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## From Soft to Subtle Power: The Case of Qatar

### *From Soft to Subtle Power: The Case of Qatar*

#### *Abstract:*

Qatar is an example of how a small state with significant natural resources has been able to survive in an environment where it is surrounded by major regional powers with antagonistic interests. Qataris have not only been able to secure the existence of their state, but have also become important interlocutors in the resolution of conflicts taking place within the new global order. The country's has risen in the international system by applying actions that go beyond what might be termed soft power and could be described as subtle power. In this way, Qatar has shaped the international system in its favour, inducing other actors to align with its interests or otherwise discredit them.

#### *Keywords:*

Qatar, soft power, soft disempowerment, subtle power.

**NOTE:** The ideas contained in the *Analysis Papers* are the responsibility of their authors. They do not necessarily reflect the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defence.

## Del poder blando al poder sutil: El caso de Catar

### Resumen:

Catar es el ejemplo de cómo un pequeño Estado, dotado de importantes recursos naturales, ha sido capaz de sobrevivir en un entorno en el que se encuentra rodeado de importantes potencias regionales con intereses antagónicos. Los cataríes no han sido sólo capaces de asegurar la existencia de su Estado, sino que se han constituido en unos importantes interlocutores en la resolución de los conflictos que se están produciendo dentro del nuevo orden global. El ascenso catarí en el sistema internacional se debe a la aplicación de acciones que van más allá de lo que se podría denominar como poder blando y que se podría calificar como poder sutil. De este modo, Catar ha configurado el sistema internacional en su favor, induciendo al resto de actores a confluír con sus intereses o desprestigiarles en caso contrario.

### Palabras clave:

Catar, poder blando, desempoderamiento blando, poder sutil.

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## Introduction

King Ferdinand VI's motto 'peace with all, war with none' was a guide that placed Spain in an era of prosperity unknown in the times immediately before or to come. Despite being involved in conflicts, many were resolved through agreements and the Spanish enjoyed a period of reform in which the treasury was increased, important scientific advances were made and the Armada was strengthened<sup>1</sup>.

In spite of temporal and geopolitical distances, it could be said that there is one country that has been able to apply this Spanish king's to perfection. Qatar has thus become a state that has managed to ensure its survival and create a space for relations, leading it to occupy a prominent position in the new global geopolitical order.

Qatar is a relatively new state entity. Since its inception, it has found itself in a compromising situation due to its proximity to Saudi Arabia, which has historically considered it as part of its territory. Equally, the Qataris have been caught up in the tension between regional powers, where the Saudi-Iranian relationship has been a permanent source of discord.

The situation of a small state with significant natural resources between two major regional rivals is geopolitically unstable. However, the Qataris have been able to ensure their survival by seeking security in exchange for their privileged status. It is therefore understandable that its territory hosts forces from the US, the UK and Turkey.

Although the Qataris are rich in energy resources, possessing some of the world's largest gas reserves, this is not enough to achieve prosperity without efficient management. The development of modern and sophisticated techniques for the extraction, liquefaction, stabilisation and transportation of its gas resources has made Qatar a major economic power.

As the security and prosperity of the Qataris increased, so did their external relations and their influence on their immediate, near and distant environment. Qatar has shown itself to be a balancer of power between the Gulf states, serving as a counterweight in the regional struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran. It has also had a very significant

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<sup>1</sup> SAN JUAN, Víctor. 'La Armada desconocida de Jorge Juan' [The unknown armada of Jorge Juan], *Nowtilus*. 2015.

influence on the conflicts in Yemen, Syria, Iraq and recently in Afghanistan and, on a global level, Qatar has important relations the US, China and Russia.

As a result, the Qataris have become attractive to those actors that interest them, while their rivals have lost prestige and credibility through a process that might be termed 'soft disempowerment'.

The privileged status enjoyed by Qatar has been the subject of study in different academic circles, and three main reasons for this have been identified. The first is because it is a small player surrounded by regional giants. This prompts it to increase its presence in the international arena to ensure survival. Second is the diversification of the economy, because it does not want to base it solely on its vast energy resources, but is looking for other productive sectors, including tourism. Finally, the soft power tools that have made it an important international mediator, including its Al Jazeera news channel<sup>2</sup>. The special way Qataris use this type of power has led to it sometimes being referred to as subtle power.

### **Background: the quest for survival and prosperity**

The Qatari peninsula is attached to the territory of Saudi Arabia, which after the formation of its state in 1913 occupied Qatari territory, but was forced to abandon it under pressure from the United Kingdom. In 1916, the Al Tahni family agreed to form a protectorate with the UK but in 1971 the British withdrew from the region, and the Qataris acceded to their independence<sup>3</sup>.

