

# Niche small States in humanitarian diplomacy: Qatar's positionality in the protection ecosystem

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## Abstract

*Humanitarian diplomacy emerged as a concept in the 2000s to describe the vital work effected by non-State humanitarian organizations to negotiate access, protect civilians and uphold humanitarian principles. This paper charts the rise of State-led humanitarian diplomacy in the Middle East, arguing for the need to expand the conventional lens that is focused on non-State actors. It does so through a detailed examination of Qatar, a case study that has emerged over the last two decades as a significant State actor engaging in a range of forms of humanitarian diplomacy. Following a brief theoretical examination of the concept of humanitarian diplomacy, the paper describes Qatar's role in humanitarian diplomacy in relation to the changing context of armed conflict and humanitarian response in the Middle East. It then presents a categorization of Qatar's humanitarian diplomacy, employing a framework structured around multiple levels including practice, policy and normative/ideational, carried out by both non-State and State actors. Finally,*

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*the paper reflects on the significance of Qatar's experience and the implications it may have on the conduct of humanitarian diplomacy in the region, and in particular what a niche small State can do to contribute to the protection of the humanitarian sphere.*

**Keywords:** humanitarian diplomacy, Qatar, armed conflict, Arab, Middle East, international humanitarian law.



## Introduction

Humanitarian organizations have long faced the challenge of operating in difficult environments in which they must engage with State and non-State actors to negotiate access, advocate for respect for humanitarian principles or pursue other humanitarian objectives through what are conventionally viewed as diplomatic activities. The term “humanitarian diplomacy” emerged in the 2000s to encapsulate this disparate yet vital set of practices undertaken by non-State humanitarian actors.<sup>1</sup> This paper argues that whilst the notion of humanitarian diplomacy remains vital to addressing the challenges of delivering life-saving aid in the disaster and conflict zones of the twenty-first century, a more expansive definition is required. It contends that our conceptualization of who undertakes humanitarian diplomacy should be widened to recognize the essential role played by the State in contemporary conflict zones such as those in the Middle East, in addition to addressing new challenges associated with the changing nature of conflict and humanitarianism.

The paper does this by presenting a case study of the State of Qatar. Whilst not unique as a State actor engaging in humanitarian diplomacy, Qatar has carved out a niche for itself as one of the Arab and Islamic world's leading States in humanitarian diplomacy. As more States enter the fray of humanitarian diplomacy, it is constructive to consider the case of Qatar in terms of what has enabled it to play such a role in the highly challenging operating environment of contemporary conflict in the Middle East.

The paper builds on two points of reference: the classic definition of humanitarian diplomacy and a typological framework for analyzing Qatar's multi-level humanitarian diplomacy. It begins by contextualizing the discussion within the history and theory of the conventional definition of humanitarian diplomacy and moves on to consider several trends in contemporary conflicts and humanitarianism, particularly in the Middle East, that prompt a rethinking of the scope of the concept. The paper then briefly introduces the context of Qatar. Following this, a multi-levelled analysis of Qatari humanitarian diplomacy is offered in terms of non-State humanitarian actors and several forms of

1 Larry Minear and Hazel Smith, *Humanitarian Diplomacy: Practitioners and Their Craft*, United Nations University Press, Tokyo, 2007.

State-based humanitarian diplomacy. The paper also explores the impact of the 2017 Gulf Crisis on Qatar's non-State and State-based humanitarian diplomacy.

## Definitions and concepts

Humanitarian diplomacy remains a nascent concept. There is a substantial difference between the theory of humanitarian diplomacy, the application and usage of the term by different actors, and international agreement on how humanitarian diplomacy should be conducted.<sup>2</sup> The concept itself only emerged in the early 2000s, emanating from and deeply rooted in humanitarian action.<sup>3</sup> In comparison to traditional diplomacy, which has been the subject and focus of a great number of studies, scholarly literature is still very scarce when it comes to humanitarian diplomacy. Humanitarian diplomacy is an instrument of humanitarian response that capitalizes on the nexus between response activities and the diplomatic tools of negotiation, compromise and pragmatism. Whilst there is no universal definition, at its core humanitarian diplomacy focuses on persuading decision-makers, military and opinion leaders, and increasingly militant non-State actors to act in the interest of vulnerable populations. All these efforts must be employed with full respect for the fundamental humanitarian principles while maximizing support for humanitarian operations and programmes.<sup>4</sup>

In complex and protracted situations, humanitarian diplomacy is used to broker space for the implementation of emergency response essentials such as negotiating for the presence of humanitarian organizations in a given country, brokering access to civilian populations in need of assistance and protection, allowing for the provision of relief aid, monitoring assistance programmes, promoting respect for international law and norms, and engaging in advocacy at various levels in support of humanitarian objectives.<sup>5</sup> These characterizations enable us to distinguish and draw out the differences between the more conventional “track one” diplomacy and humanitarian diplomacy. The first difference concerns the issue of who should undertake humanitarian diplomacy. In the classic definition put forward by Minear and Smith, humanitarian diplomacy is a practice carried out by non-State humanitarian actors rather than by States themselves:

Humanitarian diplomacy involves activities carried out by humanitarian institutions and personnel, as distinct from diplomacy exercised by traditional diplomats, even in support of humanitarian activities.<sup>6</sup>

2 Philippe Régnier, “The Emerging Concept of Humanitarian Diplomacy: Identification of a Community of Practice and Prospects for International Recognition”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 93, No. 884, 2011.

3 Antonio De Lauri, *Humanitarian Diplomacy: A New Research Agenda*, CMI Brief No. 2018:4, Chr. Michelsen Institute, Bergen, 2018.

4 International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), *Humanitarian Diplomacy Policy*, Geneva, 2009.

5 L. Minear and H. Smith, above note 1.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

This framework hinges upon a binary division in which traditional diplomacy is usually limited to international relations and typically operates at the political level. Diplomacy in its traditional form is carried out by diplomats who can exploit the many tools and means at their disposal. Humanitarian diplomacy, on the other hand, is not conducted by “humanitarian diplomats”.<sup>7</sup> Humanitarian diplomacy is instead conducted by the staff of humanitarian organizations, who are traditionally not trained in diplomatic negotiations. These humanitarian workers do not consider themselves diplomats: “[m]ost humanitarian workers negotiate in some way every day but few have thought to recognize this core activity as a conscious skill and so seek to refine and develop it across their organization”.<sup>8</sup> In contrast to traditional diplomacy, with its clear legal foundations, those involved in humanitarian diplomacy – except for their ability to rely on international humanitarian law (IHL), international human rights law and refugee law – typically do not operate in well-established international legal regimes.<sup>9</sup>

## Contextualizing humanitarian diplomacy in the Middle East

The narrow operational definition of humanitarian diplomacy is losing relevance in the contemporary context of conflict in the Middle East. This is due to several key trends related to the nature of conflict and the realities of humanitarian action and protection that are shaping the operating environment for humanitarian diplomacy.

Firstly, contemporary regional conflict theatres such as Syria and Libya are increasingly characterized by internationalization, involving an array of non-State “proxy” actors, their external patrons, and paid fighters from abroad. This phenomenon concomitantly coincides with fragmentation and localization, leading to the rise of proliferating non-State armed movements that include proscribed terrorist organizations.<sup>10</sup> Negotiated humanitarian access in such highly challenging and complex operating environments often involves multi-level diplomacy and an array of tools that may sometimes be out of reach for humanitarian charities but not for diplomatic offices of the State. This has resulted in the State (particularly Gulf donor States) rapidly assuming a role as a key actor in the region sometimes best positioned to navigate the challenging task of engaging in humanitarian assistance.

