

# **Qatar's Foreign Policy in Global Turmoil**

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The role of small states in international relations has been a not interesting topic for a long time. It was believed that they had no real influence on international politics. In the 20th century, small states surprised the world with economic miracles, and at the same time, international organizations allowed them to challenge the big powers with their own united voice. However, the example of Qatar completely supports the skeptic attitude towards small states. Qatar tried to overcome “vulnerability”, which is an undeniable characteristic of small states, through active foreign policy. This effort was largely successful.

One of the most important theories of international relations is undoubtedly realism. Realism recognizes the dominance of power politics in international relations. That is why it is inherently biased towards the study of great powers – world or regional hegemons, and pays less attention to small states.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the main position of realist authors towards small states is that they have to establish some type of military-political connection with a stronger power in all options.

Liberalism, believes that modern politics has changed its face. Today, actors are not only nation states, but also international organizations and other non-state actors.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, according to liberalism, international politics is a much more complex phenomenon and cannot be reduced to the balance of power based on the military strength of states and the distribution of this power.

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2 Galal, A., 2020. External Behavior of Small States in Light of Theories of International Relations. Review of Economics and Political Science 5.

3 Mcglinchey S., Walters R., Scheinpfug C., 2017. International Relations Theory. Bristol: E-International Relations Publishing.

The third important international relations theory is constructivism. Constructivists believe that the international system and its elements are part of social reality. That is why they are constructed by humans.

Different tribes lived on the territory of modern Qatar, as well as on the entire Arabian Peninsula. A large part of Qatar's territory is a desert, since ancient times it has been inhabited mainly by the seashore. The tribes living here are divided into two large groups. Bedouins, who led a nomadic life in the desert and Hadars - tribes living in villages. The ruling Al-Sani dynasty belongs to the latter. After Great Britain took possession of the Strait of Hormuz in 1622, the region gained special trade importance for it. The intensification of British interests in the Arab world is also connected with Napoleon's campaign in Egypt. During the 19th century, the United Kingdom, through various treaties, legalized specific sheikhs to rule a defined area.<sup>4</sup>

At the beginning of the 20th century, the main problem and challenge for Qatar was the rising Al-Saud dynasty. Such a development would have been unacceptable to the United Kingdom as well, since the Al-Saud dynasty did not participate in the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire and was therefore expected to enter under the protection of the Ottoman Empire. That is why, in 1916, the United Kingdom signed an official agreement with the son of the deceased Sheikh Jasim Al-Thani. With this treaty, Britain officially recognized the independence of Qatar.

The beginning of the 90s of the 20th centuries was difficult for Qatar. The decline in the price of oil has led to the decline of an economy completely dependent on this resource. In 1991, the first demands for political reform appeared, which was followed by arrests of opponents from Sheikh Khalifa's side. In the same period, Sheikh Khalifa's son Hamad bin Khalifa al-Sani was already equipped with serious power in the political arena of Qatar. By 1992, Hamad effectively ruled the state. Also, he was perceived by many as a war hero during the occupation of Kuwait by Iraq, the military unit of the "Gulf Cooperation Council" led by Hamad successfully liberated one of the cities. In 1995, when Sheikh Khalifa was abroad, Hamad seized power and forbade his father to return to the country. The new government was soon recognized by the USA and other countries. In 1996, Sheikh Khalifa attempted to return to power and or-

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4 Fromherz, A. J., 2017. Qatar: A Modern History. London: Georgetown University Press.

ganize a counter-coup. He was supported by his ally - Saudi Arabia. Hamad managed to retain power.

Nowadays Qatar is a country in West Asia. The total population of Qatar is 2.6 million, with 313.000 of them Qatari citizens and 2.3 million expatriates. In terms of income, the country has the fifth-highest GDP per capita in the world<sup>5</sup> and one of the highest GNI per capita.<sup>6</sup> Qatar ranks 40th in the Human Development Index, the fourth-highest HDI in the Arab world. It is a high-income economy, backed by the world's third-largest natural gas reserves and oil reserves.

Following the coup in 1995, Qatar made a concerted effort to develop its own foreign policy. The establishment of Al-Jazeera TV was one of the earliest examples of this. Because it frequently criticized the Al Saud monarchy and other Arab regimes, Al-Jazeera gained popularity throughout the Arab world.<sup>7</sup> In 2002, the first split between Qatar and other Gulf states occurred. Bahrain banned Al-Jazeera broadcasting, the latter's office in Kuwait was closed. Saudi Arabia banned Al-Jazeera from its territory and recalled ambassadors from Qatar. For 5 years, bilateral relations between these two neighboring countries did not actually exist.<sup>8</sup>

Since 2010, relations between Qatar and the Gulf countries have been taking place against the backdrop of the Arab Spring. It is important to note several events of regional significance. Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, as well as Qatar's direct involvement in the Syrian civil war, were not positively assessed by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The situation became even more complicated after Syria descended into complete chaos, with Saudi Arabia and Qatar supporting Bashar al-Assad's various rival opposition factions.<sup>9</sup>

Even if there have been sporadic instances of collaboration, it is evident that Saudi Arabia and Qatar have a generally hostile relationship. As previously stated, this is not surprising because Qatar's active foreign policy was developed specifically to counter Saudi Arabia's threats. Other tiny Gulf governments frequently rejected Qatar due to

5 Helou, E. A., (n.d.). Qatar GDP & Economy Overview. Retrieved from Middle East Economy.

6 Qatar GDP Per Capita. (2024). Retrieved from <https://www.macrotrends.net/>.

7 Verhoeven, R. M., 2020. Overcoming Smallness: Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Strategic Realignment in the Gulf. *International Politics* 57.