The country is currently ruled by Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, whose family is considered to descend from the Banu Tamim tribe; the founder of Wahhabism, Shaykh Muhammad ibn Abd Al Wahhab, belongs to the same tribe<sup>4</sup>. However, Qatar is tolerant of other religions, notably Mesaymir, a complex with facilities of different religions<sup>5</sup>. It has

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<sup>2</sup> BRANNAGAN, Paul Michael; GIULIANOTTI, Richard. The soft power-soft disempowerment nexus: the case of Qatar', *International Affairs*, 2018, vol. 94, no. 5, p. 1143.

<sup>3</sup> 'History of Qatar', *Britannica*. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Qatar/History> (accessed on 25/09/2021)

<sup>4</sup> 'Descendants of Saudi Wahhabism founder distance themselves from Qatar', *Reuters*, 28 May 2017. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/gulf-qatar-idUSL8N1IU0AH> (accessed on 24/09/2021)

<sup>5</sup> UNHCR '2015 Report on International Religious Freedom-Qatar', *Refworld*. Available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/57add83cc.html> (accessed on 24/09/2021)

a population of almost three million, although the majority are immigrants, with nationals making up about a quarter<sup>6</sup>.

The Saudis have traditionally considered Qatar to be part of their territory and there have been a number of incidents over the years, most notably at the al-Khafous border post in 1992<sup>7</sup>. It is therefore not surprising that Qatar has welcomed the presence of troops from other countries to guarantee the security of this small state against the Saudi giant and that it signed a defence agreement with the US that same year, allowing the Americans to post their Middle East air operations coordination centre, as well as an air base and the ground elements for a Mechanised Brigade in the country<sup>8</sup>.

Meanwhile, the UK has always maintained a presence that has contributed to Qatari independence. Today, Britain is still represented by its air force headquarters in the region, as well as a joint Anglo-Qatari fighter squadron<sup>9</sup>.

The Qataris have major disagreements with Saudi Arabia and especially with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) over the former's rapprochement with the Muslim Brotherhood group. The Emiratis believe that they seek to destabilise the established order in the region, while Qatar considers them to be a moderate group<sup>10</sup>.

Parallel to Qatar's history is its financial development due to its significant gas reserves, the cornerstone of its economy. These fields have been exploited by Qatar's state-owned oil company since 1974<sup>11</sup>. The country has a modern natural gas (LNG) extraction and liquefaction facility with a production capacity of 78 million tonnes of LNG, which is expected to be increased following expansion work due to be completed in 2023<sup>12</sup>. The

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<sup>6</sup> 'A guide to the population and people in Qatar', *Expatica*, 27 August 2021. Available at: <https://www.expatica.com/qa/moving/about/population-and-people-in-qatar-71297/> (accessed on 25/09/2021)

<sup>7</sup> LAVANDIER, Jérôme. 'Le Qatar: une volonté au prisme de l'histoire', *Confluences Méditerranée*, 2013, no 1, p. 17-28.

<sup>8</sup> KATZMAN, Kenneth. 'Qatar: Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy', *Congressional Research Service*. Washington D.C. 2021. pp. 14-15.

<sup>9</sup> DEVANNY, Joe; BERRY, Philip. 'Gulf Security is Our Security': Global Britain and UK Gulf Strategy, 2010-20. *Defence Studies*, 2021, vol. 21, no. 2, p. 148.

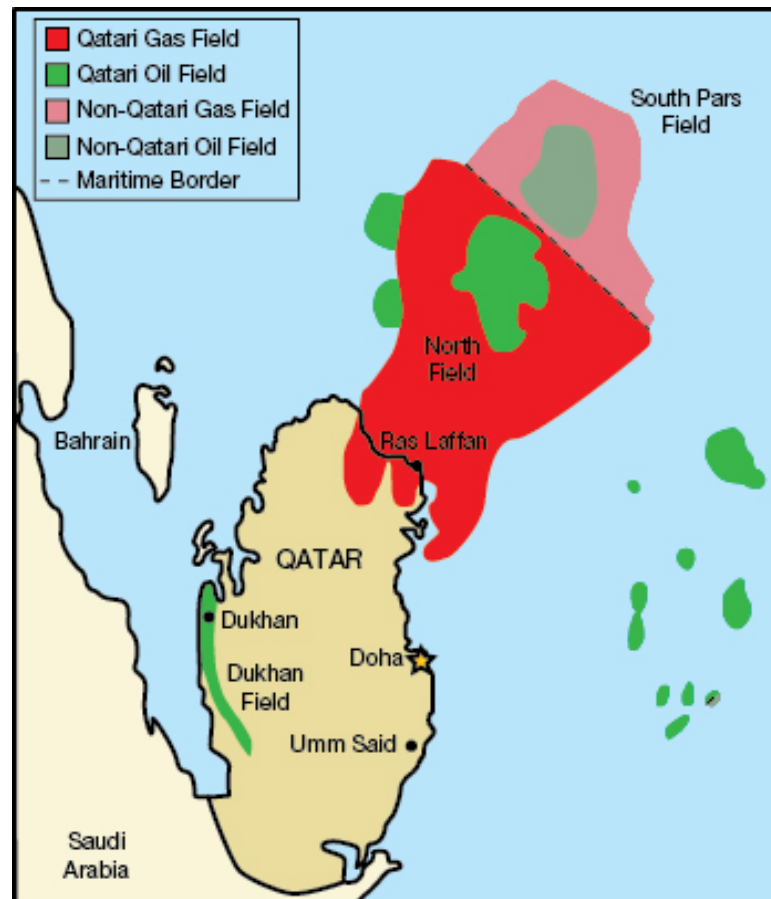
<sup>10</sup> SALMAN, Omran. 'Will Qatar's Relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood Change after Gulf Reconciliation?' *Washington Institute*, Policy Analysis. Fikra Forum, 3 February 2021. Available at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/will-qatars-relationship-muslim-brotherhood-change-after-gulf-reconciliation> (accessed on 25/09/2021)