Secondly, given the centralized nature of the State, foreign policy has always had an impact on Gulf States’ humanitarian activities. This has also impacted their level of consistency in terms of involvement, depending on their intervention’s perceived value in supporting their authority, context and stability. The Gulf

7 P. Régner, above note 2.

8 Larry Minear, “*The Craft of Humanitarian Diplomacy*”, in L. Minear and H. Smith (eds), above note 1, p. 8.

9 Peter Maurer, “Humanitarian Diplomacy and Principled Humanitarian Action”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 97, No. 897–898, 2016.

10 Alex Marshall, “From Civil War to Proxy War: Past History and Current Dilemmas”, *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 27, No. 2, 2016.

States became actively involved in conflict response in the late 1960s, particularly following the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. The oil crisis of the 1970s, which coincided with many Gulf States gaining their independence from Britain, emboldened political action by the newly sovereign rulers. In addition, the unanticipated and significant surge in wealth of the Gulf's oil-exporting States provided them with the means to engage with the rest of the Arab world.<sup>11</sup> As emerging donors, the lines between State and non-State were less clear-cut among the Gulf States than in countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC).<sup>12</sup> Much more funding was coming from State donations,<sup>13</sup> with increasing pressure on humanitarian actors to coordinate with and work alongside the State apparatus in affected countries.<sup>14</sup>

Through direct involvement in the conflict and political dynamics of the Middle East, Gulf States often walk a fine line between humanitarian assistance, military intervention and diplomacy. For instance, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia are major donors of humanitarian assistance, yet with greater concerns over regional stability and security, they would not hesitate to lead much bolder interventions ranging from the use of force, such as the war in Yemen in 2015,<sup>15</sup> to mediating peace accords, as between Ethiopia and Eritrea in 2018.<sup>16</sup> Ever since the 9/11 attacks and subsequent War on Terror, the geopolitical context has acted as a constraint within the region that "has impacted not only humanitarian diplomacy of individual countries, but also regional organizations, such as the Organization of the Islamic Conference, as member states scaled back their charity activities to avoid accusations of supporting terrorism".<sup>17</sup>

Thirdly, civil society overall and humanitarian NGOs in particular remain highly under-developed within the Middle East. The effective start of their development can be traced to the post-Gulf War period. Except for Sudan, every Arab country saw an increase in the total number of civil society organizations throughout the 1990s.<sup>18</sup> More recently, the Gulf States' interventionist involvement in the Arab Spring – particularly Syria and Libya – shifted global attention to what has been perceived as their potential support for terrorism.

11 Frauke Heard-Bey, "Conflict Resolution and Regional Co-operation: The Role of the Gulf Co-operation Council 1970–2002", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 2, 2006, pp. 199–200.

12 Mandy Turner, "'Aid Intervention' in the Occupied Palestinian Territory: Do Gulf Arab Donors Act Differently from Western Donors?", *Conflict, Security and Development*, Vol. 19, No. 3, 2019.

13 Bruce Gilley, "Turkey, Middle Powers, and the New Humanitarianism", *Perceptions*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2015.

14 Sultan Barakat, *Priorities and Challenges of Qatar's Humanitarian Diplomacy*, CMI Brief No. 2019:7, Chr. Michelsen Institute, Bergen, 2019.

15 Elinor Buys and Andrew Garwood-Gowers, "The (Ir)Relevance of Human Suffering: Humanitarian Intervention and Saudi Arabia's Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen", *Journal of Conflict and Security Law*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 2019.

16 "Ethiopia, Eritrea Sign Peace Deal at Saudi Arabia Summit", *Al Jazeera*, 17 September 2018, available at: [www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/09/ethiopia-eritrea-sign-peace-deal-saudi-arabia-summit-180917055913813.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/09/ethiopia-eritrea-sign-peace-deal-saudi-arabia-summit-180917055913813.html).

17 Center for International and Regional Studies, "Middle Power Politics in the Middle East Working Group I", Georgetown University Qatar, 2017, available at: <https://cirs.qatar.georgetown.edu/event/middle-power-politics-middle-east-working-group-i/>.

18 Sean L. Yom, "Civil Society and Democratization in the Arab World", *Middle East*, Vol. 9, No. 4, 2005, p. 19.

This, alongside the 2014 war against the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), resulted in the intensification of Western intelligence and media attention on the Gulf States, which complicated both humanitarian aid delivery and protection. In an effort to deflect accusations, Gulf States placed their humanitarian agencies under greater scrutiny through the introduction of new legislations that control not only aid flow but also direct contact with parties to the conflict. Even though research on humanitarian diplomacy tends to excessively focus on non-State actors, Gulf States' relations with conflict-affected States and groups in the region have inevitably expanded into the sphere of humanitarian diplomacy. This development is seen as an attempt by Gulf States to negotiate access to and facilitate the release of their own and other prisoners, primarily based on utilizing Islamic principles. This has occurred mostly in areas where the Gulf States' approach ended up being the alternative to what was considered a failed Western intervention.

Fourthly, faced with the complexities on the ground, regional humanitarian agencies have increasingly proven ineffective in pressing governments and non-State armed groups to implement meaningful reforms when it comes to the application of humanitarian principles. In particular, there was a large gap within domestic non-State capacities for humanitarian diplomacy in the Middle East. For example, in Syria the local NGO community was beset by significant challenges as it struggled to maintain its independence in areas under government control, while fending off accusations of association with terrorist groups when operating within territories controlled by armed groups.<sup>19</sup> Although various National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (National Societies) in the region engage in humanitarian diplomacy, including the Bahraini and the Emirati Red Crescent Societies, such engagement is not systematic.<sup>20</sup> An International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) planning framework for the Gulf subregion has observed that National Societies are primarily focused on humanitarian assistance, whilst neglecting coordination with the international movement, which ultimately could enhance support for core mandates such as humanitarian diplomacy. The IFRC has also noted a strategic need for “linking [National Societies] more effectively within the Federation/Movement network and delivery systems with stronger capacities to work together in a way that can enhance a more consolidated Movement identity with increasing humanitarian standards, coherence and impact”.<sup>21</sup>

As a result of the above, the conduct of humanitarian diplomacy in the region is undertaken primarily by outsiders to the region, as exemplified by the presence of entities such as the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) in Syria, Yemen, Lebanon and Palestine. The NRC is one of just a few agencies operating across all of Syria today.<sup>22</sup> Since the onset of the Syrian crisis in 2011, the European Union (EU) remains the largest donor supporting the work of the NRC

19 Kimberley Howe, *No End in Sight: A Case Study of Humanitarian Action and the Syria Conflict*, Vol. 2, Feinstein International Center, King's College London and Humanitarian Policy Group, 2016, p. 13.

20 National Institution for Human Rights, “National Institution Participates in the Diplomacy in the Service of Humanity Forum”, 2014, found at: [www.nihr.org.bh/EN/News/1089.aspx](http://www.nihr.org.bh/EN/News/1089.aspx) (no longer available).

