

Qatar's mediation initiatives

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■ Executive summary

This policy brief examines the policy drivers and dynamics of Qatar's diplomatic mediation initiatives. It demonstrates how mediation lies at the heart of Qatari foreign policy and represents an attempt to mark Qatar as an independent and progressive international actor. It charts the rising trajectory of Qatari diplomacy since the present emir came to power in 1995. During this period Qatar assumed positions of leadership in regional and international bodies before taking up a two-year rotating seat on the UN Security Council in 2006. Beginning in 2007, Qatar mediated in political and civil conflicts in Yemen, Lebanon and Darfur, and the policy brief assesses the strengths and weakness of the country's record. Strengths included the high-level personal engagement of the emir and prime minister, and the commitment of significant financial resources to affect mediatory outcomes. However, these were offset by weaknesses such as the lack of a large professional diplomatic corps to translate initial engagement into the sustainable implementation of agreements. The policy brief ends by considering the implications for Qatari policy arising from the shift from regional mediation to active interventionism in Libya and Syria in the wake of the Arab Spring.

Qatar's mediation initiatives

Qatar's 2003 Constitution established mediation as a cornerstone of its foreign policy. The emir and foreign minister (who is also the prime minister since 2007) have used mediation to project Qatar's regional interests and raise its international profile. Qatar has mediated in Yemen, Lebanon and Darfur, and between Eritrea and Djibouti. However, Qatar has shifted to a more interventionist foreign policy in the wake of the Arab Spring. This has encountered growing regional resistance and Qatar will struggle to maintain its reputation as an impartial mediator in the future. Libya and Syria have highlighted the limits of Qatar's diplomatic reach and its inability to sustain engagement over time.

Mediation as foreign policy

In April 2003 Qatar adopted its Permanent Constitution. Article 7 stated that Qatari foreign policy "is based on the principle of strengthening international peace and security by means of encouraging peaceful resolution of international disputes". The decision to place mediation at the heart of Qatari foreign policy reflected both the idiosyncratic motivations of the new emir (who took power in 1995) and awareness that it offered the chance to make a bold statement of Qatari autonomy on the regional and international stage. Similar to the creation of Al Jazeera (in 1996) and its pioneering role in liberalising new broadcasting and television markets in the Middle East, mediation in regional conflicts would mark Qatar as distinct from its neighbours. Diplomatic mediation therefore went hand in hand with the carving of an independent and innovative foreign policy. Attempts by Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani to

pursue policies autonomously from Saudi Arabia began in the early 1990s while he was still heir apparent. This was a period of considerable border friction and tension between Qatar and Saudi Arabia. In the early 2000s Qatar assumed the rotating leadership of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (2000-03) and the chairmanship of the G77+China grouping at the United Nations (UN) (2004). These positions provided a regional and international platform for the assertion of Qatar's new foreign policy ideals. They culminated in the prestigious gaining of a two-year seat on the UN Security Council in 2006-07.

The term on the Security Council coincided with a number of regional conflicts that offered a high-profile platform for Qatari mediatory policies. Qatar thus attracted international attention, both positive and negative. It organised a summit on Arab peacebuilding while attempting to block Security Council resolutions supporting the arrest of President Omar al-Bashir of Sudan following his indictment by the International Criminal Court on charges of war crimes. In July 2006 Qatar was the only country on the Security Council that voted against Resolution 1696 (passed by a vote of 14-1) expressing concern over Iranian nuclear intentions and demanding that Tehran halt the enrichment of uranium. Shortly thereafter, in October 2006, Qatar sponsored mediatory efforts between the competing Palestinian factions of Hamas and Fatah, although the Saudi-sponsored (and short-lived) Mecca Agreement in February 2007 subsequently upstaged this initiative. As Qatar's term on the Security Council drew to a close the emir laid out the rationale behind Qatari thinking. He told the annual debate of the UN General Assembly in September 2007 that "the major conflicts in the world have become too big for one single power to handle them on its own". Set against the civil conflict in Iraq and rising sectarian tensions across the region, this statement amounted to a rebuke of flawed Western military intervention in Middle Eastern affairs.

Mediation in practice

The three most high-profile instances of Qatari mediation took place in Yemen, Lebanon and Darfur. The emir visited Yemen in May 2007 and dispatched a delegation from the Qatari Foreign Ministry to talk to leaders of the Houthi rebellion in northern Yemen. This led to a joint ceasefire agreement between the rebels and the Yemeni government in June 2007 and a peace agreement signed in Doha on February 1st 2008. However, fighting quickly resumed, and Yemen's then-president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, declared Qatari mediation to be a failure in May 2009. A renewed Qatari-mediated ceasefire was later agreed in August 2010, along with a 22-point political agreement, but this too proved to be short lived, as both the Yemeni government and the Houthi rebels blamed each other for its non-implementation.

