

GEOPOLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF QATAR'S POLICY TOWARDS THE HORN OF AFRICA

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Introduction

In 1995, Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani assumed control of Qatar during his father Khalifa bin Hamad Al Thani's absence, executing a bloodless coup. This marked the beginning of a dynamic and autonomous Qatari foreign policy aimed at establishing Qatar as a significant regional player, driven by practical geopolitical factors and the imperative to maintain the country's security and stability in the tumultuous West Asian region. The foreign policy of Qatar is shaped by its status as a small state bordered by two large and powerful neighbours, namely, Iran and Saudi Arabia. The political elite in Qatar do not want to subordinate to either of its neighbours and seeks to establish an independent and assertive foreign policy. This is achieved through the strategic use of its economic resources, the media influence of Al Jazeera, and diplomatic arbitration, all of which serve to bolster its soft power and political influence. Mesfin (2018) identifies three tools utilized by Qatari political leadership to achieve above foreign policy objectives. First, establishing long-term military partnerships with the United States and Turkey. The second tool Qatar uses to further its foreign policy goals is the television network Al Jazeera, which gives Qatar more global exposure. Moreover, it gives Qatar a platform that is affordable from which to effectively spread its own perception of the internal and foreign policies of its adversaries (Hroub, 2013). The third tool that Qatar has adopted to further its foreign policy goals is mediation. Because of its proven neutrality and vast financial resources, Qatar can engage and persuade diametrically opposite parties. Boyce (2013) argues categorically that Qatar mediates because it "has the money and time and the lack of any obvious bias towards any one party." Moreover, through mediation, Qatar has been able to improve its reputation in the region and around the world.

In addition to that, the principle of promoting peaceful resolution of international disputes is a significant aspect of Qatar's constitution, adopted in April 2003. Article seven explicitly required that the foreign policy of Qatar be "based on the principle of strengthening international peace and security by means of encouraging peaceful resolution of international disputes." In September 2007, Qatari emir clarified his government's stance at the United

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Nations General Assembly, stating that "the major conflicts in the world have become too big for one single power to handle them on its own." The three most notable instances of Qatari mediation occurred in Yemen from 2008 to 2010, Lebanon in 2008, and Darfur from 2008 to 2010. Additionally, Doha played a role in resolving conflicts between Sudan and Chad in 2009, as well as between Djibouti and Eritrea in 2010.

Historically, Countries on the eastern and western sides of the Red Sea have interacted with one another. After the Arab Spring, there was an increase in engagement. The Horn of Africa (HOA) region has become more important in the strategic plans of West Asian powers. The region bordering Gulf of Aden including red sea has emerged as an epicentre for Gulf influence. Its closeness to essential maritime routes and internal conflicts allows external entities to influence political and security developments.

While talking about Qatar, so after gaining independence in 1971, Qatar's foreign policy regarding Africa was significantly shaped by its broad pan-Arab objectives. Cultural ties, especially linguistic and religious connections, facilitated official relations predominantly with Maghreb countries during this period. The pan-Arab perspective significantly shaped Qatar's diplomatic framework, illustrated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs designating the Arabic Affairs department to manage relations with Africa. Qatari diplomats viewed Africa as fragmented, recognizing a separate Arabic North Africa from the remaining part of the continent. This perception was influenced by American geopolitical interests and the lasting impact of pan-Arab narratives, especially those promoted by Nasser. However, Sudan constituted an exception to this trend, as diplomatic relations were formed in response to an increasing number of workers migrating to the Sheikdom. Consequently, the interactions between Qatar and the states of the HOA remained restricted until the onset of the new century. In the latter half of the 1990s, Qatar's foreign policy underwent significant reconfiguration due to favourable international and domestic conditions. The conclusion of the Cold War and U.S. defence agreements with Gulf monarchies post-first Gulf War fostered a more secure regional landscape conducive to increased diplomatic engagement. Domestically, leadership transitions infused new perspectives into Qatar's foreign policy, with the Emir advocating for substantial reforms aimed at enhancing the nation's autonomy from Saudi Arabia. Key determinants of this new foreign policy included: Substantial hydrocarbon revenues, the security guarantee of the U.S. armed forces at Al Udeid, and the rise of an elite group under the Emir's leadership (Tok et al., 2016).

