

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# The 'David' in a Divided Gulf: Qatar's Foreign Policy and the 2017 Gulf Crisis

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## Abstract

This article analyzes how Qatar strategically utilized its foreign policy to overcome the implications of the 2017 Gulf crisis. Using neoclassical realism, it investigates the ways in which Qatar used its foreign relations to mitigate the impact of a crisis that barred Qatar from aerial, naval, and land corridors in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates, henceforth referred to as the Quartet. The impacts are threefold. Starting from a macro-level perspective, Qatar leveraged its status as a crucial energy supplier, alongside the resultant financial boon, to prevent an international consensus supporting the claims of the Quartet. From a micro-level perspective, the likelihood of military escalation was circumvented by Qatar's ties with Turkey and the United States. Finally, the economic impact of the crisis was largely absorbed by Qatar's ties with Iran.

The biblical story of David and Goliath presents a case in which the strategic use of resources can be effective in overcoming a larger threat. For the tiny David facing the gigantic Goliath, a slingshot was all that was needed to win the battle. In this article, we treat Qatar's foreign-policy making as that slingshot, which was able to resist and, arguably, emerge more resilient from the sudden effects of the 2017 Gulf crisis.

On June 5, 2017, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt, known as the Quartet, cut their diplomatic ties with Qatar and imposed a land, sea, and air closure on the country. While such an act was unprecedented, the source of discontent is not new. In fact, the crisis was an escalation of events in 2014 when the Quartet alliance cut diplomatic ties with Qatar

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over claims of supporting terrorism and destabilizing the regional order.<sup>1</sup> What was different this time, however, is that alongside the closures, the Quartet presented a list of 13 demands with the intention of curbing Qatar's foreign policy both directly and indirectly:<sup>2</sup> directly by downscaling Qatar's relations with Iran and terminating the Turkish military presence in Qatar; and indirectly by shutting down the Al Jazeera news agency, a hallmark of Qatar's strategy of projecting itself as an independent actor in the region and a testament to its eclectic public diplomacy. Yet, Qatar seemed to have successfully tamed the sudden systemic shifts brought about by the crisis. Indeed, as of January 5, 2021, when the crisis officially ended, Qatar's relations with Iran have arguably become stronger, the Turkish troops have not left, and Al Jazeera still operates.<sup>3</sup>

Using neoclassical realism as a theoretical framework, we trace the history of interaction between these dynastic regimes as a factor in cooperation and conflict. We explain the nature of Qatar's political system, positing a new way of understanding what impacts elite perceptions through the notion of what we call the Ruling Family Baggage. Then, we analyze the critical role of Qatar's oil and natural gas in preventing the emergence of an international consensus supporting the claims of the Quartet. Finally, we explain Qatar's systemic opportunities by exploring how Qatar's relations with Turkey, Iran, and the United States prevented a military escalation.

## THEORY AND CONCEPT

While the systemic pressure exerted by the international system "shapes the broad contours" of states' foreign policies, it is the perception of the elites, as well as other intervening variables, that determine the character and venue of the response.<sup>4</sup> We argue that analyzing Qatar's foreign policy within the framework of neoclassical realism is essential for two reasons. First, the role of the systemic constraints in dictating a state's foreign policy explains why and how Qatar was able to leverage its foreign relations to offset the impact of the crisis, despite its small size. Second, neoclassical realism's focus on elite perceptions is important in the case of Qatar, where foreign-policy decision making is highly centralized, thereby making elite perceptions vital in understanding foreign policy. For instance, even though Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have similar capabilities and face similar systemic constraints, Soubrier and Warren note how elite-level differences in perceptions explain why Qatar decided to support the Muslim Brotherhood, while the UAE decided against it.<sup>5</sup>

This article enhances the understanding of *systemic constraints* by combining small-state theory with neoclassical realism's anarchical, material power-centric tenet. We take Rothstein's definition of small states as those that "cannot obtain security primarily by use of [their]... capabilities

<sup>1</sup> Mohammed Ahmad Naheem, "The Dramatic Rift and Crisis Between Qatar and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Of June 2017," *International Journal of Disclosure and Governance* 14, no. 4 (September 2017): 265–277.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Davidson, "The UAE, Qatar and the Question of Political Islam," in *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, ed. Andreas Krieg (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 71–90.

<sup>3</sup> Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (October 1998): 147.

<sup>5</sup> Emma Soubrier, "Evolving Foreign and Security Policies: A Comparative Study of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates," in *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies Before and after the Arab Spring*, ed. Khalid S. Almezaini and Jean-Marc Rickli (London: Routledge): 123–143; David H Warren, *Rivals in the Gulf: Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Abdullah Bin Bayyah, and the Qatar-UAE Contest Over the Arab Spring and the Gulf Crisis* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

and must rely fundamentally on the aid of other states... to do so.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, it is through such reliance that small states are able to navigate the international system by relying on more than their own relative power capabilities. Expanding on Rothstein’s state-centric alliance model, Barston argued that the power that small states are able to accrue by joining international organizations is something that departs from realism’s exclusive focus on the state.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, one can conclude that although the foreign policy of small states is often “limited and imposed by the structural dynamics of the international system,”<sup>8</sup> such limitation is not a fixed factor dependent on where a state lies in the international system, but by the networks of international relations and the importance of the state to the system.

For a state like Qatar, systemic pressures are experienced at the global and regional levels. Globally, the country, like the rest of the region, is penetrated by superpowers.<sup>9</sup> The Middle East exposes states like Qatar to pressure by the United States as the superpower in the region and the security guarantor of small states.<sup>10</sup> Regionally, with the erosion of Iraq’s status as a regional power, as a result of the 2003 US invasion, Qatar’s experience of regional pressure is chiefly emanating from “two dominant regional powers,” Iran and Saudi Arabia.<sup>11</sup>

The intervening variables that contribute to states’ behavior are those “through which systemic pressures must be filtered.”<sup>12</sup> They include domestic institutions, the nature of the polity, the role of state-society relations, and elite perceptions. Depending on the contextual circumstances of a state, certain intervening variables are going to be more important than others. For instance, while personality might be more salient than state-society relations in understanding Egypt under Gamal Abdel Nasser (1954–70) or Iraq under Saddam Hussain (1979–2003), the same cannot be said for other Middle Eastern states where different factors—such as history—might play a stronger explanatory role. To understand this intervening variable, we must be cognizant of Qatar’s sociopolitical context.

## ELITE PERCEPTIONS MATTER

Despite its constitution’s claim to be a democracy, Qatar lacks the institutional features common to the conventional understanding of democratic polities. Indeed, citizens in the country play

<sup>6</sup> Cited in Hassan Ali Al-Ebraheem, *Kuwait and the Gulf: Small States and The International System* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 1984), 22.

