

Small States and Geopolitical Challenges: The Example of Qatar (2020-2025)

Aliyah Rafika*, Mulawarman Hannase, M. Hamdan Basyar

Universitas Indonesia

Email: aliyah.rafika@ui.ac.id*

Keywords

Qatar; Small States; Geopolitics; Middle East; Diplomacy

Abstract

Qatar is a notable example of a small state in the Arabian Peninsula, covering an area of 11,571 km², that has demonstrated geopolitical influence far exceeding its geographical boundaries. This study examines Qatar's complex geopolitical strategy in the face of pressure from dominant regional powers in the Middle East, with particular focus on the period 2020–2025. Employing a qualitative methodology and a case study approach, the study adopts an analytical framework that integrates small state foreign policy theory, hedging strategies, and soft power theory. The study analyzes how Qatar leverages its asymmetric strengths across three key domains: energy resources, diplomacy, and media influence to project an outsized role in regional and global affairs. The study yields three principal findings. First, Qatar has consistently applied an asymmetric multi-alignment approach, enabling it to maintain concurrent relationships with multiple actors whose interests are in conflict. Second, the country has maximized niche diplomacy through conflict mediation, sports diplomacy initiatives, and strategic energy assets to build bargaining power disproportionate to its physical size. Third, hosting the 2022 FIFA World Cup and its active involvement in mediating the 2023–2024 Gaza conflict represents the culmination of Qatar's consolidation as an indispensable actor within the regional security architecture. In conclusion, Qatar demonstrates that small states can transcend structural limitations through asymmetric multi-alignment, niche diplomacy, and strategic soft power, effectively transforming inherent vulnerabilities into significant geopolitical influence thereby enriching the theoretical discourse on small state agency from a Middle Eastern perspective.

INTRODUCTION

A world with an international system dominated by large countries places small countries (*small states*) in a challenging position. They are considered actors with limited power and capacity, are vulnerable to external pressures, and do not exert significant influence in global geopolitical dynamics. This view is inseparable from the classical realist assumption that identifies the power of a state based on its physical size, the size of its population, and its military capabilities. However, entering the 21st century, traditional paradigms are shifting toward a much more complex and multifaceted geopolitical reality. This era has rendered the international order increasingly multipolar, a manifestation of *small states* becoming increasingly able to project their geopolitical influence, and consistently positioning themselves as inescapable actors in the global security architecture.

Qatar is an example of a small country that embodies the most striking paradox in international relations, managing to demonstrate immense global influence despite a territory of approximately 11,571 km² and a native population of no more than 400,000 inhabitants. The

country has transformed itself into a calculated diplomatic power by combining hydrocarbon wealth, multidimensional strategic *hedging*, and massive investment in soft power. In the economic dimension, for instance, Qatar has enhanced its strategic value by becoming the world's largest exporter of LNG (*Liquefied Natural Gas*), with an export volume of 79.04 million tons per year, accounting for more than 20 percent of global LNG supply (Naser, 2022). Furthermore, the Qatar Investment Authority (QIA) which manages assets exceeding 450 billion US dollars as of 2023 confirms Qatar's position among the top ten *sovereign wealth funds*, operating through media, investment, and diplomatic instruments.

Strong economic dominance does not, however, exempt Qatar from threats to stability that imperil its national interests, given its strategic geographical location and vulnerability to the dynamics of external conflicts in the Middle East region. Qatar's geographical position presents a profound structural dilemma. The foremost structural challenge facing Qatar is its geographical situation, sandwiched between two major regional powers Saudi Arabia, with its status quo orientation, and Iran, with its revolutionary posture both of which seek to draw Qatar into their respective orbits of influence amid fierce competition and a volatile security environment (Zechariades, 2025). This geopolitical reality makes Qatar an ideal *empirical laboratory* for studying the dynamics of *small states* in the context of layered structural stress.

In response to these geopolitical pressures, Qatar has developed a foreign policy strategy that may be conceptually categorized as *niche diplomacy* and *calibrated autonomy*. Through *niche diplomacy*, Qatar projects its influence under limited structural conditions by focusing on high-value domains such as mediation, soft power, and energy. The logic of *calibrated autonomy* underpins this multidimensional strategy: Doha systematically engages in *hedging* among competing regional and international actors, balancing close ties with the United States while remaining engaged with Iran. This strategy is operationalized through various instruments, including efforts to maintain balance, build alliances, and utilize available soft power instruments encompassing mediation, conflict resolution, media, cultural activities, research centers, humanitarian funding, and sports diplomacy. This strategic transformation marks a significant shift from the paradigm of the passive and reactive *small state* toward a proactive foreign policy agency (K. Hey, 2004).

