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UKRAINE X QATAR

# OPPORTUNITIES BEYOND MEDIATION



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Sergiy Danylov

UKRAINE-QATAR: OPPORTUNITIES BEYOND MEDIATION

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# UKRAINE-QATAR: OPPORTUNITIES BEYOND MEDIATION

*Sergiy Danylov*

## *Summary*

*Starting from the 1990s, Qatar has built its foreign policy on three pillars – exports of LNG to as many countries as possible, the US military base as a guarantee of US protection, and proactive exploitation of soft power with substantial investment in media, education (universities) and sports.*

*Following the initial plans – an ambitious revision of the regional order in the Arab world in the early 2010s that could have led to a profound change in its regional balancing policy and support of relations with all parties – starting from 2013, Doha narrowed down its ambitions, even if it still presents itself as an exclusive and reliable intermediary with no alternative options. It maintains working relations with Iran and its allies in the region, as well as HAMAS, Taliban, and Muslim Brotherhood – something that has triggered repeated conflicts with other Arab countries, such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Among other things, this has helped strengthen relations with Turkey and brought temporary reliance on its military assistance.*

*Qatar is interested in stable allied relations with the US and invests substantial efforts in maintaining them on the occasions where they are undermined. It competes with other countries of the region for Washington's attention and is one of its most earnest partners. Qatar has repeatedly offered the US its services as a reliable negotiator. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Qatar has become a relevant and important partner for the EU and UK in the energy sector.*

*Ukraine and Qatar established diplomatic relations on April 13, 1993. However, Ukraine did not open its embassy in Qatar until November 2012. In November 2013, Qatar opened its embassy in Ukraine.*

*In recent years, there has been an intensifying political dialogue between Qatar and Ukraine. Qatar is a promising partner for Ukraine in energy, diplomacy – on some aspects of the Ukraine-Russia war, and in the context of wider cooperation with the Arab countries. Qatar can become an important gas supplier, given its long-standing interest in the European market. Also, it is more flexible in gas supplies compared to many of its competitors. Doha's mediation in returning Ukrainian children taken illegally to Russia is priceless.*

*Qatar and Ukraine have cooperation prospects in a number of international organizations where their interests match or are complementary – such as the IAEA or International Labor Organisation. Respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, and the opportunity to have independent foreign policy are common for both Ukraine and Qatar. In Ukraine, Qatar is seen as one of the friendliest countries in the Middle East.*

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# PREREQUISITES FOR QATAR'S FOREIGN POLICY

Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani is the dominating figure in Qatar's political landscape. He has been in his post since 2013. He strengthened his position after two serious crises in 2014 and 2017-2021, where neighbouring countries led by Saudi Arabia tried to force Qatar to quit its independent regional policy.

Voices in Saudi Arabia said repeatedly that Qatar is a made-up country.<sup>1</sup> The conflict around border demarcation and small armed incidents on the Qatar-Saudi border in 1992 and 1994 convinced the then-heir and father of the current Emir, Hamad bin Khalifa that Saudi Arabia was a serious threat. Apart from that, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait showed that Saudi Arabia could not be a security guarantor for small countries in the region. This perception of threats drives the Emir's foreign policy, focusing on distancing from Saudi Arabia, which is seen as the greatest direct threat to the Emir's rule and Qatar's independence. This fear was rooted in Saudi Arabia's historical claims against Qatar and at least one failed coup attempt in February 1996. Qatar's declaration of a far-reaching modernisation program and political liberalisation were initially seen as one of the triggers for the coup.<sup>2</sup> In both crises, in 2014 and 2017-2021, when neighbouring countries tried to force Qatar to change its regional policy, Emir Tamim proved that he was fully in control of his government. In addition, the Qataris united around their leadership during the blockade.

The young Emir changed Qatar's foreign policy, walking away from the assertive regional policy conducted by his father and trying to resume the role of an intermediary in regional affairs – a role Qatar had played before 2011. Emir Tamim sought to move Qatar's foreign policy to a more professional and institutionalised version of its largely personalised version. Arabic commentators reported that Qatar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs lacked personnel for many diplomatic events during Qatar's intervention in Libya and Syria from 2011 to 2013. As a result, it often had to engage Islamist foreign intermediaries that were in Qatar in exile.<sup>3</sup> Starting from 2013, efforts to improve foreign policy activities became obvious – especially in Qatar's mediation in the Palestinian territories and Afghanistan.

Since the mid-1990s, Qatar has been applying three strategies to diminish its dependence – primarily from Saudi Arabia:

- expanding gas extraction, focusing on LNG, which made Qatar a global in-demand supplier of gas. Its importance for its markets grows continuously

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<sup>1</sup> Allen J. Fromherz, *Qatar. A Modern History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 33

<sup>2</sup> Royal jigsaw in Qatar," *The Economist*, 29.07.1999, <https://www.economist.com/international/1999/07/29/royal-jigsaw-in-qatar>

<sup>3</sup> Ulrichsen, "Foreign Policy: Discourse, Tools, and Implications" (see note 2), 67. For a particularly critical account, see Elizabeth Dickinson, "The Case against Qatar," *Foreign Policy*, 30.09.2014, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/09/30/the-case-against-qatar/>

- military protection by the US that has its most important airbase in the Middle East in Al Udeid, and
- proactive use of soft power and investment in media, culture, education, tourism and sports in order to strengthen Qatar's authority and become a centre of landmark global events, a reliable negotiator, and a Middle Eastern ally of the US.

## *A Gas Superpower*

Since the 1990s, Qatar's leadership has been focused on making the country the biggest exporter of gas in the world – primarily exporting LNG. Its ambition was to become an integral part of the global gas markets and the global economy. This was important both economically and in terms of getting as many countries as possible interested in working with Qatar.

Qatar has the third largest gas deposits in the world, second only to Russia and Iran<sup>4</sup>. In contrast to them, however, Qatar has access to modern technology and markets since the other two countries are under sanctions. Qatar has North Field, the biggest gas field in the world, located near its coastline in the Persian Gulf. Nearly a third of the field is in Iran's territorial waters. When extraction started in North Field in 1991, Qatar was looking for clients beyond the Persian Gulf region and placed its bets on LNG, which was first exported in 1996. Qatar took a huge risk since gas prices were very low in the 1990s, and LNG exports were expensive. As a result, Qatar had to borrow billions of dollars. The risk played well for Doha when demand for gas began to grow in Asia, driving the prices up.

By 2006, Qatar was the biggest LNG exporter and the second-biggest gas extractor in the world. For many years, Qatar supplied nearly a third of all LNG worldwide as it expanded its infrastructure and implemented technology that made liquefaction and LNG transportation cheaper. It made substantial investments in its own tanker fleet that outgrew the fleets of any of Qatar's competitors and, by 2015, counted over 60 modern vessels.<sup>5</sup>

A moratorium on the North Field extraction from 2005 to 2017 stifled further growth of Qatar's gas industry. It was driven by the need to conduct research for efficient exploitation of the field, reluctance to put too much gas on the market in order to prevent it from overheating, and Iran's irritation with Qatar's much faster and more efficient extraction from the shared field. The latter aspect is illustrative of Qatar's foreign policy behaviour model.