<sup>11</sup> 'Oil and Gas Sector', *Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs*. Available at: <https://mofa.gov.qa/en/qatar/economy-today/oil-and-gas-sector> (accessed on 24/09/2021)

<sup>12</sup> 'Qatar: Advantages in Adversity', *The energy year*. Available at: <https://theenergyyear.com/market/qatar/> (accessed on 24/09/2021)

gas sector has given Qatar the highest per capita income in the world and is expected to be able to sustain production for at least 50 years<sup>13</sup>.

Of all its fields, the most notable is the northern offshore field (known as North Dome), which it shares with Iran (known as South Pars in its area)<sup>14</sup>. It is therefore understandable that it is seeking a break-even situation with the latter that will allow continuity for its main source of income<sup>15</sup>.



**Figure 1. Location of Qatari oil and gas fields and their relationship with the Iranian area.** Source. ALFADALA, Hassan E.; EL-HALWAGI Mahmoud M. 'Qatar's Chemical Industry: Monetizing Natural Gas'. AICHE, February 2017. Available at: <https://www.aiche.org/resources/publications/cep/2017/february/qatars-chemical-industry-monetizing-natural-gas> (accessed on 24/09/2021)

<sup>13</sup> KATZMAN, Kenneth. 'Qatar: Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy'. Op. Cit. p. 19.

<sup>14</sup> 'Qatar: Advantages in Adversity', *The energy year*. Available at: <https://theenergyyear.com/market/qatar/> (accessed on 24/09/2021)

<sup>15</sup> In 2006, UN Security Council member Qatar was the only member to vote against Resolution 1696, which required Iran to cease producing enriched uranium. For more detailed consultation, see: United Nations Meeting Coverage and Press Releases. 'Security Council Demands Iran Suspend Uranium Enrichment by 31 August, or Face Possible Economic, Diplomatic Sanctions'. 31 July 2006. Available at: <https://www.un.org/press/en/2006/sc8792.doc.htm> (accessed on 24/09/2021)

Despite the importance of Qatar's energy sector, the state has sought to diversify the business sector and become a magnet for foreign investment in a variety of ways. This can be achieved by creating an extremely attractive environment in which the tourism sector plays an important role. The image projected to the world by its Al Jazeera news network and airlines with more than 200 aircraft and 150 destinations around the globe contribute to this. Another attractive incentive is Qatar's commitment to football, promoting its image through clubs and sporting events, such as the 2022 World Cup<sup>16</sup>.

### **The concept of soft power and how it is applied in Qatari relations**

Having looked at the first two groups of measures related to ensuring the security of the state and its prosperity, it is worth breaking down how the Qataris have been able to occupy a privileged position in the global arena by applying soft power measures in conjunction with the previous measures.

The term soft power was coined by Joseph Nye and Robert Keohane in the late 1980s, defining it as the ability of a state to persuade or convince other actors to do what it wants without resorting to coercion or the use of force<sup>17</sup>.

Although both authors recognised the importance of soft power, they also agreed that it could be used in conjunction with other hard power tools, which focused on coercive action towards the target actor. Nye would later define smart power as the way to successfully combine both types of power<sup>18</sup>.

In terms of hard power tools, Qatari military power is much smaller than that of the region's major players, but their modern armed forces could inflict severe damage on potential rivals. However, the presence on their territory of forces from states with significant global influence is a genuine guarantee of security<sup>19</sup>.

While hard power instruments are not particularly significant for the Qataris, the soft power approach may be more fruitful. Theoretically, in the current circumstances of a new

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<sup>16</sup> BRANNAGAN, Paul Michael; GIULIANOTTI, Richard. 'The soft power-soft disempowerment nexus: the case of Qatar', *International Affairs*, 2018, vol. 94, no. 5, p. 1146.

<sup>17</sup> KEOHANE, Robert O.; NYE JR, Joseph S. 'Power and interdependence in the information age', *Foreign Aff.*, 1998, vol. 77, p. 86.

