

UNPACKING QATAR'S REGIONAL POWER: A COMBINED STRATEGY

Mustafa Yetim



Unpacking Qatar's Regional Power: A Combined Strategy

Ankara-2021

Center for Middle Eastern Studies

Mustafa Kemal Mahallesi 2128. Sok. No:3 Çankaya / Ankara - Turkey

info@orsam.org.tr

Graphic Designer **Mustafa Cingöz**

T: +90 850 888 15 20

F: + 90 312 430 39 48

Printing Center / KD Karton Dijital Matbaacılık Ltd. Şti.

Zübeyde Hanım Mah. Koyunlu Han 95/36 0 312 341 52 39 Ulus / Ankara-Türkiye / Turkey

Date of Publication / 24 December 2021

December 2021 / Copyright ©

The publication and sales rights of this book belong to the Center for Middle Eastern Studies (ORSAM). Without permission, the entire book or parts of the book, the design; it may not be reproduced, printed or distributed by mechanical, electronic, photocopying, magnetic, recording or other means.

CONTENTS

Introduction	5
Foreign-Based Hard Power Instruments	7
1. <i>Multifaceted Military Engagements with Western Countries</i>	8
2. <i>Diversifying Security Engagements</i>	9
3. <i>Supporting Non-State Actors</i>	12
A Three-layered Soft-Power Strategy.....	14
1. <i>Investment in Media: Al-Jazeera within the Strategic Picture</i>	15
2. <i>Investment on Credibility: Mediation Activities and International Projects and Humanitarian Initiatives</i>	17
3. <i>Investment on Re-branding of Qatars</i>	20
Conclusion	23
End Notes	25

ORSAM Series in Middle East in Transition

The new ORSAM Series in the Middle East in Transition is an effort to examine the change and transformation in the Middle East. From geopolitics to history and from social movements to political economy, the changing characteristics of the Middle East are analyzed in this series. This series deals with ongoing themes, trends, and their effects in the Middle East. The series, which attempts to be created with an original effort, also does not neglect the devotion to representing the general tendencies. Each episode of the series will deal with a different dimension of change and transformation.

1

Towards A New Security Architecture In The Gulf

The first piece in this series focuses on Gulf security in a changing landscape. Characterized as challenges, constraints, and threats, the first piece is dealing with changing threat perceptions, new security arrangements, regional economic order, pre-conditions of stability, normalization of the nation-state, regionally driven security, new economic order and resetting strategic perception. The titles refer to issues that are at hand in this piece. The first piece in this sense concludes with an understanding that the new security system is dependent on the foreign policy trajectory of Saudi Arabia-led block consisting of UAE, Bahrain, Egypt, and other countries' trajectories such as Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman.

SERIE

Unpacking Qatar's Regional Power: A Combined Strategy

Introduction

Official Name Qatar	Military Expenditures 1,5 billion dolar (2012)
Capital Doha	Military Personel 16,500
Area 11,586	Land Forces 12,000
Population 2,479,995 (2021)	Navy forces 2500
GDP 191,29 milyar dolar (2018)	Air forces 2,000
Export 67.5 billion dolar (2017)	Paramilitary Forces 5,000
Import 30.7 billion dolar (2017)	Natural gas production 166.4 billion cu m (2017)
Government Type Monarchy	Natural gas consumption 39.9 billion cu m (2017)
Head of State Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani (2013-?)	Religious Structure Muslim % 67.7, Christian %13.8, Hindu %13.8, Buddhist %3.1, Others %1.6 (2010)
Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani (2016-?)	Ethnic Structure Non-Qatari %75, Qatari %25 (2015)

From being a dependent ally of Saudi Arabia since its independence in 1971, the State of Qatar has gradually sought to change its foreign policy outlook and pursued somewhat autonomous foreign relations. That shift within its external and internal affairs was received with suspicion by the “big brother” in the region, Saudi Arabia, and, consequently, their relations faced several hiccups,

including a coup attempt in 1996, the 2014 withdrawal of the Saudi Ambassador from Qatar and the comprehensive blockade in 2017 in coordination with the UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain. The 2017 blockade was finally removed following the 41st Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Summit held in Saudi Arabia's Al-Ula city on January 5, 2021, and the autonomous position of Qatar was recognized by the blockading countries, despite the existing fractures between Doha and the blockading countries.¹