The long-standing restriction of North Field extraction resulted in a loss of part of the market for Qatar and favoured its competitors. Australia expanded LNG exports

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<sup>4</sup> Qatar natural gas production and exports stable as country eyes expansion, The U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2.08.2023, <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=57300>

<sup>5</sup> Nikolay Kozhanov, "Navigating Troubled Waters: Geopolitics of Qatar Natural Gas in the Age of Shale Revolution and COVID Pandemic," in *Contemporary Qatar*, ed. Zweiri and Al Qawasmi, 2021

enough to undermine Qatar's status as the biggest LNG exporter in the world in 2018. Shale gas extraction increased in the US in the 2010s, making briefly the US the biggest LNG exporter in the first half of 2022.

After over a decade, the period of high oil and gas prices ended in 2014. However, Qatar did not decrease production. Quite on the contrary, in 2017, it announced an end to the extraction moratorium. It thus chose to expand its market share over keeping prices high in the short- and mid-term prospects. The need to deal with the consequences of the blockade by engaging a wide range of international partners in its gas industry was another reason for lifting the moratorium. This strategy proved a success.

Despite the blockade launched against Qatar by some Arab states in 2017, companies from the US, China, EU, Russia, and India showed great interest in Qatari projects. By contrast, Qatar ramped up its investment in gas infrastructure in consumer countries. Its gas policy contributed greatly to the failure of the isolation of Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt. Qatar became too important for global gas markets for major energy companies to stop doing business with it.

Another objective of Qatar's energy policy was to minimise the impact of political conflicts on the gas business. Qatari leadership assured its partners repeatedly that all commitments to gas consumers would be met despite logistical or political difficulties.<sup>6</sup> This included gas supplies to the UAE, one of the blocking countries, that has been linked with Qatar through the Dolphin gas pipe since 2007. Doha's priority was to present itself as a reliable energy supplier over taking revenge on Abu Dhabi. This strategy makes Qatar profoundly different from Russia, where the gas business has been primarily seen as a tool of political pressure and blackmail.

2022 made the solidity of Qatar's position all the more evident. Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent sanctions against Russia's energy industry led to a serious, even if brief, spike in gas prices. The role of Qatar as a potential gas supplier spiked, too, since its focus on LNG allowed it to respond flexibly to the market needs. Among other things, Qatar opened the potential for taking over new markets in Europe.<sup>7</sup> In previous years, it increased exports to the UK and Poland. Shrinking supplies of Russian gas in the spring of 2022 allowed Qatar to fill the gap in Germany's market.

Currently, one of the Qatari government's priorities is to determine its stance on the global environmental agenda – including giving an answer to the question of whether it is realistic to become climate-neutral by 2050 and how to transform the energy industry to meet the environmental needs. At the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2022, Qatar's Energy Minister Saad Sherida al-Kaabi warned governments that the policy of green transition has a negative impact on the stability of the extraction fuels

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<sup>6</sup> For example, Qatari Energy Minister Muhammad as-Sada said in September 2017: "During this blockade we have never missed a single shipment of oil or gas to any of our consumer partners." Anthony Di Paola, "Qatar Says It's Fulfilling Oil and Gas Deals Despite Gulf Crisis," *Bloomberg*, 13.09.2017.

<sup>7</sup> Indrajit Sen, "Qatar Looks to Extend a Helping Hand to Europe," *MEED Business Review*, 7, no. 3 (2022)

industry and that this would have a critical impact on many regions, including Europe. He highlighted that economic stability and responsible environmental policies are not mutually exclusive.<sup>8</sup>

## *A US Ally*

For the past 30 years, Qatar has viewed the policy of Saudi Arabia and Iran – both had conflicts with smaller states of the Persian Gulf – as the key challenge for its national security. Therefore, Qatari leadership tried to balance this off by establishing close ties with the US. The placement of the American military at the Al Udeid Air Base in 2003 was the most important step in this policy.

Back in 1992, Qatar and the US signed a bilateral security agreement that regulated the access of the US military to Qatar's military objects and the storage of military equipment in Qatar, and provided for the training of the Qatari military. The US used the Qatari As Sayliyah Army Base to store its military equipment from 1992 to 2021. At times, this was the largest US Army overseas prepositioning base in the world. In the following years, Emir Hamad tried to convince the US government to place more troops in Qatar – at the modern Al Udeid Air Base, among other locations.<sup>9</sup>

When Saudi Arabia asked the US to withdraw troops from its territory before the start of the war in Iraq<sup>10</sup>, Qatar had the alternative infrastructure ready. Nearly 100 fighter jets and the US Central Command's Combined Air Operations Center relocated to Al Udeid, making it the most important US air base in the Middle East. Apart from that, the United States Central Command – it was responsible for the region between Yemen and Afghanistan – established its regional U.S. Central Command's Forward Headquarters in Qatar. The presence of 8,000 to 11,000 American troops became an important security factor for Qatar.

Despite their close ties, Qatar and the US faced a crisis in 2017 as US President Donald Trump initially supported the blockade of Qatar by the UAE and Saudi Arabia. On June 5, 2017, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain broke relations with Qatar and launched the blockade, closing down land, air, and sea borders with their neighbour. They declared an ultimatum, giving Qatar just ten days to fulfil their list of 13 demands. Doha was demanded to close the Al Jazeera broadcaster, break all ties with Islamist organisations, and provide detailed information about its payments to the Arab opposition. Also, it was demanded to shut down the small Turkish air base on its territory and reduce diplomatic relations with Iran. The neighbour-countries demanded

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<sup>8</sup> Doha Forum 2022, one of the world's premier policy gatherings, *Journal Général de l'Europe*, 2022, [https://www.journalgeneraldeurope.org/en/jgde\\_dossier/doha-forum-2022-transformation-pour-une-ere-nouvelle](https://www.journalgeneraldeurope.org/en/jgde_dossier/doha-forum-2022-transformation-pour-une-ere-nouvelle)

<sup>9</sup> Qatar base becomes U.S. military hub, *CNN*, 03.01.2003, <https://edition.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/meast/01/03/sprojects.irq.qatar.us/>

<sup>10</sup> US troops to leave Saudi Arabia, *Middle East Business Intelligence*, 02.05.2003, <https://www.meed.com/us-troops-to-leave-saudi-arabia/>



Qatar coordinates its political and economic cooperation with them and undergoes regular evaluation of how those demands were complied with.<sup>11</sup>

The UAE and Saudi Arabia leaders had managed to establish relations with the new US Administration by then and invested in American media. As a result, such an approach by President Trump threatened the US-Qatar close relations. However, some members of the Trump Administration understood the importance of Qatar<sup>12</sup> for the stationing of American troops there, its role as a reliable gas supplier in the global economy, and the importance of a joint front of the Gulf Arab states against Iran.

