

A Study on the Foreign Policy of Qatar⁽¹⁾

Sena Khateeb⁽²⁾

Author:	Zuhair al-Mokh
Date of publication:	2019
Publisher:	Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies.
No. of pages:	295

Introduction

With its proactive policy and diplomatic decision making, the State of Qatar poses a challenge for classic international relations literature, unable to explain the political growth and regional ascension of a country that does not exceed an area of 12,000 square kilometers, and whose citizenry makes up just 15% of its total population.

Countries that share Qatar's demographic or geographic characteristics have always been considered secondary actors, merely imitating or following policies of major regional or global powers. But Qatar has carved out an effective regional role for itself in the Middle East, establishing an international

standing that differs from that offered by traditional approaches. Accordingly, this phenomenon requires deeper study, with an evaluation of the limits of Qatar's influence and a review of its history in order to forecast the country's potential.

Qatar is a small country seeking influence among major players in a vast and complex political arena, driven by ambitious strategies and carefully drawn up tactics by decision makers well-aware of the scale of the challenges surrounding it. Hence, Qatari diplomacy has been oscillating between mediation and humanitarian aid, economic relations, and smart investments.

Summary

In this book, Zuhair al-Mokh takes up the task of examining Qatar's foreign policy. He begins by documenting the historical foundations of Qatar, then moves on to analyze the events that transformed this small country into an important actor of significant regional and international standing, stressing the uniqueness of this model and the ambition of its decision-makers.

Al-Mokh divides his book into an introduction and two sections, over eight chapters. He begins by

discussing Qatar's position on the world stage and its foreign policies, asking: "How did this small country manage to exercise an active foreign policy?" (p. 9) He delves into the factors contributing to this small, newly independent country's transformation into a major indispensable player, both regionally and internationally. Qatar exposes flaws in the classical approach that reduces the field of foreign policy to the behaviour of major powers, demonstrating itself as a

¹ This review was originally published in Issue 52 (September 2021) of *Siyasat Arabiya*, a bimonthly peer-reviewed political science and international relations journal, and translated by Abby Al Zoubi.

² Master's Student, Political Science and International Relations Program, Doha Institute for Graduate Studies.

model for a country that, due to its vision and rational behaviour, has gained international recognition for its regional and international role, relying on a policy of regional oscillation and alignment with major powers internationally. In order to answer this question, Al-Mokh dissects the heart of Qatar's foreign policy dynamics. The first section outlines the features of Qatar's historical emergence for an understanding of the Qatari present, while the second section provides a reading of the events that transformed Qatar in to an effective and influential player.

The historical context provided in the first section of the book is pivotal to understanding the second. It situates the nascent Qatari state and documents the arrival of the Al-Thani family to the reins of government. It highlights the policy of maximizing security and autonomy from the very beginning, which would then emerge as a pattern governing most of Qatar's policies and decisions. In the pursuit of distinction from Saudi Arabia and the rejection of foreign domination, Britain supported the ambitions of the Qataris to establish an independent identity for the State of Qatar early on. Qatar's distinctive features are further explained in Chapter Two, which illustrates the country's coastal and desert topography, the huge natural gas reserves that exceed its oil reserves, and its financial weight coupled with a rich and prosperous banking sector. It also details Qatar's social characteristics, revealing a visible decline in the number of its citizens and their relative absence from the labor market compared to expatriates, not to mention the presence of the tribe as the main component of the Qatari social structure. However, the strong presence of the unifying national Qatari identity prevented the tyranny of volatile familial affiliations or their impact on loyalty to the state. The emphasis on this overarching national identity was accompanied by a deliberate economic shift, whereby Qatar anticipated the future and made preparations for a post-oil and gas economy by investing in human capital. Consequently, Qatar spends generously on education and has worked to create a successful knowledge economy and encourage innovation.

