



## DAHRENDORF ANALYSIS

# Europe's Underestimated Influence in Qatar's Foreign Policy

by Nicolas Fromm

Research Associate and PhD candidate at Helmut Schmidt University

**During the past decade, the European perception of Qatar has dramatically changed. While the tiny Gulf state was once celebrated for its Western style modernity, Qatar's image in Europe is now overshadowed by labour rights violations in the context of the country's preparations for the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Europe's admiration for the al-Jazeera host and former member of the UN Security Council has given way to reluctance and open critique. This paper aims to illustrate that European foreign policy actors – including EU institutions and representatives from EU member countries – should not underestimate the impact of European discourse on the foreign policy behaviour of its partners in the Gulf region.**

The politics of openness favoured by Qatar's previous Emir, Hamad bin Khalifa Thani (1995-2013), continue to be felt. Hamad bin Khalifa introduced a new policy of economic and social confidence. He established a new approach to domestic and foreign policy that lead to a reorientation of Qatar's policy objectives. On an equal footing with Saudi Arabia, today the country is involved as a mediator in conflicts throughout the region<sup>1</sup>.

As a political actor committed to the values of progress and peace, the EU desperately needs to develop its relations towards the Gulf to achieve its own long-term economic and security interests. This holds true today more than ever: In light of the growing importance of the Mediterranean dimension in the European neighbourhood policy, decision makers should recognize the Mediterranean region as what

it is – a common neighbourhood with the Gulf States. In order to effectively manage its long-term relationship with its southern neighbours, Europe should adopt a more constructive approach when interacting with its Gulf partners. It should move away from the discursive blame, which depicts Qatar solely as a human rights violator<sup>2</sup> and ignores the merits of Qatari foreign policy. Instead, it should employ a more appreciative approach and formulate clear expectations. History has demonstrated that such an approach has worked.

To illustrate the impact of European discourse on Qatari policy, the following section identifies some international roles played by Qatar in the recent past and analyses the respective Western responses. This analysis reflects the logics of Role Theory in international relations.

<sup>1</sup> See for example Kamrava 2011

<sup>2</sup> The openly critical discourse can be illustrated by a 2014 statement by German Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development Gerd Müller: <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/entwicklungsminister-zur-wm-in-katar-die-gehen-mit-kamelen-spazieren-1.2032775>



Photo: CCBY 2.0 Paul Trafford via Flickr <http://www.flickr.com/photos/paultraf/8209012700/>

## STILL A PROMISING PARTNER FOR EUROPE – QATAR'S ADVANTAGEOUS ROLE IN INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

Much of Qatar's international policies in the late 1990s and early 2000s might be subsumed under the role of an **international citizen** or a partner of the West in international cooperation. In the context of its numerous mediation activities throughout the Middle East and North Africa, Qatar has repeatedly referred to the importance of the United Nations for conflict resolution. In 2011, Qatar also showed its strong disposition to follow the West and to assume responsibility in the toppling of Gadhafi in Libya.<sup>3</sup> Since Qatar's involvement was publicly encouraged by major NATO members Doha succeeded in establishing itself as the primary Arab interlocutor and constructively contributed to the NATO-led alliance.

Doha has also quite consistently advocated for objectivity and peace in the Middle East conflict, bringing Article 7 of its constitution with life: "The foreign policy of the State is based on the principle of strengthening international peace and security by means of encouraging peaceful resolution of international disputes."<sup>4</sup> Qatar is one of only a few states that have granted a constitutional grade to the principle of peaceful conflict resolution.<sup>5</sup>

The Emirate has invested heavily in innovative approaches to the resolution of the Israel/Palestine conflict. To reach a durable settlement, Qatari mediation initiatives have consistently refused emotional arguments, stressing

that the fate of the Palestinian people must not lead to a repression of objective reasoning. It urged the Arab world to learn how to live with Israel rather than refusing direct negotiations.<sup>6</sup> To showcase its dedication to Arab-Israeli reconciliation, Qatar has negotiated the opening of an Israeli trade office in Doha in 1996<sup>7</sup> and distanced itself from the dominant discourse of uncritical Arab solidarity with Palestine. However, the lack of Western support for the Qatari approach repeatedly lead to a reaffirmation of traditional Arab powers, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, resulting in Qatar being only a minor player into the Arab and Gulf subsystems.<sup>8</sup>

Qatar's relations with Israel also show another important international role: Holsti has described it as the role of an "active independent," emphasizing "at once independence, self-determination, possible mediation functions, and active programs to extend diplomatic and commercial relations to diverse areas of the world."<sup>9</sup> Writing about Qatar, Cooper and Momani use the term **"innovative risk-taker,"**<sup>10</sup> underlining the potential to discover new forms and channels of diplomacy in conflict situations.

Besides the opening of the Israeli trade office and the Taliban contact office in Doha,<sup>11</sup> Qatar's successful 2008 mediation in Lebanon is a strong example of its international role. Although the negotiations during the severe political crisis were officially conducted under the aegis of the Arab League, former Qatari Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Hamad bin Jassim was personally in charge of managing the talks.