Although scholarship on Qatar's foreign policy has grown considerably, academic gaps remain to be addressed. The foreign policy of *small states* in the GCC is increasingly associated with pivotal roles in the conflict resolution process, both at the regional and global levels. By acting as mediators, the leadership of these countries effectively addresses the challenge of relevance, approaches a form of indispensability in the diplomatic process, and strengthens bilateral relations with major powers ties that are fundamentally essential to national survival and the preservation of national interests. This article seeks to systematically analyze how Qatar, as a *small state*, navigates multidimensional geopolitical challenges through a combination of material resources, institutional diplomatic capacity, and soft power strategies, with theoretical implications for the development of *small state* literature in contemporary international relations.

Studies on *small states* in international relations have produced a rich, if contested, body of literature. The foundational contribution of Rothstein (1968) in *Alliances and Small Powers* defines a small state as one that cannot rely on its own capabilities to ensure its security or survival, and therefore depends on the international system and the actions of other states. David Vital (1967), in *The Inequality of States*, reinforces this argument by emphasizing that limited material resources are the primary determinant of the position of *small states* in the global order. Robert Keohane (1969), in his seminal article "Lilliputians' Dilemmas: Small States in International Politics," further argues that small states structurally lack the capacity to influence the international system individually. In the contemporary era, Thorhallsson and Wivel (2006) expand upon this concept by emphasizing that *small states* can compensate for

their limitations through integration into the international system and the intelligent management of strategic alliances. In this regard, Qatar with an area of approximately 11,000 km² and a population of around 2.9 million represents a unique case in which geographical constraints are not necessarily proportional to diminished geopolitical influence on the international stage.

The next concept employed in analyzing Qatar's strategy as a *small state* is *hedging*. In international relations, *hedging* refers to a state's efforts to manage geopolitical uncertainty by maintaining relations with multiple powers without exclusively aligning with any single one. Evelyn Goh (2005), in "Meeting the China Challenge: The U.S. in Southeast Asian Regional Security Strategies," defines *hedging* as a foreign policy approach that preserves strategic flexibility amid competition between major powers. John Ciorciari and Jürgen Haacke (2019) emphasize that *hedging* encompasses a simultaneous combination of engagement and balancing. The concept of *multi-alignment*, developed subsequently, illustrates the tendency of small states to establish parallel relations with various great powers without being permanently bound to a single bloc. Qatar is one of the *small states* that has put this strategy into practice most notably by hosting the largest United States military base in the Middle East (Al-Udeid Air Base) while simultaneously maintaining close diplomatic and economic relations with Iran and Turkey. Lim and Cooper (2015), in "Reassessing Hedging: The Logic of Alignment in East Asia," published in the journal *Security Studies*, note that the logic of *multi-alignment* is not a form of opportunism, but rather a calculated, rational response to the structural pressures of an international system that does not favour small states.

The final concept is *soft power* and *niche diplomacy*. In his work *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, Joseph Nye (2004) defines soft power as the ability of an actor to influence the preferences of others through the legitimate appeal of culture, political values, and foreign policy without relying on coercion or material inducements. For a small state such as Qatar, soft power serves as a vital instrument for overcoming the constraints of material capabilities. The concept of *niche diplomacy*, developed by Andrew Cooper (1997) in *Niche Diplomacy: Middle Powers after the Cold War*, explains how states with limited resources can project global influence by concentrating on specific issue areas in which they possess distinctive expertise or interests. Qatar implements these two concepts through a range of strategic instruments, including the Al Jazeera Media Network established in 1996 as an influential global broadcaster the management of the Qatar Investment Authority (QIA) with assets estimated to exceed 450 billion US dollars, the hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup, and an active role as a mediator in various regional conflicts. David Roberts (2012), in *Mediterranean Politics*, affirms that Qatar's diplomacy constitutes a distinctive and highly calibrated form of statecraft, aimed at sustainably enhancing the country's visibility and relevance on the international stage.