<sup>7</sup> Ronald P. Barston, *The Other Powers: Studies in The Foreign Policies of Small States* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1973).

<sup>8</sup> Jean-Marc Rickli, and Khalid S. Almezaini, “Theories of Small States’ Foreign and Security Policies and The Gulf States,” *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies Before and after the Arab Spring*, ed. Khalid S. Almezaini and Jean-Marc Rickli (London: Routledge), 10.

<sup>9</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, “Complex Realism,” in *International Relations of the Middle East*, ed. Louise Fawcett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 239–258.

<sup>10</sup> Fred Lawson, “Security Dilemmas and Conflict Spirals in The Persian Gulf,” in *Routledge Handbook of Persian Gulf Politics*, ed. Mehran Kamrava (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2020), 382–395.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Juneau, Steven Lobell, Norrin Ripsman, and Lawrence Rubin, “Neoclassical Realism: Domestic Politics, Systemic Pressures, and the Impact on Foreign Policy Since the Arab Spring,” in *Routledge Handbook of International Relations in The Middle East*, ed. Shahram Akbarzadeh (London: Routledge, 2019), 8–22.

<sup>12</sup> Rose, “Neoclassical Realism,” 157.

“a marginal role in the unfolding dynamics that shaped the country’s politics.”<sup>13</sup> This is largely in line with rentier-state theory, where states such as Qatar derive much of their revenues from renting resources and tend to be “autonomous from societal demands. . . , [maintaining] social and political acquiescence” through a comprehensive welfare system.<sup>14</sup> That, alongside the presence of a “relatively ethnically and religiously homogenous”<sup>15</sup> society with “limited enthusiasm for democracy,” allowed the state to solidify and centralize its power.<sup>16</sup>

This article contributes to neoclassical realism by developing a new approach to understanding intervening variables in Qatar through the conception of the “Ruling Family Baggage” (RFB). Such a conception appreciates the importance of incorporating historical factors as part of the larger subframework of intervening variables in neoclassical realism to better understand foreign-policy making in a state where elite perceptions assume supremacy over other intervening variables.

The RFB enriches the understanding of elite-level perceptions of Gulf monarchies. In Qatar, the RFB signifies a process of cumulative perceptions formed toward the region by successive emirs of the ruling Al Thani family since their ascent to power in the 1800s. That is not to say that history is the sole factor affecting formation of perceptions, as factors such as identity and worldview are also important. However, this concept should be taken as a starting point of any substantive explanation of Qatar’s foreign-policy decision making. It should also not be understood as implying that the ruling family is a homogenous entity. Instead, in clearly outlining the role of the emir as the leading figure, the RFB appreciates how historical interactions impact perceptions of the emir.

Underpinning the RFB is the claim that perceptions are not solely the domain of the current leader—supported by his appointed political elite—but, instead, are a collective product of the elites of the ruling family, which involves previous Qatari emirs. Put simply, perceptions are not contingent on the current ruler per se but are a hereditary token that existed with the advent of Al Thani rule in Qatar in the mid-1800s. Over time, elite perceptions of the threat from nearby states act as *multipliers* regularly brought to the fore due to a “perceptual shock” that then translates into foreign-policy decisions. Perpetual shock occurs when single events suddenly make leaders aware of the cumulative effects of gradual, long-term power trends. Of course, elite perception is not static. The perceptions formed by subsequent Qatari elites over time serve as a guide that influences perceptions of current elites toward their neighbors. Indeed, although circumstances change over time, deep mistrust between the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states is pervasive, largely a result of historical instances.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, for over 200 years, the same ruling families involved in the crisis, with the exception of Egypt, have governed their countries. Hence, the interaction among these dynasties is in a way bound by the accumulated image of the other, which is constructed over time. As Szalai contends,

<sup>13</sup> Mehran Kamrava, “Royal Factionalism and Political Liberalization in Qatar,” *The Middle East Journal* 63, no. 3 (Summer 2009), 403.

<sup>14</sup> Rolf Schwarz, “The Political Economy of State-Formation in the Arab Middle East: Rentier States, Economic Reform, And Democratization,” *Review of International Political Economy* 15, no. 4 (October 2008): 599.

<sup>15</sup> Uzi Rabi, “Qatar’s Relations with Israel: Challenging Arab and Gulf Norms,” *The Middle East Journal* 63, no. 3 (Summer 2009): 444.

<sup>16</sup> Mustafa Yetim, “State-Led Change in Qatar in the Wake of Arab Spring: Monarchical Country, Democratic Stance?” *Contemporary Review of The Middle East* 1, no. 4 (December 2014): 395.

<sup>17</sup> Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, “GCC Foreign Policy: The Struggle for Consensus,” in *Routledge Handbook of International Relations in The Middle East*, ed. Shahram Akbarzadeh (London: Routledge, 2019), 209–221.

the Al Thani family historically had “problematic relations” with the other ruling families in the region.<sup>18</sup> This is largely due to Qatar’s status as *kaabah al-madhyoom*, a refuge for exiles who have escaped from Abu Dhabi, Bahrain, and elsewhere since the 1800s.<sup>19</sup>

Scholars have noted such problematic relations since the mid-1800s. Chronologically, both Christopher Davidson<sup>20</sup> and Kristian Coates Ulrichsen<sup>21</sup> outline the joint 1867 invasion by Bahrain and the UAE into a Qatari-owned settlement in Doha with the intention of challenging the legitimacy of the Al Thani regime. Furthermore, Miller shows how, during the 1930s, King Abdulaziz Ibn Saud (1876–1953) attempted to capture large parts of Qatar and integrate them within Saudi territory.<sup>22</sup> Further, to Abdullah Baabood, a Cambridge-based Middle East scholar, much of the 2017 Gulf crisis can be explained by the presence of lingering grievances and “dynastic rivalries” between the ruling families.<sup>23</sup> These events shaped the perception of Qatar’s elites of their neighbors. As Robert Jervis puts it, the events that decision makers learn from the most are the “kinds of events [that] have the greatest impact.”<sup>24</sup> This is in line with James Goldgeier’s contention that perceptions, to a large extent, are based on “on prior expectations [that are chiefly influenced by]...historical analogies.”<sup>25</sup>

Yet, it is important not to give the impression that Qatar and the Quartet are everlasting “fraternal enemies” or that historical factors have played the only role in Qatar’s foreign-policy decision making. Far from it. What it does show is that the aforementioned events acted as threat multipliers that incrementally fed into the RFB’s elite perception of threat and, consequently, played a major role in many of the foreign-policy decisions made by the Qatari elite. In fact, the presence of inherent mistrust from prior interactions can explain why Sheikh Hamad decided to embark on a maverick foreign policy in 1995, fearing that continued reliance on Saudi Arabia would equate to losing sovereignty.<sup>26</sup>

## POST-1995 FOREIGN POLICY

### The RFB and Gas Politics

Qatar’s regional position changed with the 1995 coup and the emergence of Sheikh Hamad Al Thani in place of his father, Sheikh Khalifa. Unlike his father, Sheikh Hamad—alongside Hamad Bin Jassim as foreign minister—had a completely different approach to the region and the world.

