This paper argues that the internal political stability of Arab Gulf monarchies is linked to external regional forces. The essay posits that regional pressures and rivalries trigger domestic policy responses that strengthen these monarchies’ political standing at home. Empirically, the essay focuses on the case of Qatar and argues that the country’s (1) militarization and (2) assertive foreign policy are reflective of its small-state vulnerability. While the literature emphasizes the regional consequences of Qatar’s robust defense and foreign policy pursuits, just as significant are the domestic implications. By responding to external regional pressures, Qatar’s monarchy enhances its standing at home.

As such, this paper asserts that there is a causal relationship between how Qatar experiences the international system and the subnational outcome of its stable monarchical rule. This argument falls within the tradition of the “aussenpolitik”¹ theoretical framework, which asserts that external forces beyond the state dictate its cohesion and structure internally. With respect to this framework, Qatar is a useful case as it ranks high on both the independent variable (external pressure beyond the state) and dependent variable (political cohesion within the state).

This paper generates two conclusions. First, the external security pressures that Qatar confronts strengthen the internal resilience of the Al-Thani dynasty by affording it

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¹ Aussenpolitik logic is originally associated with the work of German historian Leopold von Ranke.
a rationale for robust spending on military imports that in turn serve as visual symbols of an advanced state. While the system forces Qatar to confront the “perils of small-state anonymity and vulnerability,” simultaneously, these external challenges rationalize the type of internal militarization of the state that the monarchy uses to distinguish and legitimate its rule. The domestic-political context of Qatar reveals a monarchy striving to ‘prove itself’ by brandishing the material signifiers of modernity and self-reliance—such as advanced weaponry and military bases.

Second, Qatar’s aggressive foreign policy also sits at the nexus of external and internal variables. The prevalent theme that Qatar punches above its weight regionally through “subtle power” is, at its core, a claim that a strong ideational position affords the country regional status not possible from its material capabilities alone. Moreover, the contentious regional identity that Qatar assumes shapes its internal character. In adopting an ideologically combative regional identity, the monarchy invokes the external antagonisms necessary to cultivate greater internal cohesion. Qatar’s domestic-political context reveals a monarchy seeking to contrive a sense of national distinctiveness absent a compelling national myth and engender a sentiment of collectivism absent inclusive political rule.

In sum, this paper asserts that Qatar’s reaction to regional forces compels it to adopt state behaviors externally that buffer the resilience of the ruling family at home. By placing an analytical emphasis on the international system’s effect on the Qatari state, the paper diverges from traditional studies of monarchical resilience which emphasize subnational variables like patronage politics and political culture. Using Qatar as a case study, the paper asserts that by placing a greater emphasis on the system-level pressures that Arab monarchies experience, it is possible to derive new insights regarding their internal composition and political continuity.