Academic literature on Qatar has grown rapidly since the GCC blockade of 2017. Kamrava's seminal work (2013), *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics*, establishes a foundational analytical framework for understanding Qatar's strategic posture, emphasizing the role of hydrocarbon wealth and leadership agency. Ulrichsen (2020), in *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis*, provides an authoritative account of the blockade and its strategic implications, while Roberts (Mitchell, 2026) offers a detailed analysis of Qatar's soft power instruments. Nevertheless, existing research has largely focused on the period leading up to and during the GCC blockade (2017–2021). The post-Al-Ula period (2021–2025) marked by the global energy crisis, Qatar's mediation in the Gaza conflict, and post-World Cup strategic recalibration has received comparatively limited systematic academic attention. The interaction between Qatar's sophisticated strategic instruments and the dramatically shifting geopolitical environment of 2020–2025 represents a significant gap in the literature that this article seeks to address.

This research therefore aims to systematically analyse how Qatar, as a *small state*, navigates multidimensional geopolitical challenges through a combination of material resources, institutional diplomatic capacity, and soft power strategies during the 2020–2025 period. Specifically, this study seeks to: examine Qatar's resilience strategy following the GCC blockade and the Al-Ula Declaration; analyze Qatar's *hedging* and *multi-alignment* approach in balancing relations with major powers and regional rivals; investigate the role of soft power instruments (Al Jazeera, QIA, and sports diplomacy) in projecting Qatar's influence; and evaluate Qatar's mediation role in the 2023–2024 Gaza conflict as a case of *niche diplomacy*. The theoretical contribution of this research lies in enriching the literature on *small state* foreign policy by presenting an empirical case from the Middle East that challenges classical realist assumptions regarding the limitations of *small states*. It extends the concepts of *hedging*, *multi-alignment*, and soft power beyond their traditional East Asian and Western contexts. Practically, this study offers policy insights for other *small states* particularly in the Gulf region on how to leverage asymmetric strengths, such as energy wealth, diplomatic neutrality, and media influence, to enhance geopolitical resilience and become indispensable actors in the regional security architecture. Furthermore, the findings may serve as a strategic reference for policymakers in small states facing analogous structural pressures from larger neighboring powers.

METHOD

This study used a qualitative approach with a case study design. According to (Yin, 2017) in his book *"Case Study Research and Applications"*, This method is best suited to explore the "how" and "why" questions of complex and context-rich contemporary phenomena, where the boundaries between the phenomenon itself and its environment are difficult to clearly distinguish. These characteristics are closely aligned with the research questions formulated, with the aim of uncovering Qatar's strategic mechanisms when interacting with the geopolitical dynamics of the region. The choice of Qatar as a case study is based on the concept of "*Crucial Case*" put forward by Lijphart (1971) Namely, a case that provides in-depth insights to test and refine existing theoretical propositions. Qatar meets most of the typical criteria *Small States* (such as limited size, military weakness, and dependence on external factors), yet the country exhibits a pattern of behavior that is very different from what conventional theory predicts, thus making it a valuable example for the advancement of theoretical thought, especially in the Middle East region.

Data collection was carried out through a literature review which included: (1) official documents from the Qatari government, such as policy statements from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani's speech, and Qatar's National Vision 2030; (2) international scientific journal articles indexed on Scopus and Web of Science published between 2020 and 2025; (3) Policy Reports from Institutions *research* prominent such as the Brookings Institution, Carnegie Middle East Center, RAND Corporation, and the International Crisis Group; to (4) statistical data from global organizations including the World Bank, IMF Country Report, and BP Statistical Review of World Energy. Then, the data analysis in this study uses the *process tracing*, as explained by Beach and Pedersen (2016), which focuses on mapping and examining the causal chain from initial conditions to observed outcomes. In this study, this approach is used to track the relationship between Qatar's foreign policy decisions and its geopolitical achievements, while also uncovering the mediation mechanisms that play

a role in *Soft Power* her. To reinforce validity, this analysis is supported by source triangulation, where each major empirical claim is verified through at least three independent sources.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Post-Blockade Resilience Strategy and Al-Ula Declaration (2020-2021)