As the turn of the century approached, Qatar aimed to expand its influence, particularly in the HOA, through active diplomatic efforts Qatar has sought to increase its presence in the region through diplomatic engagement. Qatar's engagement in mediation, infrastructure

investments, humanitarian assistance, and security collaboration has facilitated the establishment of alliances with significant countries Eritrea, Sudan and Somalia, which allows it to mitigate the impact of its rivals. Despite being a small states Qatar has a great diplomatic impact in the HOA region. Qatar expanded its regional influence through "carrot diplomacy" and the establishment and funding of an extensive network of institutions, schools, and charities. Establishing itself as a formidable diplomatic force in the region, Qatar has provided direct assistance to state and non-state players in Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan, and South Sudan, as well as played a key mediation role in Ethiopia, Darfur, and Djibouti. The geopolitical ramifications of Qatar's stance towards the HOA extend well beyond the region. Qatari policy changed during the Arab Spring from the honest-broker mediation that had distinguished its strategy prior to 2011, becoming more active and known for choosing winners in states in transition in North Africa and the Levant. This engagement forms a key component of Qatar's broad strategy to bolster its geopolitical influence and mitigate the manoeuvres of rival states within the GCC, especially the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Following the blockade initiated by its neighbours in 2017, Qatar has significantly increased up its initiatives to establish alliances and enhance financial relations in the region, identifying the area as a vital landscape for amplifying its soft power and safeguarding strategic interests.

Firstly, this paper seeks to explore the geopolitical, economic, and security interests that influence the foreign policy of Qatar in the HOA, emphasising on its interactions with significant nations including Somalia, Eritrea, Sudan, and Djibouti. Secondly, it emphasises the assessment of Qatar's role in diplomatic mediation, peace building, and conflict resolution initiatives in the region, along with its impact on local conflicts and regional stability. Thirdly, the paper examines how Qatar's application of soft power, such as investments in infrastructure, humanitarian aid, and media influence, affects its relationships with Horn of Africa states and strengthens its influence in the region. In conclusion, the study investigates the interplay of Qatari foreign policy in the region and the strategies of its Gulf rivals, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, while evaluating the wider consequences for intra-Gulf rivalries and Gulf-African relations.

Qatari Foreign Policy and Political Strategies towards the Horn of Africa

The Gulf states, specifically the UAE, KSA, and Qatar, perceived the rapidly growing economies of Africa as an attractive option for long-term investment. The enhancement of economic and commercial relationships with African nations has enabled GCC states to broaden their Sovereign Wealth Fund portfolios and diminish their reliance on hydrocarbon revenues (Mahmood, 2020). Moreover, in the last four decades, Gulf States have provided

significant humanitarian assistance and overseas development assistance (ODA) via multiple channels, including bilateral agreements, individual donations and private contributions (Altea Pericoli & Donelli, 2023). Further, the involvement of Gulf states in the Horn region can be attributed to factors such as "geopolitics, security issues, competing religious affiliations, resource competition, food shortages and crises resulting from a changing climate (Huliaras & Kalantzakos, 2017)." This increased engagement has led GCC countries to pursue the expansion of their military, political, and commercial influence in the region. Additionally, the growing security dependency between the Gulf and the HOA is "not merely the product of material forces but an explicitly social construct, shaped by ideology, identity, and history" (Verhoeven 2018, 336). Examining the rationale behind Qatar's interest in the region, Altea Pericoli and Donelli (2023) identify three key reasons for Qatar's interest in the HOA: geographical proximity, cultural ties with local Muslim communities, and the region's structural vulnerabilities that allow for external influence. The HOA's endemic fragility, characterized by numerous conflicts, weak states, economic dependence on foreign aid, and the strategic importance of the Red Sea, presents opportunities for Qatar to enhance regional autonomy and international visibility. Since Sheikh Hamad's reforms, Qatar has pursued a proactive foreign policy, distinguishing itself from other small Gulf monarchies like Kuwait and Bahrain, which tend to adopt bandwagoning strategies.