In September 2017, Donald Trump heeded the advice of its team members and supported the mediation of the Emir of Kuwait, which did not stop the blockade but managed to avert the greatest threat for Doha. President Trump confirmed a change of course in a telephone conversation with Emir Tamim and during Emir Tamim's visit to the White House in January 2018<sup>13</sup>. Several months before that, Qatar's leadership worked hard on improving their country's relations with the US. Multibillion deals to purchase weapons – including 72 F15 fighter jets worth US \$21bn – were central to these efforts. President Trump viewed them as the best way to reinforce relations.<sup>14</sup> Also, Qatar ordered 24 Rafale aircrafts from France in 2015 and 24 Typhoon Eurofighter jets from the UK in 2017.<sup>15</sup> These contracts were primarily aimed at strengthening relations with Western allies, not improving Qatar's air force capacity.

In 2017, Qatar and the US approved joint initiatives to counter terrorism and funding of terrorism<sup>16</sup> and agreed on further expansion of the Al Udeid Air Base and an upgrade of the air force command centre that Qatar largely funded. Apart from that, Qatar offered the US Fifth Fleet to use the new Hamad Port, which was officially opened in September 2017. This fueled competition for American military presence with Bahrain where the US Navy has its headquarters for the region of the Gulf.

Russia's war on Ukraine and its impact on energy supplies strengthened Qatar's stance on the gas market substantially and had a respective effect on US-Qatar relations. In January 2022, President Biden invited Emir Tamim to the White House and announced that the US government classified Qatar as a "major non-NATO ally."<sup>17</sup> This does not stand for America's commitment to defend Qatar. However, this points to

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<sup>11</sup> Arab states issue 13 demands to end Qatar-Gulf crisis, *AlJazeera*, 12.07.2017,

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/7/12/arab-states-issue-13-demands-to-end-qatar-gulf-crisis>

<sup>12</sup> US officials scramble to limit Donald Trump's diplomatic damage over Qatar tweets, *the Guardian*, 7.06.2017,

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jun/06/donald-trump-qatar-tweets-us-diplomatic-damage>

<sup>13</sup> Peter Baker, "Trump Now Sees Qatar as an Ally against Terrorism," *The New York Times*,

10.04.2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/10/world/middleeast/trump-qatar-terrorism.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Orders accelerate the Qatar fighter evolution, *Times Aerospace*,

<https://www.timesaerospace.aero/features/defence/orders-accelerate-the-qatar-fighter-evolution>

<sup>15</sup> Zachary Keck, "Why Is Qatar Building a Massive Air Force?" *The National Interest*, 29.09.2017,

<https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/why-qatar-building-massive-air-force-22541>.

<sup>16</sup> Carol Morello and Kareem Fahim, Qatar agrees to combat terrorism financing under deal with U.S.,

*Washington Post*, 11.07.2017,

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/qatar-agrees-to-curb-terrorism-financing-under-deal-with-us/2017/07/11/1a86e3b0-a041-4300-ab03-c840d8a19bcf\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/qatar-agrees-to-curb-terrorism-financing-under-deal-with-us/2017/07/11/1a86e3b0-a041-4300-ab03-c840d8a19bcf_story.html)

<sup>17</sup> The White House, "Remarks by President Biden and His Highness Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani, Amir of the State of Qatar before Bilateral Meeting," 31.01.2022, [https://bit.ly/3SIKcXx\\_RemarksBiden](https://bit.ly/3SIKcXx_RemarksBiden).

especially close relations with the US. Until 2022, only Kuwait and Bahrain had this status in the Gulf region, as well as Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco had it in other parts of the Middle East. This gave Qatar access to military technology, weapons systems, and training conducted by the US military and strengthened its agency.

For the US, Qatar has become the most reliable and important ally in the Gulf region at a time when its neighbours have been expanding their contacts with Russia and China.

## *Qatar's Soft Power*

The focus on using soft power is the third important element of Qatar's foreign policy strategy. Qatar seeks to elevate its authority and status by investing in media, culture, and education, promoting tourism, and hosting major sports events. It works to make Doha a media, cultural, and sports capital of the region and the world.

Founded in 1996, Al Jazeera broadcaster revolutionised the Arab media landscape and grew into the most popular news TV channel in the Arab world. It had between 35 and 40 million viewers worldwide in the 2000s.<sup>18</sup> It lost some of its clouts through its support of the Muslim Brotherhood movement in Egypt in 2011 during the Arab Spring. It also had problems in 2017 as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain demanded Qatar to close Al Jazeera. Still, it remains the most popular news broadcaster in the Arab world and has a strong impact on the countries of Africa, among others, through its English-language version.

As its oil and gas export revenue grew, Qatar began to expand its soft power strategy to education, science, and culture. Investments in these sectors come through the Qatar Foundation,<sup>19</sup> founded in 1995. The Qatar Foundation set up branches of American, British, and French universities and think tanks at its Education City complex. Also, it created 88 cultural institutions, including the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha in 2008, the Qatar Philharmonic Orchestra, the Opera House, etc. These moves were aimed at turning Qatar into a tourism hub.

In addition, Qatar invested in sports and major sports events in Doha that drew a lot of attention. In 2006, Qatar hosted the Asian Games. In 2010, FIFA announced that the 2022 World Cup would take place in Qatar. This was a landmark decision for Qatar as the first Middle Eastern host of the biggest sports event in the world. Qatar invested in necessary infrastructure – including stadiums, hotels, and transport, driving an unprecedented construction boom – and intensified efforts to make Doha an international sports capital. As a result, Qatar hosted major handball, athletics, football, swimming, and other competitions in the next decade.

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<sup>18</sup> Aljazeera to retain reporting style, *AlJazeera*, 16.06.2005, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2005/6/16/aljazeera-to-retain-reporting-style>

<sup>19</sup> Qatar Foundation, <https://www.qf.org.qa/>

## *A Mediator in Regional Conflicts*

When Emir Hamad came to power in 1995, Qatar sought to become a regional mediator. In the early 2000s, Qatar began a rapprochement with Iran, the top regional rival of Saudi Arabia, for the need to coordinate joint use of the gas field, among other reasons. When, in 2005, relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia and their allies deteriorated substantially, Qatar started acting as a mediator between the two camps.<sup>20</sup> It thus sought to show – to the US and the West, among others – that it could contribute to solving problems in the Middle East and beyond. From 2005, Doha was the key mediator in conflicts between the Palestine Liberation Organisation and HAMAS, rebels and the Darfur government in Sudan, the Houthis and the government in Yemen, in Lebanon, etc.<sup>21</sup> Qatar's mediation in Lebanon in 2008 was long considered the greatest success. Thanks to the agreement reached in Doha, a government of national unity was formed in Beirut that prevented further escalation.<sup>22</sup>

Conflicts between HAMAS and its opponents in Israel/Palestine, as well as between the Taliban and the US, and the US and Iran were certainly the most significant ones. Emir Hamad met with Israeli politicians repeatedly, which was sometimes criticised harshly in the Arab world. At the same time, Qatar expanded its relations with the Palestinian Authority, represented by the Palestinian Liberation Organisation/Fatah, which Qatar has supported financially since the 1990s.<sup>23</sup> Contacts with HAMAS, which had its offices in Doha, were all the more important.