<sup>18</sup> NYE, Joseph. 'In Mideast, the goal is "smart power"', *The Boston Globe*, 2006, vol. 19.

<sup>19</sup> SAIDY, Brahim. 'Qatar's Defense Policy: Smart Choices of a Small State'. In *Příspěvek přednesený v rámci konference Small States and the New Security Environment*. 2020.

multipolar and interconnected global order, the way in which Qatar's means or tools are used to achieve the desired results depends greatly on how their audiences subjectively interpret them. This process should be studied as a competitive game in which the Qataris want to influence a global order where communication technologies rule.

In the first phase, Qatar acquired the means gain its position in this competitive environment and developed a strategy for using these means to achieve its goals or objectives. At this stage, it was essential that candidates to enter the system saw the resources offered as 'attractive'. A second phase involved adding the value of credibility to the attraction and where the selected actors perceived that they could gain advantages in competition with other actors outside the system. In a third phase, which we could call 'soft disempowerment' and is currently being implemented, actors outside the system would be stripped of the legitimacy of their actions. This would particularly benefit from the perception of audiences, which would force external actors to reassess their positions<sup>20</sup>.

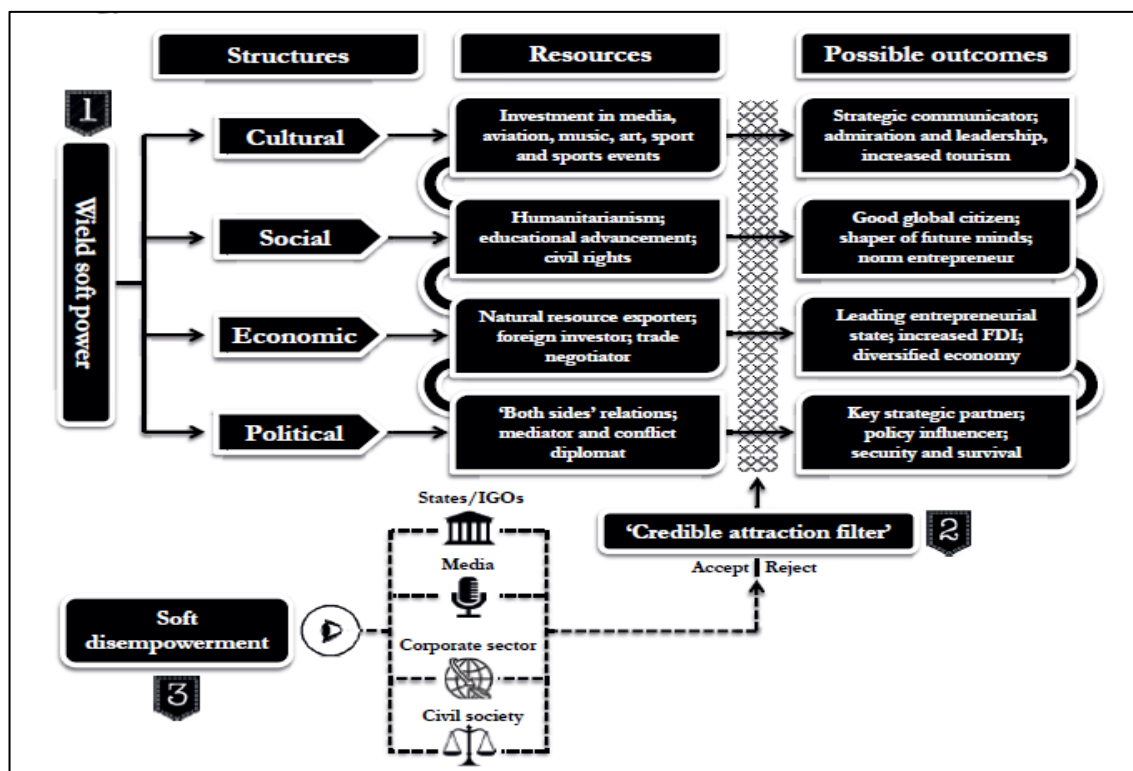


Figure 2. Diagram of soft power acquisition by one actor and soft disempowerment of its rivals. Source. BRANNAGAN, Paul Michael; GIULIANOTTI, Richard. 'The soft power-soft disempowerment nexus: the case of Qatar', *International Affairs*, 2018, vol. 94, no. 5, p. 1144.

<sup>20</sup> BRANNAGAN, Paul Michael; GIULIANOTTI, Richard. 'The soft power-soft disempowerment nexus: the case of Qatar', *International Affairs*, 2018, vol. 94, no. 5, pp. 1144-1145.



## Soft disempowerment and Qatar's role in the new world order

Qatar has been one of the states accused of harbouring extremist religious minorities expelled from other countries. This is due to the presence of Saudi refugees in Qatar after the 1979 occupation of Mecca and later of members of Al Qaeda and the Taliban<sup>21</sup>. Although officially unrelated to the Muslim Brotherhood, one of its main Egyptian leaders, Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, has taken refuge in Doha and has become host of the *Shariah and Life* programme on Al Jazeera news channel<sup>22</sup>.

