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# **SMALL STATE, MEGA POLITICS: UNDERSTANDING CONTEMPORARY QATARI FOREIGN POLICY THROUGH MEDIATION DIPLOMACY**

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# SMALL STATE, MEGA POLITICS: UNDERSTANDING CONTEMPORARY QATARI FOREIGN POLICY THROUGH MEDIATION DIPLOMACY

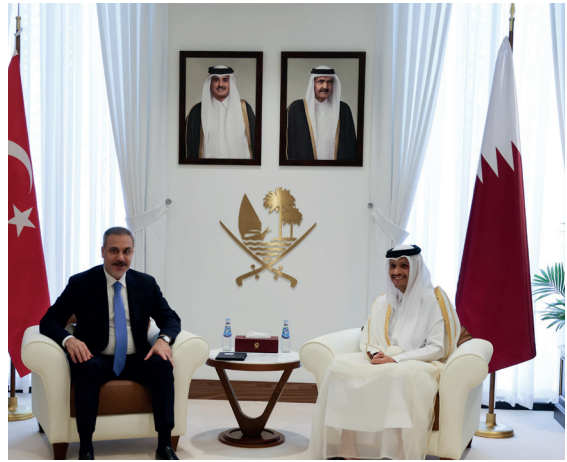
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## INTRODUCTION



When Mehran Kamrava published the revised edition of *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics* in 2015, he noted that while many features of Qatari politics remained consistent, notable changes had occurred since the book's first publication in 2013. These changes were primarily in three areas: the domestic sphere (particularly the transition of leadership from Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani to Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani following the former's abdication), international relations (with Qatar expanding its foreign policy beyond traditional mediation roles to more assertive engagements in Libya, Syria, and elsewhere—all while remaining under the U.S. security umbrella), and the economy (especially in terms of infrastructural development in preparation for the 2022 World Cup).<sup>1</sup>

If Kamrava's observations in 2013 and 2015 justified the characterization of Qatar as a small state with "big politics," then Qatar today can arguably be seen as operating in a realm of "mega politics." As I finalize this analysis on May 14, 2025, Donald Trump is making his first official international trip of his second term to Saudi Arabia, followed by a visit to Qatar. This sequence underscores Qatar's evolving status in international politics and its growing significance in U.S. foreign policy. U.S. presidents' first trips often reflect their foreign policy priorities; it is noteworthy that during Trump's first term in 2017, his inaugural trip included Saudi Arabia, followed by Israel, Palestine, and European states—not Qatar.<sup>2</sup> The inclusion of Doha this time indicates Qatar's rising prominence, even if we consider only the past eight years since Trump's first foreign

1 Mehran Kamrava, *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics*, With a New Preface (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.7591/9780801454318>.

2 "Key Takeaways from Day Two of Donald Trump's Middle East Tour in Qatar," Al Jazeera, accessed May 16, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/5/14/key-takeaways-from-day-two-of-donald-trumps-tour-of-the-middle-east>.

visit. Of course, Qatar's prominence to the U.S. is partly due to its role in U.S.-relevant foreign policies, such as its mediation and facilitation in Taliban and Israel negotiations.

Several developments have shaped the transformation of Qatar's foreign policy profile: its substantial economic resources, its active role in regional diplomacy, its assertive and largely successful interventions in Syria, and its resilience during the 2017 Gulf crisis. Although Qatar had faced a diplomatic row in 2014, the 2017 crisis, which saw a full-scale blockade by three Gulf neighbors, was a much more severe and prolonged process. It lasted nearly four years and tested Qatar's diplomatic and economic resilience. Doha survived and emerged with enhanced soft power, diplomatic capabilities, and regional influence. This experience further justifies my

reinterpretation of Kamrava's framing, moving from "big" to "mega" politics, reflecting Qatar's ability to project influence well beyond what its small size would conventionally suggest.