In June 2017, the blockade imposed by the GCC countries namely Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt became the most serious threat to Qatar's sovereignty in its contemporary history. They severed diplomatic relations by withdrawing their ambassadors and imposing a total embargo by land, sea, and air against Qatar. The main trigger came from a cyberattack on Qatar News Agency in late May of the same year, making false statements on behalf of Qatar's Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani ostensibly supporting hardline Islamist groups. Saudi Arabia and its allies have been at the forefront of this movement, considering Qatar to support terrorism, as well as affiliated with ways of funding groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood (Macdonald, 2021). They put forward a series of 13 demands, which, if met, would have the potential to fundamentally undermine the foundations of Qatar's foreign policy autonomy; Key demands include the closure of Al-Jazeera's media network as a media network, the withdrawal of Turkish troops from Qatari soil, the severing of ties with Iran except for bilateral trade purposes, and the termination of relations with a number of Islamic political movements such as Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood (Beach & Pedersen, 2016). This crisis has implications for Qatar's economic resilience while making Doha lose 80% of the strategic supply chain of the blockading countries. Qatar needs to push hydrocarbon prices to the lowest point in its economic history that is shaking the tourism sector and hampering the implementation of infrastructure projects ahead of the 2022 FIFA World Cup (Philip & Antonia, 2025).

Instead of destroying Qatar's economic model, the blockade strategy has instead provoked an accelerated process of economic diversification and the development of strategic resilience. Qatar is rapidly expanding its domestic food security infrastructure, developing alternative sea and air trade routes through Oman, Turkey, and Iran, and deepening bilateral economic ties with non-GCC partners in Europe, Asia, and Africa (Thafer & Theros, 2021). The blockade ended after 3.5 years with the signing of the Al-Ula declaration on January 5, 2021 with the slogan "Solidarity and Stability" at the 41st GCC Summit in the city of Al-Ula, Saudi Arabia and restored Qatar's diplomatic relations with the four countries without providing any substantial consequences regarding the thirteen demands (Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies, 2021). In the Gulf International Forum, experts described the outcome as a strategic success for Doha in which Qatar has managed to maintain its core foreign policy position intact and obtain diplomatic normalization that restores its institutional functions in the GCC. This empirically shows that Qatar's economic isolation, alliance diversification acceleration strategy, and institutional investment are enough to withstand pressure from its powerful regional neighbors.

Furthermore, the completion of the blockade changed Qatar's internal strategic calculations, further strengthening its resilience for the future. Economic and institutional diversification efforts during the blockade resulted in a lasting structural transformation in Qatar's trade patterns, supply chains, and diplomatic networks, which continued even after the restoration of relations. Roberts and Kamrava (2021), through their analysis in the International

Journal of Middle East Studies, note that after the Al-Ula deal, Qatar entered a new phase with a more varied economic foundation, an expanded scope of foreign partnerships, and—most essentially—tested credibility as a resilient actor facing pressure from major powers without giving up. This increased credibility also proved to play a major role in the mediation task undertaken by Qatar in the following years.

From perspective small state, Qatar's experience during the blockade and post-blockade reinforces Cooper & Timothy's argument (Cooper et al., 2009) About entrepreneurial state. Qatar does not wait for the structural conditions of the region to change, but actively establishes conditions of stability through the mobilization of economic and diplomatic resources. This case demonstrates what Thorhallsson calls (2018) refer to as Shelter Theory which means; Abilities Small State to establish various forms of institutional, political, economic protection that are used to replace military capacity that it does not have.

Hedging Strategy and Multi-Alignment

As a small country in a volatile region, Qatar leveraged the Hedging and architecture Multi-alignment or siding with many sides, in order to anticipate security threats. This allows Doha to maintain a balance of relations with major powers and regional rivals, thereby maximizing profits while minimizing risks. This strategy is based on fears of Saudi Arabia's dominance in the GCC, the Riyadh and Abu Dhabi disputes, and the need to keep pace with the Iranian threat. In simple terms, it can be understood that Qatar deliberately establishes good relations with countries or groups that are hostile to each other. Not a coincidence, but a tactic to secure the position of the country or often called Hedging (search for safety) in the perspective of international relations. This strategy, outlined in the form of a framework Hedging (Kuik, 2016) which is operationalized through Qatar's three main relational axes, namely; security partnership with the United States (US), Iran's economic and diplomatic relations, and strategic partnership with Turkey.

Qatar's first multi-alignment is a strategic partnership relationship with the U.S.—where the Qatari territory is one of the U.S. military bases called Al-Udeid Air Base, which is located 40 kilometers southwest of Doha. The base serves as the front base for the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) which houses approximately 10,000 U.S. military personnel during their study period, making it the largest U.S. military agency in the Middle East region (Ulrichsen, 2020). This arrangement provides Qatar with a security guarantee of strategic value over its territorial integrity. The presence of US security forces creates guarantees Deterrence or indirect prevention. This security guarantee does not limit Qatar, but rather strengthens it.