Before the so-called Arab Spring, Qatar was one of the few states in the region that maintained good relations with Israel, albeit not at diplomatic level, and could therefore serve as a mediator in the conflict with the Palestinians. In 2009 the Palestinian cause led these relations to freeze after the Arab League Doha summit, where tensions also arose over Egypt's non-attendance and divisions between advocates and opponents of supporting US President George Bush in his attempts to isolate Iran<sup>23</sup>.

When the Arab Spring came, many of the exiles in Doha saw the chance to return to their territories of origin to spread their ideology, especially in Tunisia, Yemen, Egypt, Palestine, Syria and Libya<sup>24</sup>. It was a dissident from the latter state, Ali Al Sallabi, who channelled support to fight against Marshal Haftar, who wanted to establish a new regime from Benghazi supported by various actors, including the UAE<sup>25,26</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> 'Qatar: Extremism and Terrorism', 2021, *Counter Extremism Project*. Available at: <https://www.counterextremism.com/node/13533/printable/pdf> (accessed on 27/09/2021)

<sup>22</sup> WAHAB, Siraj. 'Qaradawi and Qatar: the hate preacher who became Doha's spiritual guide', *Arab News*, 31 March 2019. Available at: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1475626/middle-east> (accessed on 1/27/09/2021)

<sup>23</sup> ANDONI, Lamis. 'Arab rifts challenge Doha summit', *Al Jazeera*, 30 March 2009. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2009/3/30/arab-rifts-challenge-doha-summit> (accessed on 26/09/2021)

<sup>24</sup> STEINBERG, Guido. 'Qatar and the Arab Spring: support for Islamists and new anti-Syrian policy'. *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*, 2012. p.4.

<sup>25</sup> WEHREY, Frederic. 'Is Libya a proxy war?', *The Washington Post*, 24 October 2014. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/10/24/is-libya-a-proxy-war/> (accessed on 27/09/2021)

<sup>26</sup> 'Bitter Differences in the Gulf', *Arab Digest*. Available at: <https://arabdigest.org/visitors/sample-newsletters/bitter-differences-in-the-gulf/> (accessed on 27/09/2021)

Witness to the scale of the uprisings, the other Gulf states feared for their security and increased pressure on Qatar, even threatening border closures and a ban on overflights<sup>27</sup>.

With regard to Syria, despite Bashar al-Assad's secularism and pro-Iranian stance, the Qataris had invested heavily, seeking to turn the Syrian regime towards the Arab bloc it was considered to be part of. One of the main examples of this was the Qataris' defence of the Damascus regime after the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Al-Hariri in 2005. There is also evidence that in 2009 Assad gave up on a gas pipeline, proposed by Qatar, to Turkey via Syria<sup>28</sup>. The first signs of enmity also came from the Syrians, when in 2011 they demanded an end to criticism by Yusuf Al-Qaradawi on Al Jazeera for their treatment of internal Syrian dissident movements<sup>29</sup>.

After the outbreak of the Syrian uprisings, and as Assad and the Arab world had drifted apart, Saudis and Qataris respectively turned to different Sunni movements. Qatar was accused of supporting a coalition grouped around Colonel Mithqal al-Bteish al-Noeimi and led by Kataeb al-Farouq, a group that was linked to Jabhat al-Nusra, then an Al Qaeda affiliate<sup>30</sup>. This move by Qatar distanced them from good relations with the Iranians, who supported the al-Assad regime. Nevertheless, the Qataris were willing to show independence and assertiveness in their foreign relations and to shape the international environment according to their own interests.

Qatar was also accused of supporting the 2013 Egyptian government of then Muslim Brotherhood-linked President Mohamed Morsi, who was later overthrown by Abdel Fattah El-Sisi<sup>31</sup>. That same year the Taliban opened an office in Doha, which would put the

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<sup>27</sup> HASSAN, Islam Khalid 'GCC's 2014 Crisis: Causes, Issues and Solutions', *Al Jazeera Center for Studies*, 31 March 2015. Available at: <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/dossiers/2015/03/201533172623652531.html> (accessed on 27/09/2021)

<sup>28</sup> KENNEDY, Robert F. Jr. 'Why the Arabs Don't Want Us in Syria', *Politico Magazine*, 22 February 2016. Available at: <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/02/rfk-jr-why-arabs-dont-trust-america-213601/>

<sup>29</sup> STEINBERG, Guido. 'Qatar and the Arab Spring: support for Islamists and new anti-Syrian policy'. Op. Cit. p. 22.

<sup>30</sup> LUND, Aron. 'Syrie: Les islamistes conquièrent la rébellion', *Alternatives internationales*, 2012, no. 12, p. 16.

