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Andrew F. Cooper^a & Bessma Momani^b

^a Department of Political Science at the University of Waterloo and Centre for International Governance Innovation, Waterloo

^b University of Waterloo and Centre for International Governance Innovation

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Qatar and Expanded Contours of Small State Diplomacy

Andrew F. Cooper and Bessma Momani

Most small countries find it wise to keep their heads down in world affairs. Qatar is small, a pancake-flat peninsula less than half the size of Belgium. Barely a quarter of its 750,000 people are citizens, the rest being foreign workers and their families. But the bantam-sized emirate has a habit of punching above its weight, and in several directions at once.¹

International diplomacy continues to evolve and change before practitioners' and academics' eyes. Consequently, states must navigate the ever-changing rules of the game in international politics and diplomacy. Small states have always been viewed as vulnerable actors in the international system, but at times they can capitalise on their unique vantage point in regional and international politics to make a noticeable impact in world affairs.

Qatar, a small peninsula situated in the tumultuous Persian Gulf region that is similar in size to most islands in the Caribbean, is home to less than a million people that are nearly all urbanised and can boast the second highest per capita income in the world. With an abundance of oil and gas as lucrative sources of national income and an open climate to foreign investment, Qatar had achieved GDP growth rates of up to 17 percent in recent years. Despite the international financial crisis, Qatar's GDP growth rate remained an impressive 9 percent in 2009 – far exceeding any of the other emerging market economies and dwarfing the troubled but hyped emirate of Dubai. While its economic successes are impressive, its diplomatic activities and achievements are what have made Qatar noticed in international affairs.

Qatar has played a unique diplomatic role in the Middle East as peace broker and regional moderator, balancing an appeal to Arab populist causes and extending a hand to Israel. Using its UN Security Council seat (2005–07) to play an expanded role in the region and world, Qatari actions never followed simple

Andrew F. Cooper is Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Waterloo, and Distinguished Fellow of the Centre for International Governance Innovation, Waterloo. Email: acooper@cigionline.org; *Bessma Momani* is Associate Professor at the University of Waterloo and Senior Fellow at the Centre for International Governance Innovation. Email: bmomani@uwaterloo.ca

¹“A Bouncy Bantam”, *The Economist*, 7 September 2006.

alliance structures. Instead, as a maverick but skilled diplomatic actor, it mediated and intervened in regional affairs where state interests were not clear and success was uncertain. Moreover, Qatar keeps its allies close and its enemies even closer as it is home to the US Central Command, Al-Jazeera and numerous regional exiles and radicals.

In this article, it is argued that Qatar is a unique hybrid diplomatic actor – a helpful mediator/broker, but one with an unconventional repertoire. Its focus is more than regional; it is global as well and this has increased its international visibility while accentuating its risk orientation. With the accent on solidarity and coalitions through power of numbers as the means to overcome its precarious condition in terms of size and location, the traditional International Relations literature is unable to explain Qatar's diplomatic choices and behaviour. The case of Qatar challenges academics to extend their contours of analysis. Defensive forms of collective resilience as a counterpoint to vulnerability are subordinated in the case of this small sheikdom to an outward-looking and wide-ranging diplomatic strategy.

The changing context of small state diplomacy

The study of small state diplomacy is an increasingly diverse and exciting project. During the Cold War, the theme of structurally imposed conditions dominated. When small states grabbed attention it was because they projected some degree of collective voice and/or votes. Leveraging what attributes they possessed in the Westphalian system, small states channelled much of their diplomatic activity through the United Nations in sites and forums where one vote per sovereign state is the rule. Today, the G77 and other regional groupings stand out as notable examples.

Symptomatic of this orthodox perspective during the Cold War is the analysis of the practice of small state diplomacy in the early work of David Vital.² His two monographs are preoccupied with the state of Israel in the Middle East in a period of intense bipolarity; they are 'pre-globalisation' and acutely realist, with a concentration on conflict. The bulk of the literature in this period is premised on the assumption that small states could not simply assume that their sovereignty/independence would be respected by greater powers, especially if those greater powers saw strategic relevance in either interfering with the smaller states' domestic policies or even, sometimes, in violating their territorial integrity. This impression of vulnerability was increased when a small state was situated within the sphere of influence of the greater power.³

² Vital, *The Survival of Small States* and *The Inequality of States*.

³ Mathisen, *Functions of Small States*, 49–66, 238–65; Bjöl, "Small States in International Politics", 31–7.