After 2013, Qatar worked closely with Israel to ensure humanitarian assistance for Gaza. In August 2020, Qatar and its payments to HAMAS played an important role in the ceasefire between HAMAS and Israel.<sup>24</sup> Israel saw Qatar as an actor that influences HAMAS, alleviates economic problems in Gaza with its financial aid, and does not have an anti-Israel agenda. In April 2022, Qatar once again demonstrated its role as a mediator in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict when the Temple Mount unrest broke out in Jerusalem.

HAMAS' attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, was an extraordinary challenge for Qatar. Qatar's assistance for Gaza and trustful political contacts with HAMAS leadership were seen as reliable prevention for such attacks. Its immediate attempt at mediation in a prisoner exchange on October 7 was an important element in resuming

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<sup>20</sup> Robert F. Worth, Qatar, Playing All Sides, Is a Nonstop Mediator, *the New York Times*, 9.07.2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/09/world/middleeast/09qatar.html>

<sup>21</sup> Mehran Kamrava, Mediation and Qatari Foreign Policy, *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 65, No. 4 (Autumn 2011), pp. 539-556

<sup>22</sup> Qatari deal defuses Lebanese crisis, *ReliefWeb*, 22.05.2008, <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/qatari-deal-defuses-lebanese-crisis>

<sup>23</sup> Qatar's Foreign Policy. Decision-making processes, baselines, and strategies. *SWP-Studie* 12/2022, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2023RP04/>

<sup>24</sup> David M. Halbfinger and Adam Rasgon, "Israel and Hamas Agree to Cool Hostilities, for Now," *The New York Times*, 31.08.2020 (updated 24.09.2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/31/world/middleeast/hamas-gaza-israel-corona-virus.html>.

contacts with Israeli representatives.<sup>25</sup> Qatar's ambassadors to the US and the UK met with the families of the hostages and reaffirmed Qatar's commitment to doing everything possible to have them released.

The relatively small Gulf country played a huge role in seeking a diplomatic way out of the crisis with hostages in Gaza, allowing the flow of necessary humanitarian aid into the enclave while avoiding a wider regional conflict.<sup>26</sup> However, Qatar failed to develop success and free all hostages or halt the land operation.

Qatar's role as a mediator between the US and the Taliban evolved similarly. Its first contacts with the Afghan Islamists dated back to the late 1990s. Qatar's relations with the Taliban became important in the early 2010s when those contacts resulted in the opening of the Taliban's office for relations with foreign actors in 2013 in Doha – including negotiations with the US.<sup>27</sup> In 2014, talks between the US and the Taliban in Doha led to a prisoner exchange.

Qatar later played an important role in the talks on the withdrawal of the US troops from Afghanistan.<sup>28</sup> The US Embassy was relocated from Kabul to Doha, while since 2022, Qatar has represented the US interests in Kabul. Just like in other cases, however, Qatar has limited influence on the Islamist side. Doha has consistently called on the Taliban to be more moderate, allow education for girls, and make a government that would be as inclusive as possible. Nevertheless, these calls did not lead to policy adjustment by Afghanistan's de facto government.<sup>29</sup>

Doha's role in the preparation of the agreement on the termination of the US military mission in Afghanistan and facilitation in the withdrawal of NATO troops and citizens in 2021 helped clear most memories about Qatar's activities during the Arab Spring in 2011-2013. The Afghan case helped Doha ultimately turn the page of the Arab Spring.

Qatar became an important channel between Washington and Teheran. The Biden Administration held consultations with the Iranians on the nuclear program,<sup>30</sup> American prisoners,<sup>31</sup> and regional issues and tried to stop the exports of Iranian weapons to Russia through this channel. These contacts were moderately successful but highlighted Qatar's importance to the US interests.

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<sup>25</sup> Gianluca Pacchiani, Qatar said trying to negotiate female prisoner swap; UAE, Egypt meet on crisis, *The Times of Israel*, 9.10.2023,

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/qatar-said-trying-to-negotiate-female-prisoner-swap-uae-egypt-meet-on-crisis/>

<sup>26</sup> Qatar mediates humanitarian aid deal between Israel and Hamas, *Financial Times*, 16.01.2024,

<https://www.ft.com/content/00d6afb2-e6e2-4e13-9b9e-63dfa064b15e>

<sup>27</sup> Dania Akkad, How Qatar became the US-Taliban mediator - and what happens next, *Middle East Eye*,

13.09.2021, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/qatar-us-taliban-how-became-mediator-talks>

<sup>28</sup> Steve Hendrix, Liz Sly and Kareem Fahim, Taliban takeover propels tiny Qatar into outside role in Afghanistan, *The Washington Post*, 31.08.2021,

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/taliban-qatar-mediator-afghanistan/2021/08/31/6a787b2c-0992-11ec-a7c8-61bb7b3bf628\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/taliban-qatar-mediator-afghanistan/2021/08/31/6a787b2c-0992-11ec-a7c8-61bb7b3bf628_story.html)

<sup>29</sup> Magnus Storvik, Foreign Policy and Contemporary Relations between the Taliban and China, Qatar & Saudi Arabia, The Asia Scotland Institute, 28.11.2023,

<https://asiascot.com/op-eds/foreign-policy-and-contemporary-relations-between-the-taliban-and-china-qatar-saudi-arabia>

<sup>30</sup> Andrew England and Najmeh Bozorgmehr, Qatar mediates between Iran and US in nuclear talks, *Financial Times*, 8.03.2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/1d93fef9-06f4-459f-9266-5d3b9272a495>

<sup>31</sup> Five Americans freed in Iran-US prisoner swap deal brokered by Qatar, *France 24*, 18.09.2023,

<https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20230918-iran-usa-prisoner-swap-americans-qatar>

Qatar sees the nuclear race in the Middle East as a serious risk to regional security. Iran's nuclear program, if completed successfully, can push Saudi Arabia to make an effort to join the nuclear club. This would increase the pressure of bigger countries in the region and fuel uncertainty and tension. Therefore, as a partner of the IAEA, Qatar stressed "the importance of strengthening efforts to make the Middle East region free of WMD as it is an essential step for consolidating the non-proliferation system and achieving the goal of the complete elimination of nuclear weapons and their facilities, stressing that the goal of establishing a region in the Middle East free of nuclear weapons is a common goal for the peoples of the region and for the entire international community"<sup>32</sup>.

The need to monitor and understand processes in this sphere pushed Qatar to engage in the work of the IAEA proactively. Qatar was elected to the Board of Governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency for the third time. Doha signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty and adopted all international resolutions that call for a Middle East free of nuclear weapons. In July 2023, IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi expressed gratitude to Ambassador Mansouri for Qatar's financial contribution to the support of IAEA's various projects.<sup>33</sup> In exchange, the IAEA provided cooperation and expertise to help Qatar develop its own programs, and R&D. Given Qatar's proactive engagement in the work of the IAEA, Kyiv and Doha can invest efforts jointly to solve the issue of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, among other things.