Among the various dimensions of Qatar's foreign policy, this study focuses on its mediation diplomacy—arguably the most distinct and consistent feature of its international engagement. While U.S. support and regional dynamics have enabled Qatar to act as a mediator, the country's ability to sustain and institutionalize this role, from Taliban negotiations to recent Israel-Hamas ceasefire talks, reflects its success in institutionalizing such roles. This analysis aims to evaluate Qatar's mediation efforts over the last decade, exploring how and why a small Gulf state has come to exceed its weight in the geopolitics of the Middle East and beyond.

## MEDIATION AS A QATAR'S FOREIGN POLICY: SOFT POWER AND SMALL STATE TOOL



The roles of small states in regional and global arenas have been revisited in international politics, both within the Gulf and in broader global contexts.<sup>3</sup> Despite their geographic and demographic limitations, the influence of these states has been appreciated in the scholarly world. Five of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members can be considered small states and Qatar is among those whose role has attracted significant attention in international relations. Matthew Gray, for example, examines Qatar's foreign policy and labels Qatar as "an ambitious small state," due to its role that surpasses the classical per-

spectives of international relations theories.<sup>4</sup>

Kamrava argues that Qatar's foreign policy should be seen as a deliberate endeavor to exceed its small size by embracing activism, autonomy, and proactive diplomacy.<sup>5</sup> Within the broader literature on Qatar as a small state, its mediation diplomacy has emerged as a central theme. Mediation, as a significant component of Qatar's foreign policy, has been frequently studied over the past two decades. For example, Kristian Coates Ulrichsen examines how Qatar simultaneously attempted to mediate between conflicting parties in Yemen, Sudan, and Lebanon, albeit with sig-

3 Peter J. Katzenstein, "Small States and Small States Revisited," *New Political Economy* 8, no. 1 (March 2003): 9–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1356346032000078705>; Tom Long, "It's Not the Size, It's the Relationship: From 'Small States' to Asymmetry," *International Politics* 54, no. 2 (March 2017): 144–60, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-017-0028-x>; Larbi Sadiki and Layla Saleh, "Writing' Small States: Contextualizing the Construct in the Arab Gulf," *International Politics*, July 27, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-021-00335-y>; Ahmed M Abozaid, "The Rise of Small States in the Arabian Gulf: The Case of UAE and Qatar: A Historical Sociology Perspective," *Journal of Rising Powers and Global Governance* 1, no. 2 (2020): 7–41; Khalid S. Almezaini and Jean-Marc Rickli, eds., *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies before and after the Arab Spring* (London ; New York, NY: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2017).

4 Matthew Gray, "An Ambitious Small State," in *Routledge Handbook of International Relations in the Middle East*, ed. Shahram Akbarzadeh (London: Routledge, 2019), 195–208, <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315229591-15/qatar-matthew-gray>.

5 Kamrava, *Qatar*.



It is important to recognize that Qatar is not alone in its mediation attempts in the Gulf, and this study does not argue that Qatar is unique. Instead, it argues that Qatar's mediation efforts have been more prominent recently. Most Gulf states, if not all, seek to utilize small-state tools, such as mediation and foreign aid, to gain influence in regional and global areas.

nificant challenges. These challenges stemmed from Qatar's "absence of a 'day after' policy; in Lebanon and Darfur, Qatari mediation was more an exercise in bridging surface divisions than in addressing deeper structural roots or tangibly contributing to peacebuilding and post-conflict recovery."<sup>6</sup> As will be seen in later mediations, such as in Israel or Afghanistan cases, Qatar has gained significant experience and achieved greater success in its mediation efforts.