The context of the international economic system was just as problematic, as witnessed by the volatility of the oil shocks through the 1970s. Small states lacked diversification in their economies and were therefore more reliant on trade than larger states. Limited domestic market size and high transportation costs (a result of remoteness from major markets and small cargo loads) further reduced their competitiveness and returns. When the proximity to a larger state was close, economic dependence on a larger power merged with geopolitical vulnerability (as in the case of Swaziland, Lesotho and Botswana *vis-à-vis* South Africa).⁴

Yet, even in the Cold War period, small states could not be seen simply as structurally weak Lilliputians in a system controlled by the big and strong. Keohane opened up some of the possibilities available to an analysis of small states in his well known 1971 article, the “Big Influence of Small Allies”.⁵ But the privileging of small states’ diplomatic agency was still tempered by a number of analytical obstacles. Realist thinking still dictated that small states choose between a narrow set of choices, namely a bandwagon and a balancing approach. Moreover, the states that were given most of the attention in these studies were far more akin to middle powers than smaller states. Much of the older literature (pre-1990s) tended to focus on states that were under the 10–15 million in population range, categorising the world into large states or ‘Great Powers’, medium states or ‘Medium Powers’ and small states or ‘Small Powers’. When making specific reference to states below the 1–1.5 million range in population, they were often referred to as ‘microstates’.⁶

The greater range of choices

The 21st century highlights a far greater range of choices – and outcomes – for small states. At one end of the spectrum, the theme of vulnerability is accentuated. Dominant images of structural weakness cannot be completely set aside, as witnessed by the number of failed or fragile states that fit the category of small states (from Vanatu to Haiti). Globalisation has served to exacerbate this sense of divergence between strong and weak actors. Small states can be upwardly mobile. But there is also an alternative race to the bottom, most visible in the South Pacific. For example, the early work of Lino Briguglio is concerned with post-independence island states characterised not only by economic but also ecological vulnerability, a notion that has become more acute with an appreciation of the dangers of climate change.⁷

⁴ Bartson, “External Relations of Small States”, 43–6; Commonwealth Secretariat/World Bank, “Vulnerability”, 6–7; Horscroft, “Special and Differential Treatment”.

⁵ Keohane, “Big Influence of Small Allies”.

⁶ Vital, *The Inequality of States*; Dommen and Hein, *States, Microstates and Islands*.

⁷ Briguglio, “Small Island States”.

Reflective of the structurally imposed set of conditions, small states continue to be disconnected from the most salient debates in International Relations. Current shifts in the regional-global architecture are almost universally perceived to be due not to any re-location among small actors but because of the emergence of the so-called BRICs – or alternative acronyms such as CHINDIA, BASIC or the Next 11⁸ – at the upper middle part of the international hierarchy.

At the other end of the spectrum, the theme of resilience is highlighted. In a post-Cold War context, the privileged form of collective activity via ‘Third World’ solidarity has eroded. Small states no longer have as their main game the mobilisation of a wider south-oriented trade union movement. In functional terms, the more successful small states adopt international practices that run parallel to classic middle power diplomacy.⁹ Small states have revealed that they can adopt diplomatic practices that involve global networks advancing global governance on an issue-specific basis.

Economically, resilience is meshed with taking advantage of the range of options open to small states. Consistent with the flexibility built into the theme of resilience, some states have built up their economic niches using a well thought out strategy with a focus on education and technological infrastructure. Others have adapted in a far more *ad hoc* or even opportunistic manner. A good number of states see themselves – and are often seen by others – as being innovative risk-takers.

Small states had a good run in adapting to the new rules of the post-Cold War order. Harold James, although akin to Keohane emphasizing the role of the bigger small states, gives this category of countries pride of place as adapters: “In the heyday of modern globalisation in the 1990s, it looked as if small open states would be the winners: New Zealand, Chile, Ireland, the Baltic Republics, Slovakia and Slovenia.”¹⁰ These countries were able to take advantage of the removal of barriers to international trade and investment through a variety of means, some conventional (lowering taxes) and some very unconventional (making Iceland a banking centre).

One of the hallmarks of the 2008 international financial crisis is the return of the theme of vulnerability to the study of small states. As an article by Gideon Rachman argues, a variety of small states have been among the hardest hit by the ‘Great Recession’.¹¹ Casualties have included most notably Iceland, Ireland, and the Baltic states, in particular Latvia and Lithuania.

This modern day vulnerability is not only a Euro-centric phenomenon. The city-state of Dubai risked falling into the same category when in late 2009,

⁸ BRICS = Brazil, Russia, India and China; CHINDIA = China and India; BASIC = Brazil, South Africa, India and China; Next 11 = Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, Philippines, South Korea, Turkey and Vietnam. Cooper, Ankiewicz and Shaw, “Size Trumps all Else?”.

⁹ Cooper, *Niche Diplomacy*.

¹⁰ James, *Creation and Destruction of Value*, 182.

¹¹ G. Rachman, “How Small States Were Cut Adrift”, *Financial Times*, 20 October 2009.