<sup>18</sup> Máté Szalai, “Between Accommodation and Opportunism: Explaining the Growing Influence of Small Gulf States in The Middle East,” *The International Spectator* 52, no. 2 (June 2017): 14.

<sup>19</sup> David B. Roberts, *Qatar: Securing the Global Ambitions of a City-State* (London: Hurst & Company, 2017).

<sup>20</sup> Christopher M Davidson, *After the Sheikhs: The Coming Collapse of The Gulf Monarchies* (London: Hurst & Company, 2012).

<sup>21</sup> Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, “The Regional Implications of the Gulf Crisis,” *Journal of Arabian Studies* 10, no. 2 (April 2021): 305–320.

<sup>22</sup> Rory Miller, “Qatar, The Gulf Crisis and Small State Behaviour in International Affairs,” in *The Gulf Crisis: The View from Qatar* ed. Rory Miller (Doha: Hamad Bin Khalifa University Press), 89–98.

<sup>23</sup> Abdullah Baabood, “The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and its Future Prospects,” in *GCC: Evaluation, Lessons Learned and Future Prospects*, ed. Juline Beaujouan (*Global Policy*, 2019), 20.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

<sup>25</sup> James M. Goldgeier, “Psychology and Security,” *Security Studies* 6, no. 4 (December 2007): 146.

<sup>26</sup> David Roberts, *Qatar: Securing the Global Ambitions of a City-State* (London: Hurst & Company, 2017).

As Faisal Mukhyat Sulaib puts it, “While Sheikh Khalifa was satisfied to remain in Saudi Arabia’s shadow, his son and younger advisors did not agree and in the mid-1990s began to drift away from the regional powerhouse.”<sup>27</sup>

The 1992 “Kufoos incident” was a perceptual shock that evoked long-held suspicions toward Qatar’s neighbors as part of the RFB. The incident occurred alongside Qatar’s only land border with Saudi Arabia, where a dispute about pre-existing border agreements resulted in an exchange of fire leading to the death of two Qatari border officers.<sup>28</sup> Sheikh Hamad, the minister of defense at the time, experienced the impact of the incident firsthand. Alongside the disagreements between Sheikh Hamad and his father during his reign as emir, the border crisis served as a crucial turning point and a perceptual shock for Sheikh Hamad. To act on this perceptual shock, Qatar embarked on a foreign policy that “indicated a growing independence from Riyadh.”<sup>29</sup> This involved opening an Israeli trade-liaison office in Doha; fostering closer ties with Iran due to the potential benefits of the shared liquid-gas field; restoring ties with Iraq; and strengthening Qatari-US relations.<sup>30</sup> The forging of such ties is in line with intervening variables of neoclassical realism in that Emir Hamad’s perceptions of Saudi Arabia and, specifically, the need for independence in foreign affairs, could not have been realized without forging significant partnerships with states such as the United States and other Western powers that act as a deterrent to any possible response from Saudi Arabia.

Moreover, the exploitation of immense reserves of natural resources was a crucial domestic development that aided Qatar in its pursuit of carving out an independent foreign policy. In 2007, Qatar ranked third in the world in states with proven natural-gas reserves, amounting to as much as 905 trillion cubic feet.<sup>31</sup> It was under Sheikh Hamad that developments occurred focusing on the “the possibilities of [expanding] Qatar’s vast natural-gas resources and liquefaction technology.”<sup>32</sup> For instance, even though liquefied natural gas (LNG) in the country was discovered in 1971, it was first exported in 1996, a year after Sheikh Hamad became emir, following a period where preference for oil dominated the market’s demand. Specifically, expanding LNG capabilities occurred in 1996 where \$6 billion were invested in starting the gas project as the first export scheme for LNG in Qatar. Such reforms and expansions resulted in an influx of wealth that has aided in the state-branding process since the late 1990s. Such branding has broadly taken place through assuming rules in mediation as well as investments in international markets.

While investments, mediation, and the export of LNG are not unique to Qatar, they became part and parcel of Qatar’s soft power. This is in line with George Liska’s problematization of neo-realism’s focus on absolute power, in cases where a small state can still wield disproportionate force if it provides a commodity or services needed by other states.<sup>33</sup> Qatar used soft power to

<sup>27</sup> Faisal Mukhyat Sulaib, “Understanding Qatar’s Foreign Policy, 1995-2017,” *Middle East Policy* 24, no. 4, (December 2017): 41.

<sup>28</sup> Gwenn Okruhlik, and Patrick J. Conge, “The Politics of Border Disputes: On the Arabian Peninsula,” *International Journal* 54, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 230–248.

<sup>29</sup> Roberts, *Qatar*, 169.

<sup>30</sup> Mehran Kamrava, *Troubled Waters: Insecurity in The Persian Gulf* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 2018).

<sup>31</sup> Justin Dargin, “Qatar’s Natural Gas: The Foreign-Policy Driver,” *Middle East Policy* 14, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 136–142.

<sup>32</sup> Andrew Hammond, “Qatar’s Leadership Transition: Like Father, Like Son,” *European Council on Foreign Relations*, Policy Brief, 2014, 2.

<sup>33</sup> George Liska, *International Equilibrium: A Theoretical Essay on the Politics and Organization of Security* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1957).



gain sufficient reciprocity and prevent the emergence of an international consensus supporting the claims of the Quartet.

Qatar's rise on the world stage during the late 1990s is a result of fundamental changes to its foreign-policy approach following the rise of Sheikh Hamad Al Thani as emir in 1995—characterized by forging an independent political line, despite pressure from its larger neighbors, in order to carve a niche in the international system.<sup>34</sup> From hosting local camel races to becoming the only Arab state to win the right to host the FIFA World Cup in 2022, Qatar has risen to prominence as a small state with global ambitions. It was able to use its status as a crucial energy supplier of LNG and other hydrocarbon products, and a strong financial investor in key states, to its benefit during the 2017 Gulf crisis. This use of soft power took place in the absence of broad international support for the claims of the Quartet. Merely having states maintain neutrality—let alone, in the case of Turkey and Germany, siding with Qatar to varying extents—was a win for Qatar. Without international support, the Quartet would have pursued further escalation.