Like other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, Qatar is also a monarchic emirate ruled by the Al-Thani family, whose legitimacy comes from its religious, tribal, and financial power. In this sense, the protection of the ruling family, namely the al-Thani family, is equivalent to the protection of the state. Therefore, state institutions, policies, and state-society relations are initially designed to sustain the regime's survival. In other words, national security in the Gulf States, including in Qatar, prioritizes stability and durability of the existing regimes over the normal concept of border security. As a result, internal and external threats are classified based on their potential subversive impacts on the regimes in question. This long-rooted approach shapes the alliance relations of Qatar in the region. In this context, countries which are considered to be backing opposition groups are seen as the main enemies to the stability of their regimes. What constitutes the strategic outlook of the state of Qatar are the factors affecting the stability of the regime, its perception among its own people and outside, and its relations with key security partners. When analyzing its security linkages with western countries, specifically the USA, its integration into the GCC at the time, and its current alienation from the Saudi-led

regional bloc, all of these seem to be completely associated with its main purpose, regime survival.

To maintain its regime's survival and to thwart related security concerns, Qatar is building its national security strategy on the combination of several hard power and soft power instruments. In this sense, it follows both three-layered hard power and soft power strategies to overcome its security problems. As will be discussed below, while hard power strategies are largely based on developing necessary links with external actors (states and non-state actors), Qatar is making an extensive investment in its soft power resources. Consequently, this state attempts to realize its master power strategy by combining its hard power with soft power.

Foreign-Based Hard Power Instruments

Qatar's own local-national defense planning and its military equipment and personnel are rather insufficient to repel any sort of threat against its borders when compared with other Middle Eastern countries. It has only 16,500 active military personnel, consisting of 12,000 land forces, 2,500 Navy forces, and 2,000 air forces. In addition to its military personnel, it also has around 5,000 paramilitary forces designed to maintain internal security. Its military technology is modest as well. When considering that it has no indigenous defense industry, it can be observed that Qatar is heavily reliant on the military power of allied countries to protect both its regime's survival and territorial security. Its strategic capability has three layers; first, *Multifaceted Military Engagements with Western Countries*, second, *Diversifying Regional Security Engagements* and third, *Supporting Non-State Actors*. There are some indications that

Qatar is gradually empowering its military arsenal through recent billion dollar military deals signed with several western countries since the eruption of the Gulf crisis in 2017. During this process the disagreements between Qatar and the Saudi-led camp widened. Therefore, Qatar wanted to be well prepared for possible coup attempts, local but powerful tribes' rebellions and, even worse, military intervention, all of which were perceived as the imminent scenarios during the unprecedented feud between Qatar and the several GCC countries. Despite the recent de-escalation and the normalization process between Qatar and the former blockading countries, Doha still sustains its attempts in this direction to overcome its structural problems on the security-related issues.

1. Multifaceted Military Engagements with Western Countries

To ward off possible domestic and foreign security challenges, Qatar is increasingly engaging with western-based military technology and hosting several comprehensive military bases in its country. Previously, Qatar joined the GCC so as to contain the possible spread of the Iranian, so called Shia expansion, threat. But especially since Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, Doha has sped up its efforts to integrate with the entrenched US-led security umbrella in the region. Accordingly, it started to host one of the major US military bases in the al-Udeid region in the mid-1990s and has currently agreed with the USA to extend and enhance its military capability, where it has around 10,000 US soldiers. The last unexpected threat did not come from revisionist countries such as Iraq and Iran, but from a former ally, namely Saudi Arabia. Defense policy and

diplomatic negotiations became very intertwined in the aftermath of this “siege”.² This new regional landscape has led Qatar to diversify its military engagements with western countries. In this way, it accelerated its diplomatic efforts to strike various military deals, specifically with countries like Italy, the United Kingdom (UK), and France, not to mention the USA. By pursuing such a robust defense strategy, Emir attempted to persuade its western partners to ensure their country’s protection against potential local-regional threats. In other words, all signed agreements and planned military equipment exports, including fighter jets such as the French Rafales, the USA F-15, and the UK Eurofighter Typhoon, are prohibited. Not only with Western capitals, but also with other powerful centers, Russia is negotiating the purchase of military equipment such as the S-400. These are all indications of Qatar’s willingness to be part of a mainly Western security umbrella and, surely, diversify its security linkages with emergent global powers like Russia.³