Dubai World asked a banking consortium for a 6-month moratorium on debt service to avoid possible default. Although this issue has brought out some impressive forms of crisis management, the episode conveyed an image of unanticipated vulnerability. As Rachman reminds us, Joseph Stiglitz once conveyed the warning that “[s]mall open economies are like rowing boats on an open sea.”¹²

Notwithstanding this evidence, however, the case of Qatar demonstrates that the theme of resilience – especially diplomatic resilience – should not be discarded. If the potential for economic vulnerability has increased, the build up of various manifestations of diplomatic innovation in a number of small states is an impressive one. The image of the weakness of small isolated states is no longer good enough. Nor, conversely, is the notion of a large-scale ganging up of an assembly of Lilliputians – the so-called ‘tyranny of the weak’.

The ongoing, albeit nuanced, privileging of resilience and resourcefulness makes us look much more closely at the diplomatic profile of individual small states. In this narrative the image of small states is reconfigured in quite striking ways. Vulnerability is a naturally imposed and predictable condition in which the room for manoeuvre is severely constrained. Resilience by way of contrast is adaptive, whereas structural factors cannot only be resisted but reshaped. Space for unorthodox diplomatic activity presents itself.

The case of Qatar exemplifies the subordination of vulnerability to resilience. Qatar, to be sure, has a number of strong economic attributes. Far from being a reactive small state, however, Qatar has moved to re-brand itself through some of the means that the advocates of the ‘resilient’ theme suggest. Using a blend of conventional and unconventional techniques, Qatar has become the poster illustration of how a small state can upgrade its diplomatic reputation.

Qatar: beyond vulnerability to small state innovation

Since the 1995 peaceful coup ending his father’s reign, the leader of the small state of Qatar, Sheik Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, has attempted to craft an innovative diplomatic role for his country. With the support of his charismatic wife, Shaikha Mozha bin Nasser al-Misnad, Sheik Hamad can be positioned as part of a new generation of Arab leaders in the Middle East. Shifting Qatar’s foreign policy agenda away from his father’s acquiescence to Saudi hegemony in the region, Sheik Hamad has tried to lever the attributes of his small state as a source of strength. Sheik Hamad has brought Western economic and political reforms to Qatar, including universal suffrage and extensive economic liberalisation and deregulation. Qatar also hosts campuses of prominent US universities such as Georgetown, Cornell, Texas A&M, Virginia Commonwealth and Carnegie

¹² *Ibid.*

Mellon of Pittsburgh. In December 2010, Qatar won the bid to host the prestigious FIFA World Cup games in 2022, the first Middle Eastern country to host FIFA's 45 participating countries and its estimated 3 million fans. As one champion for the Qatari World Cup bid put it:

we [wanted to] turn the negatives of a small country, with a small population, into...positives...Anyone who spends time here knows...that this country delivers. And delivers not because it has got resources to deliver but because it knows how to build projects and get the right people together.¹³

Sitting on the United Nations Security Council from 2006–07 and as chairman of the Group of 77 in 2004, Qatar appeared to be reverting to some of the older stereotypes of small state diplomacy. Yet, Qatar's diplomacy has built up a much greater range of influence than this suggests. Qatari leaders have courted regional radicals, flirted with 'rejectionist' causes, and upheld a critical satellite Arab media. As the architect of the 'soft power' concept, Joseph Nye, has noted: "Qatar has managed to find an important diplomatic niche between the West and the Arab nationalist mainstream, which it backs up with its considerable financial resources."¹⁴ In 2011, Qatar submitted the candidacy of Ambassador Al-Nasser for President of the UN General Assembly during the 66th Session that starts in September 2011. Having been elected to most of the key UN committees and forums, including the Human Rights Council, the Commission on Sustainable Development and the Economic and Social Council, as well as the Security Council, it came as no surprise that Qatar won this competition. Indeed it did so by acclamation.

Regional moderate and peace broker

Qatar has tried to be a peace broker and has been involved from the Western Sahara, to Indonesia and Yemen. But its greatest impact and acclaim has come from its work within the Middle East region. Qatar's role as a regional diplomat has been most evident in its attempts to serve a mediating role with Israelis.

Israel and Arab states

Despite not having formal diplomatic ties with the Israel, Qatar has maintained covert and informal relations with Israel. Qatar and Israel commenced quiet business relations in 1996. In that same year, Qatar established its first trade office in

¹³ "World Cup Bid Win had Smart Brains Behind it", *The Peninsular*, 11 March 2011.

¹⁴ G. Abraham, "Qatar is Diplomatic Heavy-Hitter", *Al Jazeera.net*, 21 July 2008. <http://english.aljazeera.net/focus/2008/07/200872164735567644.html>

Israel and the Israelis opened their second office in the Gulf in Doha.¹⁵ Then Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Perez was the first high-level Israeli official to visit the Gulf peninsula state. The first Israeli delegation to visit the Doha office represented business interests in banking, communication and agriculture.¹⁶ Moreover, despite stalled Arab-Israeli negotiations following the election of Benjamin Netanyahu's hawkish Likud government in 1997, Qatar hosted the Israeli trade minister at the fourth annual Middle East and North Africa Economic Summit in Doha the same year. This continuation of business relations with the Israelis was in sharp contrast to other Arab governments, such as Egypt, which renewed the call for an Arab economic boycott of Israel.¹⁷ In a similar set of circumstances, Qatar did not back down to regional pressures when it hosted the Organisation of Islamic Countries' conference in 2000 and dismissed calls from the chair of the OIC, Iranian President Khatami, to make a stand against the Israelis by banning the Israeli trade office.