21 IFRC, *Long Term Planning Framework: Gulf Sub-Region 2012–2015*, Geneva, 2011, p. 2.

22 NRC, “NRC in Syria”, available at: [www.nrc.no/countries/middle-east/syria/](http://www.nrc.no/countries/middle-east/syria/).

and other foreign agencies.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, in Yemen, the UK has donated more than £1 billion in aid since 2015. At the United Nations (UN) pledging meeting for Yemen in March 2022, the UK was one of the country's largest donors, behind Saudi Arabia.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, most humanitarian volunteers and employees in the Middle East are affiliated with or work for international organizations. This, however, runs counter to emerging global norms for localization of conflict response at all levels.<sup>25</sup> Locally led humanitarian diplomacy within the Arab world cannot overlook the State, which in many contexts offers the only workable national capacity able to engage with conflict parties in a sophisticated and strategic manner. This recognition in part explains the recent increase in research on the Gulf States' humanitarian diplomacy.<sup>26</sup> The UAE's humanitarian diplomacy has become particularly apparent as the country has emerged as a major global donor with influence in the humanitarian system. This is driven by a soft power rationale that comprises a major pillar of a public diplomacy strategy to bolster regional power and international influence.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, humanitarian diplomacy actors in the region emphasize culture and religion as tools in their repertoire for the purposes of persuasion. Humanitarian diplomacy has deep roots within Islamic traditions. Although Arab and Muslim States may have played only a minor role in the development of the public international law of warfare (a role whose prevalence spanned from the entry of the Ottoman Empire into the legal system of European States in 1856 and lasted until the First Hague Peace Conference in 1899), Islam as an ideology has played a critical role in both internationalizing and humanizing European war law.<sup>28</sup> Humanitarian diplomacy is rooted in Islamic scriptural teachings. Tabak writes that "in the Surah al-Hujurat [49:9] it is stated that 'if two groups of Muslims fight against each other, reconcile them' [T]his shows the obligation for a third party to take [the matter] in charge."<sup>29</sup> As a staff member of IHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation, one of the most established Turkish humanitarian NGOs, explained to the author, examples from the biography of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) also reveal that "when the Prophet Muhammad advised his followers, 'Help the oppressed and the oppressor,' his followers asked in surprise, 'We already help

23 European Commission, "Syrian Crisis: €5.3 Billion Mobilised by Donors for 2021 and Beyond at 5th Brussels Conference", 30 March 2021, available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_21\\_1464](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_1464).

24 Philip Loft, *UK Aid and Yemen's Humanitarian Crisis*, Research Briefing No. 9326, House of Commons Library, London, 25 September 2023, available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9326/>.

25 Sultan Barakat and Sansom Milton, "Localisation across the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus", *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2020.

26 Deniz Gökalp, "The UAE's Humanitarian Diplomacy: Claiming State Sovereignty, Regional Leverage and International Recognition", CMI Working Paper No. 2020:1, Chr. Michelsen Institute, Bergen, 2020, p. 11.

27 Ibid.

28 James Cockayne, "Islam and International Humanitarian Law: From a Clash to a Conversation between Civilizations", *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 84, No. 847, 2002, p. 599.

29 Husrev Tabak, "Broadening the Nongovernmental Humanitarian Mission: The IHH and Mediation", *Insight Turkey*, 1 July 2015, available at: [www.insightturkey.com/articles/broadening-the-nongovernmental-humanitarian-mission-the-ihh-and-mediation](http://www.insightturkey.com/articles/broadening-the-nongovernmental-humanitarian-mission-the-ihh-and-mediation).



the oppressed, but how can we help the oppressor?’ He answered, ‘By stopping his cruelty.’”<sup>30</sup> Thus, Islam underlines the importance of engaging all sides in an effort to advance humanitarian principles, and this can be incorporated into the ethos of humanitarian diplomacy across Arab and Islamic nations.

## Can State-based humanitarian diplomacy be “humanitarian”?

The present author contends that due to the realities of contemporary conflict and humanitarianism, the State has emerged as an essential actor in humanitarian diplomacy in the Middle East. A scoping study on foreign policy and humanitarianism has identified a critical research gap caused by a lack of comparative research and an excessive analytical focus on States as donors, which “misses other significant areas of State action, including humanitarian diplomacy”.<sup>31</sup> This clearly signals a significant academic gap in examining State-based humanitarian diplomacy in the Middle East.

Traditionally, humanitarian diplomacy is seen as distinct from diplomatic action that has some humanitarian effects for two main reasons. First, humanitarian diplomacy specifically attempts to solve potential crises using negotiation while simultaneously finding ways to relieve the suffering of the people affected by the crisis; and second, it is strongly based on the principles of independence, neutrality and impartiality.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, bringing the State into humanitarian diplomacy raises several dilemmas. One dilemma lies in the argument that States cannot pursue “humanitarian” diplomacy because they are motivated by self-interest rather than altruism. This paper proposes two responses to this line of reasoning. First, all individuals engaged in humanitarian diplomacy – whether officials of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), State representatives or NGO staff – may be motivated by both altruistic and non-altruistic intentions, some of which can be attributed to ego, financial gain, political belief or acting in the interests of other parties. Second, international humanitarian negotiations require a pragmatic approach and a consequentialist ethos. Communities in conflict-affected areas are unconcerned with who it is that responds to their needs and adheres to humanitarian principles. Even if States only act in their own self-interest, if the effect is to persuade conflict parties to respect IHL and uphold humanitarian principles, this should be welcomed.

Another dilemma is that State-based humanitarian diplomacy raises the evidentiary bar for determining whether any act of engagement with non-State actors to obtain compliance with humanitarian standards is a genuine act of persuasion. When the ICRC, individual respected leaders or other non-State actors engage in humanitarian diplomacy, it is *prima facie* much more plausible that such

30 Interview with IHH senior officer, Istanbul, 30 November 2018.

31 Sherine El Taraboulsi McCarthy, Victoria Metcalfe-Hough and Barnaby Willits-King, *Foreign Policy and Humanitarian Action: An Agenda for Inquiry*, HPG Working Paper, Humanitarian Policy Group, London, 2016, p. 12.

32 P. Régnier, above note 2.



engagements involve persuasion by virtue of these actors' lack of powers and capacities to enforce any particular outcome. When States engage with the same actors, they possess a much wider array of tools, ranging from coercion and threats of force to financial inducements. Due to the highly secretive nature of these engagements, our epistemic access to the true nature of State behaviour is more limited. This epistemological gap, however challenging, does not rule out the possibility that States do genuinely utilize powers of persuasion.

States which act as patrons often suffer reputational damage because of the public perception of their client non-State armed movements in contemporary regional proxy wars. If a patron State threatens to withhold payments or offers more payments in return for the modification of the behaviour of its proxy armed groups in line with IHL and humanitarian principles, this could be classified as a form of humanitarian diplomacy. The challenge in humanitarian diplomacy lies not in figuring out the logistics and technicalities of aid provision, but in creating the political will for that aid provision. In the case of some Gulf States, it may be assumed that due to their large financial reserves, these States could make side payments in order to achieve humanitarian diplomacy goals. The practice, actors and goals of humanitarian diplomacy make it a unique form of diplomacy. Given that the Gulf States (in particular Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar) maintain relationships with a range of non-State actors regionally, this complicates the humanitarian diplomacy that they engage in.

Some regional States have direct or even existential stakes in particular conflicts, while others have only indirect interests.

## **Qatar's humanitarian diplomacy in context**

This section examines key contextual features of Qatar's approach to humanitarian diplomacy. Over the past fifteen years, Qatar has played an important role as an emerging Arab and Islamic non-traditional donor in the humanitarian system.

Firstly, to solidify its aims within the humanitarian sphere, Qatar publicly committed to becoming a major humanitarian donor in 2016 at the World Humanitarian Summit, where it pledged \$10 billion in assistance over the coming decade. In 2018, Qatar once again demonstrated its commitment to humanitarian diplomacy by greatly increasing its multilateral contributions; in line with its "belief in the principle of international cooperation and burden-sharing", Qatar has continued to make voluntary contributions to many activities and programmes of the UN at all levels and has strengthened partnerships with a range of UN entities so that they can effectively implement their mandates, especially in relation to international peace and security, the fight against terrorism and extremism, human rights, and development.<sup>33</sup>

33 Government Communications Office, "Qatar and the UN", available at: [www.gco.gov.qa/en/focus/qatar-United-nations/](http://www.gco.gov.qa/en/focus/qatar-United-nations/).