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<sup>32</sup> Qatar Reiterates Full Support for Establishing Middle East WMD-Free Zone, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Qatar, 15.11.2023, <https://mofa.gov.qa/en/all-mofa-news/details/1445/05/01/qatar-reiterates-full-support-for-establishing-middle-east-wmd-free-zone>

<sup>33</sup> IAEA Director General Lauds Qatar's Support, Cooperation with Agency, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Qatar, 19.07.2023, <https://www.mofa.gov.qa/en/all-mofa-news/details/1445/01/01/iaea-director-general-lauds-qatar-s-support-cooperation-with-agency>

# UKRAINE AND QATAR

## *Political Cooperation between Ukraine and Qatar*

Ukraine and Qatar established diplomatic relations on April 13, 1993. Their relations did not see any dynamics for nearly ten years as, in the 1990s, Ukraine's diplomatic activity was limited beyond traditional areas of interaction with partners and neighbours, and it did not have enough diplomatic missions in many regions. Qatar was accumulating resources during that period, while the grand projects that would eventually catch the attention of the world were just initiated or existed as ideas. The first visit of a Ukrainian foreign minister to Qatar took place in 2002 when the Middle East was in the spotlight of the world after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. For Ukraine, it was important to understand regional dynamics and possible risks.

The second stage in Ukraine-Qatar relations started in 2009 when Kyiv hosted the first round of political consultations between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of the two countries.<sup>34</sup> On the one hand, Kyiv started looking for alternatives to Russian gas after two gas crises provoked by Russia – at least on the level of ideas. On the other hand, the period of high gas prices created conditions in which Doha started looking at new markets. Ukraine was the key transit country for Russian gas to European markets and an important actor that could influence the price of contracts or the dynamics of market shares for different suppliers.

A breakthrough in bilateral relations took place in the 2010s. On October 19-20, 2011, Qatari Emir Hamad Al Thani visited Ukraine. In May 2012, Ukraine's Prime Minister arrived in Doha for an official visit. Eventually, in November 2012, Ukraine's President visited Qatar for the first time in bilateral relations. A number of factors contributed to this sudden intensification of bilateral contacts. The dramatic Arab Spring was unfolding in the Middle East, and Qatar was proactively engaged in it. Emir Hamad's ambitious plan called for consultations with many actors – especially the ones who knew and understood Russia well as an actor in the opposing camp. It is safe to assume that the talks focused on more than bilateral relations – covering the exports of Ukrainian grain to Egypt, where forces close to Qatar came to power at that moment. Apart from that, Qatar's ambitious construction plans required metal, which could be supplied by the companies close to the then-President of Ukraine. Gas affairs were supposed to be on the table as Ukraine had an extremely unfavourable contract with Russia at that moment. Ukraine's government was interested in Qatar's investment opportunities for different industries. This was when Ukraine started more intense Black Sea exploration, installing sea gas platforms there, and Ukrainian officials were

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<sup>34</sup> Політичні відносини між Україною та Державою Катар, Embassy of Ukraine in Qatar, <https://qatar.mfa.gov.ua/spivrobitnictvo/politichni-vidnosini-mizh-ukrayinoyu-ta-derzhavoyu-katar>

interested in Qatar's experience. Finally, both countries opened their embassies during the top-level visits.

The next period was marked by attempts to resume contacts after a pause of several years and a change of government in Ukraine. A new emir came to power in Qatar at the time. President Poroshenko met with him on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in the fall of 2016.<sup>35</sup> In March 2018, the President of Ukraine paid an official visit to Qatar as part of his regional tour.<sup>36</sup> Ukraine had some issues with organising negotiations in some countries of the region during that tour, but it did not face similar problems in Qatar.

The last two years have seen intense contacts and communication between the leaders of Ukraine and Qatar. President Zelenskyy spoke with Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani on the telephone several times. On April 4-5, 2021, Ukraine's President Zelenskyy went to Qatar on an official visit.<sup>37</sup> In that period, Ukraine was actively seeking investors for various projects. On its part, Qatar was investing in logistics, infrastructure, and other projects worldwide, seeking to increase its strategic presence. Following these contacts, Qatari investors entered the Ukrainian Olvia port.<sup>38</sup> Similar to other Gulf countries, Qatar was looking closely at the Saudi experience of investing in Ukrainian agriculture. Plans to engage Ukrainian police officers in the protection of public order for the World Cup were an unexpected idea.<sup>39</sup> The intensity of economic contacts helped expand cooperation in culture and arts.

The contacts between President Zelenskyy and Emir Tamim in 2020 and 2021 played a very important role after Russia launched its full-scale invasion in 2022. They laid the foundation for fruitful cooperation and contributed arguments to Qatar's stance on respect for the territorial integrity and independence of Ukraine, which was made public in the first days after the aggression.<sup>40</sup>

## *Qatar's Approach to the Russia-Ukraine War*

A number of factors condition Qatar's stance on the Russian aggression against Ukraine. These include its own experience of regional identity and the need to take into account the stance of the partners that guarantee the country's security, foreign

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<sup>35</sup> Ukraine's Diplomatic Achievements at the UN General Assembly in 2016, Borisfen, 24.09.2016, [https://bintel.org.ua/en/nash\\_archiv/axiv-regioni/axiv-ukra%D1%97na/diplomatichni-zvitjagi-ukra%D1%97ni-nagenasamble-oon-2016/](https://bintel.org.ua/en/nash_archiv/axiv-regioni/axiv-ukra%D1%97na/diplomatichni-zvitjagi-ukra%D1%97ni-nagenasamble-oon-2016/)

<sup>36</sup> President of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko paid official visit to the State of Qatar, Embassy of Ukraine in Qatar, 23.03.2018, <https://qatar.mfa.gov.ua/en/news/63814-prezident-ukrajini-poporoshenko-zdijsniv-oficijnij-vizit-do-derzhavi-katar>

<sup>37</sup> During an official visit of Volodymyr Zelenskyy to the State of Qatar, a number of documents were signed, Office of the President of Ukraine, 5.04.2021, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/u-mezhah-oficijnogo-vizitu-volodimira-zelenskogo-do-derzhavi-67797>

<sup>38</sup> Ukraine and Qatar signed the agreement regarding the concession of the Ukrainian port of Olvia, Embassy of Ukraine in Qatar, 20.08.2020, <https://qatar.mfa.gov.ua/en/news/ukraine-and-qatar-signed-agreement-regarding-concession-ukrainian-port-olvia>

<sup>39</sup> Zelensky: Ukrainian police to help maintain order at FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, Interfax Ukraine, 5.04.2021, <https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/735401.html>

<sup>40</sup> Russia-Ukraine war: Qatar supports Ukraine's territorial integrity, Middle East Eye, 28.02.2022, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/russia-ukraine-war-qatar-supports-territorial-integrity>

policy priorities, economic interests, the vision of its mission as a mediator, and the views that prevail in the regional international organisations Qatar is part of.