In its many bold diplomatic attempts to mediate between Israel and its fellow Arab states, Qatar has repeatedly offered to broker peace between Israel and its neighbours. First in 2003, Qatari and Israeli foreign ministers, Sheik Hamad and Silvan Shalom, met in Paris to discuss ways of forging Middle East peace. Later, Sheikh Hamad would also state that Qatar might think about a formal peace treaty with Israel.¹⁸ Applauding Israeli disengagement from Gaza in 2005, Sheik Hamad noted that "Arab countries must take a step towards Israel... in an attempt to come up with a clear vision to the period after Gaza."¹⁹ This was followed by a meeting between Sheik Hamad and Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni on the sidelines of the UN meeting in New York.²⁰ This seemingly 'balanced' approach to diplomacy has allowed Qatar not to shy away from using its regional influence to mediate Israeli-Arab relations while remaining steadfastly loyal to long-standing Palestinian and 'rejectionist' causes. This does not mean, however, that Qatar will bow to traditional Arab nationalism. In 2006, Qatar defied the Arab League consensus by refusing to vote for Jordan's Prince Zeid for the post of UN Secretary General and instead supported South Korea's Ban Ki Moon. The Qatari decision played unfavourably among Arab nationalists and their supporters.

¹⁵ The other Gulf trade office was in Oman and would later close in 2000 after the onset of the Palestinians' second intifada against the Israelis.

¹⁶ "Israel Business Delegation in Qatar, Trade Office to Open", *Dow Jones International News*, 27 May 1996.

¹⁷ A. Lyons, "Mideast Peace Logjam Blocks Arab-Israel Business", *Reuters*, 12 Nov. 1997.

¹⁸ "Israel Holds Talks With Qatar", *BBC News*, 14 May 2003, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3027909.stm

¹⁹ "Arab Nations Quietly Bridge the Trade Gulf with Israelis", *The Times Online*, 7 April 2006.

²⁰ On the lighter side, soon after this meeting Qatar gave a reported USD 10 million to help build a soccer stadium for Arab Israelis. The 13,000 seat Doha Stadium was built in 2005 in the northern town of Sakhnin for the Bnei Sakhnin soccer team. The mixed Arab and Jewish team, which had won the 2004 Israeli State cup, has often been used as a model of binational co-existence. *Ibid.*

Qatari efforts in Lebanon

In a second attempt at peacemaking in 2006, Qatar stood out as a maverick willing to suggest peace negotiations after a bloody battle between Israel and Hezbollah. Other Arab states did not want to get involved in the Israeli-Hezbollah crossfire, preferring not to support the Iranian-backed organisation. Despite the Arab streets' support for Hezbollah and wide international condemnation of Israeli actions, pro-Western states like Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt were quiet during the onslaught on Lebanon. In contrast, Qatar used its UN Security Council seat at the time to criticise the Israelis. In his speech to the Security Council, Sheik Hamad uttered harsh words: "It is most saddening that the Council stands idly by, crippled, unable to stop the blood bath... what is happening will sow the seeds of hatred and extremism in the area."²¹

Even after the conflict subsided, most Arab states quietly ignored the Lebanese predicament in order to avoid showing support for Iranian-backed Hezbollah. In contrast, Qatar provided a small number of troops to the UN's peacekeeping mission in Lebanon after the Israeli bombing.²² Some argued that Qatar's contribution facilitated Indonesia's and Turkey's joining the UN peacekeeping force.²³ Qatar also quickly sent relief supplies and financial aid to Lebanon and was the first Arab state to send its head of state to Beirut. This financial investment in Lebanon would help Qatar gain Hezbollah's support for Qatari involvement in the country.²⁴

In its third and most important diplomatic gesture, the Qataris helped mediate a Lebanese national unity government in 2008 after many months of tense internal political wrangling that verged on another deadly Lebanese civil war. Lebanese political factions could not agree on the appointment of a president, who must be a Christian, in a power-sharing consociational constitution. The Qataris managed to bring both factions into a unity government that quelled the conflict in what became known as the Doha Agreement. A snub to Saudi Arabia, which had for many years supported the Hariri family and his Future Party, this brokerage offered Qatar a 'high profile' role as it flew the various stakeholders into Doha for a 'summit style' meeting.²⁵ To sweeten the Doha deal, Qatar donated USD 300 million to aid in the reconstruction of Lebanon.