At the same time, Qatar is managing its most pressing geopolitical risk: pragmatic engagement by maintaining diplomatic and economic relations with Iran. Starting from the need in the energy and trade sectors to share key energy resources managed by the South Pars/North Dome – the world's largest gas field (the physical foundation of Qatar's entire economic model) – where Qatar produces about 18.5 billion cubic feet per day (accounting for 80% of government revenue), while Iran only produces about 2 billion cubic feet per day until early 2026 (Energy Information Administration, 2025). The cooperation between the two countries is not optional but structural, representing what Kuik calls (Kuik, 2016) "Economic pragmatism" maintenance of economically necessary relationships with potentially threatening actors, as a form of strategic guarantee in the event of an escalation. Therefore, Qatar is

systematically balancing relations with Saudi Arabia, the U.S., and Iran to develop a resolute foreign policy.

Other dimensions of Multi-alignment Qatar is its relationship with Turkey. Since the 2017 GCC blockade, Turkey has positioned itself as a major supporter of Qatar by deploying military forces to Qatar in response to the 2017 crisis. The action shows that the two countries share enough strategic interests to commit each other to each other's security. This relationship is evolving towards a broader economic partnership through; Qatar-Turkey economic ties including significant QIA (Qatar Investment Authority) investments in the Turkish economy and the expansion of bilateral trade transformed the relationship from situational alignment to structural partnership. This arrangement provides Qatar with additional security guarantors that operate independently of both the GCC countries as well as the United States, diversifying Qatar's security architecture in an appropriate and consistent manner (Vij, 2025).

But the attacks on Qatar in recent months have been a severe test that exposes the inherent challenges in maintaining policy Multi-alignment in volatile regions. First, There may be differences in strategic culture. Qatar's state governance is built on a network logic centered on dependence. Recent events have shown that this approach will be challenged when confronted with conventional security doctrines. For Iran with a revolutionary ideology or Israel with military superiority, the calculation of risk is different. They prioritize retaliatory actions over maintaining diplomatic networks, a scenario that has not been fully optimized in Qatar's strategy to prevent it. Second, Qatar's success in positioning itself as a vital center of diplomacy and energy has given it great power and influence. But the attacks that have occurred, show that as a key partner it can be defeated when the core security of other countries is threatened. Although the mediation efforts offered by Qatar are useful, they have not been able to substantially prove their claims of uniqueness at the negotiating table (Vij, 2025).

Soft Power Qatar: Al-Jazeera, Qia, and Sports Diplomacy

Despite being in unfavorable geopolitical conditions, Qatar remains an influential actor in the Middle East. This role is inseparable from the strategy soft power dynamic. As Joseph Nye said (2004) Define soft power as the ability of a country to achieve its goals through attraction, not coercion. This is one of the most effective ways for small countries to achieve their foreign policy goals, as it is considered capable of persuading other countries to share the same goals without the use of force or coercion. For Qatar itself, this is not just an option, but a strategic imperative. Projections soft power Qatar operates through three main channels that have developed distinctive and mutually reinforcing geopolitical functions over the period 2020–2025.

Al-Jazeera, the first 24-hour news channel in the Middle East, broadcasts to more than 300 million households in more than 100 countries as the only pan-Arab rival to global news corporations such as the BBC and CNN. Founded in 1996, the network has quickly morphed into the most visible geopolitical instrument of architecture soft power Qatar (Chaziza & Carmela, 2025). In the period studied, Al-Jazeera functioned not merely as a broadcaster, but as a geopolitical instrument that framed the crisis through a lens that highlighted Qatar's position as both a victim and a diplomatic restraint actor, while examining the motives and actions of the countries that carried out the blockade (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2022). This medium often serves as a focal point in a strategy soft power Qatar is not only a media giant,

but also a dynamic force that strengthens Qatar's influence. In addition, AL-Jazeera's news coverage has often been criticized by Western media for allegedly presenting different perspectives in its Arabic and English content. The Arabic-language version faces accusations of supporting narratives promoted by certain groups such as the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan (2021), the Gaza conflict (2023-2024), to various North African political crises.