Qatari mediation in Lebanon was more successful. Eighteen months of political deadlock in Beirut threatened to

escalate into armed conflict between Hizbullah and the government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora in May 2008. Qatar brought the various Lebanese parties to Doha for negotiations that succeeded in reaching the Doha Agreement on May 21st 2008. This covered the appointment of a compromise candidate, General Michel Suleiman, as president of Lebanon and the formation of a national unity government that achieved a balance between competing Lebanese groups, including Hizbullah.

In Darfur, Qatar was named the Arab League representative to mediate between the government of Sudan and rebel factions after violence escalated in 2008. As with Lebanon, the participants were hosted in Doha, albeit this time together with mediators from the African Union, the Arab League and the UN, as well as from nearby states Egypt, Libya and Chad. Following several failures, a ceasefire Framework Agreement was signed between the Sudanese government and the largest opposition group, the Justice and Equality Movement, in February 2010, whereupon President al-Bashir declared the conflict at an end.

Reasons for success

The succession of Qatari mediatory initiatives between 2008 and 2010 earned the country international acclaim. The resolution of Lebanon's political crisis was particularly noteworthy, leading *The New York Times* to comment that "Qatar, playing all sides, is a nonstop mediator". Qatari success depended on several interlocking factors. Firstly, it was intensely personalised. Decisions were (and continue to be) made within a restricted circle at the very top of the ruling family. The emir and the prime/foreign minister, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim Al-Thani, drive Qatari interventions and are heavily involved in negotiations. Moreover, they carefully pick conflicts where they believe negotiations can realistically be successfully concluded. Secondly, and equally significantly, there was the use of financial inducements and investments to facilitate settlements between the disputing parties. An important component of Qatar's foreign policy is that its model of "state capitalism" can be tapped for political dividends as and when the need arises.

Qatar has invested heavily in all the countries where it has played a mediating role. It became one of the largest investors in south Lebanon, and Qatari business interests in Syria were also mobilised to secure Syrian support for the 2008 Doha Agreement. In Sudan, Qatari investment assumed a strategic dimension through the acquisition of farmland for Qatar's National Food Security Programme. Qatar also pledged up to \$500 million in reconstruction assistance for Sa'ada Province, which was the centre of the Houthi insurgency in northern Yemen. This promise lay at the core of the February 2008 accord but, notably, it was withdrawn in 2009 once Qatari mediation was deemed to have failed.

Two further factors assisted Qatar's mediation efforts. It lacked the problematic historical baggage of the region's

traditional heavyweights, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. This meant that Qatari mediators were perceived as relatively impartial, honest brokers, particularly in Sudan and Yemen, both countries with a legacy of troubled relations with, respectively, Cairo and Riyadh.

Limitations, overreach and pushback

There are nevertheless significant constraints on the policy effectiveness of Qatari mediation. Qatar lacks the administrative and on-the-ground resources to translate initial agreements into the sustainable resolution of disputes. Its diplomatic service is too small to follow up on or monitor progress toward implementation once negotiations end. In the absence of a “day after” policy, Qatari mediation in Lebanon and Darfur was more an exercise in bridging surface divisions than actually addressing their deeper structural roots or tangibly contributing to peacebuilding and post-conflict recovery.

Qatar’s intervention in Libya in 2011 magnified the growing gap between regional ambition and professional capacity. Siding against Muammar Qaddafi represented an opportunity for Qatar to boost its credibility as a serious

international actor by making a highly visible stand against tyranny. Yet it also marked an escalation from mediation towards a comprehensive strategy for regime change involving political, military, diplomatic and economic leverage. However, Doha’s close ties with the Transitional National Council increased rapidly after Qaddafi’s death as the extent of Qatar’s involvement became known. Concern also began to grow in Doha that Qatar’s role in Libya far exceeded its ability to manage its involvement.

Qatar subsequently attempted to rally Arab and international support against the Assad regime in Syria. Qatar’s leaders hoped to maintain the momentum after the fall of Tripoli and confirm their country’s reputation as a progressive Arab member of the international community. However, signs of regional pushback against Qatar’s interventionist foreign policy began to appear, a case being Ali Abdullah Saleh’s denunciation of Qatar’s “blatant interference in Yemeni affairs” in March 2011. Moreover, the challenge facing Qatari policymakers is that their role in Libya and Syria has shattered Qatar’s reputation for (relative) neutrality and impartiality, and moved away from their strength as a balancer of competing interests. The loss of these pillars underpinning Qatar’s previous attractiveness as a mediator will not easily be rectified. ■

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