Understanding Qatar's options and policies requires an astute awareness of its regional position. Its positioning as a central part of the Middle East and a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) prompted Qatari

decision-makers to distinguish itself and exert regional influence, whether through imposing a kind of regional presence through intervention in Libya and Syria, or balancing relations with the two rival poles of Saudi Arabia and Iran. But the common thread in Qatar's regional policy is the essentialism of maintaining its security while enhancing its influence, which forms the backdrop for its pivot towards Africa through collaborative projects and economic aid. These two objectives invite further study of the pattern of Qatari foreign alliances that the researcher expands on in the fourth and final chapter of the first section. Qatar's regional position has left the country under geostrategic pressures, triggering it to strengthen its alliances and consolidate its relations with the United States. Today, Qatar is home to one of the largest American military bases outside the United States. This relationship provides Qatar with a security guarantee as a small state in a turbulent environment, which al-Mokh notes has "given it confidence to build an independent and dynamic foreign policy, and has also given it greater flexibility to move." (p. 142) But Qatar was not content with relying on its US ally and instead sought to expand the sources of its security cover through alliances with countries such as France, Britain and Turkey. It is worth noting that these bilateral relations, especially with Washington, did not preclude the Qatari independence in decision-making and ideology, even if it conflicted with US interests at times.

The first section establishes a solid grounding before elaborating on Qatar's diagonal pillars of strength in the second section. In the fifth chapter, the author discusses the foundations of the paradoxical Qatari military power: On the one hand, Qatar's modest demographics suggest the difficulty of creating a regional military balance, but on the other hand, Qatar has an army that can be likened to "Little Sparta" because of the military strength represented in its land, naval and air forces. In striving to attain balance and as deterrence measures, Qatar relies on the concept of smart warfare, combining information and electronic superiority and advanced weapons with a complex system of hacking, spyware and jamming devices. What Qatar cannot achieve militarily is sought after with economic diplomacy, which the author looks at in Chapter Six.

In its quest for regional and international recognition, and to maintain its own security, Qatar has adopted a policy of "realistic reciprocity" based on making itself indispensable to some of the most important actors in the world through gas exports, thus binding the stability of these countries to the security and stability of Qatar. Ultimately, Qatari diplomacy is based on the principle of bartering economic benefit in exchange for its own security. This economic diplomacy expands to include governmental and private foreign investments and financial aid, the majority of which are directed to the wider Middle East and North Africa. This diplomacy cannot be understood in isolation from the general Qatari policy based on stabilizing the region and enhancing its own international standing, consolidating friendly relations to confront potential regional challenges, and maintaining security and stability within a turbulent and volatile environment.

Chapter Seven details Qatar's treatment of this turmoil, given the challenges it faces from the most prominent players on the regional scene: Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Israel. At a time when Saudi Arabia is embarking on what it feels is a "patriarchal tutelage," in an attempt to impose its political choices on Qatar, the latter has maintained its independence and confronted Saudi regional hegemony in order to establish its regional status and role. This can be observed through its pragmatic recruitment and support of traditionally anti-Wahhabi currents of political Islam in Saudi Arabia, in addition to Qatar's interventions in Syria, Yemen, and Egypt to achieve competing goals on behalf of parties opposed to the Kingdom.

Qatar has maintained a friendly relationship with Iran, despite their conflicting positions on some regional issues. Three elements have contributed to this cordiality: Qatar's awareness of geostrategic realities and of Iran's regional and global capacity, Qatar's refusal to entertain the sectarian nature of the Gulf-Iran conflict and considering it a political dispute only, and Qatar's readiness to mediate an Arab dialogue with Iran. Meanwhile, Qatar's policy addressing Israel reflects the independence of Qatari decision-making. While Qatar has always supported

the Palestinian right to self-determination, Oslo prompted it to re-evaluate its positions, based on its regional status and its sovereign right to prioritize its own foreign policy. However, Qatar has never hesitated to criticize Israel, especially in its response to the 2014 war on Gaza. To this day, it adheres to its endeavors to find a just solution to the Palestinian issue by calling on the international community to facilitate a two-state solution.