²¹ "Security Council has been Idle During Lebanese 'Bloodbath' — League of Arab States", *UN News Center*, 8 August 2006, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=19433&Cr=leban&Cr1=>

²² "A Bouncy Bantam", *The Economist*, 7 September 2006.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ G. Abraham, "Qatar is Diplomatic Heavy-Hitter", *Al Jazeera.net*, 21 July 2008.

²⁵ S. Wright, "Foreign Policies with Global Reach: The Case of Qatar", *The Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States*.

Israel-Hamas

Soon after its 2008 success in Lebanon, Qatar tried to promote Israeli-Hamas rapprochement in a tense regional climate that ultimately led to an Israeli assault on Gaza in late 2008. Sheik Hamad had offered to assist in brokering a cease-fire between Hamas and Israel in early 2008.²⁶ He was on record as stating: "Qatar is open to assisting Israel in any attempt to talk to any Arab state or organization, Hamas included."²⁷ Even more interesting, the Qatari leader passed the message on through an Israeli Knesset member (of the progressive leftist party, Meretz) and former foreign minister, Yossi Beilin. The two had met in Qatar at a meeting for former foreign ministers.

The attempt at Qatari mediation was reported in the progressive Israeli daily, *Ha'aretz*. While the matter did not go far as the Israeli and Hamas conditions for dialogue were too far apart, the Qatari offer remained of interest to regional leaders. Following the *Ha'aretz* report that created significant media coverage in Israel, Israeli Foreign Minister Livni was set to visit Qatar on her first trip to the Gulf region. Invited by the Qatari leader, Livni was to give a keynote address at the Doha Forum on Democracy, Development and Free Trade.²⁸ The two were to also have a private meeting later.

Responding to regional criticism of Qatar's invitation of Livni, Qatar's Deputy Foreign Minister, Mohammed al-Rumaihi, stated that its regional neighbours "... aren't politically ready for this [peace] . . . They aren't ready for free dialogue, for open-minded thinking. This is Qatar now. This is who we are."²⁹ Livni's trip was cancelled, however, when it was revealed that Hamas would also attend the Doha meeting and represent the Palestinian people. Nevertheless, the Israeli-Qatari relationship is one prized by Israel in a region of many resistance movements and governments who refuse to talk to Israelis while the occupation of Palestinian lands continues. Some have explained Qatar's motives as being both strategic and economic: on the one hand, the Qatari's friendly relations with Israel are meant to further strengthen ties with the United States and the West; on the other hand, Qatar hopes that strengthened economic ties with Israel will lead to sales of its plentiful natural gas.³⁰

²⁶ B. Ravid, "Qatar Willing to Broker Cease-Fire Agreement Between Israel and Hamas", *Ha'aretz*, 25 Feb. 2008, <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/957777.html>

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ "Israel Foreign Minister in Qatar to Discuss Peace", *Gulf News.com*, 13 April 2008, <http://www.gulfnews.com/news/gulf/qatar/10205322.html>

²⁹ J. Krane, "For Qatar, Bold Moves Including Outreach to Israel", *Associated Press*, 9 November 2006.

³⁰ See U. Rabi "Qatar's Relations with Israel an Exemplar of an Independent Foreign Policy", *Tel Aviv Notes*, 7 October 2008, <http://www.dayan.org/Qatar.pdf>

Keeping allies close and enemies even closer***Al-Jazeera***

Qatar's most impressive diplomatic achievement has been the initiation of the Al-Jazeera media network in 1996 – a first in uncensored media in the Arab world. Al-Jazeera is technically privately owned, but Qatar's royal family has financially supported the media network as Al-Jazeera faces continued financial constraints.³¹ Al-Jazeera broadcasts 24 hour news in Arabic throughout the Middle East and since 2006 has added an English news channel that broadcasts internationally as well. A number of Arab governments have criticised Al-Jazeera for scrutinising their policies, which quickly received the attention and admiration of Arab viewers.³² This has led many countries, including Iran, Iraq, Israel and Saudi Arabia, to sanction Al-Jazeera in some way.³³ The network has also been used to provide a counterweight to Saudi Arabia's pan-Arab media giant, the Middle East Broadcasting Corporation (MBC).

Al-Jazeera has revolutionised Arab societies' response to critical news, known as the 'Al-Jazeera effect' – similar to the 'CNN effect' among Western audiences. Its non-stop coverage of both the uprising in Tunisia in January 2011 and the January 25 popular revolt in Egypt gained international media praise.³⁴ Calling the Egyptian popular revolution against Mubarak 'Al-Jazeera's moment', the English and Arabic networks were used by anti-government protestors to have their voices heard across the world. With the unparalleled street access that Al-Jazeera sustained, the Egyptian crisis turned international public opinion against the Mubarak government and enhanced sympathy for the plight of the protestors. In contrast to enthusiastic support for the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, Al Jazeera has been criticized for its relatively faint coverage of the uprisings in Bahrain throughout February 2011. It was believed that Qatar silenced Al Jazeera coverage (particularly on its Arabic channel) as Qatar has supported the Saudi and GCC-led initiative to crush the mainly Shiite protestors who have grievances against Bahrain's Sunni ruling Al-Khalifa monarchy.