2. Diversifying Security Engagements

Until the Arab uprisings, Qatar largely avoided being part of other regional military engagements apart from being a part of the GCC security umbrella since it did not want to worry about Saudi hegemony. However, emerging foreign policy similarities between Turkey and Qatar, such as their support for regional liberalization and possible reforms, as well as their pro-MB position, drew these countries to strengthen their relations. Consequently, both countries strengthened their economic and political ties, which had a significant impact on the institutionalization of their military ties. From Turkey’s perspective, an encompassing alliance with Qatar could provide a first and important

foothold within this region from which it can benefit not only economically but also strategically, balancing its two important regional rivals. For Qatar, drawing Turkey to this region can create an important space that it can also capitalize on to alleviate Saudi pressure and balance Iran. Since it seems impossible to improve relations with Iran, which is seen as a basic threat by the USA to its Middle Eastern interests as a western country and NATO member, Turkey arises as the best option.

Such an understanding promoted both countries to solidify and diversify bilateral relations, which are currently regarded as an emergent/alternative regional alignment. With its superior military power, Turkey can also provide the necessary support for Qatar to thwart possible challenges. This situation became clearer when the Gulf crisis erupted, during which Turkey rushed to back its ally not only politically and economically, but also militarily. In this context, Turkey immediately deployed some armored military vehicles and personnel to the Tariq bin Ziyad military base outside Doha and partially relieved economic, political, and military pressure on Qatar. All in all, in addition to western based military engagements as a new dimension of its changing defense-national security strategy and empowering its hard power situation, Qatar also tried to diversify its regional security linkages by welcoming Turkey's active and effective role during the 2000s. This strategic alliance eventually urged neighboring countries to recognize the resilience of this alliance and Qatar's autonomous actorhood in the Gulf and the wider region with the Al-Ula summit.⁴

Additionally, both countries are not radically against the Iranian regime and they think that Iran should also be integrated into the global system. Despite their opposition to Iran's possible advance towards nuclear armament, they don't feel an existential threat as Saudi Arabia-led countries do. This position recently enabled the Doha regime to play an active facilitator role in the normalization of relations between Iran and several Gulf countries, like Saudi Arabia, which have serious conflicts with the Tehran regime as well as Washington. They also welcomed the growing impact of several Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan) affiliated groups over the region specifically during the Arab Uprisings. For these two countries' declared regional purposes in this process were largely similar to the pro-reform and pro-population position of these groups. It is believed that an unspoken agreement exists between the Muslim Brotherhood group in Qatar and the Qatar regime, in which this group vowed not to challenge the regime. This allegation was validated as there is no officially established Muslim Brotherhood organization in Qatar. Consequently, the regime and the Muslim Brotherhood seemed to agree to back up each other regionally. This is indeed the main reason behind the lack of the regime's threat perception towards this group and its differentiation from other Saudi-led Gulf countries in regards to the Ikhwan movement.⁵ Therefore, Qatar never considered these groups as a basic threat to its regime survival. As for the Arab Uprisings, Ankara and Doha just privileged the reform demands in the region and, by extension, backed several moderate Ikhwan groups, which adopted these demands. Therefore, backing Ikhwan affiliated groups especially during the Arab Uprisings, was the natural outcome of their regional orientation, not the opposite.

