of migrant construction labourers in building FIFA stadiums. The international attention hosting the World Cup brought to Qatar opened a door for its regional rivals to fan the flames of suspicion. The example of the Qatari blockade and stalemate reveals the importance of Qatar's strategy of partner diversification for enduring such actions.

Whatever happens, it is too early to speculate on regional outcomes in a space undergoing a great deal of political upheaval. Policy miscalculations and failures happen to all states with an active global presence. Both states have demonstrated a willingness to undertake activities even when costs may be incurred. Betting on outcomes of dramatic regional change is a risky enterprise, especially when neighbouring entrepreneurial states bet against you. Qatar has most visibly borne the brunt of policy failures. Its policy shift from neutrality in mediation to choosing winners in interventions has proven costly. Yet even the UAE, having taken an active part in the Saudi-led coalition war in Yemen, faces concerns about policy overreach and failure. When 45 soldiers died in a missile attack in Yemen in the fall of 2015, the UAE declared a day of mourning and later a National Martyrs' Day to commemorate all those who "sacrifice their lives in the line of duty."<sup>102</sup> Since, its once-vocal engagement has grown much quieter as success appears murkier. Its vocalism has instead shifted to opposition to Qatar.

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101. Benedetta Berti and Yoel Guzansky, "Gulf monarchies in a changing Middle East: Is spring far behind?" *Orbis* 59, no. 1 (2015): 35–48.

102. Rym Ghazal, "Martyrs' Day a fitting tribute to UAE's heroes," *The National*, 9 September 2015, <https://www.thenational.ae/uae/government/martyrs-day-a-fitting-tribute-to-uae-s-heroes-1.130492> (accessed 4 October 2018).

Attempts to use military engagements as a symbol of nationalism and unity are far more complicated than development successes. Developing states are more likely to embrace leadership on economic trajectories than security ones “that can detract from their efforts at internal economic development.”<sup>103</sup> Military engagement by actors like the UAE and Qatar in regional conflicts represented a newer extension of their power and coalition-building. If the new security territory continues to be contentious and the cost incurred raises, we may see a recalculation follow.

What will prove important is how actors in the region respond to controversies and failures. Active branding and lobbying appears to be an effective tool, especially in the Emirati case. Qatar’s exercises in public diplomacy are complicated by perceived failures to address its reform promises on its labour sponsorship system, and its pledges to exercise caution in the support of rebel groups in the region.<sup>104</sup> The UAE’s boycott of Qatar is also risky. It has caused sudden and sharp difficulties for regional and international businesses based in Dubai—raising questions about its once-perceived reliability. How these states move forward will be illustrative of how meaningful failure is for entrepreneurial powers, and how such power can continue to be exercised in the face of controversy and competition. Understanding actor preferences for regional outcomes, the meaning of changing external security calculations, and the presence of a large domineering neighbour is critical for interpreting evolving regional dynamics. Building on these assessments, I suggest that not only understanding the pursuit of status, but also the negotiation of status among new, small, but loud players in international affairs provides a crucial angle for interpreting entrepreneurial state behaviour.

## Conclusion: States, power, and autocracy

This paper explores the puzzle of oil-wealthy, rentier states exerting entrepreneurial power in regional and global affairs. It shows how entrepreneurial power in Qatar and the UAE has been facilitated by the pursuit of status, the construction of compelling development narratives, and effective branding coupled with flexible autocratic governing. When power is traditionally discussed in the context of the Gulf, focus usually centres on security and securitization discourses with a view of US–Gulf relations. Extending analysis beyond this allows scholars to bring the Gulf into wider conversations on the changing global political economy and global “dispersal of power” which has given rise to “a new layer of ambitious” states seeking to craft “an independent foreign policy profile and clout.”<sup>105</sup>

103. Andrej Krickovic, “‘All politics is regional’: Emerging powers and the regionalization of global governance,” *Global Governance* 21, no. 4 (2015): 559.

104. Dorsey, “How Qatar is its own worst enemy.”

105. Kristina Kausch, “The promise of Middle Eastern swing states,” *Carnegie Europe*, 12 May 2016, <http://carnegieeuropa.eu/2016/05/12/promise-of-middle-eastern-swing-states-pub-63565> (accessed 4 October 2018).

Although research on Western states has observed that status-seeking abroad is rarely popular with the public electorate,<sup>106</sup> this finding may operate differently in autocratic states that base their legitimacy on a different mix than popular electoral politics—of which there are few. Naturally, it is difficult to measure popularity in non-democratic political systems, but it is clear that these states expend a great deal of effort managing popular opinion nonetheless. Powerful development narratives domestically have become important to image-shaping globally. Autocracy affords more flexibility in governance and the speed of policy implementation. This can have positive outcomes, especially in economic development, but appears more complicated in other issue areas. Managing the discourse around policy change and intervention becomes especially important.

Using the term entrepreneurial power allows us to explore such dynamics and think about power through multiple levels of governance. It helps us move away from the strictures that accompany stories of hierarchy, hegemony, and position, to understand how multiple states across world regions pursue different forms of power and outcomes in the international order. Entrepreneurial power is strengthened by its analytical flexibility, absent restrictions of positional, size, or regime-type descriptors. It also allows more precision in analysis by facilitating the examination of the diversity and idiosyncrasies which afford an assortment of state power. Moreover, it contributes to literature on global IR by not forcing comparisons to development path or expressions of power based solely on examples from the North Atlantic.

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106. Carvalho and Neumann, *Small State Status Seeking*.