In addition to that, in the early 21st century, the increase in global food prices encouraged Qatar and other GCC states, such as Saudi Arabia and UAE, to increase their investment in agricultural land. As a result, they all turned to Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda as prospective breadbaskets. Qatar particularly, has emerged as a notable donor, contributing resources and acting as a diplomatic power facilitator by employing its networks with both state and non-state actors. This strategy has allowed Qatar to transform its financial influence into soft power, facilitating autonomy in mediation and aid efforts (Altea Pericoli & Donelli, 2023). By leveraging its vast resources, Qatar was able to build soft power toolkits, which in turn facilitated its activism. Media branding, arbitration, and financing are the three separate but interconnected elements that make up Qatar's soft power.

Aid and Investment

The Arab uprisings significantly reshaped the aid strategies of Qatari foreign policy, compelling the Sheikhdome to adapt its approach through mediation and increased foreign aid to leverage the regional instability. Notably, Qatar's governmental aid surged in 2011 compared to the previous year, reflecting its interest in countries affected by unrest. The nation engaged in both direct and indirect interventions in Libya and Syria, advocating for Arab-led solutions, while also providing economic support to Tunisia and Egypt. This period

allowed Qatar to assert its ambitions as a regional power, using foreign aid to promote its political values and forge alliances. However, the HOA did not feature prominently in Qatar's priorities until the 2017 blockade, which marked a pivotal shift in aid interventions by Gulf States. Despite the Gulf crisis, Qatari humanitarian aid remained stable, evolving from bilateral to multilateral channels to enhance transparency and accountability.

Doha proposed the construction of a vast canal in central Sudan that would have diverted more than one per cent of the total annual downstream flow of the Nile River to create additional farmland (Lawson 2017). In addition, Qatar and Sudan have engaged in economic and military agreements which include (a) Qatar supplying natural gas to Sudan for electricity generation, and (b) a \$1 billion deposit by Doha into Sudan's central bank in 2014, specifically designated for energy and agricultural investment, and (c) an increase in military cooperation between Qatar and Sudan, including joint military training. In 2008, the Qatari government created the Hassad Food Company as a \$1 billion subsidiary of the Qatar Investment Authority, as part of a National Food Security Plan. A contract worth \$500 million was signed in 2009 to cultivate rice and wheat in Sudan (Ulrichsen 2012, 6).

In contrast to other Gulf nations, Qatar's economic involvement in Somalia has been relatively limited in the past. A \$200 million agreement pertaining to job creation and infrastructure development was signed by Somalia and Qatar in November. Furthermore, Qatar has invested in diverse sectors, including housing, tourism, mining agriculture, and construction across several countries in the Horn region. In 2015, representatives from Nebras Power, the national energy company of Qatar, held discussions with President Ismail Omar Guelleh in Djibouti to explore potential energy initiatives and growth. The governments of Qatar and Ethiopia signed agreements pertaining to agriculture and infrastructure with the objective of rejuvenating the Ethio-Qatari rapprochement in 2017 (Ethiopian Investment Commission, 2017).

In addition to its agricultural investments, Qatar has also taken steps to strengthen Horn's security. In this regard, Qatar has stepped in to cover the void left by the United Arab Emirates' withdrawal from Somalia by initiating investments in Mogadishu and bolstering Somalia's armed forces. Early in 2019, Qatar provided 68 armoured vehicles to Somalia, bolstering its military's ability to combat Islamist insurgencies. Also, despite its small size and population, Qatar has had a significant influence on Somalia's politics for over a decade. Qatar's involvement in Somalia began in 2006. To establish political influence, Qatar began actively engaging with various Islamic factions, using personal and religious networks and, most importantly, members of the Somali diaspora (Cannon, 2019).