Besides Qatar's active and intensified military engagement with Turkey, there are also other efforts pursued by Qatar to advance its military ties with alternative power centers like Russia, India and China. Qatar is trying to compensate for its future security needs by creating new channels.⁶ In this context, there are several lasting negotiations and meetings between Doha and other global actors. To illustrate, Russia is planning to supply an anti-aircraft missile system to Qatar and is running negotiations with Qatar to provide the S-400 air defense missile system as well.⁷ Currently, it is also improving its military links with India by intensifying bilateral meetings on defense-related issues and realizing some military deals with New Delhi, which is a powerful global actor.⁸ Furthermore, Qatar attempted to develop its relations with a powerful international organization, NATO, in order to benefit from its security umbrella. In this context, we can see some earlier attempts like the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative launched in 2004 to institutionalize security relations specifically with Gulf countries. Qatar immediately became part of this initiative and held talks with NATO.⁹

3. Supporting Non-State Actors

Another important dimension of Qatar's hard power strategy is based on backing some armed non-state groups in the region. This strategy is not only specific to Qatar, as exemplified by the United Arab Emirate's support for the Southern Transitional Council (STC) in Yemen and Saudi Arabia's support for General Khalifa Haftar's forces in Libya, which are prominent non-state armed groups in their countries. However, this is currently a further performed strategy within Qatar's new regional approach.

Since the start of the Arab uprisings, some groups have translated the emergent regional vacuum into gaining a more powerful and embedded position within the region. In this sense, as in other regional countries, Qatar considered embracing these actors as a favorable way to avoid huge and unnecessary costs in the field. Rather than getting involved directly in the lasting conflicts, Qatar opted for arming and assisting these groups, as evidenced in its support for the Free Syrian Army (FSA), then the Syrian National Army (SNA), and other MB-affiliated groups in Libya and Yemen. Not only did these groups, but they also gave major support to the MB political groups all over the region, as in Egypt and Tunisia. It should also be remembered that Qatar is a long-standing ally of Palestinian armed resistance groups, namely Harakat al-Muqawamah al-Islamiyyah (Hamas), which adopts religious Palestinian nationalism against Israel's invasion of Palestine. It never avoids backing this group despite its closer engagement with the USA, which is Israel's main security provider and political supporter in the Middle East.¹⁰ However, there is again a modest shift in this position and Qatar has started to focus more on the utilization of soft power instruments to enhance its regional and international reputation.

Normally, supporting non-state armed actors was a significant departure from Qatar's previous strategies, in which it actively supported these groups, particularly during Arab uprisings. Qatar did not avoid embracing these groups to achieve its regional goals and to create a regional environment in which it could be more secure and influential. To sum up, Qatar developed and highlighted its hard power instruments by aligning with several armed non-state organizations which were then seriously criticized by

Saudi-led countries and several western capitals and seen as an indirect support for terrorist networks. In particular, its initial unconditional support for MB groups within the Gulf region and Egypt was one of the main reasons behind the GCC's current fragmentation and gradually ensuing Gulf crisis.¹¹ In a nutshell, Qatar's main expectation is to have a certain influence and role on local and regional policies of other regional actors by backing these actors. Since non-state groups are seen as alternative powers in the case of regime change within these countries, Qatar can be said to make an investment in the formation of sincere relations with these powers in advance.

A Three-layered Soft-Power Strategy

Possessing enormous natural resources such as natural gas Qatar largely uses that “God’s gift” to enhance its positive image within the international arena and to alleviate possible reactions/criticisms against the regime by implementing rentier policies. When recalling that almost 70 percent of its national income comes from Qatar’s natural resources, the dependency of Qatar’s foreign and domestic policy strategies on these resources can be easily understood. Generally, natural resources have two inseparable meanings for the Emirate, which was thought to be “the most boring” land in this region before 1995. On the one hand, it benefits from this resource in its efforts to craft a “niche position” and to empower its “state-branding”. On the other hand, as one of the leading rentier states in this region, Qatar also never avoids using economic facilities to ward off any social explosion. This policy is closely in line with the “no taxation, no representation” approach prevalent within the Gulf region. Although investing in niche positions

internationally and avoiding democratization domestically seem to be inconsistent, these policies serve a similar and basic purpose: Regime survival. In this way, as a militarily weak, structurally authoritarian but economically powerful actor, Qatar attempts to gain international legitimacy through its three-layered soft power strategies like *Investment in Media, Investment in Credibility and Investment in Re-branding*, while retaining its sympathetic position to liberalization and possible domestic reforms.