In an unorthodox move for Arab leaders, the Qatari leadership also called on Muammar Qaddafi to quit as leader of the Libyan republic after an intense rebellion and fighting commenced in Libya on 16 February 2011. Subsequently, the Libyan Secretary-General for the People's Committee, Ahmed Al-Zuwi, stated on Libyan television on 22 February 2011, that the Qatari government and Al-Jazeera were in a conspiracy to incite violence and spread lies of citizen deaths

³¹ K. Byrd and T. Kawarabayashi, "Al-Jazeera – 'The Opinion, and the Other Opinion' – Sustaining a Free Press in the Middle East", *Media in Transition*, 2–4 May 2003, 10.

³² Bahry, "The New Arab Media", 88–99.

³³ "A Bouncy Bantam", *The Economist*, 7 September 2006.

³⁴ R.F. Worth and D.D. Kirkpatrick, "Seizing a Moment, Al Jazeera Galvanizes Arab Frustration", *New York Times*, 27 January 2011.

in Libya. The Qataris were accused of paying and giving Qatari citizenship to Egyptian nationals in exchange for assisting the Libyan rebellion. In a bold move, Qatar supported the 18 March 2011 UN Security Resolution to place a no-fly zone on Qaddafi's army forces in an attempt to support the Libyan rebellion based in Benghazi. It also sent weaponry to the Libyan rebels, in addition to a number of warplanes placed under French command to enforce the UN resolution. To assist rebels in selling eastern deposits of Libyan oil on the international market, Qatar has provided assistance in shipping and invoicing Libyan oil sales. Moreover, Qatar has co-hosted an international donor meeting to help fund the humanitarian needs of Libyans in rebel-held territory and provided the rebels with foreign aid.

Strategic friendship with the US

As part of Qatar's diplomatic balancing act, the emirate has since 2001 also hosted US military bases in its country. Once stationed in Saudi Arabia, after the 1990–91 Gulf War the US military bases were moved to Qatar in response to growing domestic Saudi pressure. The al-Udeid air base in Qatar, built in 1996 for USD 100 million in hopes of attracting the Americans to station there, was instrumental to US military objectives in both Afghanistan and Iraq, as many Saudis did not want to be involved in or appear to be supporting either US military adventure. The US air base became the United States Central Command centre that managed the invasion and occupation of both Afghanistan and Iraq and was used as a means of supplying US troops to both conflict zones. After the invasion of Iraq, President George Bush noted to the Qatari Emir: "You made some promises to America and you kept your promises. We are honored to call you [a] friend."³⁵ Qatar's assistance to the United States in the Iraq and Afghan wars was also coupled with generous humanitarian aid to the United States after Hurricane Katrina.³⁶

Qatar's pariah friends

While Qatar has friendly relations with Israel and the United States, and has attempted to broker peace in the Middle East and Gulf region, it has also maintained strong relations with regional 'pariah states' and declared enemies of the United States: Syria and Iran. Qatar has also donated money to Hamas and Hezbollah, both stark enemies of Israel, classified as terrorist groups by the United States and other Western states.³⁷ After the Israeli attack on Gaza in late 2008, Qatar transferred USD 22 million to Hamas to pay overdue Gazan salaries in the public service.³⁸

³⁵ A. Koppel, "War on Iraq has Affected U.S. Alliances", *CNN Washington Bureau on the Web*, 9 May 2003, <http://www.cnn.com/2003/ALLPOLITICS/05/09/us.allies/>

³⁶ Qatar spent USD 100 million on hurricane relief and donated a USD 17.5 million grant to black-dominated Xavier University in New Orleans. "A Bouncy Bantam", *The Economist*, 7 September 2006.

³⁷ J. Krane, "For Qatar, Bold Moves Including Outreach to Israel", *Associated Press*, 9 November 2006.

³⁸ "Qatar Gives \$22 million for Palestinian Teachers", *Khaleej Times*, 7 May 2007.

While Qatar has played the role of regional maverick to keep friendly relations with Israel, it has not shied away from acting on a set of principles in its international endeavours. For example, Qatar broke the 2006 air blockade of Lebanon by reinitiating Qatar airlines' daily flights to Beirut, despite Israeli requests to the contrary.³⁹ Moreover, after the 2008–09 Israeli onslaught on Gaza, the Qataris asked the Israeli trade office to leave the country (albeit only temporarily, as the office later returned).