It is important to recognize that Qatar is not alone in its mediation attempts in the Gulf, and this study does not argue that Qatar is unique. Instead, it argues that Qatar's mediation efforts have been more prominent recently. Most Gulf states, if not all, seek to utilize small-state tools, such as mediation and foreign aid, to gain influence in regional and global areas. Mediation, in particular, is a tool for which Qatar, Oman, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are well known. For instance, Oman mediated between Iran and the U.S. for the Joint Plan of Action in 2013<sup>7</sup> while Kuwait played a me-

diating role among Gulf members during the 2017 Gulf Crisis.<sup>8</sup>

The UAE, similarly, has begun to consider mediation as a tool for its foreign policy. For example, Abu Dhabi has been involved in mediation between Russia and Ukraine for the prisoners' exchange in 2025.<sup>9</sup> While Kuwait, Oman, and the UAE use mediation as a tool, Qatar has gained more visibility in recent years. For example, the Taliban-U.S. negotiations were centered on Qatar's mediation and hosting. Likewise, Qatar has taken a leading role in Israel-Hamas negotiations since October 7, 2023.

This study builds on existing literature by synthesizing these insights, particularly those that have occurred since the early 2000s. It argues that Qatar's mediation diplomacy has matured and been sophisticated, reflecting a more institutionalized approach to foreign policy. By focusing on Qatar's strategic use of mediation up to the present, this paper contributes to ongoing debates about the agency of small states in an increasingly fragmented and competitive global order.

6 Kristian Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 93.

7 Marc Valeri, "Oman's Mediatory Efforts in Regional Crises," Expert Analysis (The Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre (NOREF), March 2014), <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/178923/c3f2474284d7aaeadeb5a8429ef64375.pdf>.

8 Huzeyfe Altıok, "Kuwait's Mediation in the Gulf Crisis: Dynamics of Kuwait's Foreign Policy Approaches," in *Social Change in the Gulf Region: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Md Mizanur Rahman and Amr Al-Azm (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2023), 597–618, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-7796-1\\_35](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-7796-1_35).

9 Anna L. Jacobs, "Gulf Mediation in the Ukraine Crisis," *Arab Gulf States Institute* (blog), April 1, 2025, <https://agsi.org/analysis/gulf-mediation-in-the-ukraine-crisis/>.



## CASE STUDIES IN QATARI MEDIATION DIPLOMACY



Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein welcomes Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani who arrived in Iraq's capital Baghdad to attend the Arab League Summit, May 17, 2025.

Qatar's mediation has evolved from focusing on regional conflicts to including different actors, notably non-state groups like the Taliban and Hamas. Its approach emphasizes inclusion, engaging with both state and non-state actors, even those often labeled illegitimate.<sup>10</sup> These are mostly also aligned with its ability to host organizations that most would not engage, in addition to Hamas and Taliban leadership; the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood can be an example of this policy.

By prioritizing dialogue over exclusion, Qatar facilitates backchannel communication and builds trust, aligning with global mediation norms. This inclusive strategy, exemplified by efforts such as the Afghanistan talks,

strengthens its ability to navigate both official and informal diplomatic spaces.<sup>11</sup> The two cases involving state-non-state actors will be studied as case studies not only because they are between states and non-state actors, which are considered controversial by many, but also because they are the most recent examples of Qatar's increasingly prominent role. Additionally, compared to previous mediations, the country is not merely a facilitator or bridge between parties but is more deeply engaged in these issues, giving Doha more say than in previous efforts.

### 1. TALIBAN-U.S. NEGOTIATIONS

Qatar's role in the Taliban-U.S. negotiations is an important case in its foreign policy.

<sup>10</sup> Beverley Milton-Edwards, "Small States Big Conflicts: Strategic Analysis of Qatar's Conflict Resolution Initiatives," *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 18, no. 3 (July 2, 2024): 282–97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25765949.2024.2411103>.

<sup>11</sup> Milton-Edwards.