Exporting oil, and later natural gas, provided Qatar with the financial capabilities to sustain a highly active foreign policy and, at the same time, diversify its partnerships.<sup>35</sup> As the country with the world's highest per capita income, Qatar was able to use its newly found wealth from the sales of hydrocarbons to project itself into the international system.<sup>36</sup> Qatar positioned itself as a vital player with global influence in order “to protect itself from the perils of small-state anonymity and vulnerability.”<sup>37</sup> Qatar's deployment of its wealth in foreign policy as a mediator and investor became part and parcel of its *modus operandi*.

## Qatar's Soft-Power Projection

Qatar has positioned itself as a “diplomatic power broker” due to its networks of relations with both states and nonstate actors.<sup>38</sup> Examples include mediation efforts in Yemen, Lebanon, Palestine, the Horn of Africa, and the 2021 Afghan-Taliban peace talks.<sup>39</sup> Presenting itself as a mediator to world powers increases Qatar's “usefulness” beyond merely supplying natural gas or being a financial investor. This strategy intensifies the relationship between Qatar and whatever state it perceives to be important. Even if one of its services is no longer required, the provision of other services still renders Qatar important. By achieving its state-branding objectives, Qatar managed to translate its financial power into soft power that serves as crucial capital to be leveraged in times of crisis. Its effectiveness as a mediator is emblematic of Huntington's conception of a secondary regional power,<sup>40</sup> as Qatar's networks of relations with nonstate and state actors imbues it with a unique regional influence.

<sup>34</sup> Kristian Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring* (London: Hurst & Company, 2014).

<sup>35</sup> Sultan Barakat, “The Qatari Spring: Qatar's Emerging Role in Peacemaking,” *Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalization in the Gulf States*, LSE, Research Article, no. 24 (2012): 24.

<sup>36</sup> Kenneth Katzman, “Qatar: Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy,” *Congressional Research Service*, April 7, 2021, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R44533.pdf>.

<sup>37</sup> Khatib, “Qatar's Foreign Policy,” 418.

<sup>38</sup> Babak Mohammadzadeh, “Status and Foreign Policy Change in Small States: Qatar's Emergence in Perspective,” *The International Spectator* 52, no. 2 (June 2017): 19.

<sup>39</sup> Khatib, “Qatar's Foreign Policy.”

<sup>40</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, “The Lonely Superpower,” *Foreign Affairs* 78, no. 2 (March/April 1999).

High oil prices provided Qatar with a sizable budgetary surplus<sup>41</sup> vital in forging strong ties with states around the world mostly through investments by its sovereign wealth fund (SWF), the Qatar Investment Authority (QIA). As an extension of Qatar's foreign policy, QIA is behind a significant number of investments worth in excess of \$100 billion in nations such as France, the United Kingdom, and Germany.<sup>42</sup> For instance, in France, Qatar maintains over €35 billion in investment and has a financial and tax agreement that favors Qatari investment in France.<sup>43</sup> While Gawdat Bahgat is right in arguing that such investments by Qatar's SWF are in pursuit of an economic diversification strategy beyond hydrocarbon exports,<sup>44</sup> it is equally true that these investments and, broadly, Qatar's mediation efforts create links of dependence that can be used in times of crisis. Alongside mediation and investments, Qatar's status as an energy supplier is a crucial element of its leverageable assets.

Qatar possesses the world's third-largest proven reserves of natural gas and is one of the largest exporters of LNG.<sup>45</sup> Steven Wright traces Qatar's drive for independence in foreign policy to the decision by the Qatari elite to value the international market over the formation of a regional network that would have seen Qatar supplying gas to its neighbors at discounted prices.<sup>46</sup> By investing in tankers capable of carrying LNG, Qatar was able to effectively reach across the world, where the small state played an important role in satisfying energy demands. In 2013, Qatar's export of LNG accounted for 85% of India's LNG needs, 93% of the United Kingdom's, and 83% of Canada's.<sup>47</sup> An immediate benefit was the development of substantive political and economic ties with influential states that now have a vested interest in Qatar's stability.

Unlike the links of dependence on investments and mediation efforts, the demand for LNG renders Doha an indispensable partner in the international system. This is a beneficial strategy, as it makes the involved states dependent on Qatar's long-term security. Qatar's indispensability as an energy supplier was leveraged in the crisis to help in "rebuking the Saudi-Emirati embargo" and providing the country with a degree of strategic maneuverability, whereby it is able to mitigate the systemic constraints imposed by its limited power capabilities.<sup>48</sup> Soon after the crisis, states such as France, the United Kingdom, and China—all of which rely to differing extents on Qatari natural gas—have voiced concerns about the ongoing crisis and have sought to establish or support ongoing mediation efforts that were mostly led by Kuwait alongside the United States.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Fahad Al-Marri, "To What Extent Has the Sovereign Wealth Fund Assisted Qatar's Security and Foreign Policy in Resisting the Blockade?" in *The 2017 Gulf Crisis an Interdisciplinary Approach*, eds. Mahjoob Zweiri, Arwa Kamal, Mizanur Rahman (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2021), 303–324.

<sup>42</sup> Jeremias Kettner, "Making Sense of Europe's Response to The Gulf Crisis," in *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, ed. Andreas Krieg (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 251–265.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid

<sup>44</sup> Gawdat Bahgat, "Sovereign Wealth Funds in The Gulf - An Assessment," *Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalization in the Gulf States*, LSE, Research Article, no. 16 (2011).

<sup>45</sup> Rory Miller, "Qatar, Energy Security, And Strategic Vision in a Small State," *Journal of Arabian Studies* 10, no. 1 (February 2020): 122–138.

<sup>46</sup> Steven Wright, "The Political Economy of The Gulf Divide," in *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, ed. Andreas Krieg (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 149–159.

<sup>47</sup> Roberts, *Qatar*.

<sup>48</sup> Rory Miller and Harry Verhoeven, "Overcoming Smallness: Qatar, The United Arab Emirates and Strategic Realignment in the Gulf," *International Politics* 57 (May 2019).

<sup>49</sup> Ibrahim Fraihat, "Superpower and Small-State Mediation in the Qatar Gulf Crisis," *The International Spectator* 55, no. 2 (May 2020): 79–91.



## CRISIS-MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

### Hedging Turkey and the US

Standing on the White House lawn at a press conference four days after the beginning of the 2017 Gulf crisis, US President Donald Trump declared Qatar a funder of terrorism at a very high level. This was surprising to many, as almost three weeks earlier he had lauded Qatar as crucial strategic partner in the fight against terrorism by hosting the United States Central Command, CENTCOM. Standing next to him on September 8, 2017, Sheikh Sabah Al Sabah, then emir of Kuwait, stated, “What is important is that we have stopped any military action [against Qatar].”<sup>50</sup> These events shed light on the inconsistent US approach to the region and to the crisis, and illuminate how the crisis might have escalated to unforeseen levels. Central to mitigating this were Qatar’s skillful use of its influence in Washington to change the Trumps administration’s tone from pro-Quartet to neutral.