On the Russia-Ukraine war, Qatar was more responsive to the stance of the United States<sup>41</sup> compared to the UAE, which took a softer stance on Russia. Shortly after Vladimir Putin announced the “special military operation” against Ukraine, Qatar as well as Kuwait were seen as the two Gulf Cooperation Council countries that supported Kyiv the most, at least rhetorically. Four days after Russia invaded Ukraine, Qatar’s Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani highlighted Qatar’s “respect for Ukraine’s sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders.”<sup>42</sup> Qatar and Kuwait are currently the only Gulf monarchies that vote for the condemnation of human rights violations in Crimea and support Ukraine on the issue of reparations. The other four GCC countries abstain.

Qatar’s stance is driven not so much or solely by its aspiration to act in unison with the US. Instead, it resonates with Qatar’s experience of various forms of aggression from bigger neighbours. According to Dr Ali Bakir, a Research Assistant and Professor at Ibn Khaldun Center for Humanities and Social Sciences, “Why Qatar stood with Ukraine should not be a mystery. Qatar and Kuwait, apart from being US partners, see themselves as closer to Ukraine due to their historical experiences. As small states sandwiched between much bigger and more powerful countries, both suffered from the aggressive policies of their neighbouring countries. Kuwait suffered an Iraqi invasion in 1990, and Qatar underwent a Saudi-led blockade in 2017.”<sup>43</sup> Doha’s response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine was thus linked to Qatar’s perception that the norms of international law that define the use of force (or blockade as a form of aggression) and annexation of the territory of smaller neighbours as illegal should be complied with. This stance of Qatar resonates with President Zelenskyy’s address at the Doha Forum in the first month of the war: “So that someone 28 times bigger does not think he can do anything he wants. And that the nuclear status of the state does not serve as a permit for any injustice against other states.”<sup>44</sup>

When he spoke at the World Economic Forum in Davos in May 2022, Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani said that solving disputes with aggression was on the rise and that he kept contacts with all parties to the Ukraine crisis: “We are ready to contribute to every international and regional effort to find an immediate peaceful solution to the conflict in Ukraine. We should never give up trying to bring parties together. As long as we believe our efforts could save even a single life, our attempts

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<sup>41</sup> Giorgio Cafiero, How do the approaches of Qatar and the UAE differ on Ukraine? *Doha News*, 25.03.2022, <https://dohanews.co/how-do-the-approaches-of-qatar-and-the-uae-differ-on-ukraine/>

<sup>42</sup> Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Affirms Qatar’s Support for UNHRC in Facing Global Challenges, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 28.02.2022, <https://www.mofa.gov.qa/en/all-mofa-news/details/1443/07/27/deputy-prime-minister-and-minister-of-foreign-affairs-affirms-qatar%27s-support-for-unhrc-in-facing-global-challenges>

<sup>43</sup> Giorgio Cafiero, How do the approaches of Qatar and the UAE differ on Ukraine? *Doha News*, 25.03.2022 <https://dohanews.co/how-do-the-approaches-of-qatar-and-the-uae-differ-on-ukraine/>

<sup>44</sup> President Zelenskyy at Doha Forum, Office of the President of Ukraine, 26.03.2022, <https://www.president.gov.ua/news/volodimir-zelenskij-na-doha-forum-2022-vidmova-krayin-yevrop-73849>



to mediate will be worth it.”<sup>45</sup> The Emir expressed sympathy with millions of people forced to leave their homes as a result of the conflict, regardless of their race or religion. “We consider the value of each European life to be just as precious as someone from our region. We stand in solidarity with the millions of innocent refugees who are victims of this European war and the victims of all other wars taking place right now.”

As a country that conducted revolutionary foreign policy amid the Arab Spring protests in 2011-2013, Qatar has been in the opposing camp to Russia in most major crises in the Middle East in the past 11 years. Seeing them on the opposing sides of the Ukraine crisis is not something unexpected. However, even in this situation, Qatar measures its moves in order to retain room for its customary role of a mediator in the future. The visit of Qatar’s Foreign Minister to Russia in early March 2022, despite the fact that Doha opposes the violation of Ukraine’s sovereign rights by Russia, points to its capacity to engage all conflicting parties.<sup>46</sup> In the summer of 2023, Qatar embarked on its intermediary mission in the return of Ukrainian children kidnapped by Russia, one of the most challenging aspects.

Other GCC members that once supported Western states proved more interested in partnership with Russia. Therefore, they took a less clear stance. All GCC countries called for a diplomatic solution to the crisis, which partly underlines their shared desire to avoid being drawn into the conflict. However, there has been no unified response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine from the GCC. Members of this subregional institution have somewhat diverging positions — especially Qatar and the United Arab Emirates – which highlights more fundamental differences in foreign and security policies of Doha and Abu Dhabi. Doha has opted for long-term objectives, while Abu Dhabi leans towards quick profit.

Alongside geopolitical and ideological factors, energy interests largely drive Qatar’s perspective of the conflict in Ukraine. As a producer of gas, Qatar has an unprecedented opportunity to strengthen its position on the European market. Russia has single-handedly given away 40% of the most profitable market to its competitors, and Qatar is one of its key competitors to benefit from this. It is safe to assume that Qatar can invest part of its revenue from the new market in support of Ukraine.

In turn, President Zelenskyy has called on energy-supplying states – including Qatar – to increase energy production in order to strip Russia of the opportunities for energy blackmail, thus contributing to stabilisation in Europe.<sup>47</sup>

Despite the tension between Doha and Moscow, the two countries have had pragmatic cooperation – including in sports, tourism, infrastructure, and investment.

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<sup>45</sup> Zaynab Khojji, Emir says Qatar is ready to contribute to every effort to mediate between Russia and Ukraine, *Arab News*, 23.05.2022, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2087926/middle-east>

<sup>46</sup> Qatari foreign minister to visit Moscow on Sunday, says source, Reuters, 13.03.2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/qatari-foreign-minister-visit-moscow-sunday-says-source-2022-03-13/>

<sup>47</sup> President Zelenskyy at Doha Forum, Office of the President of Ukraine, 26.03.2022, <https://www.president.gov.ua/news/volodimir-zelenskij-na-doha-forum-2022-vidmova-krayin-yevrop-73849>

Also, Qatar Investment Authority's substantial investment in the Russian oil giant Rosneft had an impact on Doha's attitude – in particular, its sanctions policy against Russia. In this context, Doha has taken a cautious stance in order to avoid a serious deterioration of relations with Russia. Doha showed its principle on the protection of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine, and this stance can help Qatar demonstrate to the US foreign policy establishment that its recent qualification as a major non-NATO ally was well deserved. However, Qatar refrains from supporting the West's sanctions policy against Russia. While the value of QIA's investment in Russia has declined as a result of sanctions, the ban on flights, and the devaluation of the Russian ruble, Qatar's Sovereign Wealth Fund has not withdrawn its investment from the Russian economy so far. Analysts point to the dilemmas the Gulf countries faced with the war. According to the Gulf analyst Alexander Jalil, "Withdrawing from Russia...would mean selling at a significant loss."<sup>48</sup> The expert points to the dilemmas the Gulf countries have to overcome: "Divesting from Russia would also be seen by the Russians as Qatar siding with Western sanctions. Many Gulf countries are in a difficult position when it comes to their strategic interests shared with both the US and Russia, as well as their traditional foreign policy of hedging and balancing between regional and global powers."<sup>49</sup>

Similar to other Gulf countries, Qatar is interested in not triggering too much hostility with the West or Russia, which matches its foreign policy objectives of contributing to positive relations with virtually all key actors in the international arena. Doha views Russia's war against Ukraine as an opportunity to support diplomatic initiatives aimed at positive changes.