8 Pashayan, A., 2018. Saudi Arabia-Qatar. From Cooperation to Confrontation.

9 Miller, 2016. Desert Kingdoms to Global Powers.

Saudi Arabia's influence. Qatar needs specific military assurances of security since Saudi Arabia, its large and powerful neighbor, is its primary adversary. One of the primary guarantors proved to be the US. The United States and Qatar have maintained a military alliance since the 1990s. In 1992, a defense cooperation agreement was signed. In 1996, Qatar contributed \$1 billion to build the Al-Udeidah Air Base. This base soon became one of the most important and large US military bases in the region.<sup>10</sup> Since 2002, CENTRCOM has been located here, and it is from here that the US conducted its operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Along with strategic cooperation, there are clear US economic interests in Qatar. US energy companies have significant investments in Qatar's energy sector.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the presence of security guarantees from the US, Qatar tries not to depend on only one power. This is how we can explain the rapprochement process between Qatar and Turkey. Qatar and Erdogan's Turkey are united by the tendency to support Islamist movements. For example, during the Arab Spring both states supported the Muslim Brotherhood. Qatar and Turkey also had a common policy in Syria. These two states can be seen as revisionist states at the regional level, which challenged the existing regional security system. In addition, Turkey has military capabilities, and Qatar has large financial resources. All this, together with the ideological similarity, which is manifested in the support of the Islamist movements, creates an important basis for the military-political union. Therefore since 2018, Turkish military units have been stationed on the territory of Qatar. In this point Qatar creates a great power ally to achieve their safety. However, it is actually more complex. If Qatar's policy is explained by the principles of total reality, then its foreign policy should be a reflection of US foreign priorities. The relationship between Qatar and Iran shows that Qatar, despite being a military ally of the United States of America, continues to maintain good neighborly and active relations with the latter's rival.

As a result of its neutral position in the Iraq-Iran war, Qatar accepted Iran's support in its territorial dispute with Bahrain. Qatar welcomed the Iran nuclear deal reached in 2015. This allowed him to invest in Iran's energy sector and make significant profits. Qatar's response was also different from other Gulf Arab nations', who thought the nuclear

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10 Saidy, B., 2021. Qatar's Military Power and Diplomacy: The Emerging Roles of Small States in International Relations.

11 Momani, C. a. (n.d.). Qatar and Expanded Contours of Small State Diplomacy.

agreement would make their bitter enemy stronger. Qatar and Iran are not allies. When we look at global politics outside of the Gulf, this becomes evident. For instance, Iran has long backed Bashar al-Assad in Syria, but Qatar backs the opposition to him.

Sheikh Hamad understood early on how crucial the soft power approach was to the nation. Getting Qatar firmly established on the map was one of his top concerns. Qatar's soft power operates in a variety of ways. This includes sports, culture, etc. But without a doubt, the founding of Al-Jazeera was the most significant and impactful. One could argue that the latter enabled the existence and broad dissemination of Qatar's soft power. Furthermore, it wouldn't be an audacious claim to argue that Al-Jazeera was and remains a key tool of Qatar's foreign policy. Al-Jazeera was founded in 1996. It was preceded by the closure of the office of the Arabic version of the BBC. The reason for this was their criticism of the members of the Al-Saud royal family. Sheikh Hamad recruited people with extensive journalistic experience to work here. At first, Al-Jazeera was broadcast only in Arabic. Criticism of Arab dictatorial regimes and royal families was often heard in Al-Jazeera. A 2004 survey showed that Al-Jazeera had very high trust among the public, including Saudi citizens, despite the tense situation between the two countries during this period. In order to improve its international image, the English-language version of Al-Jazeera started broadcasting in 2006. Soon it was able to compete with such important media outlets as CNN and BBC. Such success of Al-Jazeera really put Qatar on the map. Through it, Qatar covers all its important political, cultural or sporting achievements. This information reaches many people.<sup>12</sup>

Qatar's soft power consists of more than just Al-Jazeera. Sports and cultural accomplishments are equally significant in this context; hosting FIFA 2022 in Qatar is one example. All of these items, however, have gained popularity, and Al-Jazeera is the main source of information about them. Qatar's branding is significantly influenced by Al-Jazeera.