In many ways, the US status in the region can be viewed within Robert Keohane’s conception as a “system-determining” state.<sup>51</sup> This implies that, as a superpower, the United States is able to play a critical role in shaping the international system. While an increasingly multipolar world, especially with the emerging role of China in the region, raises questions about how much of a determinative role the United States still possesses, it is nevertheless safe to claim that in the Gulf region, the United States maintains its supremacy.<sup>52</sup>

The implications of Trump’s victory in the 2016 presidential elections highlight the volatile nature of the systemic pressure facing Qatar. Unlike the Obama administration, the Trump administration opted for a twin-pillar approach favoring Saudi Arabia and the UAE.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi saw Trump’s win as an “invaluable opportunity” to continue their unfinished business with Qatar that started with the 2014 diplomatic spat.<sup>54</sup> Under the Trump administration, the systemic pressure on the Quartet afforded the former the opportunity to escalate the crisis. As the systemic pressure on the Quartet decreased, the pressure on Qatar increased.

Recognizing the importance of the United States, Qatar exercised its influence in the Pentagon, the Oval Office, and Congress to cause a shift in Trump’s initially pro-Quartet tone. This is part and parcel of Qatar’s foreign-policy capabilities, influencing outcomes to its advantage, something Mehran Kamrava refers to as “subtle power.”<sup>55</sup> For example, Qatar was the first Gulf state to sign a memorandum of understanding with the United States, shortly after the beginning of the crisis, with regard to financing of terrorism. Furthermore, Qatar leveraged its status as a crucial player in the mediation of important issues, to the Department of State.

<sup>50</sup> “War ‘Stopped’ Between Qatar, Blockading Arab Nations,” *Al Jazeera*, September 8, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/9/8/war-stopped-between-qatar-blockading-arab-nations>.

<sup>51</sup> Robert O. Keohane, “Lilliputians’ Dilemmas: Small States in International Politics,” *International Organization* 23, no. 2 (Spring 1969): 291–310.

<sup>52</sup> Jonathan Fulton, “China and The Persian Gulf: Hedging Under the U.S. Umbrella,” in *Routledge Handbook of Persian Gulf Politics*, ed. Mehran Kamrava (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2020), 493–506.

<sup>53</sup> Kristian Ulrichsen, “What’s Going on With Qatar?” in *The Qatar Crisis: Project on Middle East Political Science*, 2017, 6–7, [https://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/POMEPS\\_GCC\\_Qatar-Crisis.pdf](https://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/POMEPS_GCC_Qatar-Crisis.pdf).

<sup>54</sup> Giorgio Cafiero, “The ‘Trump Factor’ In the Gulf Divide,” in *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, ed. Andreas Krieg (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 127–144.

<sup>55</sup> Mehran Kamrava, *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 2015), 60.

At the time, the department was led by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, the former CEO of ExxonMobil. In view of the latter's significant partnership with Qatar petroleum, Tillerson "more than anyone else in the U.S. [recognized] the true value of the Qatari partnership."<sup>56</sup>

Qatar's subtle powers were also activated in the main US legislative body, Congress, where the amount spent by Qatar in hiring lobbying firms from June to October 2017 was \$4.7 million as compared to \$6.5 million spent over five years starting in 2012.<sup>57</sup> Such measures generated an effective response within Washington against the claims of the president, as evident from the lack of any further escalation of the crisis. It arguably also set in motion a series of events culminating in the president's playing an important role in ending the crisis with the signing of the Al-Ula agreement.

Although Qatar embarked on a series of military sales procuring French Rafales, Russian AK rifles, and Chinese SY-400 short-range ballistic missiles, to name a few, the United States is by far the most significant security partner to Qatar, due to its status as a superpower and its prominent involvement in the region since the 1991 Gulf War.<sup>58</sup> This highlights the "bandwagoning dilemma" faced by a small state like Qatar seeking the protection of a great power.

How can a small state keep the delicate balance between projecting influence and accepting its lack of autonomy, a result of its dependence on a greater power? This dilemma was left dormant until the early 2010s, when the United States began withdrawing from the region.<sup>59</sup> While the United States still maintains a military presence in Qatar, its lackadaisical support of Hosni Mubarak, a key ally, during the 2011 Arab uprisings cast a shadow over its commitments to its partners.<sup>60</sup> If small states are conceptualized by their inability to provide for their own security, one way of mitigating this is through bandwagoning by forging security partnerships with stronger states.<sup>61</sup> Thus, fears of abandonment by the United States, coupled with the emergence of Turkey as a regional power, especially after the Arab uprising, contributed to Qatar's need to diversify its security partnerships. Much of Qatar's security derives from international military sales and the presence of foreign military bases on Qatari land.<sup>62</sup> This opportunity arose when the Qatar-Turkey Supreme Strategic Committee was established in 2014, paving the way for the formation of a fully fledged security alliance.

The 2014 Qatari-Turkish alliance was crucial in absorbing sudden changes to systemic pressure. Two days after the beginning of the crisis, the Turkish parliament convened to approve legislation authorizing further deployment of Turkish troops to Qatar as a deterrent against further

<sup>56</sup> "Qatar Has Shown Remarkable Resilience to Withstand Gulf Crisis: Expert Tells QT," *Qatar Tribute*, February 5, 2018, <https://www.qatar-tribune.com/news-details/id/110281>.

<sup>57</sup> D. B. Grafov, "Lobbying of Qatar's Interests in The United States and The Qatar Diplomatic Crisis," *MGIMO Review of International Relations* 13, no. 2 (April 2020): 183–204.

<sup>58</sup> Islam Hassan, "Between Anarchy and Arms Race: A Security Dilemma in The Persian Gulf," in *Routledge Handbook of Persian Gulf Politics*, ed. Mehran Kamrava (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2020), 397–416.

<sup>59</sup> Victor Gervais, "The Changing Security Dynamic in The Middle East and Its Impact on Smaller Gulf Cooperation Council States' Alliance Choices and Policies," in *The Small Gulf States Foreign and Security Policies Before and After the Arab Spring*, eds. Jean-Marc Rickli and Khalid S. Almezaini (London: Routledge, 2016), 31–46.

<sup>60</sup> Daniela Huber, "A Pragmatic Actor — The US Response to The Arab Uprisings," *Journal of European Integration* 37, no. 1 (December 2014): 57–75.