Al-Mokh infers the beginning of what he calls the "Qatari Era" toward the end of his book. Qatari diplomacy has adopted a range of complex and sometimes contradictory alliances, mediating several regional conflicts in Yemen, Lebanon, Palestine, the Horn of Africa, and Darfur. Mediation was not a goal in and of itself. Rather, it was a tool to help maintain Qatari security and expand its sphere of influence and global status, evident in the cultural imbalance of power in favour of Qatar to the detriment of Saudi Arabia. The emergence of this new era can be inferred from five factors: First, Qatar's acknowledgment of the existence of secondary and mediating actors between the state and society, thus confirming the principle of cultural pluralism. Second, the open Qatari mediation, which is based on the principle of compromise in heterogeneous societies. Third, achieving cultural dominance through the Al Jazeera media network, which contributed to spreading awareness and creating a cultural body through which it can challenge the regional media structure. Fourth, Qatar has developed the concept of "rebuilding societies" through intensive attention to education, dialogue, and sustainable economic aid, contributing to the production of educated elites who participate in changing the rules of the game. Finally, the Qatari approach toward dialogue in resolving the Gulf-Iranian cold war, and its belief in the importance of accepting differences between the two sides of the Gulf without viewing this as a threat.

The author concludes his book by emphasizing Qatari soft power and culture as strategic gambles that are more effective than traditional economic or military methods, and which will ensure Qatar's resistance, prosperity, and well-being if it continues to adhere to them.

A Critical Reading

Through a smooth presentation of ideas and clear language, Al-Mokh provides an insightful analysis of Qatar's foreign policy, adopting a method that combines simple, clear terms with depth of content. This is evident in the solid foundational ground he presents to document the establishment of the State of Qatar, the demographic features of this country, and its geostrategic positions, culminating in a rigorous study of Qatar's foreign policies and its economic and political foundations. This provides the reader with a sequential presentation of events and their implications, and the patterns of policy that made Qatar a pivotal player in the region.

Al-Mokh has thus provided the political literature library with a reference for any researcher who seeks to build a comprehensive and deep understanding of the emergence of Qatar and its foreign policies. However, a critical reading of the book highlights four points:

1. Although the writer demonstrates an implicit bias towards Qatar, this did not distract him from his clear commitment to present reality without obscuring the truth whatever its implications. In more than one place, the author presents conflicting sides and divergent viewpoints regardless of whether such events serve in favour of the public image of Qatar and its decision-makers or not. He presents the history of the emergence of the state and the arrival of the Al-Thani family to power objectively, and makes reference to the family's monopoly on diplomatic representation. He also remains objective when discussing the failure of some of Qatar's efforts to mediate between countries, such as Yemen, Palestine, and Darfur.

Speaking about the state's institutional structures, the country's permanent constitution, and the Qatari attitude towards the principle of democracy, Al-Mokh refers to the importance of the Shura Council as one of the institutions of popular representation. The constitution stipulates that two-thirds of its members (30 out of 45 members)

are elected by universal suffrage and stresses the importance of this newly born legislative experience, "so that the Shura Council becomes a legislative council, a partner of the executive authority in its decisions," (p. 54) But he neglects to mention that the Head of State (The Emir) appoints a third of Council members and retains the right to dissolve the Council (Article 104), in addition to the delay in holding the elections. Qatar — which passed its permanent constitution in 2004 — did not hold any popular elections until October 2021, finally setting a date after recurrent postponement.

However, anyone familiar with the country's permanent constitution observes a contradiction between the preamble to the constitution, which affirms that Qatar is a democratic state,⁽³⁾ and the concentration of powers in the hands of the Emir, similar to other neighboring monarchical regimes. This leads to the conclusion that the rhetoric of democracy is reserved for diplomacy directed abroad and to provide domestic reassurances. Nevertheless, this contradiction is counterbalanced by "popular legitimacy," reinforced by the economic prosperity and social well-being of Qataris, who enjoy the highest per capita income in the world, in addition to free healthcare and education for Qatari citizens, which has always topped Qatari priorities. This popular sentiment became evident in the Gulf crisis (2017-2021), with the proliferation of national slogans and symbols, as well as campaigns to encourage the purchase of local products.⁽⁴⁾

These factors (the popular legitimacy of the ruling family, the high quality of life for Qatari citizens, with municipal elections taking place every 4 years since 1999) help understand why democracy is not a basic requirement of the Qatari citizen. In fact, democratic demands are decreasing (though not non-existent) in an environment of contentment, comfortable living, and prosperous economic conditions as a result of the leadership's decision-making.