Mediation

While taking into consideration of peace-making efforts in the HOA, initially, Qatar took on the role of a mediator in various disputes within West Asia. Following this, Doha employed the instrument to enhance its impact in the region. The initial mediation effort by Qatar can be traced back to 1996, concerning the conflict among Yemen and Eritrea regarding the Hanish islands (Minich, 2015). Building on its early mediation experience in West Asia, Qatar expanded its peacekeeping operations to the Horn of Africa, taking a more direct and hands-on approach, as seen by its participation in the Eritrea-Djibouti peacekeeping mission. Moreover, Qatar's role in resolving the conflict in the HOA is linked to its endeavours to establish itself as a global mediator. Furthermore, participation in certain peace building initiatives has also secured backing for entities that share ideological alignment of Qatar with the Muslim Brotherhood, as observed in Somalia during the mid-2000s (Mahmood, 2020). Nevertheless, it has been criticized that the effectiveness of Qatar's mediation efforts has been limited by either the absence of immediate progress or the achievement of temporary resolutions. Efforts by the concerned party have not been able to fundamentally change the dynamics of the conflict in the areas where it has been involved. For instance, Mahmood(2020) argues that the peacekeeping mission undertaken by Qatar along the Eritrean Djiboutian border has been effective in maintaining peace, however, it has not yielded a sustainable solution. The sudden withdrawal of Qatar in 2017, following the alignment of Eritrea and Djibouti in opposition to Qatar amid the Gulf crisis, created a vacuum. The Qatari efforts in mediation, along with the media coverage by the Al Jazeera network, enhanced Qatar's international standing, irrespective of the tangible results achieved. Doha improved mediation efforts via the contributions of its two humanitarian organizations: Qatar Charity and Qatar Red Crescent Society, effectively establishing a positive environment by gaining the trust of the involved parties (Altea Pericoli& Donelli, 2023).

"Al Jazeera Effect"

Branding diplomacy has been an integral part of Qatar's strategy since the late 90s. Al Jazeera is the principal medium for the propagation of information. Qatar aimed to raise its profile internationally, particularly among the Arab population at large, with the launch of Al Jazeera (Altea Pericoli& Donelli, 2023). Qatar utilizes Al Jazeera as a strategic tool for soft power in the HOA, aligning the channel's coverage of political, social, and economic issues with its foreign policy goals. Scholars note that the network's focus on conflicts and humanitarian crises in Somalia, Sudan, and Eritrea complements Qatar's mediation and diplomatic initiatives. This approach enhances Qatar's image as a humanitarian actor and

impartial mediator, promoting peace and stability in the region. Qatar employs a media-centric branding strategy, notably through Al Jazeera, to advance its foreign policy in the HOA. This approach aims to shape public perception, counter competing narratives such as Al Jazeera has been critical of the UAE and Saudi Arabia's interventions in the region, and position Qatar as a mediator and humanitarian actor, thereby augmenting its regional influence. Consequently, this strategy facilitates the enhancement of Qatar's soft power while diminishing the hegemony of larger Gulf States, solidifying its role in the HOA's geopolitics (Saba Bebawi, 2021).

Analysis of Geopolitical Implications

The rivalry in the Gulf, largely fuelled by differing foreign policy objectives, has escalated in recent years, as Saudi Arabia and the UAE have united on multiple geopolitical issues in contrast to Qatar. These tensions have been shaped by enduring political, economic, and ideological disparities, exemplified by the alignment of UAE and Saudi Arabia with Egypt against Qatar's perceived backing of Islamist movements. This rivalry has now broadened to encompass strategic competition in the HOA, a region that is gaining notable geopolitical importance. The Saudi-led military campaign in Yemen and the Gulf crisis (2017-2021) are pivotal events that have driven West Asian nations to seek influence in the Horn region, resulting in an ongoing realignment of both state and non-state actors since 2015. The beginning of military operations led by Saudi Arabia in Yemen had the potential to form a united front among HOA nations. However, the Gulf crisis of 2017 finally fractured this front, resulting in new alliances. The process began in 2014, when the UAE Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain withdrew their diplomats from Doha. Tensions between the GCC nations rose, and in 2017, the "so-called Arab Quartet" placed commercial and diplomatic restrictions on Qatar for its support of Islamists and relations with Iran.