Secondly, Qatar is well positioned within the region to accept risks associated with humanitarian diplomacy due to its high level of domestic and financial stability, with one of the world's highest rates of GDP per capita, at \$87,480 as of 2022.<sup>34</sup> Qatar has also gained greater political capital in pursuing morally popular humanitarian interventions. Thirdly, it can be argued that Qatar's foreign diplomacy is characterized by a high level of autonomy, combining pragmatism and the will to pursue autonomous international relations despite constant pressure from regional and international actors. This has allowed Qatar to pursue objectives that are often perceived as controversial,<sup>35</sup> as demonstrated by its strategic dialogue with non-State actors such as Hezbollah, the Taliban and Hamas. Fourthly, Qatar's humanitarian role proved resilient during the most difficult crisis resulting from the blockade that it endured from 2017 until 2021, as the "Quartet" – Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE – presented a list of accusations with direct bearing on Qatari sovereignty, including the accusation that Qatar's humanitarian operations were being used as a facade to support "terrorism".<sup>36</sup>

Qatar has consistently utilized principles of humanitarian diplomacy like many other non-traditional or OECD-DAC donors, but it has not formally recognized the term as an instrument of foreign policy. However, an examination of Qatar's humanitarian interventions reveals the various application levels at which diplomacy tools have been integrated within its humanitarian interventions. In the following section, we will analyze these levels of application in detail.

## Qatari non-State actors in humanitarian diplomacy

The Gulf Crisis of 2017 disrupted Qatar's charitable sector, which was on its way to becoming one of the leading humanitarian response ecosystems in the region. Since then, several Qatari humanitarian organizations have either closed or scaled down their operations overseas. For instance, the Sheikh Thani Bin Abdullah Foundation for Humanitarian Services shut down in August 2017.<sup>37</sup> Although a handful of Qatari NGOs have continued their worldwide operations, the sector has faced major challenges in the past few years. Presently, Qatar has only three major international implementing agencies: Qatar Charity, Education Above All and Qatar Red Crescent Society (QRCS).

Amongst the functioning agencies, QRCS uses humanitarian diplomacy extensively in day-to-day operations, particularly in negotiating access to conflict-affected populations in the most difficult operating environments, including

34 World Bank, "GDP per Capita (Current US\$) – Qatar", 2022, available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=QA>.

35 Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring: Policy Drivers and Regional Implications*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, DC, 2014, p. 8.

36 Gabriel Collins, "Anti-Qatar Embargo Grinds toward Strategic Failure", Baker Institute for Public Policy, 22 January 2018, p. 1.

37 Sultan Barakat, Sansom Milton and Ghassan Elkhoul, "The Impact of the Gulf Crisis on Qatar's Humanitarian Sector", *Disasters*, Vol. 44, No. 1, 2020.

Somalia, Afghanistan and Sudan. Additionally, the war in Syria has been especially trying for QRCS, as it suffered the loss of employees in 2013, 2014 and 2017, and subsequently needed to negotiate the release of its own workers in Syria and elsewhere. QRCS also assisted other humanitarian actors in Syria with prisoner releases through a process of information-sharing with the NRC and the Italian Red Cross when, in 2013, fourteen QRCS and seven NRC workers were taken hostage and held captive for two weeks.<sup>38</sup> The ICRC and QRCS have worked together to strengthen their ties with each other. In 2021, the secretary-general of QRCS met with a delegation from the ICRC and the two organizations agreed to start working on a draft memorandum of understanding as a framework for cooperation aimed at addressing armed conflict on a broader basis.<sup>39</sup>

In Sudan, QRCS employs skilled mediation to negotiate between communities in villages across the war-affected Arara and Beida districts in West Darfur, in order to allow for the implementation of projects under the Doha Document for Peace in Darfur.<sup>40</sup> These projects provide basic services that support the welfare of internally displaced persons. This type of engagement allows organizations to deliver life-saving emergency aid that often goes unreported due to the sensitive nature of developing relationships with local contacts (almost always community-based) and creating discussions built around trust.

Qatari non-State organizations also engage in regional and global humanitarian diplomacy policy development, advocacy and knowledge production. QRCS has done much work to develop culturally rooted approaches to IHL in Islamic societies. At the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, QRCS hosted a workshop on the compatibility of IHL and Islamic Sharia law. In the same vein, Doha hosts the Islamic Forum for International Humanitarian Law, an affiliate of the Islamic Committee of the International Crescent, which undertakes research, training and advocacy for humanitarian protection through "IHL and Islam", a project that also explores social, political and economic issues during armed conflict.

Yet all these forms of non-State humanitarian diplomacy by Qatari actors could not have emerged without a supportive and permissive environment provided by the State and reinforced by Qatar's Al Jazeera media network, which ever since its establishment in the mid-1990s has helped shape emerging narratives about conflict in the region, starting from the Iraq War and peaking during the Arab Spring.<sup>41</sup> Al Jazeera also sheds light on specific neglected humanitarian crises, such as the plight of Myanmar's Rohingya Muslims and the women and children of the so-called Islamic State. Al Jazeera also controversially interviewed Osama bin Laden and more recently the head of Al-Nusra; as a result, it suffered regional and

38 Interview with QRCS senior staff member, Doha, 20 November 2021.

39 *Ibid.*

40 *Ibid.*

41 K. C. Ulrichsen, above note 35, p. 3.

international backlash, but it managed to weather the storm with little direct intervention from the State.<sup>42</sup>

In contrast to the domestic humanitarian sectors in Europe and North America, the emergence of humanitarian actors in the Gulf was not a long-term, bottom-up process driven by civil society. Instead, the State was central to the emergence of Qatar's non-State humanitarian diplomacy ecosystem. Whilst many Qatari humanitarian charities emerged from large philanthropic foundations, the State necessarily sanctioned their role in humanitarian diplomacy. However, as will be discussed later in this paper, this State–society relationship has been tested since 2017, primarily due to the pressures of the Gulf Crisis. Thus, the lines between the State and non-State actors are increasingly being blurred in Qatar and the wider region.

### State-led humanitarian diplomacy

The Qatari State – comprising various offices including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, its diplomatic apparatus, the intelligence services and the armed forces – is involved in liaison and negotiation with national governments and non-State armed groups. Whilst much of this activity does not fall under the traditional rubric of humanitarian diplomacy, the Qatari State has engaged in numerous activities that would be categorized under the expanded conceptualization of humanitarian diplomacy advanced in this paper.

### *Humanitarian diplomacy and third-party conflict mediation*

Amongst the Gulf States, Qatar stands out as the most actively involved in mediation efforts which it describes as both a moral obligation and a means of gaining broader strategic advantages.<sup>43</sup> From Qatar's perspective, mediation reflects a desire to uphold ethical standards rooted in deep religious conviction and a commitment to peace and stability. Qatar's mediation commitment is enshrined in Article 7 of its 2003 Constitution, which states that the "foreign policy of the State is based on the principle of strengthening international peace and security by means of encouraging peaceful resolution of international disputes".<sup>44</sup> The decision to focus on conflict mediation as a major aspect of its

42 David Roberts, "Qatar: Domestic Quietism, Elite Adventurism", in Fatima Ayub (ed.), *What Does the Gulf Think about the Arab Awakening?*, European Council on Foreign Relations, London, 2013.