In its most unorthodox of diplomatic stances, Qatar has maintained good relations with Iran. Qatar invited Iran's Mahmoud Ahmedinejad to a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) meeting in 2007, to the dismay of both regional and world leaders. Subsequently, Qatar used its 2006–07 UN Security Council seat to defy the United States by disagreeing to pressure Iran on nuclear proliferation in 2006 and by rejecting calls to place UN troops in Darfur.⁴⁰ Moreover, upon Ahmedinejad's contested election victory in 2009, Qatar was one of the first Arab countries to congratulate him. In response to criticism of Iran by fellow Arab states, Sheik Hamad stated: "Iran has had four presidents since its revolution, while some Arab countries have not changed their leaders at all."⁴¹ In the June 2010 UN Security Council vote to reprimand Iran for its nuclear activities, Qatar was no longer on the Security Council but it reiterated its commitment to preserving a nuclear weapons-free zone in the Middle East while supporting peaceful uses of nuclear energy. Qatar also welcomed Turkish and Brazilian efforts to mediate the Iran nuclear dilemma, despite the lukewarm reaction to the Turkish–Brazilian intervention by the United States.

Some have argued that behind Qatar's good relations with Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas is an attempt to ward off security threats and keep up populist support from the 'Arab streets' that support 'rejectionist' states.⁴² In particular, having shared gas fields with Iran means Qatar needs to play an important balancing act. As former US ambassador to Qatar and current president of the US–Qatar Business Council, Patrick Theros, once stated: "Qatar definitely practices the maxim of holding your friends close, and your enemies even closer."⁴³ Despite hosting the US command during the attack on Iraq and overthrow of the Hussein regime, Qatar has allowed former Iraqi Baathists and Saddam Hussein's widow, daughter and grandson

³⁹ "A Bouncy Bantam", *The Economist*, 7 September 2006.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ "The Arabs' View of Iran: Mixed Feelings", *The Economist*, 16 July 2009.

⁴² D. Roberts, "Explaining Qatar's Schizophrenic Foreign Policy", *Egypt Daily News*, 28 April 2009, <http://www.thedailynewsegypt.com/article.aspx?ArticleID=21350>

⁴³ G. Abraham, "Qatar is Diplomatic Heavy-Hitter", *Al Jazeera.net*, 21 July 2008.

to seek refuge there.⁴⁴ Theros notes that Qatar's hosting of some of the world's most wanted is an appeasement of radicals: "They keep the exiles here as a way to guard against terrorism."⁴⁵ Qatar's ability to communicate with all parties has accorded it some successes; for example, it was reported that Qatar had a hand in helping aid the release of BBC journalist Alan Johnston from Hamas' captivity in July 2007. Similarly, in July 2007, Qatar reportedly assisted in the release of Bulgarian nurses held by the Libyan government for 'spreading AIDS' in the country.⁴⁶

Extending the diplomatic contours on a global basis

It would be difficult to explain Qatar's role in contemporary international relations using classical theories. Comparative politics, including Middle East political science literature, has often been perplexed by the Qatari case. The actions of Sheik Hamad are not well understood using the state-society argument found in many area studies' literature: the oil-producing rentier state extracts political acquiescence from its people because of the statist policies and benefits it doles out to its citizens. Political liberalisation and progressive reforms come to the Middle East and the Gulf when the state cannot maintain the distribution of economic gains to its people – a case that is so familiar to many countries in the region. However, Qatar's political liberalisation, economic openness and media freedoms cannot be explained by traditional Middle East comparative political science literature on state-society relations.⁴⁷

Traditional international relations theory is also limited in providing an explanation for Qatar's foreign policy choices. Qatar cannot boast either the hard power of military and economic might in the international political system or the soft power of cooptation. As Mehran Kamrava explains, Qatar has 'civilian power': "... a combination of personal and state-owned wealth and stability along with strategic and clever use of these assets".⁴⁸ Moreover, Steve Wright argues that Qatar is able to engage with 'pariah states' because of its security arrangements with

⁴⁴ Interestingly, the Iraqi Multinational Force even noted that Saddam Hussein's widow "... is a major source of guidance, logistical support, and funding for Iraq's insurgent leadership. She has established significant connections to individuals directing the insurgency in Iraq and has access to substantial assets stolen by Saddam Hussein." "Iraqi Government Releases '41 Most Wanted' List", Official Website of the Multi-National Force, 3 July 2006, http://www.mnf-iraq.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=572&Itemid=46

⁴⁵ J. Zacharia, "For Qatar, Relations with West are a Balancing Act", *The New York Times*, 4 March 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/04/world/africa/04iht-letter5.1.10686376.html?scp=1&sq=qatar%20and%20relations&st=cse>

⁴⁶ M. Nizza, "Recipe to End a Libyan Standoff", *New York Times*, 24 July 2007.

⁴⁷ Ramthall and Schulze. "Political Reform in the Gulf", 47–62.

⁴⁸ Kamrava, "Power Realignment", 6. Note the term has also been used to explain the EUs approach to international politics. See Sjursen, "What Kind of Power?", 169–81.

the United States. By having the United States guarantee its security, Qatar has “a greater degree of autonomy in foreign policy...”.⁴⁹ Wright’s explanation and analysis hardly fits traditional views of diplomacy, but it is useful to understanding the Qatari rationale.