<sup>3</sup> Roberts 2011

<sup>4</sup> Permanent Constitution of the State of Qatar, Article 7

<sup>5</sup> Gullbrandsen, 2010, 29

<sup>6</sup> Quotes by Qatar's former Prime Minister Hamad bin Jassim: <http://www.cfr.org/qatar/conversation-sheikh-hamad-bin-jassim-bin-jabr-al-thani-rush-transcript-federal-news-service-inc/p8878>; [http://english.mofa.gov.qa/minister.cfm?m\\_cat=2&id=76](http://english.mofa.gov.qa/minister.cfm?m_cat=2&id=76)

<sup>7</sup> Niethammer 2012, 2

<sup>8</sup> Kostiner and Mueller 2009, 220

<sup>9</sup> Holsti 1970, 262

<sup>10</sup> Cooper and Momani 2011, 116

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/05/04/us-qatar-afghanistan-idUSKBN0N0M920150504>



The foundations of Qatar's successful mediation had already been laid by the risky diplomatic involvement, including massive reconstruction programs in Lebanon just after the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah. This policy granted Hezbollah's good will and commitment towards the Qatari 2008 initiative.<sup>12</sup> Here, unlike in the Israel-Palestine conflict, the explicitly supportive attitude of European countries such as France allowed Qatar to take considerable political risks in its diplomatic strategy to challenge the traditional regional powers' dominance. As Gullbrandsen puts it, "President Nicolas Sarkozy's ambitions and leverage proved crucial for the success of Qatari mediation attempts in the region."<sup>13</sup>

Europe should also be particularly interested in Qatar's role as a **bridge**, a "translator" or a "transmitter for news and information" between different peoples and cultures.<sup>14</sup> In fact, Qatar frequently served as bridge not only between the antagonists of the Middle East conflict or between the West and the Arab world, but also in Shia-Sunni relations, for example, by prominently including Hezbollah in its peace initiatives or by proposing intensified exchange between the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Iran.<sup>15</sup> But again, Qatar can only continue to risk such experimental diplomatic ventures – often heavily criticized by its Gulf neighbours – if Western diplomats and public provide some backing against the pressure from the more conservative regional powers. Only then can Qatar help compensate for the lack of European communication channels to decisive state or non-state actors in the region.<sup>16</sup>

However, the absence of European support has repeatedly forced Qatar to abandon these constructive

international roles and fall back to its pre-1996 behaviour as a **faithful ally** of Saudi Arabia. This is arguably driven by a "perception of threat" and "insufficient capabilities"<sup>17</sup> to stand up against the powerful conservative forces in the region without external backing. The dramatic failure of Qatar's mediation attempts in Yemen's Houthi conflict perfectly illustrates Qatar's lack of room to manoeuvre on its own. Qatar's behaviour on the international scene thus seems to depend at least partly on the attitude of the West. The leadership of Qatar was only able to push for its permanent strategy of sustainable, balanced, dispassionate reasoning and diplomatic innovation when external support allowed the country to overcome its regional predisposition as a faithful ally under Saudi dominance.

While Europe could to some extent count on Emir Hamad's intrinsic motivation to remain dedicated to diplomatic innovation and the values of progress and peace, there are several indications that today's leadership will come under increasing pressure to integrate itself into traditional regional conservatism. Support from Europe will hence be even more decisive in encouraging Qatar to play the roles of international citizen, advocate for dispassion, objectivity and peace, innovative risk-taker and bridge in international and regional relations.

## A CHANCE AND A CHALLENGE – THE ROUGH POLITICAL CONTEXT FOR EUROPEAN ACTION

The implications of the "Arab Spring" and its mixed results in terms of international and regional status have

<sup>12</sup> Cooper and Momani 2011, 120

<sup>13</sup> Gullbrandsen 2010, 37

<sup>14</sup> Holsti 1970, 267

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/fr/originals/2013/02/qatar-proposal-gcc-iran.html#>

<sup>16</sup> Niethammer 2012, 5

<sup>17</sup> Holsti 1970, 297



reduced Qataris' readiness to see national wealth being jeopardized by risky, politically motivated investments. Also, the new Emir is likely to make concessions to the more conservative representatives of the ruling family, whose critique of Qatar's innovative and sometimes "Western style" diplomacy has mainly been ignored during Hamad bin Khalifa's reign. Moreover, the new Emir does not yet share his father's charisma and determination to continue to make Qatar the home of innovation and progress in the region, which were the main driving forces behind Qatar's politics of openness.<sup>18</sup>

The values of internationalism and objectivity are also weakened by the rising influence of Saudi Arabia as a regional power, which seems to have the edge in shaping Qatar's national priorities over Europe's lukewarm support of Qatar's modernist values. This is due to geopolitical external shocks, such as the recent developments in the Iranian nuclear file or the United States' reassessment of its presence in the Middle East. The 1992 US-Qatari defence agreement, including a vast security guarantee and the deployment of United States Central Command at al-Udeid Airbase, have made possible Qatar's rise as an independent actor within the Gulf context.<sup>19</sup> If the United States is re-evaluating its strategic, global, and long-term interests in favour of the Pacific region, tiny Gulf States such as Qatar find themselves confronted with a feeling of vulnerability vis-à-vis a newly rehabilitated Iran. In this context, Qatar's medium-term foreign policy accents are likely to be laid more on regional solidarity with its more conservative neighbours than on being a Western style vanguard. Hence, if Europe wants to preserve the international roles Qatar has often advantageously played in the past; it needs to come up with consistent and visible support.