43 S. Barakat, above note 14.

44 Permanent Constitution of the State of Qatar, 29 April 2003, Art. 7, available at: <http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/research/qatar-constitution.html>. A referendum on constitutional amendments, held on 5 November 2024, has received overwhelming support from Qatari citizens with regard to the following amendment to Article 7: "The foreign policy of the State is based on the principle of strengthening international peace and security by means of encouraging peaceful resolution of international disputes, and in accordance with the role of the State in resolving these disputes at the regional and international levels through mediation and dialogue, and what this entails in terms of maintaining balanced relations with all parties; shall support the right of peoples to self-determination; and shall not interfere in the domestic affairs of states; and shall cooperate with peace-loving nations." This amendment makes a direct reference to mediation. See "Constitutional Amendment Referendum... Wide Popular Welcome,

international engagement forms part of Qatar's independent foreign policy. During 2007–14, Qatar served as an impartial broker in more than ten regional and international conflicts; this included brokering the Doha Agreement in the 2008 Lebanon conflict, the 2008 ceasefire agreement in Yemen and the Doha Agreement in the Fatah– Hamas conflict in 2012, and mediating the North/South Sudan conflict in 2010 as well as conflicts in Western Sahara, Algeria, Eritrea/ Ethiopia, Djibouti/Eritrea, Somalia, and most recently Afghanistan and Chad.<sup>45</sup>

As Qatar gains international prowess as a trusted third-party mediator and successfully cultivates sophisticated engagements in peace and conflict, it increases the State's access to greater opportunities for humanitarian and development engagement, which comes with greater responsibilities to undertake humanitarian diplomacy as part of a confidence-building measure between parties in order to ensure the continuation and/or the success of peace talks.

One example in which Qatar's mediation role opened up opportunities for State-based humanitarian diplomacy can be seen in Palestine. Qatar's repeated Hamas–Fatah and Hamas–Israel mediation attempts provided it the positioning and relations with Israel to negotiate unprecedented access to Gaza on behalf of Qatari humanitarian activities.<sup>46</sup> Qatar's hosting of Hamas' Political Office (Al-Maktab al-Siyasi), led by Khalid Meshaal between 2012 and 2017 (this period includes his departure from Damascus and passing on the leadership to the Gaza-based Ismail Haniyeh), afforded Qatar unique access to engage in humanitarian diplomacy in Gaza. This was also abetted by the Qatari emir's visit to Gaza following the 2008–09 war – a high-profile visit by a head of State that required official coordination between Tel Aviv, Washington and Cairo. This initiated Qatar's role as the main funder of Gaza's reconstruction, led by the Qatar Committee for the Reconstruction of Gaza (with a \$407 million donation in 2010 by Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, followed in October 2014 by a \$1 billion reconstruction pledge by the State of Qatar).<sup>47</sup> Despite its name and its relative independence, the Committee is formally instituted under Qatar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. To maintain Qatar's reconstruction role, the Committee's chairman, Ambassador Mohammed Al Emadi, must engage in humanitarian diplomacy on a daily basis in order to achieve a balance between people's needs, acquiring Hamas approval, acquiring Ramallah's approval and maintaining legitimacy, all whilst ensuring that Israel permits Qatari access.

Another example is Qatar's multi-year facilitation of the Afghan peace process, during which multiple short-term agreements on violence reduction were reached by Qatari and other mediators. This includes three Eid ceasefires during

Historic Turnout Expected", *Qatar News Agency*, 3 November 2024, available at: [www.qna.org.qa/en/News-Area/News/2024-11/03/0054-constitutional-amendment-referendum-wide-popular-welcome-historic-turnout-expected](http://www.qna.org.qa/en/News-Area/News/2024-11/03/0054-constitutional-amendment-referendum-wide-popular-welcome-historic-turnout-expected).

45 Sultan Barakat, "Qatari Mediation: Between Ambition and Achievement", Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper, Brookings Institution, 13 November 2014, available at: [www.brookings.edu/research/qatari-mediation-between-ambition-and-achievement/](http://www.brookings.edu/research/qatari-mediation-between-ambition-and-achievement/).

46 Interview with senior consultant to Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Doha, July 2020.

47 Sultan Barakat, Sansom Milton and Ghassan Elkahlout, "The Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism: Old Wine in New Bottlenecks", *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, Vol. 12, No. 2, 2018.

2018–20, most notably the short-term “reduction in violence” first mentioned on 12 February 2020 by US defence secretary Mark Espier.<sup>48</sup>

Following Kabul’s fall to the Taliban on 15 August 2021, various international and regional actors scrambled to evacuate their citizens and many Afghans as well. The United States oversaw evacuations from 15 August to 31 August. President Biden succeeded in removing all US forces from Afghanistan by 31 August.<sup>49</sup> Amidst this period of evacuations, the State of Qatar facilitated talks between the Taliban and the international community, enabling one of history’s largest humanitarian airlifts.<sup>50</sup> Due to Qatar’s close contact with the Taliban and its stationing of one of the largest US airbases, it was only natural for Western governments to request the relocation of their Kabul embassies to Doha and to seek Qatar’s support in evacuating their citizens, encouraged by the Qatari foreign minister’s statement on 16 August, which highlighted Qatar’s “utmost [effort] to help evacuate diplomats and foreign staff from international organizations seeking to leave Afghanistan”.<sup>51</sup> This aided international NGOs, media organizations, educational institutions and even individuals to utilize Qatar’s strategic influence to help them evacuate employees and relatives on a humanitarian basis. Qatar surpassed the US evacuations by responding to various nations’ requests directly and evacuating foreign nationals.<sup>52</sup>

Afghans who were at risk of Taliban retaliation due to their history of working with the US military were evacuated. Within a short period of time, Qatar became the main transit hub for processing evacuees before they travelled to their final destinations. To house these refugees in transit, Qatar utilized the housing compounds built as accommodation for the 2022 FIFA World Cup. In attempts to accommodate the evacuees’ needs, on-site doctors, PCR testing, access to health-care facilities, and daily events for children were made available in the compounds.<sup>53</sup> This situation highlights Qatar’s compliance with and upholding of IHL, specifically through its application of the principle of *non-refoulement* under the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol while evacuees awaited resettlement.

48 Andrew Watkins, “U.S. and Taliban Announce Agreement on Afghanistan”, International Crisis Group, 21 February 2021, available at: [www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/us-and-taliban-announce-agreement-afghanistan](http://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/us-and-taliban-announce-agreement-afghanistan).

49 “Why is August 31 the Date for the US Pullout from Afghanistan?”, *France 24*, 25 August 2021, available at: [www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210825-why-is-august-31-the-date-for-the-us-pullout-from-afghanistan](http://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210825-why-is-august-31-the-date-for-the-us-pullout-from-afghanistan).

50 Steve Hendrix, Liz Sly and Kareem Fahim, “Taliban Takeover Propels Tiny Qatar into Outsize Role in Afghanistan”, *Washington Post*, 31 August 2021, available at: [www.washingtonpost.com/world/taliban-qatar-mediator-afghanistan/2021/08/31/6a787b2c-0992-11ec-a7c8-61bb7b3bf628\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/taliban-qatar-mediator-afghanistan/2021/08/31/6a787b2c-0992-11ec-a7c8-61bb7b3bf628_story.html).

51 Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani, at a news conference in Amman, 16 August 2021.

52 Phil McCausland, “‘We Don’t Want to Die’: Afghans Remain Desperate to Leave after U.S. Departure”, *NBC News*, 31 August 2021, available at: [www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/u-s-withdrawal-leaves-afghan-allies-grappling-fear-anger-panic-n1278144](http://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/u-s-withdrawal-leaves-afghan-allies-grappling-fear-anger-panic-n1278144).

53 “Cozy Villas, Doctor on Site, Ice-Cream Stand: Qatar Opens World Cup Compound for Afghan Evacuees”, *Qatar Tribune*, 24 August 2021, available at: [www.qatar-tribune.com/latestnews-article/mid/506/articleid/7213/cozy-villas-doctor-on-site-ice-cream-stand-qatar-opens-world-cup-compound-for-afghan-evacuees](http://www.qatar-tribune.com/latestnews-article/mid/506/articleid/7213/cozy-villas-doctor-on-site-ice-cream-stand-qatar-opens-world-cup-compound-for-afghan-evacuees).