<sup>61</sup> Michael I. Handel, *Weak States in The International System* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 1990). Also check Randall L. Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back," *International Security* 19, no. 1: 72–107

<sup>62</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman, *Bahrain, Oman, Qatar and the UAE: Challenges of Security* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 1991).

escalations by the Quartet.<sup>63</sup> By siding with Qatar at a time in which “no one had yet understood the full magnitude of the game,” Turkey effectively deterred an invasion by increasing the costs of any further escalation.<sup>64</sup> Some viewed the dispatch of Turkish troops as a sign of support for Qatar against a potential coup.<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless, one must not exaggerate the nature of the alliance. No regional or international power has the capability or intention to fill the role of the United States in the region. As Bulent Aras and Emirhan Yorulmazlar put it, “While the average Qatari is thankful to Turkey [for dispatching its troops], the main security provider for Qatar is still the United States.”<sup>66</sup> Alongside capitalizing on the immediate deterrent benefit of the Qatari-Turkish alliance, it was imperative to engage with the United States to influence a change in the US position.

Much of Qatar’s perception of Turkey is driven by Qatar’s RFB and strategic interests.<sup>67</sup> More important, from the Qatari side, the RFB helps to explain the choice of Turkey. For instance, in 1867, Abu Dhabi and Bahrain launched an incursion against the Qatari cities of Al-Wakra and Doha. Twenty-one years later, Sheikh Ali bin Jassim Al Thani, the son of Qatar’s founder, was assassinated in a naval raid launched by Abu Dhabi. In a translated telegram sent to Ottoman officials following the assassination, Sheikh Jassim Al Thani—the founder of Qatar—divulged how he “placed [his dependence] on God and you (the Ottoman troops)” in order to protect Qatar against aggression by its neighbors. Almost more than a century later, Emir Tamim was faced with a similar threat and resorted to a similar approach. In fact, the spectacle of Turkish troops landing in Doha shortly after the beginning of the 2017 crisis evoked memories of Ottoman troops departing from their garrisons in Qatar almost a hundred years earlier. This highlights how threat perceptions formed by Qatar’s elites within the ruling family have carried over to influence the decision making of the current emir. Some have even referred to Erdogan’s attempts to project influence in lands previously led by the Ottomans as a form of neo-Ottomanism.<sup>68</sup>

Additionally, Qatar and Turkey played key roles during the 2011 Arab uprisings through their support for Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoots as well as by maintaining common positions on Libya, Syria, and the Israeli-Palestinian issue.<sup>69</sup> Therefore, Qatar’s embrace of Turkey as an ally is in line with Walt’s contention that common strategic interests and ideologies foster a conducive ground for the emergence of an alliance.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Ebrar Sahika Kucukasci, “Entente Cordiale: Exploring Turkey–Qatar Relations,” TRT World Research Centre (2019), [https://www.academia.edu/38468820/Entente\\_Cordiale\\_Exploring\\_Turkey\\_Qatar\\_Relations](https://www.academia.edu/38468820/Entente_Cordiale_Exploring_Turkey_Qatar_Relations).

<sup>64</sup> Ali Bakir, “The Evolution of Turkey—Qatar Relations Amid a Growing Gulf Divide,” *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, ed. Andreas Krieg (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 213.

<sup>65</sup> Mustafa Gurbuz, “Ankara’s Ambiguous Policy Toward a Divided GCC,” Arab Centre Washington DC, October 30, 2017, [http://arabcenterdc.org/policy\\_analyses/ankaras-ambiguous-policy-toward-a-divided-gcc/](http://arabcenterdc.org/policy_analyses/ankaras-ambiguous-policy-toward-a-divided-gcc/).

<sup>66</sup> Bulent Aras, and Emirhan Yorulmazlar, “Turkey, Iran and the Gulf Crisis,” *Humanitarian Studies Foundation*, 2018, 7.

<sup>67</sup> Omar Al-Ejli, Sheikh Jassim Al-Thani: Founder of Qatar, A Historical Study of a Nineteenth-Century Gulf and The Arabian Peninsula (New York: Page Publishing Inc., 2015).

<sup>68</sup> Giorgio Cafiero, and Daniel Wagner, “Turkey and Qatar’s Burgeoning Strategic Alliance,” *Middle East Institute*, June 8, 2016, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/turkey-and-qatars-burgeoning-strategic-alliance>.

<sup>69</sup> Jonathan Hoffman, “Israel and the Counterrevolutionaries: Gauging Tel Aviv’s Evolving Regional Alliances After the Arab Uprisings,” *Durham Middle East Articles*, no. 102 (2020).

<sup>70</sup> Stephen M. Walt, “Why Alliances Endure or Collapse,” *Survival* 39, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 156–179.

## Qatar and Iran

In 1981, Qatar joined Saudi Arabia and four other Gulf monarchies to form the GCC, largely in response to the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution and the subsequent Iran-Iraq War.<sup>71</sup> Here, the existence of the GCC can be explained through Buzan's concept of a "security complex," where the threat of a revolutionary spillover from the newly founded Islamic Republic of Iran enmeshed the national-security concerns of the Gulf states.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, the threat of Ayatollah Khomeini's export of the Islamic Revolution and the instability caused by the Iran-Iraq War trumped concerns of the smaller Gulf states about a potential Saudi hegemonic role within the organization.<sup>73</sup>

However, in 1992, the perception of a threat from Saudi Arabia took center stage as Qatar began to adjust to the presence of an Islamic Iran. As Yoel Guzansky notes, the aforementioned Kufos incident had major negative ramifications on the efficacy of the GCC. Its occurrence cast "a shadow over [the GCC's]... ability to develop and maintain organizational cooperation."<sup>74</sup> Therefore, while the formation of the GCC was predicated upon mitigating the insecurity emanating from outside the organization, the period following the early 1990s witnessed the proliferation of insecurity from within the organization. This also was manifested in the case of the 1996 countercoup in Qatar, which implicated three members of the GCC (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE). As such, this period marked an important shift in Qatar's regional geopolitical perceptions as a result of the perceptual shock from the 1992 border skirmish and, subsequently, the 1996 countercoup. This entailed Qatar's resort to strengthening its relations with its other neighbor, Iran. Indeed, Qatar, alongside Kuwait and Oman, does not perceive the Iranian threat as existential.<sup>75</sup>

In fact, during the year that Sheikh Hamad ascended to power, 1995, there were reports that Qatar would leave the GCC over concerns regarding Saudi Arabia's hegemonic role within the organization.<sup>76</sup> Yet, systemic pressure continues to influence the scope of Qatar's relations with Iran, mainly the involvement of the United States in the regional-security architecture since the early 1990s as Qatar's main security guarantor. This severely constrains the latter from fully realizing the potential of its relationship with Iran. Instead, Qatar has had to calibrate its foreign policy with Iran in such a way as to not antagonize the United States. As such, the current relationship can be best explained through a tacit security regime (TSR) framework. This is a departure from past research that largely treats Qatar's relations

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<sup>71</sup> Kristian Ulrichsen, "Internal and External Security in The Arab Gulf States," *Middle East Policy* 16, no. 2 (June 2009): 39–58.