The visit of Qatar's Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, to Ukraine on July 28, 2023, marked a new stage in Qatar's engagement in Ukraine's affairs.<sup>50</sup> The foundation for this visit was laid in March 2023 when Ukraine's Special Representative for the Middle East and Africa, Maksym Subkh, visited Qatar and called for greater humanitarian assistance for Ukraine and participation in the postwar reconstruction.<sup>51</sup> During its July visit, the Qatari side supported a number of Ukraine's foreign policy initiatives, including the Peace Formula and the Grain Deal, and announced the allocation of US \$100mn for humanitarian programs. This visit served as an impulse for Qatar's mission, facilitating the return of Ukrainian children kidnapped by Russia. Representatives of Ukraine and Qatar now have consistent communication. On January 8, 2024, President Zelenskyy had a telephone conversation with Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim, where he thanked Emir Tamim

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<sup>48</sup> Giorgio Cafiero, Russian-Ukrainian conflict: What does it mean to Qatar? *TRT World*, 2022, <https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/russian-ukrainian-conflict-what-does-it-mean-to-qatar-55415>

<sup>49</sup> Giorgio Cafiero, Russian-Ukrainian conflict: What does it mean to Qatar? *TRT World*, 2022, <https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/russian-ukrainian-conflict-what-does-it-mean-to-qatar-55415>

<sup>50</sup> Qatari prime minister visits Ukraine, meets with President Zelensky, Arab News, 28.07.2023, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2345791/middle-east>

<sup>51</sup> George Erman, How sheikhs are helping Ukraine. What the Game of Thrones, Iran and the oil noose for Russia have to do with it, *BBC*, 19.03.2023, <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/articles/cw0ey9r2349o>

for the contribution of US \$20mn to the Grain from Ukraine initiative and discussed other relevant issues, according to official reports.<sup>52</sup>

In his interview for the BBC, Ukraine's Ambassador to Qatar, Andriy Kuzmenko, noted that the Qatari leadership avoided terms such as war and aggression in its public communication initially and used the crisis in Ukraine or conflict between Ukraine and Russia instead: "Qatar's top leadership began to change its moderate stance in May 2022, leaning towards condemnation of the Russian aggression against Ukraine."<sup>53</sup> According to Kuzmenko, Qatar is currently investing great efforts in mobilising the voices of other countries in the region in favour of Ukraine.

Owned by the ruling Al Thani dynasty, Al Jazeera invests efforts in covering Russia's war against Ukraine and features Ukrainian speakers in contrast to the domination of pro-Russian narratives in many Arab media.<sup>54</sup>

## *Economic Relations*

Trade between Qatar and Ukraine shrank substantially as a result of the war. Qatar's exports to Ukraine are worth nearly US \$19.55mn, and Ukraine's exports to Qatar are worth US \$11.43mn. This is a serious decline compared to the prewar years.

The Qatar-Ukraine partnership was boosted substantially in 2020. Official data points to this, showing bilateral trade at almost US \$150mn, which was more than double of the 2018 rate. According to Ukraine's State Statistics Bureau, total trade in goods and services between Ukraine and Qatar was at its peak at US \$179mn in 2021. Ukraine exported US \$148mn worth of items to Qatar and imported US \$18.6mn worth of items from it.<sup>55</sup> Ukraine's main export items included ferrous metals, grains, fats and oils, food waste disposal, milk and dairy products, eggs, and ferrous metal products. Qatar exported plastics and polymers, organic chemical compounds, and textile materials to Ukraine.<sup>56</sup>

Bilateral trade in services between Ukraine and Qatar is fairly low. It grew insignificantly in 2021 to US \$12.2mn, mostly through upgraded transport services.

The Agreement on the concession of the Ukrainian Olvia port between Ukraine's Ministry of Infrastructure, Ukrainian Sea Ports Authority, and QTerminals, a Qatari company, signed on August 20, 2020, is the biggest accomplishment in Ukraine-Qatar investment cooperation to date.<sup>57</sup> QTerminals planned to invest US \$3.4bn in the

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<sup>52</sup> Qatar contributes US \$20mn in Grain From Ukraine, *Babel*, 8.01.2024,

<https://babel.ua/news/102625-katar-vnis-20-milyoniv-u-programu-zerno-z-ukrajini>

<sup>53</sup> George Erman, How sheikhs are helping Ukraine. What the Game of Thrones, Iran and the oil noose for Russia have to do with it, *BBC*, 19.03.2023, <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/articles/cw0ey9r2349o>

<sup>54</sup> George Erman, How sheikhs are helping Ukraine. What the Game of Thrones, Iran and the oil noose for Russia have to do with it, *BBC*, 19.03.2023, <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/articles/cw0ey9r2349o>

<sup>55</sup> Trade and economic cooperation, Embassy of Ukraine in Qatar, <https://qatar.mfa.gov.ua/en/partnership/trade-and-economic-cooperation>

<sup>56</sup> Qatar, Ukraine ties have potential to expand further, *The Peninsula*, 23.10.2023,

<https://thepeninsulagatar.com/article/23/10/2023/qatar-ukraine-ties-have-potential-to-expand-further>

<sup>57</sup> Ukraine and Qatar signed the agreement regarding the concession of the Ukrainian port of Olvia, Embassy of Ukraine in Qatar, 20.08.2020,

<https://qatar.mfa.gov.ua/en/news/ukraine-and-qatar-signed-agreement-regarding-concession-ukrainian-port-olvia>

development of the Ukrainian port and its infrastructure within the following five years. The purchase of solar power assets in some oblasts of Ukraine by Nebras Power was another investment deal.<sup>58</sup> Future investment in Ukraine's development can rely on these precedents.

Energy, agriculture, road infrastructure, IT, and others offer good potential for deeper bilateral cooperation in the future.<sup>59</sup>

## *Qatar's Role in Returning Ukrainian Children*

Qatar's most important mediation mission for Ukraine began in the fall of 2023 when Doha joined the effort to solve the extremely complicated problem of returning kidnapped Ukrainian children from Russian territory. A few months after the visit of Qatar's Prime Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani to Kyiv in July 2023, the first group of children returned to Ukraine from Russia with Qatar's mediation.<sup>60</sup> Following his July visit, Sheikh Al Thani told the Qatari media that "Returning Ukrainian children is our contribution to international security"<sup>61</sup> and that Qatar asked Ukraine how it could help in this difficult situation and received a request about children. According to Prime Minister Sheikh Al Thani, Qatar used its channels of communication and relations it has with Russia in order to protect children, and these efforts will continue. After each successful operation of returning children, Qatar publishes an official statement thanking both Russia and Ukraine "for cooperation and goodwill throughout the reunification process."<sup>62</sup> The children are usually handed over in neutral territory and taken through Moscow. Qatar ensures the security of children and the caretakers who come to pick them up on the territory of Russia. It provides its airplanes to fly them from Moscow to Minsk, accompanying them to Belarus where they are handed over to the representatives of the Red Cross.