Qatar's capacity to communicate to various parties on the ground and its readiness to escort individuals through Taliban-controlled Kabul notably enabled evacuees to access the airports and seek safety. Although not the most traditional application, this serves as a stark example of humanitarian diplomacy.<sup>54</sup> Qatar was internationally recognized for acting in the interests of vulnerable and in-need Afghans, improving access to humanitarian aid and working towards upholding internationally recognized humanitarian principles.<sup>55</sup> Even members of the US Congress directly thanked the Qatari emir for Qatar's force-multiplying role in Afghanistan, stating that "the United States will not forget that Americans and our partners were escorted safely by the Qatari ambassador through the streets of Kabul".<sup>56</sup> Following this experience, an agreement was reached on 12 November between the US secretary of State, Antony Blinken, and the Qatari minister of foreign affairs, Mohammed bin Abdulrahman, that solidified Qatar's role as a diplomatic proxy for the United States in Afghanistan.<sup>57</sup>

### *Specialized, niche capacities for prisoner and hostage releases*

The Arab Spring in 2011 ignited a wave of foreign policy changes in Qatar as it shifted from a historic policy of impartiality based on its mediator status in the region (during the mid-2000s) to a more partisan and interventionist role in order to influence the outcome of the Arab uprisings in Syria and Libya between 2011 and 2014. By 2013, Qatar was demonstrating a significant reduction in its appetite for both intervention and international conflict mediation. Apart from Gaza, where Qatar maintained an almost routine mediation role, the State moved away from complex conflicts to single-issue mediation, mostly run by its Intelligence Department and focused on prisoner exchanges and hostage releases – often justified on humanitarian imperatives.<sup>58</sup>

While the precise scope of Qatar's involvement has not been settled as a matter of public record, various sources have, over the years, reported a number of humanitarian diplomacy interventions that involved Qatar alongside a

54 Anonymous conversation with a group of employees of the Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Doha, September 2021.

55 Leonardo Jacopo Maria Mazzucco and Giorgio Cafiero, "Qatar's Humanitarian Diplomacy in Afghanistan: A Bridge with the West", *Inside Arabia*, 7 January 2022, found at: <https://insidearabia.com/qatars-humanitarian-diplomacy-in-afghanistan-a-bridge-with-the-west-part-1-of-2/> (no longer available).

56 "Qatar Lauded for Its Role in Afghanistan Evacuations", *Al Jazeera*, 30 August 2021, available at: [www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/30/qatar-emerges-as-key-player-in-afghanistan-after-us-pullout](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/30/qatar-emerges-as-key-player-in-afghanistan-after-us-pullout).

57 Humeyra Pamuk and Jonathan Landay, "Blinken Says Qatar to Act as U.S. Diplomatic Representative in Afghanistan", *Reuters*, 12 November 2021, available at: [www.reuters.com/world/exclusive-qatar-act-us-diplomatic-representative-afghanistan-official-2021-11-12/](http://www.reuters.com/world/exclusive-qatar-act-us-diplomatic-representative-afghanistan-official-2021-11-12/).

58 "Qatari Hunters Kidnapped in Iraq Freed after 16 Months", *Al Jazeera*, 22 April 2017, available at: [www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/4/22/qatari-hunters-kidnapped-in-iraq-freed-after-16-months](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/4/22/qatari-hunters-kidnapped-in-iraq-freed-after-16-months); Paula Marie Young, "Bustards, Bullies, Billions, and the Blockade: Applying Dispute Resolution Theory to the First Nine Months of the Siege of Qatar", in Haitham M. Alkhateeb (ed.), *Qatar: Political, Economic and Social Issues*, NOVA Science Publishers, New York, 2019; Robert F. Worth, "Kidnapped Royalty Become Pawns in Iran's Deadly Plot", *New York Times*, 14 March 2018, available at: [www.nytimes.com/2018/03/14/magazine/how-a-ransom-for-royal-falcons-reshaped-the-middle-east.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/14/magazine/how-a-ransom-for-royal-falcons-reshaped-the-middle-east.html).



multitude of other actors, but without apportioning responsibility. One of the most significant cases was the exchange of Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl of the US Army for five Taliban prisoners from Guantanamo Bay in May 2014.<sup>59</sup>

In Syria, Qatar spent some \$3 billion in support of the people's rebellion (three times its annual average spend on humanitarian and development aid worldwide), which inevitably established unique channels of communication that were utilized for various forms of humanitarian diplomacy.<sup>60</sup> Qatar helped with the release of forty-five Fijian UN peacekeepers held captive by Jabhat al-Nusra in September 2014,<sup>61</sup> and played a key role in securing the release of Jumpei Yasuda, a Japanese journalist held hostage by Hayaat Tahrir al-Sham.<sup>62</sup>

Furthermore, in November 2019, Qatar assisted in exchanging three Taliban commanders, including Anas Haqqani, the younger brother of one of the most important Taliban leaders, for two university professors, Kevin King (a US citizen) and Timothy Weeks (an Australian citizen) who were kidnapped by the Taliban three years earlier.<sup>63</sup> This act of humanitarian diplomacy was also a confidence-building measure employed by Qatar to restore the Doha talks between the United States and the Taliban, which were interrupted in September 2019.

Qatar's attempts at prisoner and hostage releases are often shrouded with suggestions of paying financial ransoms, occasionally on behalf of countries whose internal law makes it illegal to do so. Such claims are denied by Qatari officials, who are quick to emphasize Qatar's commitment to humanitarian values and peaceful negotiations. Recently, to cite just one example, Qatar has played a leading role in reuniting children separated from their families in armed conflict situations.

### *Efforts to influence the behaviour of armed groups*

Since the Syrian crisis in 2011, the Qatari State has been engaging in humanitarian diplomacy to influence the behaviour of armed groups and the composition of alliances between them. In the initial stages of the war, Qatar attempted to suspend Syria's membership in the Arab League and initiated economic sanctions. Over time, Qatar, Turkey and Saudi Arabia became major financiers of Syrian organized armed groups. Turkey initially turned to Muslim Brotherhood affiliates, before its intelligence arm, the National Intelligence Organization, began to work more closely with organized armed groups after they had formed, such

59 Hope Hodge Seck, "Court Upholds Bowe Bergdahl's Sentence Despite Trump 'Dirty Traitor' Comments", *Military.com*, 28 August 2020, available at: [www.military.com/daily-news/2020/08/28/court-upholds-bowe-bergdahls-sentence-despite-trump-dirty-traitor-comments.html](http://www.military.com/daily-news/2020/08/28/court-upholds-bowe-bergdahls-sentence-despite-trump-dirty-traitor-comments.html).

60 Roula Khalaf and Abigail Fielding Smith, "Qatar Bankrolls Syrian Revolt with Cash and Arms", *Financial Times*, 16 May 2013.

61 "Qatar Mediated the Release of Fijian UN Peacekeepers", *Middle East Monitor*, 12 September 2014, available at: [www.middleeastmonitor.com/20140912-qatar-mediated-the-release-of-fijian-un-peacekeepers/](http://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20140912-qatar-mediated-the-release-of-fijian-un-peacekeepers/);

62 Makiko Inoue and Daniel Victor, "Japanese Journalist Freed From 3-Year Captivity in Syria", *New York Times*, 24 October 2018, available at: [www.nytimes.com/2018/10/24/world/asia/japan-jumpei-yasuda-hostage-freed.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/24/world/asia/japan-jumpei-yasuda-hostage-freed.html).