In this article, it has been argued that Qatar is in many distinctive ways a hybrid diplomatic actor. Through one set of lenses, its diplomatic profile reads from a familiar script: a small state as convener and helpful fixer. Through another set of lenses though, Qatar has become a risk taker and unconventional player. The image of Qatar as the host of the US Central Command regional headquarters is very different from its image as the pivotal hub for the Al-Jazeera satellite network.

As with other small states, the theme of vulnerability, as it applies to Qatar, has been accentuated by the international financial crisis. Nonetheless, what stands out is the degree to which this vulnerability is triggered by symbolic and not instrumental factors. As with all other small states, Qatar has been left out of the exclusive G20 club. But unlike many other small states, Qatar has not come under attack from the G20 through its assault on tax havens and off-shore financial centres (OFCs).

An interesting sign of Qatar’s sensitivity to the changing international ‘club’ context, but also to the extent of its comparative strength over other small states, is its decision to join with Singapore, Tanzania and Switzerland in the World Economic Forum’s Global Re-design Initiative (GRI) – a body seeking to channel the views of small and medium-sized UN states into the G20 process. The GRI process undertook a global dialogue of leaders in business, government, civil society, academic and media to discuss ways of improving global governance.⁵⁰

Qatar hosted an international summit at the end of May 2010 that convened 1200 people to discuss ways to advance the GRI initiative. On the one hand, this initiative signals explicitly that Qatar’s diplomacy is global, rather than regional, in scope. On the other hand, it demonstrates that Qatar can work with the top tier small states and do so without the instrumental determination of states like Singapore and Switzerland because, unlike them, Qatar has no ambition to become a G20 member.

As a rule, the international financial crisis has increased the sense in small states that they are living in dangerous times. Big states – at least from the global South – are in ascendancy. Familiar brands – as is the case of Switzerland – have become tarnished. Space for innovation, or at least unorthodox variations of innovation (whether it be OFCs or Internet gambling by Antigua and other small states), is

⁴⁹ S. Wright, “Foreign Policies with Global Reach: The Case of Qatar”, *The Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States*.

⁵⁰ “Global Redesign Initiative”, World Economic Forum, http://www.weforum.org/docs/GRI/GRI_Executive_Summary.pdf

diminished. Still, Qatar reveals that there are important exceptions to this dynamic. At odds with the image of exacerbated small state vulnerability, Qatar has become increasingly visible, particularly in diplomatic affairs. Regionally, it has become a skilled mediator. It not only straddles the structure of political polarisation, but leverages that condition to its own advantage – in terms of public and private diplomacy. Globally, it is on the cusp of becoming one of the key ‘go-to’ states when architectural issues intensify. Although vulnerability has returned as the plight of many small states, the ability of Qatar not only to escape this predicament but to prosper in stressful times is a testament to the diversity in the constellation of small states, and an example of why both International Relations generally and diplomatic studies especially cannot ignore small states in serious analysis.

Conclusion

Blessed with significant oil and gas deposits, the small state of Qatar could have carried out its diplomatic relations like its counterparts in the region – think of Oman, Bahrain and Kuwait – flying low under the radar, sitting quietly when conflict strikes the region, be it in Israel/Palestine, Lebanon, Iran or Iraq. Qatar on the other hand, hosts the controversial Al-Jazeera and angers the leaders of its fellow Arab states. It has played host to Israel, Iran, Hamas and Hezbollah – a far cry from a coalition of common interests. At the same time, it welcomes US command forces to station their bases in the country and draws the potential for criticism from ‘rejectionist’ causes in the region.

In Middle East and Gulf politics, Qatari foreign policy does not fit in the usual constructs of pro-Western and anti-Western camps. Qatar does not attempt to fit the typical mould, but instead tries to focus on raising the stakes of its reputation. In a region of great geostrategic value and the site of numerous intrastate and interstate conflicts, the Qatari balancing act is a difficult one at best. Qatar is literally squeezed by two neighbouring hegemonies, Iran and Saudi Arabia, which have competed for both regional dominance in military power and religious legitimacy as the ‘truest followers of Islam’. While much of the attention on economic innovation has focused on Dubai, it is Qatar that has continued to grow strong and steady with economic liberalisation and development. In terms of traditional diplomatic strength, eyes have often turned to Egypt and at times to Jordan for a moderate voice in Middle East affairs. However, it has been Qatar that has more recently brokered entente in the region among Middle East foes.

To understand Qatar, one needs to reflect on the role of small states in the international political system. Mental constructs have to be stretched to better understand the twenty-first century and the age of globalisation. If the international financial crisis and the ascendance of the G20 teach us anything, it is that the rules of the game are never static and that shifts in international power can be tectonic.

Small states cannot be overlooked in academic analysis and traditional international relations theory needs to adapt to the changing realities of global governance today.

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