1. Investment in Media: Al-Jazeera within the Strategic Picture

1995 was an important turning point, as underlined frequently, as it did not simply bring an Emir change within Qatar but radical transformations in Qatar's domestic and foreign policy. Following the end of the Ottoman control over Qatar during 1871-1915 and the end of the British Empire during 1915-1971, Qatar aligned with Saudi Arabia until the Emir was changed in 1995.¹² After Hamad bin Khalifa al-Tani deposed his father Sheikh Khalifa Al Thani, Qatar's internal and external orientation underwent drastic shifts which continue to have critical regional and domestic implications. After this bloodless coup, the first thing the new Emir did was to change its regional security understanding, which was based on complete accordance with and even obedience to the Saudi-led regional stance. Saudi Arabia's initial and failed reaction was to instigate a possible coup against the new Emir. Afterwards, the new Emir considered it more legitimate to launch a new domestic and foreign policy strategy owing to increasing pressure from their former brother (Saudi), with whom they shared a similar sectarian (Sunni) identity and even a tradition (Wahhabi).

The first and most prominent result of this change was Qatar's steady search for international legitimacy to protect its regime, which was previously safeguarded by Saudi Arabia. In this sense, the new Emir correctly realized the importance of media outlets and promoted some figures to found al-Jazeera, which started its Arabic and English broadcasts. Al-Jazeera English, with its western style journalism and its persistent efforts to bring pervasive and rooted social, economic, and political problems to the international agenda, largely reinforced Qatar's legitimate ground on the international platform. Qatar began to be viewed as a country with a strong desire to integrate into the Western-led globalization process. This was indeed a clear divergence from its previous understanding. While in the beginning it protected its regime's survival by adhering to the Saudi hierarchy within the Gulf, this time it preferred international integration to gain a more autonomous position within the region. Thus, the establishment and its broadcasting policy should be seen as the one piece of this changing foreign policy orientation.

While paying attention to the deep social problems and promoting seemingly universal values over the region al-Jazeera never leveled its criticisms against its regime which indeed points out close linkages between the regime and al-Jazeera network. This contradictory situation became clearer during the Arab uprisings starting in 2011, during which Al-Jazeera was seriously lashed out by embattled regimes due to its obvious support of peoples' demands. During this process, which largely served Qatar's basic interests, there took place serious disagreements and even a crisis between Doha and other capitals in the region. To summarize, Al-Jazeera was founded to consolidate its soft-power oriented stance within the regional and international

environment by presenting Qatar as pro-Western and a supporter of universal values.

However, its pro-reform and pro-democracy broadcasts gradually drew harsh criticism from existing regimes, particularly in the aftermath of the Arab uprising. The regimes which faced popular demonstrations demanded Qatar to intervene in al-Jazeera's broadcasts and thereafter closed them due to al-Jazeera offices' alleged support for these demonstrations within their countries. Saudi Arabia-led countries also severely criticized al-Jazeera's broadcast policy during the Arab uprisings and thereafter. Along with Egypt, they all closed al-Jazeera offices in their countries on the ground that these offices were propagating against the existing regimes and adopting a pro-Ikhwan stance. Al-Jazeera is also criticized owing to its hesitant stance on the democracy-related and human rights problems within Qatar, demonstrating its ambivalent and selective approach towards popular demands within the region.

2. Investment on Credibility: Mediation Activities and International Projects and Humanitarian Initiatives

To defy possible threats against its regime and gain credibility among its partners, Qatar always attempts to play a mediator role between conflicting parties in the region and the international arena. In this context, establishing leader-based channels and using its financial capabilities encourages conflicting parties to make some deals to solve the ongoing problems. Its previous mediation attempts between Hamas-Israel, Hezbollah and other Lebanese factions in 2008 and between Yemeni groups in 2008 and can be seen as the results of this policy. During

these efforts, it managed to convince the parties to strike some deals by promising several investments in their countries. This strategy provided Qatar more credibility and neutrality within the region and it felt more secure and stable by improving its friendly relations with all actors within the region.