As a result, Qatar and Turkey strengthened their relationship, resulting in the establishment of a "Qatar-Turkey Combined Joint Force Command military base" in Qatar in December 2017. Consequently, the two Gulf States exerted pressure on HOA countries to sever ties with Qatar. Djibouti and Eritrea have diminished their diplomatic relations with Doha, while Sudan, Somalia, and Ethiopia remained neutral and called for a diplomatic resolution to the Gulf dispute, (Dahir 2022). Moreover, Qatar, in collaboration with Turkey, is strategically engaging in the HOA region with the aim of overcoming the "diplomatic isolation" imposed by the KSA and UAE. This move is also aligned with Qatar's pursuit of its own geopolitical and economic objectives. According to Maziad (2022) Qatar implemented an expansionist foreign policy in the Horn region with the aim of challenging the strategic interests of other regional rivals. Among these rivals are: "Egypt, with its African roots and

strategic depth in the Nile Valley, Israel, with its investments and presence in Ethiopia, the UAE with its economic and military training projects in Eritrea, and both Saudi Arabia and Iran with its competing efforts to enter the same East African region."She further argues that Qatar's decision to align with the Turkish alliance was motivated by two primary factors: firstly, the need to ensure food security, and secondly, the desire to reduce dependence on the United States by diversifying military security (Maziad 2022, 128).

The Horn region is witnessing heightened engagement from Gulf States, as they compete for control and influence in the area after the Qatar crisis. The Gulf nations view the HOA region to be within their "sphere of influence." The region in question is subject to a primary conflict of interests among the UAE and Saudi Arabia, contrasted with Qatar (Dahir, 2022). In this regard, Saudi Arabia and the UAE established military bases in countries such as Somaliland and Eritrea, whereas Qatar has aimed to bolster political connections with Somalia via diplomatic and economic assistance. In short, the Gulf states are strategically employing a combination of hard and soft power to influence regional politics, driven by their foreign policy objectives and national interests. The 2017 GCC crisis highlighted a competitive dynamic, particularly between Saudi Arabia and the UAE against Qatar. Their involvement in the ceasefire agreement among Eritrea and Ethiopia may be interpreted as a strategic move to mitigate the influence of Turkey and Qatar considering evolving regional dynamics.

Conclusion

The Horn of Africa region is currently a focal point of intense rivalry among Gulf nations, as they attempt to extend their military, political, and commercial influence in the area. The management of this region is crucial for the transportation of commodities and the safeguarding of the security of the GCC state. Qatar has significantly contributed to the promotion of harmony and security in the HOA, through mediation efforts between states and insurgent groups, in addition to providing financial support for initiatives aimed at resolving conflicts and advancing reconstruction. Qatar employs several diplomatic strategies in the Horn, including substantial investment and aid, developing media outlets, and establishing direct air links. Qatar's successful mediation efforts have been enabled by its financial capacity and highly personalized decision-making structure, which has enabled it to enhance its diplomatic credentials and become an influential player in the region. Moreover, the diplomatic conflict among Qatar and the "Saudi-led Quartet" had a profound effect on the HOA, forcing nations to adjust to the shifting landscape. While some countries such as Eritrea and Djibouti aligned with the "anti-Qatar camp", others such as Somalia and Sudan opted to remain neutral, extending support to Kuwaiti-led mediation efforts.

Furthermore, Qatar needs to regulate its ambitions and adopt a long-term, regional perspective. The diplomatic efforts and financial resources are concentrated on the integration process of the HOA, guided by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). This will enable Qatar to re-establish its regional presence and ensure that its future actions are more impactful.

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