**Qatar's mediation is shaped by its strategic positioning between Western allies and regional actors like Iran and Hamas. This role reflects both a geopolitical necessity and a consistent pro-Palestinian stance. While Qatar does not endorse Hamas's October 7 attack, it balances its position by also blaming the ongoing Israeli occupation.**

The roots of Qatar's involvement date back to 2013, when Doha hosted a Taliban political office with U.S. support.<sup>12</sup> Since the establishment of the office, Qatar has facilitated both backchannel and official talks that were eventually finalized by signing the Doha Agreement on February 29, 2020.<sup>13</sup> The agreement technically ended the U.S.'s longest war, which began in 2001.

Qatar's importance grew significantly during the U.S.–Taliban talks, culminating in the February 2020 peace agreement signed in Doha. Even before these talks, Qatar hosted intra-Afghan negotiations. It facilitated prisoner swaps, including the high-profile 2014 exchange of U.S. soldier Bowe Bergdahl for five Taliban detainees from Guantanamo, and the 2019 exchange involving Anas Haqqani and two American professors.<sup>14</sup>

Following the Taliban's takeover of Kabul in 2021, Qatar continued to act as a diplomatic intermediary. Unlike many countries that distanced themselves

from the Taliban, Qatar maintained its ties and hosted key talks between the Taliban and Western actors. Doha provided a platform for countries like Germany and the EU to engage indirectly with the Taliban while avoiding formal recognition.

However, Qatar's mediation has brought both opportunities and challenges. While it gained international credibility, it opened a possibility to be considered biased by some Afghan factions, and the Taliban have begun diversifying their diplomatic channels, notably engaging the UAE, which has increased its influence by securing airport contracts and hosting Taliban leaders.<sup>15</sup> Despite these shifts, Qatar remains central to Afghan diplomacy, although it faces limits in influencing Taliban behavior. Its future role hinges on maintaining its reputation as a neutral and reliable mediator amid growing regional competition.<sup>16</sup>

12 Sansom Milton and Ghassan Elkahoul, "Qatar's Multifaceted Humanitarian Role in Afghanistan since August 2021," *Development Policy Review* 43, no. 1 (January 2025): e12793, <https://doi.org/10.1111/dpr.12793>.

13 Shereena Qazi, "Afghanistan's Taliban, US Sign Agreement Aimed at Ending War," *Al Jazeera*, February 29, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/2/29/afghanistans-taliban-us-sign-agreement-aimed-at-ending-war>.

14 Amin Bagheri, "The Afghan Crisis and Qatar Mediation in the Region," *Middle East Political and Economic Institute (MEPEI)* (blog), September 28, 2021, <https://mepei.com/the-afghan-crisis-and-qatar-mediation-in-the-region/>.

15 Leonardo Jacopo Maria Mazzucco and Kristian P. Alexander, "Saudi Arabia and Qatar Are Cooperating with the Taliban. But Their Approaches to Afghanistan Are Different," *Atlantic Council* (blog), January 12, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/saudi-arabia-and-qatar-are-cooperating-with-the-taliban-but-their-approaches-to-afghanistan-are-different/>.

16 Mazzucco and Alexander.

## 2. HAMAS-ISRAEL CEASEFIRES AND HUMANITARIAN COORDINATION

Since the late 2000s, Qatar has positioned itself as a key mediator in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, particularly regarding Gaza and Hamas.<sup>17</sup> Qatar hosts Hamas's political leadership, including figures like the late Ismail Haniyeh. It has been central to multiple ceasefire negotiations between Hamas and Israel, especially during escalations in 2012, 2014, 2021, and 2023–2024.<sup>18</sup>

Qatar has emerged as a central mediator in the ongoing Gaza conflict, especially in negotiations between Israel and Hamas over hostage releases and humanitarian aid. Drawing on its long history of engaging both state and non-state actors, including previous dialogues with the Taliban and peace efforts in Gaza, Doha leverages its ties with Hamas, backed by over \$1.8 billion in aid, to facilitate talks.