Such a policy faced major backlash during the Arab uprisings since Qatar largely invested in the possible advance and triumph of Muslim Brotherhood affiliated groups within the Middle East. Considering that Arab uprisings could provide a possible ground from which Qatar can play a leading role Doha initially lent unconditional support to these groups, which are seen as main threats to their regimes by Saudi-led countries. Therefore, Qatar was dragged into major regional conflicts at the end of which it was accused of sponsoring terrorism and losing its earlier reliable partners. Its regional isolation reached a climax in 2017 when the Gulf crisis resurfaced with the Saudi-led “siege” of Qatar. After the initial shock, Qatar managed to relieve the negative economic and political effects of this crisis and resumed its mediation efforts to regain its tarnished mediator role. In this sense, it hosted Taliban forces and the USA several times in Doha to achieve a possible agreement to end the lasting conflicts within Afghanistan which finally led to an agreement between these two actors and currently enhanced Qatar’s position in the II. Taliban period. It also proposed a mediator role between Iran and the USA in regards to the nuclear problem. In this way, Qatar is attempting to keep Iran as a balancer actor against Saudi Arabia within the Gulf while pleasing the USA with billions of dollars’ worth of military and economic deals. Overall, whereas its mediation efforts temporarily stalled during the Arab uprisings and it pursued

an aggressive role, it seemed to intensify these initiatives to regain lost reliability between the parties.

As a part of making an investment in its credibility, Qatar seems very eager to host several major international projects and lead several humanitarian initiatives. By hosting major organizations, it attempts to display its modern and advanced cities, which is fairly opposite to their previous *boring* times. To illustrate, it showed great effort to host the 2022 World Cup that was finally given to Qatar despite ongoing criticisms about its working conditions. Qatar will be the first country to host a World Cup organization in the Middle East. Therefore, hosting such a major international organization is not without some serious problems. After being declared as the winner of the bid to host the World Cup, it is always criticized by major international organizations like the International Labor Organization (ILO) and International Amnesty (IA) due to the Kafala sponsorship system, which is thought to be “modern slavery” in our time since it attributes almost no humanitarian rights to migrant/foreign workers. Some anti-Qatar countries and groups have launched a powerful campaign to convince the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) to cancel Qatar’s hosting of the World Cup. Despite these negative initiatives, Qatar became the first Gulf country to fix and finally remove the long-criticized Kafala system, thus reforming its working conditions for migrant workers.

In this way, it is also attempting to prove its flexibility and openness to distinct cultures and identities. Furthermore, it is demonstrating its technological and economic capacity through such organizations. Finally, these organizations

are deemed critical to maximizing possible sympathy for the regime. In addition to these, it is also extending its humanitarian support to the failed countries and regions which are facing malnutrition, sanitation, water shortages, drought, starvation and lack of electricity. It can be said that Qatar is fairly generous in its assistance to suffering people around the region. It provided humanitarian assistance to countries like Yemen, Sudan, Somalia, and Palestine. What is more, it provided some loans and credits for these actors to rebuild their destroyed homes and roads and to have better life conditions. Thus, it tries to be regarded as the leading backer of the aggrieved people of the region and to help the regimes that have sincere relations with Doha to overcome these problems. Due to economic problems the global pandemic (Coronavirus) caused for Qatar and other countries, there was a decline in Qatar's humanitarian outreach to the mentioned countries, but recently Qatar seems to have recovered this process and to be intensifying these activities again. All in all, both international organizations and humanitarian initiatives are seen as fundamental parts of the public diplomacy that consequently empowers the legitimacy of a "monarchic" regime in the eyes of not only regional-international actors but also local peoples.