<sup>72</sup> Barry Buzan, *People, States & Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in The Post-Cold War Era* (Sussex: Wheat-sheaf Books, 2017).

<sup>73</sup> Anoushiravan Ehteshami, "Security and Strategic Trends in The Middle East," in *The Transformation of The Gulf: Politics, Economics and The Global Order*, eds. David Held and Kristian Ulrichsen (Oxfordshire: Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), 261–278.

<sup>74</sup> Yoel Guzansky, "Lines Drawn in The Sand: Territorial Disputes and GCC Unity," *The Middle East Journal* 70, no. 4 (Autumn 2016): 544.

<sup>75</sup> Cinzia Bianco, "The GCC Monarchies: Perceptions of the Iranian Threat amid Shifting Geopolitics," *The International Spectator* 55, no. 2 (June 2020): 92–107.

<sup>76</sup> Islam Hassan, "The UAE: A Small State with Regional Middle Power Aspirations," in *Unfulfilled Aspirations: Middle Power Politics in The Middle East*, ed. Adham Saouli (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 183–203.

with Iran within the broader hedging strategy that involves Saudi Arabia and the United States.<sup>77</sup>

## Tacit Security Regime

Aaron Kleiman developed the concept of TSR to explain the presence of a clandestine relationship between Israel and Jordan prior to the 1994 peace treaty.<sup>78</sup> At its core, such a regime emerges from what Keohane defines as the presence of “functional expectations,” an essential prerequisite for cooperation between two otherwise adversarial states.<sup>79</sup> The construct of TSR used in this article is heavily inspired by Clive Jones and Yoel Guzansky’s study of the foreign-policy interaction between Israel and the Gulf states.<sup>80</sup> First, the geographical contiguity of Qatar and Iran is an important determinant. The two states share the region’s largest natural-gas field, which since the early 1970s has accounted for 99% and 50% of Qatar’s and Iran’s reserves, respectively.<sup>81</sup> Second, both share negative perceptions of Saudi Arabia. For Qatar, these negative perceptions are the result of attempts by the Saudis to interfere in its domestic affairs as well as the perceived hegemonic ambitions by Saudi Arabia in the region. While Iran shares this perception with Qatar, its perceptions of Saudi Arabia are driven by the wider competition over the “ideological and geopolitical” spectrum.<sup>82</sup> Third, the informality of Qatari-Iranian relations is rooted in the cognizance by both parties that systemic pressures prevent the flourishing of such a relationship into an open alliance. Unlike Jones and Guzansky’s contention that concerns for domestic legitimacy initially impeded some Gulf states from pursuing a full-fledged relationship with Israel,<sup>83</sup> the case of Qatar and Iran is different. For the latter, international constraints chiefly emanating from US pressure, which prevents Qatar from further intensifying its relationship with Iran. Fourth, the “tacitness” of such a regime does not underpin the overall nature of the relationship. For instance, Qatar maintains strong economic relations with Tehran and has common views toward the Israeli-Palestinian issue.<sup>84</sup>

Fifth, the intimacy of such relations with the Iranian regime is not only a result of subjective perceptions about Great Power commitments to the security of the region, but also the need to prioritize regional solutions to regional issues. Qatar has wanted to involve Iran in the regional security architecture since the early 1990s.<sup>85</sup> Sixth, there is a lack of ideological, territorial, or historical barriers that can severely impede cooperation between the two states.<sup>86</sup> Although Qatar

<sup>77</sup> Sofia Hamdi, and Mohammad Salman, “The Hedging Strategy of Small Arab Gulf States,” *Asian Politics & Policy* 12, no. 2 (May 2020): 127–152.

<sup>78</sup> Aaron Klieman, “The Israel-Jordan Tacit Security Regime,” in *Regional Security Regimes: Israel and Its Neighbours*, ed. Efraim Inbar (New York: SUNY Press, 1995), 127–150.

<sup>79</sup> Robert Keohane, *After Hegemony* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984).

<sup>80</sup> Clive Jones and Yoel Guzansky, *Fraternal Enemies: Israel and The Gulf Monarchies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>81</sup> Omid Kalehsar, “A Flexible Pipeline Dream: Iran’s LNG Goals,” *Energy & Environment* 27, no. 5 (August 2016): 542–552.

<sup>82</sup> Simon Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Power and Rivalry in The Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018), 4.

<sup>83</sup> Clive Jones and Yoel Guzansky, *Fraternal Enemies*.

<sup>84</sup> Mehran Kamrava, “Iran-Qatar Relations” in *Security and Bilateral Issues Between Iran and Its Arab Neighbours*, eds. Anoushiravan Ehteshami, Neil Quilliam, and Gawdat Bahgat (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 167–189.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

is a Sunni state, it lacks the sectarian cleavage that is present in neighboring countries such as Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. Therefore, ideology does not play an important role in dictating the contours of Doha's relations with Tehran. Additionally, there are no accounts of territorial conflicts between the two.<sup>87</sup> Finally, the Qatari regime is dynamic in its response to emerging issues. Depending on the circumstances, Qatar can take anti-Iranian positions without posing a security threat to Iran, as was the case of the two states supporting different sides in Syria.<sup>88</sup> Alternatively, in times of need, such a regime can be activated to offset a sudden security threat, as was the case in the 2017 Gulf crisis.

## Iran's Logistic Support

The observable elements of Iran's support to Qatar during the 2017 crisis took place through the delivery of basic foodstuffs, as well as providing a much-needed air corridor to allow the operational continuity of Qatar Airways. Iran's food assistance was vital during the early crucial phases of the crisis. Prior to 2017, 40% of Qatar's imported food came over its only land border, with Saudi Arabia.<sup>89</sup> Additionally, much of Qatar's food imported by sea passes through the UAE port of Jebel Ali, the primary transshipment hub of the region.<sup>90</sup> Like the decision by Saudi Arabia to close the land border, the UAE prohibited the entry and unloading of all vessels destined for Qatar. In a country where 90% of its food is imported, the crisis threatened the core of Qatar's food security, a need that was fulfilled largely by Iran's support. According to Boussois, Iran sent around 350 tons of foodstuffs by air and sea to cover Qatar's basic needs.<sup>91</sup> In fact, Iran's Busheir port played a vital role in the crisis, shipping 1,100 tons of food to Qatar on a daily basis as well as acting as a transit route for food from Turkey.<sup>92</sup>

The second avenue of Iran's observable support was logistical, by providing Qatar Airways access to its air corridors. The closure of the air corridors and land border was initiated to create severe challenges for Qatar's economy that would result in swift capitulation to the demands of the Quartet.<sup>93</sup> Sigurd Neubauer goes even further by stating that the closure was part of a two-phase plan to drive Qatar Airways into bankruptcy,<sup>94</sup> which, alongside crippling other drivers of Qatar's economy, would have been a conducive ground for public unrest. Petcu noted that the closure of the Quartet's airspace to Qatar Airways resulted in the airline "losing 50 flights per day,

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in The New Middle East* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2018).