Qatar Investment Authority (QIA) is the embodiment of soft power Qatar's financial system, according to Nye (Nye, 2004) Included in the category "soft power structural" that is, an influence rooted in economic institutional bonds that run naturally and sustainably, without the need for special intervention, because they are based on inherent common interests. The difference between QIA and Sovereign Wealth Fund Others lie in its open geopolitical dimension. QIA acts as a mechanism "Sovereign Pressure Valve"(Global Times, 2025) meaning that it helps Qatar manage and alleviate geopolitical, economic, strategic pressures such as dependence on volatile energy revenues flexibly and controllably. This allows Qatar to protect itself from fluctuations in energy prices, ensure continued access to foreign markets, and strengthen geopolitical resilience amid the dominance of stronger regional actors such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Egypt.

QIA is more than just a fund. It is an extension of Qatar's foreign policy, which often advances strategic national objectives through its investments. This makes QIA one of the few funds in the world where finance, diplomacy and statehood are perfectly integrated. With assets reaching around US\$450 billion by 2024 according to the Sovereign Wealth Fund Institute (Global Times, 2025), QIA has built an investment portfolio in major European financial institutions and real estate, such as shares in Credit Suisse, Volkswagen, Barclays, Harrods, and The Shard in London. Such investments have fostered influential political support groups in European capitals, such as institutional players and big businessmen whose economic interests are aligned with efforts to maintain good relations with Qatar. In addition, like most other state funds, the QIA has not been spared controversy such as ownership of sports teams—notably Paris Saint-Germain F.C. (PSG) which has raised questions about the practice of image laundering through sports (sportswashing). Then, investments in the companies involved in the scandal such as the one mentioned above, have attracted attention (Global Times, 2025).

The last instrument, sports diplomacy, which Qatar has represented through the 2022 FIFA World Cup, has produced geopolitical gains—both symbolic in the form of international recognition, and tangible such as bilateral meetings and economic investment. The general image obtained before the 2022 FIFA World Cup was only as a small bay country rich in hydrocarbon resources. Qatar is trying to change its relatively limited image on the international stage by hosting the world's biggest football event. It is seen as Platform the right thing to do Rebranding and reintroduce itself to the world, not only excelling in energy sources but also excelling as a center of culture and civilization as well as Hub creativity and innovation in the Arabian Gulf region (Elbanna et al., 2022). In the athletics dimension, Qatar has hosted more than 150 international sporting events over the past three decades as part of its sports diplomacy, Qatar Sport Investment has been the main financier of major league sports clubs such as FC Barcelona and PSG, and infrastructure investments, cultural initiatives and reforms have also aimed to address diplomatic concerns (Ibrahim et al., 2025).

Although it is colored by controversy Pre-Event which extends to labor practices and governance, the success of Qatar's implementation proves its organizational capability, so that

it is able to change the international image of this Gulf country. Brannagan & Giulianotti (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2022) through their writing in the *Third World Quarterly*, examining Qatar's approach to sports mega-events through the concept of "Soft disempowerment" that is, a strategy of small countries in the face of international normative criticism (Human Rights (HAM), social issues) that takes advantage of major events to gradually reshape the global narrative. In addition, the World Cup became a place of diplomacy: Emir Tamim held a series of bilateral meetings with the country's leaders, while the soaring global spotlight created favorable momentum for Qatar's diplomatic activities in 2023–2024.

Qatar as A Mediator of The Conflict (Gaza 2023-2024)

If the 2022 World Cup is the peak Nation Branding Qatar, the role of mediation in the 2023-2024 Gaza conflict is the culmination of Qatar's consolidation as a Indispensable actor in the architecture of regional security. The eruption of the Gaza conflict on October 7, 2023, after the Hamas attack put Qatar in a central position because the country is the only government that has active diplomatic relations at the same time with Hamas in Gaza, the Israeli government (indirectly through mediation), the US, and major Arab countries. This unique position did not arise suddenly, but rather was the result of Qatar's long-term diplomatic investment in managing relations with various conflicting actors.