63 "Qatar Plays Active Role in Release of Afghan Detainees", *Gulf Times*, 21 November 2019, available at: [www.gulf-times.com/story/648256/qatar-plays-active-role-in-release-of-afghan-detainees](http://www.gulf-times.com/story/648256/qatar-plays-active-role-in-release-of-afghan-detainees).

as Liwa al-Tawheed and later Ahrar as-Sham. Qatar, on the other hand, backed multiple groups in a scattergun approach.<sup>64</sup>

While some may consider the outcomes of this messy engagement as negative for the overall trajectory of the war in Syria, the financial leverage of Qatar was utilized to persuade various organized armed groups not to form alliances with non-State armed actors such as Jabhat al-Nusra. Although this claim is based on reliable insider information from several credible yet anonymous sources, it remains unclear which component of the State apparatus undertook such State-based humanitarian diplomacy. Plausible candidates are the Qatari ambassador in Lebanon supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, or intelligence services.<sup>65</sup> Unsurprisingly, many in the humanitarian community would be deeply uncomfortable with the unreasonable widening of the definition of humanitarian diplomacy to include engagement by intelligence services in such contexts. This type of application would not be consistent with a pure form of humanitarian diplomacy.

### *Qatari humanitarian diplomacy after the Gulf Crisis*

Despite Qatar maintaining its commitments as a humanitarian donor, the operating space for Qatari humanitarian actors narrowed after the Gulf Crisis. Although blockading parties expected their actions to force Doha's swift compliance, Qatar proved socio-politically and economically resilient. Yet whilst maintaining operational continuity, humanitarian aid became part of the landscape of contestation within the Gulf Crisis because it was long assumed to form part of Gulf State foreign policy.<sup>66</sup> The blockade deepened this politicization of Gulf State assistance, with intra-Gulf political dynamics affecting aid delivery in crisis zones across the Middle East and the Horn of Africa. In some cases, the blockade forced recipients to choose between Qatari or Saudi–Emirati support, heightening the tension between nations.<sup>67</sup> This development underscores the need for Gulf States to include humanitarian diplomacy as an active tool for foreign policy, not only to negotiate access or implore parties to respect humanitarian principles, but also to simply persuade recipients to receive or accept assistance.

Since the Gulf Crisis, Qatar's non-State humanitarian diplomacy has been restricted both by the rational responses of Qatari humanitarian organizations to the highly challenging operating environment and by State policies. The blockade was accompanied by loudly publicized but unsubstantiated accusations that Qatar, and some of its humanitarian agencies, supported terrorism. On 24 November 2017, two organizations, the International Union of Muslim Scholars (headed by Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a prominent theologian) and the International Islamic

64 Christopher Phillips, "Eyes Bigger than Stomachs: Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar in Syria", *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 2017.

65 Interviews with anonymous senior humanitarian practitioners and consultants based in Doha, 2020.

66 Karen E. Young, "The Limits of Gulf Arab Aid: Energy Markets and Foreign Policy", "Reflections" Working Paper Series, Vol. 1, European Centre for Energy and Resource Security, 2015.

67 S. Barakat, S. Milton and G. Elkhahlout, above note 37.

Council for Da'wah and Relief, and eleven individuals, including a staff member of QRCS, were added to a “terror list” drawn up by the four blockading countries (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt and the UAE). The accusations were strongly refuted by Qatar and many international organizations that would only adhere to UN listing. Nevertheless, this has significantly damaged Qatar’s global reputation. The blockading countries stated that these individuals and entities carried out terrorist actions while receiving direct Qatari backing at different levels, including the issuance of passports and their appointment to Qatari organizations with a charitable appearance to facilitate their movement.<sup>68</sup>

By focusing the spotlight on Qatar’s humanitarian activities, the blockade increased the pressure on Qatari charitable organizations to prove that they act with integrity and professionalism, which shifted the focus away from their specific activities and towards their public perception. As a result, Qatari humanitarian agencies – although not commanded by the Qatari State – became increasingly risk-averse when considering their engagement in challenging, yet rewarding, forms of humanitarian diplomacy. As one interviewee stated, “we have never been asked by the state to start or stop an operation, but since the Gulf Crisis, we have an inner feeling to be more cautious”.<sup>69</sup> Qatari aid agencies have become reticent about their humanitarian diplomacy, even denying having entered into humanitarian negotiations with governments and non-State organized armed groups in fear of further reprisal from the region. This hesitancy and precaution have affected the intensity of humanitarian diplomacy and have forced Qatar to adopt a more politically cautious foreign policy.

In addition to this self-policing, several regulatory changes were introduced by the Qatari State that restricted the operating space for non-State humanitarian diplomacy. Qatar’s Regulatory Authority for Charitable Activities (RACA) has been empowered since 2017 to play a stronger role in governing the scope of activities in which Qatar’s charities engage. RACA claims that its aim is to shield Qatari charities from the pressures outlined above. It has strongly condemned the claim that Qatari humanitarian organizations promote terrorism and has threatened taking legal action against Arab States and institutions claiming otherwise. It has also introduced vetting processes that are designed to make sure that Qatari charitable organizations are not being exposed to money laundering or financing of terrorism.<sup>70</sup> On the other hand, reflecting on the changing role of RACA, one experienced observer of Qatari aid organizations has stated that the body itself “has become a securitizing agent within Qatar’s humanitarian ecosystem”, with the effect of furthering the self-policing and doubt of NGOs that may want to engage in humanitarian diplomacy.<sup>71</sup> In an attempt to clarify the situation for State and non-State actors in Qatar, the present author, through the Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies which he founded in Doha in

68 “Saudi Bloc Expands So-Called Blacklist”, *Qatar Tribune*, 24 November 2017, available: [www.qatar-tribune.com/news-details/id/97843](http://www.qatar-tribune.com/news-details/id/97843).

69 Interview with senior staff member of Qatar charity, Doha, July 2020.

70 *Ibid.*

71 Interview with senior aid consultant to a number of Qatari charities, Doha, September 2021.

2016, held a closed consultation on the “Research–Practice Nexus in Qatar’s Humanitarian Ecosystem”, to which a select number of international academics and practitioners were invited.<sup>72</sup> The meeting focused on the exchange of institutional ideas and experiences, as well as the dissemination of suggestions and lessons learned by experienced international professionals. To bridge the two sectors, the consultation recommended that Qatari institutions should identify common needs and areas for engagement, as well as issues of common purpose and agendas of common interest around the practice of humanitarian diplomacy. Given that the suggested nexus in Qatar has yet to be fostered, the support of an advisory committee to steer and orient activities is crucial.<sup>73</sup>

Another necessary change is the incorporation of greater managerial auditing and risk assessment as the increase in risky ventures such as engagement with conflict parties comes under growing scrutiny. Whilst this has raised professional standards, it has come at the cost of some of the flexibility for which Qatar’s humanitarian sector has long been valued. Furthermore, the Qatari State has shifted from providing Qatari charities the space to engage in humanitarian diplomacy to increasingly subcontracting international specialist entities, such as Geneva Call and other organizations that are increasingly present in Doha. The cumulative impact of these pressures has been to limit the space for risky, but worthy, forms of humanitarian diplomacy, with international humanitarian professionals in other countries reportedly lamenting the partial erosion of Qatar’s valuable niche role in this area.<sup>74</sup>

Subject to greater media smearing, Qatar ended up applying a strategy that maintained and expanded its humanitarian and foreign aid sector partnership with established and respected international organizations. Given that no independent international entity exists to assess the validity of allegations such as the Saudi–UAE claims of terror financing, Qatar has resorted to a strategy of “innocence by association”. This approach emphasizes the country’s commitment to multilateral cooperation and alliances. Thus, because Qatari humanitarian organizations have long worked in partnership with their global counterparts, particularly those in the UN system, it is routine for the State to undergo a slew of due diligence procedures that bear witness to the sector’s integrity.<sup>75</sup> This strategy has been successful in fending off the unsubstantiated accusations. A statement from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) underscores that “the UN is bound only by ... the sanctions lists put together by UN organs such as the Security Council”, while also noting that “OCHA, over the years, has built [a] strong partnership with [Qatari

72 Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies, “International Experts and Qatari Institutions Consider How to Bridge the Research–Practice Nexus”, 26 May 2021, available at: <https://chs-doha.org/en/News/Pages/International-Experts-and-Qatari-Institutions-Consider-how-to-Bridge-the-Research-Practice-Nexus.aspx>.