³ "The Permanent Constitution Issued by the State of Qatar," *Al Meezan* (Qatar Legal Portal), 8/6/2004, accessed on 24/11/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/2T2PMkr>

⁴ Justin Gengler, "Society and State in Post-Blockade Qatar: Lessons for the Arab Gulf Region," *Journal of Arabian Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2 (2020), pp. 238-255.

2. The book would arguably benefit from an accurate delineation of the limits of Qatari power regionally. With the growth of the power of this country, in contrast to the relative decline of the Saudi role, Qatar's geographical location and the fact that its only land borders are shared with Saudi Arabia should be taken into account. Nor does Qatar have a military power comparable to its neighbors, or a population big enough to compete with them.
3. Although the author is justified in his assumption that Al Udeid base, which is the largest US military base in the Middle East, is a safety valve and a guarantee for Qatar's security, and the Qatari-American agreement included an explicit American commitment to "defend Qatar's security and maintain its political stability" (p. 140) it is important to note that the United States used this base as a strategic military center against countries with which Qatar shared no hostilities, including war against Iraq and Afghanistan.
4. The author takes pains to explain that one of the most important pillars of Qatar's foreign policy is to draw recognition as a key player in the regional arena, and to consolidate this through Qatar-led mediations. Yet he fails mention the negotiations that took place between the United States and the Taliban under Qatari auspices, despite representing an important event in Qatari foreign policy which would have served his argument concerning the active role of Qatari diplomacy. These negotiations, which began in 2010 through a Qatari initiative to open an office for the Taliban in Doha,⁵ led to the two parties signing an agreement stipulating the withdrawal of US military forces from Afghanistan in February 2020. Following this, the US withdrew its last soldier from Afghanistan on 30 August 2021 after 20 years of war. This mediation initiative between the United States and the Taliban stands out among Qatar's foreign policy achievements, not only for its management of US mediation, but also because this mediation directly ended the longest war in US history, according to current US President Joe Biden.⁶ The Qatari role transcended negotiations with the United States to enhance

Qatar's input in matter and to deal with the Taliban government. Speaking to this development, the Center for Conflict Studies and Humanitarian Action in Doha hosted a dialogue session with acting Afghan Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi. Furthermore, the Qatari government has overseen meetings between a delegation from The Afghan interim government and its counterparts from the United States, Canada and Britain, and representatives of the European Union and Germany, indicating the importance of the Qatari role and the success of its foreign diplomacy.

Perhaps the value of this book lies in the comprehensiveness of the ideas it presents, built on a solid foundation that clearly illuminates the historical path that directed Qatar to its current status and role. The book can thus be considered essential reference material for anyone interested in Qatari policy or the potential political role that a small country can enjoy in spite of geographic and demographic obstacles. The book does not cover all aspects of Qatari diplomacy, which would be an unreasonable expectation in any case, but it does provide a detailed clear map of Qatari foreign policy and international relations, with detailed examination, evaluation, and analysis.

5 Lina Khatib, "Qatar's Foreign Policy: The Limits of Pragmatism," *International Affairs*, vol. 89, no. 2 (March 2013), pp. 417-431.

6 Ibid.

References

Gengler, Justin. "Society and State in Post-Blockade Qatar: Lessons for the Arab Gulf Region." *Journal of Arabian Studies*. vol. 10. no. 2 (2020).

Khatib, Lina. "Qatar's Foreign Policy: The Limits of Pragmatism." *International Affairs*. vol. 89. no. 2 (March 2013).