In August 2023, Ukrainian Ombudsman Dmytro Lubinets visited Qatar. According to the official statement following the visit, the parties "worked on ways of future cooperation and discussed the protection of rights of Ukrainian children."<sup>63</sup> According to media reports, the talks are taking place on the top level. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Head of the Office of the President Andriy Yermak represent Ukraine.

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<sup>58</sup> Nebras Power And UDP Renewables Announce A Strategic Partnership, UFuture, 7.04.2022, <https://ufuture.com/en/nebras-power-and-udp-renewables-announce-a-strategic-partnership/>

<sup>59</sup> Trade and economic cooperation, Embassy of Ukraine in Qatar, <https://qatar.mfa.gov.ua/en/partnership/trade-and-economic-cooperation>

<sup>60</sup> Ombudsman: Qatar helped return 4 Ukrainian children from Russia, *Suspilne*, 16.10.2023, <https://suspilne.media/595037-za-sprianna-mzs-kataru-do-ukraini-z-rosii-povernut-cotiroh-ditej/>

<sup>61</sup> How Qatar returns Ukrainian children captured by Russia, *BBC*, 3.02.2024, <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/articles/c1751nrnqlo>

<sup>62</sup> A post from the official Facebook account of the Qatari Embassy to Ukraine, 21.02.2024, <https://www.facebook.com/kyiv.embassy.qa/posts/pfbid036rVWXSxKqqd7YhGCjntvB79riBrH7QwTSD2wX3vPjYUqcW3sM4cNSfyKvBqCG9Lb1>

<sup>63</sup> Ombudsman Dmytro Lubinets discussed the protection of rights of Ukrainian children in Qatar. Ombudsman, 08.08.2023, [https://www.ombudsman.gov.ua/news\\_details/ombudsman-dmitro-lubinec-obgovoriv-u-katari-zahist-prav-ukrayin-skih-ditej](https://www.ombudsman.gov.ua/news_details/ombudsman-dmitro-lubinec-obgovoriv-u-katari-zahist-prav-ukrayin-skih-ditej)

At the same time, Ukraine does not rule out Qatar's engagement in returning civilian hostages and prisoners of war.

Qatar's intermediary role is based on its aspiration of being helpful through mutual dependence, which makes it an irreplaceable partner that brings together state and non-state actors, big and small states, unlikely partners, and ideological adversaries. Its self-presentation as a geopolitical hub for mediation and dialogue is an important component of Qatar's network-centric approach.

### *Qatar and Ukrainian Muslims*

Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood had a visible impact on the development of the Muslim community in Ukraine. In 1998, the Ar-raïd (Council of Ukrainian Muslims) had its founding conference in Kyiv. Ever since, Ar-raïd has been working on developing Muslim infrastructure in the regions with the biggest share of people of Muslim origin – primarily Crimea and Donbas.<sup>64</sup> It focused on building mosques, developing Muslim education, small infrastructure projects in the areas populated by Crimean Tatars in Crimea, and some humanitarian projects. It launched several publishing projects, periodicals, and a series of book translations to promote Islam.

Later on, UMMA, the Religious Administration of Muslims of Ukraine, was established on the basis of Ar-raïd. At the same time, Ar-raïd continued to support initiatives of the Spiritual Direction of the Muslims in Crimea that also worked with Turkish funds. Said Ismagilov, a young theologian from Donetsk Oblast, became the mufti of UMMA. Facing the threat of repressions, he was forced to flee Donetsk after the Russians took over in 2014. Pro-Russian forces in Crimea and competitors in the Islamic field have accused Ar-raïd and UMMA of promoting an Islamist agenda and being dependent on the Muslim Brotherhood<sup>65</sup> since the early days of these organisations. Both were portrayed as dangerous extremist institutions that radicalised Ukrainian Muslims. This public criticism was accompanied by requests for law enforcement authorities to inspect or shut down these organisations. In spite of these challenges, Ar-raïd mostly managed to find acceptable models of interaction with the local authorities in Crimea and other regions of Ukraine. Qatar never officially admitted being their main donor.

The Russian aggression of 2014 and the full-scale invasion of February 2022 especially had a huge impact on the work and prospects of UMMA. The war cut it off from the regions with the largest share of Muslims, while Russian organisations took over the Muslim infrastructure built with the funding of Middle Eastern donors. This forced UMMA to switch its focus to diaspora groups in big cities in the Kyiv-controlled territory. UMMA continues its operations on a much smaller scale and has downscaled its public activity substantially.

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<sup>64</sup> O. Bohomolov, S. Danylov and others. *Islamic Identity in Ukraine*. Kyiv. Stylos, 2005

<sup>65</sup> A network of an extremist organization active in Crimea, *RIA*, 20.04.2018, <https://ria.ru/20180420/1519068875.html>

# CONCLUSIONS

Ukraine and Qatar have built intense and friendly relations. New initiatives in the economy, culture, and politics will help support them. Given Qatar's unique experience as a negotiator and mediator, it would be beneficial to expand its engagement in freeing civilian hostages, in addition to children.

Ukraine and Qatar can expand their interaction in a number of international organisations. Primarily, these are the IAEA and the International Labor Organisation. Nuclear security and the development of nuclear technology for peaceful purposes are the areas of interaction that offer potential. Qatar can be important within the UN, especially in the General Assembly voting, to get other countries of the region to vote in favour of Ukraine.

Despite the ongoing aggression against Ukraine, it should already work on investment plans with Qatar. It can offer Qatar joint logistic hub projects in neighbouring countries of Eastern Europe. Such proposals can be based on the existing demand and Qatar's experience in developing port infrastructure in Turkey (Antalya) and the Netherlands (Rotterdam), as well as the development of Qatar Airways cargo terminals for the destinations that offer potential. Transport and logistics infrastructure on Ukraine's Western border will have to be expanded and upgraded under any circumstances.

The energy sphere offers potential for cooperation in more than just fuel supply to Ukraine. Qatar is currently one of the key actors in the European gas market, and the two countries have the opportunity to cooperate in storing Qatari gas in Ukraine's underground facilities.

Wider trade in services can offer new areas of cooperation. Innovative technology and IT are cases where Qatari investment and Ukrainian technology can help find new niches in the Middle East. This can cover both civilian technology and dual-use or military technology, such as drone production, etc.

Ukrainian representatives should continue and expand their participation in cultural, art, and scientific events in Qatar as they cover a very wide audience. In parallel, Qatar can be engaged as a sponsor of cultural events, restoration of cultural heritage, and sports teams.



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