<sup>31</sup> HARB, Imad K. 'An Economic Explanation for Egypt's Alignment in the GCC Crisis', *Arab Center Washington DC*. 9 August 2017. Available at: <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/an-economic-explanation-for-egypts-alignment-in-the-gcc-crisis/> (accessed on 27/09/2021)

Qataris in a position to become a diplomatic power, serving as a bridge to the transition that former US President Barack Obama wanted even then<sup>32</sup>.

Disagreements with Qatar by the rest of the Gulf states led to a diplomatic crisis in 2014, with Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE withdrawing their ambassadors. The excuse for this was the accusation of 'interference in internal affairs', but the Qataris maintained their ambassadors in these countries, deploring their neighbours' actions but asserting the justice of their cause<sup>33</sup>. Despite the fact that Al Jazeera suppressed the broadcasts of its Egyptian news channel Mubasher Misr and that several Muslim Brotherhood members were expelled, there was no way to calm the tempers of the warring countries<sup>34,35</sup>.

Disagreements appeared to ease after the death of Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah in 2015 and the succession by his brother Salman, who delegated many of his duties to the young Prince Mohammed bin Salman. However, tensions increased in 2016 when the Saudis sentenced Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr to death along with 47 others, prompting the ransacking of the Saudi embassy in Tehran. While this led to the withdrawal of ambassadors by all Gulf states, Qatar maintained diplomatic relations with Iran, seeking a point of balance. The fact that Qatar remained neutral, creating its own system of alliances, particularly irritated the Saudis<sup>36</sup>.

Differences of opinion among actors outside the Qatari system were the trigger for Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Egypt and Jordan to cut diplomatic ties with Qatar in 2017, accusing it of interfering in their domestic politics and supporting terrorist groups Al Qaeda and Daesh. Border closures and restrictions on air and sea traffic caused a crisis in Qatar that even affected food supplies<sup>37</sup>. The shortages led both Iran and Turkey to support the

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<sup>32</sup> ROBERTS, David. 'Why has the Taliban opened an office in Qatar?', *RUSI*, 4 January 2012. Available at: <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/why-has-taliban-opened-office-qatar> (accessed on 27/08/2021)

<sup>33</sup> KERR, Simeon. 'Diplomatic crisis as Gulf states withdraw ambassadors from Qatar', *Financial Times*, 5 March 2014. (accessed on 27/09/2021).

<sup>34</sup> 'Al-Jazeera suspends Egyptian channel Mubasher Misr', *BBC News*. 23 December 2014. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-30585551> (accessed on 28/09/2021)

<sup>35</sup> MICHAEL, Maggie. 'Qatar expels prominent Muslim Brotherhood figures', *The Times of Israel*, 13 September 2014. Available at: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/qatar-expels-prominent-muslim-brotherhood-figures/> (accessed on 28/09/2021)

<sup>36</sup> CAFIERO, Giorgio. 'Qatar's precarious position between Saudi Arabia, Iran', *Al Monitor*, 3 February 2016. Available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2016/02/qatar-balancing-act-saudi-arabia-iran-risk.html> (accessed on 28/09/2021)

<sup>37</sup> 'Qatar row: Saudi and Egypt among countries to cut Doha links', *BBC News*. 5 June 2017. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40155829> (accessed on 24/09/2021)

Qataris, creating a worrying system of alliances and hostilities that led to an imbalance in the region's complicated order.