## **FROM AWARENESS TO ACTION – THE BENEFITS OF A MORE SENSITIVE EUROPEAN APPROACH TO QATAR**

Given the decisive importance of Western prescriptions, a more strategic approach is needed to positively impact Qatar's international role. If political discourse and, as a consequence, public opinion in Europe continues to emphasize cultural differences and misconduct, Europe might quickly lose one of its most promising partners in the Gulf region. A discourse that continues to display a thoroughly hostile attitude will ultimately encourage Qatar's leadership to turn away from its policy of openness and to back regional conservatism.

However, if representatives from Europe consciously steer official discourse to provide consistent conceptual support for Qatar's innovative potential, Qatar might be more likely to defend its diplomatic independence against the overwhelming dominance of Arab conservatism in the Gulf. To some extent, external support can help withstand regional pressures by opening the perspective of supra-regional recognition, allowing Qatar to fully invest in its intended international roles in the service of growth and progress instead of being thrown back to the current state of subordination.

Through the European lens, it fully reflects long-term strategic interest to build up sustainable partnerships with like-minded progressive countries in the Gulf to keep track of regional politics and to manage the common challenges in the Mediterranean, such as the current refugee crisis. Especially in times of geopolitical reshuffling, the relatively young Qatari government needs to be sent a signal that Europe still believes in the country's modernization process and remains committed to the prospects of partnership and cooperation.

<sup>18</sup> Fromherz 2012, 130

<sup>19</sup> Gullbrandsen 2010, 29

Rather than fuelling Qatar's image as a violent oppressor by pushing through controversial arms deals, European support should focus on a different formula: If Europe considers Qatar as a partner, Qatar should also be treated as such in public discourse. This does by no means imply that observations worthy of criticism should be ignored or banned from the official rhetoric, but optimism and sincere encouragement need to return into the discourse.

Almost like a self-fulfilling prophecy, European discourse can, to a large extent, shape Qatar's international future.

**Nicolas Fromm** is a Research Associate and PhD candidate at Helmut Schmidt University. His research focuses on the Gulf region as well as on the theory of international relations.

## WORKS CITED

Cooper, Andrew F./ Momani, Bessma (2011): Qatar and Expanded Contours of Small State Diplomacy, in: *The International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs*, 46 (3): 113-128

Fromherz, Allen J. (2012): *Qatar – A modern history*, London: I.B. Tauris.

Holsti, Kalevi J. (1970): National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy, in: *International Studies Quarterly*, 14(3): 233-309

Gaupp, Peter (1983): *Staaten als Rollenträger. Die Rollentheorie als Analyse-Instrument von Außenpolitik und Internationalen Beziehungen*, Bern/Liebefeld: Huber.

Gullbrandsen, Anders (2010): *Bridging the Gulf: Qatari Business Diplomacy and Conflict Mediation*, Washington D.C.: Georgetown University, <http://repository.library.georgetown.edu/bitstream/handle/10822/552827/gullbrandsenAnders.pdf?sequence=1>

Kamrava, Mehran (2011): Mediation and Qatari Foreign Policy, in: *Middle East Journal*, 65(4): 539-556

Kostiner, Joseph/ Mueller, Chelsi (2009): Egyptian and Saudi Intervention in the Israeli Palestinian Conflict (2006-09): Local Powers' Mediation Compared, in: Rabi, Uzi; *International Intervention in Local Conflicts*, London: I.B. Tauris.

Niethammer, Katja (2012): Katar als arabischer Konfliktmediator: Neuer Hoffnungsträger oder Gernegross?, GIGA Focus (8), [http://www.giga-hamburg.de/dl/download.php?d=/content/publikationen/pdf/gf\\_nahost\\_1008.pdf](http://www.giga-hamburg.de/dl/download.php?d=/content/publikationen/pdf/gf_nahost_1008.pdf)

Roberts, David (2011): Behind Qatar's Intervention in Libya, *Foreign Affairs*, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/libya/2011-09-28/behind-qatars-intervention-libya>

Wish, Naomi B. (1980): Foreign Policy Makers and Their National Role Conceptions, in: *International Studies Quarterly*, 24(4): 532-554

For further information  
about the Dahrendorf Forum  
see [www.dahrendorf-forum.eu](http://www.dahrendorf-forum.eu)

## CONTACT US

Gesa-Stefanie Brincker, Project Manager  
Hertie School of Governance  
[brincker@hertie-school.org](mailto:brincker@hertie-school.org)

Louise Ingledow, Project Manager  
LSE IDEAS  
[L.ingledow@lse.ac.uk](mailto:L.ingledow@lse.ac.uk)



APRIL 2016