3. Investment on Re-branding of Qatar

Qatar is trying to project itself as a modern and open Gulf country by embarking on several reforms within domestic politics and by adopting a reformist state. Since the mid-1990s, it has taken a different stance on political and economic liberalization. Against this background, Qatar held general elections for membership in the 29-member

Central Municipal Council (CMC) in November 1995 and, afterwards, allowed women to vote and run for the election in the March 1999 elections. Those reforms raised optimism and expectations concerning the possible non-violent transformation of a monarchy within this region. The most important step came with a new Emir's promise of a new and modern constitution and the foundation of an elected national assembly, the Advisory Council (Majilis Al-Shura). Labeled as a "democracy festival" by several figures Qatar's new direction was welcomed and supported by leading western countries.¹³

However, it can be stated that the emergent "new world order" (globalization) under the leadership of the USA and Qatar's divergence from Saudi hegemony were two essential international factors urging Qatar to launch a new strategy. In addition to these previous steps, which were attempting to reconcile Qatar's traditional values with universal ones, Qatar sustained its progressive stance, albeit with several setbacks and regressions. Confronting traditional security challenges during the Arab uprisings like possible armed conflicts, border problems and regional isolation, Qatar temporarily stalled this reform-based orientation and got dragged into regional conflicts. Afterwards, it resumed and speeded up its reforms, especially by promising to correct and, at best, abolish the Kafala sponsorship system. This system is pervasive within the Gulf monarchies and is widely criticized by most human rights-based and labor organizations. As Qatar gained an important opportunity to host the 2022 World Cup organization, it was put at the center of these discussions.

To alleviate these criticisms and to advance further its pro-reform position, Qatar's Emir took bold steps to

ameliorate this system, which is seen as “Modern Slavery” in the 21st century as it even attributes no basic rights to foreign/migrant workers. What is more substantial in terms of the consolidation of political participation of Qatari people in the system is the Gulf Arab state’s first legislative elections for the advisory Shura Council, held on October 2, 2021.¹⁴ With this, another bold step, Qatar resumed and enhanced its reformistic and liberal posture once stalled during the Arab Uprisings. Aside from these steps, Qatar also tried to modernize its cities and capital by building major towers and by advancing its educational facilities, not only for local students but also for international students. These initiatives were also stalled due to the destructive impacts of the global pandemic which obviously hit several fields of the Qatari economy, especially like energy, airline transportation, and the exchange market. However, there is again some recovery on these fields which would probably increase Qatar’s similar investments on the mentioned fields. Through these economic-social initiatives, Qatar intends to establish a convenient and stable environment between its citizens and foreign ones, which would probably empower its soft-power orientation. Through such social, cultural, and other exchange activities, it is planned to be identified as an important bridge and center between different peoples. All in all, carrying out some smaller but important reforms towards political and economic liberalization, realizing essential social-cultural exchange programs, and making major investments in urbanization, comprehensive educational facilities, and tourism activities are also envisaged as other critical state-led strategies to gain both international and local sympathy and support.

Conclusion

Small countries can have different strategic orientations compared to militarily effective countries. Against this background, they can advance dissimilar security arrangements to compensate for their militarily weak positions. Since they cannot afford to conduct conventional military war, they generally and initially prefer alternative security umbrellas ensured by leading regional and global powers. Secondly, the lack of such hard-power deterrence urges them to invest heavily in soft-power deterrence. In this context, as small monarchic countries, they are more prone to support popular opinions and ideas like Islamism, in the case of the Gulf region. To enhance their legitimate and credible position within the global platform, they try to benefit from media outlets, to host major international organizations and to improve their economic integration into the global system. This soft power orientation basically aims to make a contribution to neutralizing the emergent threats and challenges against these regimes.

The trajectory of Qatar's national security is also an amalgamation of soft power and hard power strategies. While largely prioritizing and diversifying soft power instruments in its strategic security understanding to empower its legitimacy within the international scene, this militarily weak country attempts to compensate for its deficiencies in hard power instruments by solidifying its military-defense ties with global powers and current regional powers like Turkey. Additionally, it seems that Doha embraced several non-state armed groups and backed them militarily and politically in the region, particularly during the Arab uprisings. Qatar's recent regional activities

are deeply based on proving its military/hard power position through these actors. Behind all its soft and hard power strategies, there is a clear concern and motivation: That is regime survival. Like in all other Middle Eastern states, state-society relations in Qatar are not built upon strong foundations, despite its reform-based and liberal initiatives in the domestic arena, which eventually trigger the regime's survival concerns. Therefore, despite seeming contradictory and inconsistent at times, all pursued strategies serve a similar and grand purpose, namely regime survival.