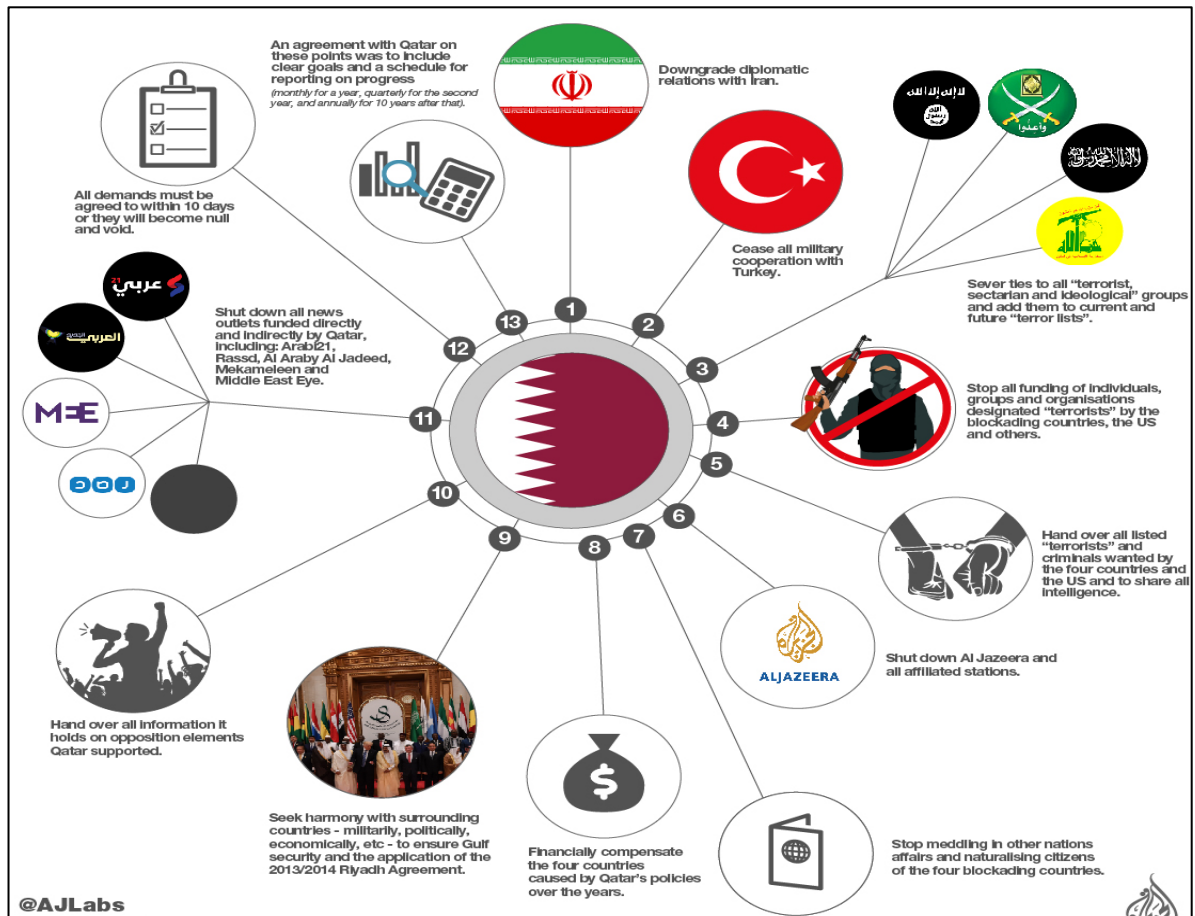


Figure 3. Demands during the 2017 crisis against Qatar. Source. CHUGHTAI, Alia. 'Understanding the blockade against Qatar', *Al Jazeera*, 5 June 2020. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/6/5/understanding-the-blockade-against-qatar> (accessed on 01/08/2021).

Qatar's immediate reaction to the accusation was through its powerful Al Jazeera news network, which dismissed the allegations as interference in its own internal affairs<sup>38</sup>. Moreover, with Saudi interventions in Bahrain in 2011 and Yemen in 2015 fresh in Qatar's mind, and fearing that Western support would not be enough, they turned to their Turkish allies who expanded their modest training facilities in Doha to a joint-combined base<sup>39</sup>.

<sup>38</sup> 'Blockade of Qatar: Expectations and repercussions', *Al Jazeera Centre for Studies*. 2 July 2017. Available at: <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/positionpapers/2017/07/blockade-qatar-expectations-repercussions-170702083909669.html> (accessed on 24/09/2021)

<sup>39</sup> YÜKSEL, Engin; TEKİNEŞ, Haşim. 'Turkey's love-in with Qatar: A marriage of convenience', *Clingendael*. CRU Report, January 2021. pp. 11-12.

Meanwhile, time was running in favour of the Qataris as their informative actions were gradually making an impact on external actors, while the Saudis were weakened by the lack of Qatari economic support and by Qatar's stance towards Iran and Turkey rather than the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Qatar's patience finally paid off at the GCC conference in Al Ula in January 2021, where an end to the blockade and a return to diplomatic relations were agreed. Following this event, Qatar has strengthened its role as a responsible and influential player in the region, a neutral mediator in conflicts, and a financial, tourism, sports and media centre in the Middle East<sup>40</sup>.

Qatar achieved its victory without any compromise on its support for Islamist movements and possibly driven by the exhaustion of the Saudis, who needed economic investments and cheap gas from the Qataris, while wanting to project a renewed image to the US administration of President Biden<sup>41,42</sup>.

From that moment on, Qatar felt empowered to strengthen its network of alliances to become a key player in East-West relations. Thus, in May 2021 and after clashes between Israelis and Palestinians, Qatar offered the latter \$500 million for the reconstruction of facilities in the Gaza Strip, administered by the Hamas group<sup>43</sup>. Qatar's consolidation came when the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan at the end of August 2021. Thanks to Doha's mediation in talks with the Taliban, they had given assurances that Afghan territory would not serve as a sanctuary for terrorists, while the largest air evacuation of civilian personnel in history took place<sup>44</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> JACOBS, Anna L. 'Qatar's Regional Relations and Foreign Policy After Al Ula', *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, 14 April 2021. Available at: <https://agsiw.org/qatars-regional-relations-and-foreign-policy-after-al-ula/> (accessed on 29/09/2021)