<sup>89</sup> Kristin V. Monroe, "Geopolitics, Food Security, and Imaginings of the State in Qatar's Desert Landscape," *Culture, Agriculture, Food and Environment* 42, no. 1 (April 2020): 25–35.

<sup>90</sup> John Davison, "Gulf Crisis A "Blessing in Disguise" for Qatar Seaport," *Reuters*, June 15, 2017, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/gulf-qatar-port/gulf-crisis-a-blessing-in-disguise-for-qatar-seaport-idUSL8N1JC2LJ>.

<sup>91</sup> Sébastien Boussois, "Iran and Qatar: A Forced Rapprochement," in *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, ed. Andreas Krieg (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 217–232.

<sup>92</sup> "Iran Continues to Ship Food to Qatar," *Radio Frada*, June 22, 2017, <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-qatar-food-shipments/28573344.html>.

<sup>93</sup> Michael Stephens, "Why Key Arab Countries Have Cut Ties with Qatar – and What Trump Had to Do with It," *Washington Post*, June 7, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/06/07/what-you-should-know-about-qatar-now/>.

<sup>94</sup> Sigurd Neubauer, *The Gulf Region and Israel: Old Struggles, New Alliances* (New York: Kodesh Press, 2020).



18 destinations...and increasing flight time [for an airline that]...operated more flights on the affected routes than all other airlines combined.”<sup>95</sup> Prior to the crisis, Qatar Airways had access to 18 air corridors. During the crisis, the number decreased to only two, making Iran the single source of entry to Qatar. Iran’s role took shape through allowing a daily influx of 200 Qatar Airways planes to use its aerial corridor.<sup>96</sup>

## Military Assistance

It might be wishful thinking to imagine an Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps base erected next to the US Al-Udeid Airbase in Qatar. However, that does not mean military cooperation between Qatar and Iran is non-existent, as shown by the 2010 Qatari-Iranian defense-cooperation accord that was largely aimed at combatting human trafficking, drug smuggling, and counterterrorism operations.

This, alongside examples of visits by high-ranking military personnel from both states, has largely occurred without a clear indication of the extent of the military cooperation between the two states. This reflects the third point in the TSR criteria, where the presence of the United States in the region prevents the manifestation of a more comprehensive Qatari-Iranian military cooperation. Yet, according to Matthew Hedges and Giorgio Cafiero, a Qatari source confirmed the deployment of Iranian naval forces to Qatar’s waters shortly after the beginning of the crisis in order to prevent a potential naval incursion by the UAE.<sup>97</sup> If this is true, it exemplifies cashing in on a TSR agreement in order to prepare for a military escalation. In a sense, the ramifications of a military invasion on Qatar would have also had negative implications for Iran. This is due to the enmeshing of Qatar’s security with Iran’s national interests. In fact, the former Iranian ambassador to Doha clearly stated that the supreme objective of Iran’s support for Qatar was underpinned by the importance of wanting “to prevent a regime change attempt by Saudi Arabia.”<sup>98</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In this article, we analyzed Qatar’s foreign-policy determinants since 1995 and how Qatar was able to mitigate the 2017 Gulf crisis. Focusing specifically on the accumulated historical perception among the Gulf dynasties in the Arab Peninsula, we formulated the concept of Ruling Family Baggage (RFB) and added to the tenets of neoclassical realism. We argued that the causes of the crisis are better understood from a historical perspective, that the 1992 Kufoos incident was a

<sup>95</sup> Catalina Petcu, “The Role of Qatar Airways in The Economic Development of Qatar: Before and During the Gulf Crisis,” in *The 2017 Gulf Crisis: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, ed. Mahjoob Zweiri, Md Mizanur Rahman, and Arwa Eldin Gaf Abbas (Singapore: Springer, 2021), 337.

<sup>96</sup> Max Bearak, “Three Maps Show How the Qatar Crisis Means Trouble for Qatar Airways,” *Washington Post*, June 7, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/06/07/three-maps-explain-how-geopolitics-has-qatar-airways-in-big-trouble/>.

<sup>97</sup> Matthew Hedges and Giorgio Cafiero, “Can Qatar Hedge Its Bets on Security Guarantors?” *Lobelog*, November 13, 2017, <https://lobelog.com/can-qatar-hedge-its-bets-on-security-guarantors>.

<sup>98</sup> Mehran Haghiriian, “Iran’s Pragmatic Foreign Policy in Response to Regional Crises: The Case of The Blockade Against Qatar,” in *The 2017 Gulf Crisis: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, eds. Mahjoob Zweiri, Md Mizanur Rahman, and Arwa Eldin Gaf Abbas (Singapore: Springer, 2021), 280.

deceptive moment in the history of Qatar-Saudi relations, and that with the change in leadership of Qatar in 1995, the country's attitude toward Saudi Arabia changed. Along with the territorial disputes, we contended that the Kufoos incident provided a "perceptual shock" that evoked long-held suspicions of Sheikh Hamad toward Qatar's neighbors. When Sheikh Hamad rose to power, he embarked on an independent foreign policy outside Saudi Arabia's orbit by opening diplomatic channels with Israel and Iran, something that was taboo before 1995.

Focusing on liquefied natural gas, sports, and public diplomacy as foreign policy tools, we argued that Qatar was able to create systemic pressure on the Quartet and avoid escalation of the conflict against Doha. Moreover, Qatar used a hedging strategy with the United States and Turkey to gain their support during the 2017 crisis. Moreover, Qatar was able to exercise its influence inside the power configurations in the United States in its efforts to change Trump's pro-Quartet policy through signing a memorandum of understanding with the United States and capitalizing on its diplomatic power-broker status. Also, we argued that Qatar was able to pressure the Trump administration through the ExxonMobil-Qatar petroleum ties of Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, the former CEO of ExxonMobil. As for Turkey, we argued that Qatar's diversification of its security partnerships with Turkey was determined by the RFB. Given their historical ties since the time of the Ottoman Empire, along with Turkey's growing regional status, Turkey became a viable ally. Finally, we incorporated the use of a Tacit Security Regime (TSR) into neoclassical relations in our effort to explain perceptions and systemic constraints that influence the contours of international relations. Bypassing ideological barriers, we argued that the geopolitics of the natural-gas field shared by Qatar and Iran is an important determining factor in bringing the two countries together.

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