Ednotes

- ¹ Gerald M. Feierstein, “The GCC al-Ula Statement: Perhaps a step, but not a solution”, *Middle East Institute*, 6. 02. 2021.
- ² Mustafa Yetim, “Katar 2017 (Qatar 2017)”, *Ortadoğu Yılığ 2017 (Middle East Yearbook)*, Kadim Yayınları, Ankara, 13 (2018): 357-362.
- ³ “Chapter Seven: Middle East and North Africa”, *The Military Balance*, 118. 1 (2018): 315-374; “Chapter Seven: Middle East and North Africa”, *The Military Balance*, 119. 1 (2019): 320-379.
- ⁴ İsmail Numan Telci, “Is Qatar the new actor in the balance of power in the Gulf?”, *MENA Affairs*, 6 January 2021.
- ⁵ Silvia Colombo, “The GCC and the Arab Spring: A tale of double standards”, *The International Spectator*, 47.4 (2012): 110-126.
- ⁶ “Russia snubs Saudi threats over Qatar military deal”, *Middle East Monitor*, 03.06.2018; “Russia in talks over S-400 air-defense systems with Qatar, Saudi Arabia”, *Daily Sabah*, 19.02.2009.
- ⁷ Gökhan Erel, “Katar’ın Ortaklıklarını Geliştirme Stratejisi”, *Ortadoğu Analiz*, Cilt: 10, Sayı: 89, Eylül-Ekim 2019, p. 52-55.
- ⁸ “Qatar, India discuss military relations”, *Gulf Times*, 21.06.2018; “Roar of the Sea: India, Qatar Begin Maiden Tactical Exercise Involving Rafale, P8 Spy Plane”, *Sputnik*, 18.11.2019.
- ⁹ “Istanbul Cooperation Initiative”, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_58787.htm? (retrieved 05.12.2019); “Qatar signs security agreement with NATO”, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_150794.htm (retrieved 05.12.2019)

- ¹⁰ Ahmad Azem, “The Extent and Limits of Qatar-Hamas Ties”, *Al-Monitor*, 16.05.2013.
- ¹¹ Lina Khatib, “Qatar and the Recalibration of Power in the Gulf”, *Carnegie Middle East Center*, (2014): 1-20.
- ¹² Betül Doğan Akkaş, “Katar Ulusal Güvenliđi: Yumuşak Politikalar ve Önleyici Pragmatizm”, *Ortadođu’da Ulusal Güvenlik Stratejileri (Ed. Veysel Kurt)*, Seta Yayınları, 2018: 181.
- ¹³ J. Lambert, “Political reform in Qatar: Participation, legitimacy and security”, *Middle East Policy*, 18.1 (2011): 89; Mustafa Yetim, “State-led Change in Qatar in the Wake of Arab Spring: Monarchical Country, Democratic Stance?” *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 1.4 (2014): 391-410.
- ¹⁴ Linah Alsaafin, “Qatar’s first legislative polls: What to expect from Shura vote”, *Al-Jazeera*, 1. 10. 2021.

Author



Mustafa Yetim

Gulf Studies Research Expert & Middle East Analysis Magazine Editor

Dr. Mustafa YETİM is an Assistant Professor at Eskişehir Osmangazi University. He completed his undergraduate studies in 2009 at Karadeniz Technical University and then received his master's degree in 2011 from Sakarya University. His master's thesis was about "Turkey's Middle East Policy between 2002 and 2010: Turkey's Changing Perception in the Middle East". He finished his PhD in 2016 at Ankara University with the thesis titled "Hizbullah within Middle East and Lebanon Ground: Neo-Weberian Perspective". He has published several book chapters, articles, commentaries and analysis on topics such as Turkish Foreign Policy towards the Middle East, Turkey-Qatar relations, Hezbollah, Lebanon and Middle East.



Center for Middle Eastern Studies

Address : Mustafa Kemal Mah. 2128 Sk. No: 3 Çankaya, ANKARA

Phone : +90 850 888 15 20 Faks: +90 312 430 39 48

info@orsam.org.tr

www.orsam.org.tr

[f](#) [in](#) [t](#) [e](#) [orsamorgtr](#)