<sup>41</sup> RAMANI, Samuel. 'The Qatar Blockade Is Over, but the Gulf Crisis Lives On', *Foreign Policy*, 27 January 2021. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/27/qatar-blockade-gcc-divisions-turkey-libya-palestine/> (accessed on 29/09/2021)

<sup>42</sup> GRAHAM, Emma; MURPHY, Dan. 'Qatar Financial Centre wants to attract \$25 billion of foreign investments by 2022 as Gulf rift ends', *CNBC*, 14/01/2021. Available at: <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/01/14/qatar-financial-center-wants-to-attract-25-billion-of-foreign-investments-by-2022-as-gulf-rift-ends.html> (accessed on 29/09/2021)

<sup>43</sup> 'Qatar pledges \$500m for Gaza reconstruction', *Al Jazeera*, 26 May 2021. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/26/qatar-pledges-500-million-to-gaza-reconstruction> (accessed on 27/09/2021)

<sup>44</sup> SHILOH VIDON, Tamar. 'Qatar emerges as central player in West's relationship with Afghanistan' *France24*, 05/09/2021. Available at: <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20210905-qatar-emerges-as-central-player-in-west-s-relationship-with-afghanistan> (accessed on 29/09/2021)

## Conclusions: from 'soft disempowerment' to Subtle power

Qatar has masterfully used its capabilities to position itself in the new world order as the diplomatic power in the Middle East.

In its immediate surroundings it has been able to ensure survival between the power of the two antagonistic regional powers, Saudi Arabia and Iran, with one being able to encroach on its territory and the other to appropriate the gas resources they share. In response, the Qataris have consolidated their security with the presence of the great US naval air power. However, not only have they entrusted this security to a single external actor, but the presence of the UK and Turkey have been additional guarantees. The latter state is also a counterweight to Anglo-American power because of its different geopolitical orientations.

In its close environment, Qatar has been able to play to the needs and interests of GCC countries, discrediting their actions when they were unfavourable and persuading them of the need for the support that its healthy economy can provide. Nevertheless, tensions still exist with the UAE, due to its economic independence and radical opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood. It is therefore quite possible that in the future Qatar could engage in 'soft disempowerment' actions to counter the Emirates' attitude.

Equally, further afield, Qatar has much to contribute with its assistance and mediation in various conflicts. It has been active in Yemen, Syria, Libya and Palestine, and has become a major player in negotiations in the Afghanistan conflict.

All of Qatar's actions in the three circles surrounding geopolitics have made it a force to be reckoned with by global and regional powers alike. Many authors have therefore pointed out that the Qataris have taken Nye's theories of soft power to a point of refinement that could be described as 'subtle power'<sup>45</sup>.

For Qatar, subtle power could be defined as a harmonious composition of three capacities. The first would be the opportunity to influence another actor to take an action that they would not otherwise take. The second is the possibility of creating favourable conditions for achieving the desired goals by shaping the environment of influence. The

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<sup>45</sup> The term subtle power can be seen in a number of articles on China written in the early 2000s. For the Chinese, this kind of power consisted of the 'art of using three minimalist axioms - non-confrontation, non-interference and readiness for paradigm change'. For a study on the origins of the concept, see GOSSET, David. 'Smart power vs subtle power', China Daily, 15 April 2011. Available at: [http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2011-04/15/content\\_22365894.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2011-04/15/content_22365894.htm) (accessed on 29/09/2021)

third could be defined as ‘bias mobilisation’, which would lead to changing the perceptions of target audiences<sup>46</sup>.

The example of Qatar has challenged many theories in the discipline of international relations on the grounds that a small state, which should be vulnerable and lacking in autonomy, has been able to influence the international system in a pre-eminent manner. This is surprising in the current world scenario, which tends towards offensive realism, where the weak or the small seemed to be left with only the opportunity to ‘jump on the bandwagon’ of the strongest, or simply to bow to their interests, allowing themselves to be manipulated to avoid greater evils in what could be called appeasement<sup>47</sup>. Qatar has shown that size has nothing to do with weakness and that the small can often be mighty.

Qatar's subtle power could be studied in an approach similar to the ‘hybrid warfare’ studies of Western schools or the ‘non-linear warfare’ of Russian-oriented schools. It is interesting to see how, with great economic power and refined foreign relations, the Qataris have been able to completely reconfigure a system that was a priori against them, bringing all actors into positions favourable to their interests and seeking to discredit those who did not want to be part of this system. The example of Qatar can therefore be described as a real laboratory of experience in the field of International Relations and Defence and Security, which should be closely followed at least in diplomatic and military think tanks.

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<sup>46</sup> KAMRAVA, Mehran. ‘Qatari foreign policy and the exercise of subtle power’, *Int'l Stud. J.*, 2017, vol. 14, p. 91.

<sup>47</sup> MEARSHEIMER, John J. *The tragedy of great power politics*. WW Norton & Company, 2001. p. 163.