Qatar has managed to position itself as the main mediator in the post-October 7, 2023 Gaza conflict, not only through spontaneous diplomatic initiatives, but thanks to the foundations of relations that have been built over decades. Qatar has played a key role in mediating a halt to Israel's repeated attacks on the Gaza Strip, including ending the war in 2014. Together with Egypt and the United States, Qatar led the negotiation efforts that resulted in a temporary ceasefire agreement in November 2023 that allowed for the release of a number of hostages and the entry of humanitarian aid into Gaza (The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2025). Qatar's unique position stems from a combination of two strategic factors: its long-term relationship with Hamas, and its close security partnership with the United States. In addition, Qatar has set three main goals in its political efforts regarding Gaza: preventing the conflict from spreading to the regional level, distributing humanitarian aid to civilians, and ensuring the release of hostages goals that have public support from Washington. The combination of access to non-state actors such as Hamas, the presence of a US military base in Al-Udeid, and a large financial capacity makes Qatar a mediation actor that cannot be replaced by any other country in the context of the Gaza conflict (The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2025).

In the operational dimension, Qatar carries out a mediation role through a Shuttle Diplomacy which is intensive, bringing together the demands of the warring parties through a series of separate negotiations in Doha. The agreement reached in November 2023 resulted in a seven-day pause in hostilities, the release of 104 hostages in exchange for 240 Palestinian prisoners, as well as the delivery of humanitarian aid to Gaza a significant humanitarian achievement amid a deepening crisis (Schiff & Admoni, 2025). Over the next 15 months, Qatar led intensive diplomatic efforts that finally yielded concrete results. On January 15, 2025, Qatar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced the achievement of a ceasefire and prisoner exchange agreement between Israel and Hamas, scheduled to take effect on January 19, covering a hostage exchange between the two sides and aiming to create a sustained period of calm as a path to a permanent ceasefire. This success is inseparable from the institutional

capacity that has been systematically built. The delivery of tangible results such as the 2020 Doha Agreement between the U.S. and the Taliban and the Gaza ceasefire in January and October 2025 has strengthened Qatar's credibility as an intermediary capable of hard work and producing concrete deals (Ulrichsen, 2025).

Nonetheless, Qatar's mediation role does not take place without significant geopolitical contradictions and risks. Academic studies identify Qatar as a "biased mediator" (Biased Mediator), but a major argument that develops in the literature challenges traditional assumptions about the impartiality of mediators: Qatar's bias towards Hamas, when strategically managed, actually increases the effectiveness of mediation by allowing access and influence that the other side does not have (Schiff & Admoni, 2025). This paradox reached its peak in September 2025, when Israel launched an airstrike against a Hamas delegation in Doha—an act that seriously threatened the survival of the negotiation process. Israel's attack on September 9 targeted without warning a complex in the residential area of Doha, further increasing the "human cost" that Qatar bears from its mediation efforts (Ulrichsen, 2025). Despite the pressure, Qatar maintains its diplomatic commitments. Qatar and Egypt with Turkey following in the mix provided essential mediation infrastructure: maintaining direct channels of communication with Hamas, running Shuttle Diplomacy, and put continued pressure on the group, until a permanent ceasefire is finally reached in October 2025 with Qatar as one of the co-guarantor countries of the US, Egypt, and Turkey (Milton, 2025).

This role of mediation also has important implications for the academic debate about small state agencies. Leira (2019) argue that small states are often able to play a mediation role that cannot be played by the Great Powers It is precisely because of their inability to perceive as an existential threat to the parties to the conflict. Qatar is taking advantage of what can rightly be termed as Advantages of limitations: precisely because Qatar is not a superpower with a regional hegemony agenda, it can be accepted by all parties as a relatively trustworthy facilitator. This confirms Kamrava's argument (2013) that Subtle Power Qatar operates most effectively not through coercion, but through the creation of diplomatic spaces that cannot be filled by larger actors.

CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated that Qatar's geopolitical achievements throughout 2020–2025 derive from a mature, internally integrated, and long-term *hedging* approach combined with *niche diplomacy*, through which the country's physical vulnerability is consciously transformed into strategic bargaining power rather than an impediment to agency. Two theoretical contributions emerge from this analysis. First, Qatar's case extends the concept of *small states* beyond its classical definition, as Doha does not merely respond to structural incentives generated by great power competition, but actively shapes the environment in which larger powers operate most notably through its decades-long cultivation of relations with Hamas, which produced the specific diplomatic infrastructure enabling its central role in Gaza mediation. Second, the analysis reveals that *hedging* in the Middle Eastern context operates across more dimensions security, energy, finance, and mediation than the existing theoretical literature, developed predominantly in the East Asian context, has systematically recognized, suggesting the need for a refined typology of *hedging* in which engagement with hostile actors is understood as a source of diplomatic utility rather than merely a security or economic insurance mechanism. While this study is constrained by its reliance on public documents and its temporal boundary of 2025, both of which limit access to internal decision-making

processes and preclude assessment of post-Gaza ceasefire developments, future research should pursue elite interviews with Qatari and regional officials, conduct comparative case studies with other *small states* in the Gulf facing analogous structural pressures, and employ quantitative analysis to systematically examine the relationship between Qatar's LNG revenues and the scope of its diplomatic activities.

