



IPS INSIGHTS

Perspectives On the Issues Shaping Policy

Qatar: From Isolation to Mediation

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Qatar's rise from a diplomatically isolated state to one of the most prominent mediators in international affairs represents one of the most remarkable transformations in contemporary Middle Eastern politics. Despite being a small state located on the Arabian Peninsula and sharing the world's largest natural gas field with Iran, Qatar has succeeded in carving out an influential role far beyond its geographical size. Its journey from regional isolation to global mediation was neither accidental nor immediate; rather, it was the result of pragmatic foreign policy adjustments, strategic balancing, and the effective use of soft power, energy resources, and diplomacy.

The roots of Qatar's isolation can be traced to the period of the Arab Spring that began in 2011. During this period, popular uprisings swept across the Middle East and North Africa, challenging long-established political orders. Qatar actively supported several political movements and groups associated with political Islam, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, opposition groups in Syria, and similar movements in Tunisia and other Arab states. Through its financial assistance, diplomatic backing, and the extensive reach of Al Jazeera, Qatar positioned itself as a supporter of political change in the region. However, this policy brought Doha into direct conflict with several Gulf monarchies, particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which viewed these movements as threats to regional stability and to their own political systems.

Between 2013 and 2017, the ideological differences between Qatar and its Gulf neighbours gradually intensified. Qatar's

relatively cordial relations with Iran, its support for certain Islamist groups, and its independent foreign policy generated increasing mistrust among fellow members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Tensions reached their peak in June 2017 when Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt imposed a comprehensive diplomatic and economic blockade on Qatar. Air, land, and sea routes were closed, diplomatic relations were severed, and Qatar found itself regionally isolated. For a small state dependent on regional connectivity, the blockade represented a serious challenge to its political and economic survival.

Nevertheless, the crisis became a turning point in Qatar's foreign policy. Qatar adopted a strategy of balance and pragmatism through practical and hybrid means. It strengthened its relations with Turkey and Iran, both of which provided important economic and logistical support during the blockade. Furthermore, Qatar benefited from hosting the United States' Al-Udeid Air Base, the largest American military installation in the Middle East, which served as an important guarantee of its security and sovereignty. The blockade demonstrated to Qatari policymakers the importance of diversification, strategic partnerships, and diplomatic flexibility.

The end of the blockade came with the Al-Ula Summit in January 2021, which marked the restoration of diplomatic relations between Qatar and the blockading states. The summit represented much more than a political reconciliation; it symbolized the beginning of a new phase in Qatar's foreign policy. Doha increasingly shifted away from supporting regional political movements and instead embraced a policy centered on mediation,

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conflict resolution, and diplomatic engagement. The experience of isolation convinced Qatar that its long-term security and influence could best be achieved by becoming an indispensable mediator rather than a participant in regional rivalries.

Since 2021, Qatar has increasingly relied on a combination of hard and soft power instruments to enhance its diplomatic role. Its vast reserves of natural gas and its position as one of the world's leading exporters of liquefied natural gas (LNG) have provided Doha with considerable economic leverage. Through long-term energy partnerships with Europe and Asia, Qatar has become an important stakeholder in global energy security. Simultaneously, its sovereign investments in various countries have strengthened its international influence and created extensive diplomatic networks. Similarly, the global reach of Al Jazeera has enabled Qatar to project its narratives and shape regional discourse. In addition, its policy of maintaining communication with all parties, regardless of ideological differences, has enhanced its credibility as a mediator. Qatar has carefully balanced its relations with competing powers, including the United States, Iran, Turkey, and the Gulf states, thereby positioning itself as a neutral actor capable of facilitating dialogue between adversaries.

This strategy has yielded significant diplomatic successes. Qatar played a central role in facilitating negotiations between the United States and the Afghan Taliban, which culminated in the Doha Agreement and demonstrated its ability to host complex and prolonged peace processes. More recently, Qatar has acted as an intermediary in negotiations between Israel and Hamas, facilitating hostage exchanges and contributing to ceasefire efforts. Qatar was not deterred by Israeli air attack on the Hamas political leadership at its soil as part of the negotiation team in 2025. Iran also carried out attacks on Qatar on the plea of hosting US military bases, but the strategic restraint displayed during the war provided it with an opportunity to carve a role in the technical negotiation between Iran and US. The reconstruction of Iran with \$300 billion could be better managed with

Gulf states investment in Iran in order to work as a bridge between Iran and GCC. It has also undertaken humanitarian mediation in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, particularly in efforts to reunite displaced children with their families. These initiatives have significantly enhanced Qatar's reputation as a constructive and reliable diplomatic actor.

Despite these achievements, Qatar continues to face important challenges. Its close relations with Iran, its dependence on regional stability, and the broader tensions in the Middle East expose it to significant security risks. The shared North Dome-South Pars gas field with Iran highlights both economic interdependence and strategic vulnerability. Escalating tensions between Iran and Israel have demonstrated how regional conflicts can directly affect Qatar's security and economic interests. In the context of recent exchange of blows and counter blows between US and Iran, the latter appears to be selective in targeting Gulf States that are home to the US bases. Bahrain and Kuwait were targeted by IRGC, but Qatar and UAE were spared. Though UAE received the maximum blows from Iran during the conflict, but some leaning towards Iran has coupled it with Qatar. Such an approach can be detrimental to the unity of GCC and the role of Qatar in the technical negotiation between Iran and US. The elevated standing of Iran in the region may boost the hegemonic spirit of the hardliners i.e. the Pasdaran. The balancing act by Qatar in an atmosphere of elevation and degradation be walking on a tight rope.

Nevertheless, Qatar's transformation from isolation to mediation remains a remarkable success story. Through pragmatism, strategic balancing, economic resources, and skillful diplomacy, Qatar has succeeded in converting a period of regional isolation into an opportunity for global influence. Today, despite its small geographical size, Qatar has emerged as an important mediator in international politics and a significant contributor to conflict management and peacebuilding efforts. Its journey demonstrates how a small state can utilize diplomacy, soft power, and economic strength to achieve an outsized role in regional and global affairs.