Qatar's mediation is shaped by its strategic positioning between Western allies and

regional actors like Iran and Hamas. This role reflects both a geopolitical necessity and a consistent pro-Palestinian stance.<sup>19</sup> While Qatar does not endorse Hamas's October 7 attack, it balances its position by also blaming the ongoing Israeli occupation.<sup>20</sup>

Of course, just like it was the case with the Taliban office in Doha, the Hamas office was also opened with the "in coordination with the U.S., after a request from Washington to establish indirect lines of communication."<sup>21</sup> While this study joins the small state theories literature in their increased influence in global and regional policies, the U.S. approval and encouragement of such role both in the Taliban and Hamas cases are also important to consider the limitations of small states in their autonomy. While this is evidence of its limitations, Doha's increasing role can be seen in 2024. It was claimed that when Hamas rejected the ceasefire-hostage proposal in November 2024, Qatar "suspended its mediation efforts and agreed to expel Hamas's political leadership from its territory."<sup>22</sup>

17 Sultan Barakat, "Qatari Mediation: Between Ambition and Achievement," Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper (Doha: Brookings Doha Center, 2014).

18 "Israel's Campaign against Qatar over Its Support for Gaza and a Ceasefire," Unit for Political Studies, Situation Assessment (Doha: Doha Institute, February 24, 2025), <https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/PoliticalStudies/Pages/the-israeli-campaign-against-qatar-because-of-its-role-in-supporting-gaza-and-the-ceasefire.aspx>.

19 Anna Mier y Teran, "Handling Israel-Hamas war mediation: The role of Qatar," Global Affairs and Strategic Studies, May 15, 2024, <https://www.unav.edu/web/global-affairs/handling-israel-hamas-war-mediation-the-role-of-qatar>.

20 Teran.

21 Aya Batrawy, "Freeing Hostages, Hosting Hamas: Qatar's Influence in Israel-Gaza War, Explained," *NPR*, November 2, 2023, sec. Middle East crisis — explained, <https://www.npr.org/2023/11/02/1210110109/qatar-israel-gaza-hamas-war>.

22 "Qatar Plays Key Role in Israel-Hamas Ceasefire Deal," *Economist Intelligence Unit* (blog), January 31, 2025, <https://www.eiu.com/n/qatar-plays-key-role-in-israel-hamas-ceasefire-deal/>.





## CONCLUSION



Qatar's transformation from a peripheral Gulf state to a central player in regional and global diplomacy illustrates how a small state can pursue "mega politics" through strategic mediation. Its ability to engage with state and non-state actors, such as the Taliban and Hamas, has allowed Doha to influence regional politics and position itself as a key actor for global powers.

While Doha's mediation diplomacy benefits from U.S. support, it reflects a deliberate and institutionalized foreign policy approach rooted in soft power. However, Qatar's rise is not without constraints. Its actions are shaped by broader global interests, particularly those of the U.S., and it faces growing regional competition, especially from actors like the UAE.

In fact, Qatar's stance directly contributes to the resolution of regional conflicts and thus represents a deliberate step toward both Qa-

tar's own stability and that of regional politics. Consequently, diplomacy conducted through mediation is not merely an instrument of foreign-policy objectives; once its humanitarian dimensions are taken into account, it also generates positive outcomes that extend beyond Qatar's borders.

Qatar's mediation-based diplomacy is in essence both a reflection of its own strategic choice and a means of mustering a form of influence that could not be achieved through conventional military instruments on behalf of Qatar. Accordingly, it is arguable that mediation has become an arena of competition between Qatar and the UAE, as well as Qatar and Oman. Yet, unlike other forms of competition, the principal outcome of this competition is the promotion of regional stability –and, by extension, the advancement of welfare and peace across the region.

Nevertheless, its consistent investment in diplomatic capital, strategic neutrality, and crisis negotiation capacity has made Qatar a key actor in today's world. In an era of geopolitical

challenges, Qatar's model of mediation diplomacy provides a compelling example of how small states can achieve influence through calculated engagement and sustained soft power.





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