REFERENCE

- Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies. (2021). *Al-Ula GCC Summit Ends the Blockade of Qatar* (Issue January).
- Beach, D., & Pedersen, R. (2016). *Process- Tracing Methods : Foundations and Guidelines* (4th ed.). The University of Michigan Press.
- Brannagan, P. M., & Giulianotti, R. (2022). The soft power – soft disempowerment nexus : the case of Qatar. *International Affairs*, 5(2018), 1139–1157. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiy125>
- Chaziza, M., & Carmela, L. (2025). Qatar emerges as an authoritarian middle power through strategic specialization and defensive activism in the global system. *Discover Global Society*, 7(2025). <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1007/s44282-025-00300-7>
- Cooper, A. F., Shaw, T. M., & Leysens, A. (2009). The Diplomacies of Small States at the Start of the Twenty-first Century: How Vulnerable? How Resilient? In *The Diplomacies of Small States Between Vulnerability and Resilience* (pp. 1–18). Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/https://link.springer.com/book/10.1057/9780230246911>
- Elbanna, S., Elsharnouby, T., Aljafari, A., & Fatima, T. (2022). *The FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022*. Springer.
- Energy Information Administration. (2025). *Country Analysis Brief: Qatar*.
- Global Times. (2025). The Qatar Investment Authority: Strategic Power in a Turbulent World. *Medium*.
- Ibrahim, B., Yusuf, G., & Gumbi, K. (2025). The Use of Soft Power as A Tool for Projecting State's International Image: A Study of Qatar 2022 Federation of International Football Association (FIFA) World Cup. *IJRISS*. <https://doi.org/https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.905000199>
- Kamrava, M. (2013). *Qatar Small State , Big Politics* (1st ed.). Cornell University Press.
- Kuik, C. (2016). How Do Weaker States Hedge ? Unpacking ASEAN states ' alignment behavior towards China How Do Weaker States Hedge ? Unpacking ASEAN states '. *Journal of Contemporary China, March*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2015.1132714>
- Leira, H. (2019). The Emergence of Foreign Policy. *International Studies Quarterly*, 0, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqy049>
- Lijphart, A. (1971). Comparative Politics and the Comparative Method. *American Political Science Review*, 65(3), 682–693. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.2307/1955513>
- Macdonald, A. (2021, January). Qatar blockade: What caused it and why is it coming to an end? *Middle East Eye*.
- Milton, S. (2025, November). How Qatar Became a Conflict Mediation Heavyweight. *World Politics Review*.
- Nye, J. (2004). *Soft Power (The Means to Success in World Politics)*. United States by Public Affairs.
- Philip, L., & Antonia, G. (2025). Qatar : Introductory country profile. *The House of Commons Library*, 9530, 13.
- Schiff, A., & Admoni, A. (2025). Any port in a storm : Qatar as a biased mediator. *Israel Affairs*, 31(6), 1012–1046. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537121.2025.2495599>
- Thafer, T., & Theros, P. (2021). What the Al-Ula GCC Summit Has (and Has Not)

- Accomplished. *Gulf International Forum*.
- The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. (2025). *Israel ' s Campaign against Qatar over Its Support for Gaza and a Ceasefire* (Issue February).
- Thorhallsson, B. (2018). A small state in world politics : Iceland ' s search for shelter. *STJÓRNSÝSLA (Icelandic Review of Politics and Administration)*, 14(1), 61–82. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.13177/irpa.a.2018.14.1.3>
- Ulrichsen, K. C. (2020). *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197525593.001.0001>
- Ulrichsen, K. C. (2025, April). From Target to Key Player: Qatar's Resilience as a Regional Mediator. *FONDAZIONE OASIS*.
- Vij, S. (2025). *Reassessing Qatar's Multi-Alignment Strategy*. ORF ME (The Observer Research Foundation Middle East).
- Yin, R. (2017). *Case Study Research and Applications Design and Methods* (6th ed.). SAGE Publication Ltd.