Another important feature of Qatar's foreign policy is its involvement as a mediator in many different conflicts. Mediation of intra-state or inter-state conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa region was known even before the appearance of Qatar. The role of mediators was often played by regional powers - Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

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12 Samuel-Azran. (n.d.). Al-Jazeera, Qatar, and New Tactics in State-Sponsored Media Diplomacy.

The case of Qatar is distinguished by the fact that, until then, the role of mediator in international relations by small states was not a frequent case.

Until now, Qatar has been unable to stand in many conflict situations. It is unconditionally helped in this process, on the one hand, by large financial resources, on the other hand, by the lack of bureaucracy and the presence of real political power in the hands of only a few people. The mediation procedure heavily relies on neutrality, which Qatar was cautious about prior to the Arab Spring. It had less experience with other state or non-state players than Saudi Arabia or Egypt up until that point because it was a relatively new force in regional politics. Qatar's multilateral relationships are very significant. It was determined that Qatar's engagement in the events in Lebanon was especially effective.

Qatar has had examples of both successful and failed mediations, but in all cases, branding has been particularly important to its foreign policy. Each time Qatar tried to mediate to de-escalate the conflict, Qatar gained the status of an honest mediator and peace-loving state in the region.

Qatar's open desire to participate as a mediator in the negotiations between the US and Iran is also noteworthy. All this shows that Qatar still remains an important mediator in the region and is likely to maintain this role in the near future. Nowadays we can see that Qatar mediating Israeli-Hamas negotiations for the de-escalation in Gaza. We should mention that large state Egypt also tried to mediate between them but it failed, but small state Qatar because of the reputation, because of the previous experience did it and these negotiations continues already months.

In 2014, Qatar's aggressive foreign policy created difficulties. Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia all called back their diplomats from Qatar this year. Then, things quickly changed. Sheikh Hamad's resignation and the accession of his son, Sheikh Tamim, to the Amira throne followed this event. This is also thought to have been done to strengthen ties with Saudi Arabia.

Three significant variables were added to the overall backdrop of Saudi Arabia's discontent with Qatar. The first is Muhammad bin Salman, the country's successor, who has a sour attitude toward Qatar.

The second reason was US President Donald Trump's visit to Riyadh. Furthermore, if Saudi Arabia took action against Qatar, the US presidential administration implicitly supported it.

The third reason was Qatar's release of 26 individuals who had been kidnapped by Shiites in Iraq. Representatives of the Qatari royal family were among them.

On June 5, 2017, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt announced a blockade of Qatar and severed diplomatic ties with it. The accusations against Qatar were as follows: supporting Islamists and terrorists in various parts of the region; pursuing Iran's interests; Al-Jazeera's encouragement of protests around the region.

The four countries made 13 demands to Qatar. These demands included the closure of Al-Jazeera, the end of Qatar's independent foreign policy and its submission to Saudi Arabia's foreign priorities. Since these 13 requirements were too strict, the Quartet soon demanded that 6 new general principles be met. These 6 principles meant the submission of Qatar to Saudi Arabia.

Presumably, the urge to penalize Qatar was sparked in part by Qatar's aggressive attempts to resolve different regional disputes. The country faced serious issues as a result of the abrupt declaration of the blockade and the blockade itself. A country lost land access, and people and products were unable to enter and exit its borders, in addition to the harm to its reputation. For Qatar, ensuring survival was the primary priority. The US military base in some way ensured the country's security, but President Trump's support for Saudi Arabia has put this guarantee in doubt. Qatar has become indispensable to US foreign policy.

The blockade of Qatar officially ended in January 2021. As a result of this blockade, Qatar proved that its active foreign policy has withstood the toughest test. Qatar's multilateral contacts, its strategic partnership with the US, the existence of a pragmatic policy in relation to Iran, and the effective use of soft power have ensured its ability to withstand the crisis.

Qatar chose to solve this problem in a political way. In order to secure its sovereignty and the stability of the Al-Sani family's rule, it focused

all of its financial and intellectual resources on a single goal: developing an autonomous foreign policy. Marking Qatar on the map is the first assignment and obstacle. A country must first be aware of its existence before it can accomplish anything. This was Qatar's soft power's initial objective. To be a good mediator, it is important to have multiple contacts. Qatar has managed to establish ties with regional state and non-state actors.<sup>13</sup>

The example of Qatar shows that if there is an appropriate strategy and with the right allocation of resources, a small state may be able to overcome its vulnerability through political means and create an independent foreign policy.

Those who adhere to realism believe that Qatar is not a small nation that can only be saved by forging alliances. Qatar's membership in international organizations does not explain its significance. It has created an image of multilateral action for its foreign policy by using its membership in organizations like the Arab League and the United Nations, and this should continue.

Qatar's foreign policy is not without mistakes. Nevertheless, Qatar, with an active foreign policy, has achieved exceptional strength and has been able to protect its sovereignty and the stability of its ruling family. All this shows that, in the end, Qatar's as a small state foreign policy is successful.

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13 Zafirov, M. M. (n.d.). The Qatar Crisis—Why Did the Blockade Fail?