73 Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies, *Research–Practice Nexus in Qatar’s Humanitarian Ecosystem: Joint-Conference Report*, 25 May 2021, available at: <https://chs-doha.org/en/Events/Documents/Research%20Policy%20Nexus%20Report%20En%20.pdf>.

74 Interview with QRCS senior staff member, above note 38.

75 S. Barakat, S. Milton and G. Elkhoul, above note 37.

humanitarian charities], based on shared humanitarian principles, which are strictly non-political".<sup>76</sup>

Furthermore, despite the Gulf Crisis creating precautionary approaches, Qatar has renewed its humanitarian diplomacy efforts in part to deflect criticisms and reclaim its space in the international arena. Due to the weight of accusations levelled against Qatar and its charitable sector, Qatar has adopted a hybrid model of humanitarian diplomacy that involves pure State engagement in some instances and State/non-State collaboration in others.

### **Qatar's comparative advantages in humanitarian diplomacy as a small niche State**

It is evident from the examination above that the State of Qatar has employed central concepts of humanitarian diplomacy within the Middle East, despite a lack of formal recognition of its practice or clear self-understanding of the State as a humanitarian diplomacy actor. Qatar's humanitarian diplomacy is an evolving practice that, if framed appropriately, has the potential to not only learn from previous failures and triumphs but also to offer guidance that may be of relevance to other small States. This can be leveraged amidst Qatar's attempt to chart a course between global aid norms and defining an approach to humanitarian action commensurate with its socio-cultural identity and comparative advantages in the region and beyond, thus gearing the potential for the current practice of humanitarian diplomacy to evolve from reactive, short-term strategies to a more sophisticated approach of engagement by both non-State and State actors at the local, regional and global levels. This section will briefly examine some of the comparative advantages that have underpinned the State of Qatar's evolution as a niche actor in humanitarian diplomacy. Many of these characteristics are typical of a small State and can be applied to similar States in the region, particularly the UAE, Kuwait and Oman.

#### **Adherence to international law**

As a small State, Qatar's respect for, and propagation of, international law is central to its own survival as a sovereign and independent State. Its commitment to the law was tested in its handling of the Gulf Crisis. While the four blockading countries disregarded Qatar's sovereignty by insisting on it shutting down Al Jazeera, ending Turkey's military presence and cutting diplomatic ties with Iran (as part of thirteen demands to be met in exchange for lifting the blockade),<sup>77</sup> Qatar chose to seek justice in international courts rather than getting into a tit-for-tat battle with its neighbours. This level-headed strategy paid off, with Qatar securing

76 UN, "Daily Press Briefing by the Office of the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General", 9 June 2017, available at: [www.un.org/press/en/2017/db170609.doc.htm](http://www.un.org/press/en/2017/db170609.doc.htm).

77 "What Are The 13 Demands Given To Qatar?", *Gulf News*, 23 June 2017, available at: <https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/qatar/what-are-the-13-demands-given-to-qatar-1.2048118>.

legal victories against the blockading nations in international courts on issues ranging from human rights to airspace violations and even intellectual property rights.<sup>78</sup> Qatar's capacity for critical self-examination and eagerness to correct its mistakes also contributed to the amicable resolution of the crisis. Additionally, in attempts to address the allegation that it is "funding international terrorism", Qatar brought all aid organizations privately established by Qatari families under RACA and gave this body greater institutional powers. It also withdrew permission to raise funds from any charitable organization that failed to conform with the accountability standards.<sup>79</sup>

This adherence to international law (including IHL) is a major structural reason why Qatar could be effective in humanitarian diplomacy. Since 2012, and through the National Committee for International Humanitarian Law based in the Ministry of Justice, Qatar has provided consistent support to ensure that IHL is adhered to on a national level (through the training of its own armed forces).<sup>80</sup> It is also notable that many of the top Qatari diplomats, including its special envoy for counterterrorism and mediation in conflict resolution – Qatar's chief mediator since 2016 – and the assistant foreign minister for regional affairs, hold doctorates in international law, which grant them a deep understanding of IHL.<sup>81</sup> This high level of in-house capacity and awareness of IHL is quite distinctive within the diplomatic culture of the Middle East, where States tend to outsource humanitarian diplomacy to specialized private consultants or actors such as Geneva Call. This feature of Qatar's diplomatic corps opens many opportunities for linking more conventional diplomacy with humanitarian diplomacy.

## Independent and supportive foreign policy

Qatar's State-led humanitarian diplomacy benefits from its foreign policy's independent and balanced diplomatic culture, primarily mandated by its geographical location between two long-term opponents: Saudi Arabia and Iran. Not wanting to antagonize either neighbour because of its complex economic and social interdependency on both, Qatar ended up mastering the art of soft diplomacy.

Hugo Slim contrasts quiet, back-channel humanitarian diplomacy with the loud, name-and-shame advocacy associated with leading global human rights NGOs – with the former often providing a more effective means of attaining the desired ends of reduced human suffering.<sup>82</sup> During the early years of the Arab

78 "UN Top Court Rules in Favour of Qatar in International Airspace Dispute", *UN News*, 14 July 2020, available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/07/1068341>. See also "Qatar Wins Air Blockade Case at Top UN Court", *Gulf Times*, 14 July 2020, available at: [www.gulf-times.com/story/668168/Qatar-wins-air-blockade-case-at-top-UN-court](http://www.gulf-times.com/story/668168/Qatar-wins-air-blockade-case-at-top-UN-court).

79 Sultan Barakat, "Qatar-GCC Agreement: A Victory for Measured Diplomacy", *Al Jazeera*, 8 January 2021, available at: [www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/1/8/qatar-gcc-agreement-a-victory-for-measured-diplomacy](http://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/1/8/qatar-gcc-agreement-a-victory-for-measured-diplomacy).

80 Interview with former consultant to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Doha, June 2020.

81 Mutlaq Al-Qahtani, "Enforcement of International Judicial Decisions of the International Court of Justice in Public International Law", PhD diss., University of Glasgow, 2003.

82 Hugo Slim, "Humanitarian Diplomacy: The ICRC's Neutral and Impartial Advocacy in Armed Conflicts", *Ethics and Humanitarian Affairs*, Vol. 33, No. 1, 2019.



Spring, the tone of Qatar's foreign policy was more aligned with that movement's activist spirit, but it has since then moderated to suit back-channel diplomacy. For instance, in the case of Myanmar, when nearly all other Organisation of Islamic Cooperation countries were loudly denouncing the government as repressive or even genocidal in its treatment of the Rohingya minority, Qatar took a more measured approach and attempted to utilize its good offices to persuade the Myanmar government to respect humanitarian principles, rather than demonizing it.<sup>83</sup> The same qualities were demonstrated throughout the Taliban–US talks between 2018 and 2021.

The State of Qatar has acted as a humanitarian norm entrepreneur, supporting various global instruments that feed into the concept of humanitarian diplomacy, including protecting education in armed conflict, championing Sustainable Development Goal 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions, and endorsing the Responsibility to Protect. Qatar has also made various efforts with regard to counterterrorism and preventing violent extremism, including through financial support to the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund,<sup>84</sup> with a clear link to humanitarian protection in conflict zones.

### Cultural and religious proximity

While the global protection system mainly relies on the UN and other international actors to respond to crises, these actors tend to be culturally worlds apart from many of the State and non-State armed groups that have emerged in the Middle East over the past few decades. Qatar's effectiveness in humanitarian diplomacy is in large part due to its cultural and religious affinity with the populations affected by conflict across the region. By speaking the same language and demonstrating cultural and ideological empathy with various causes, and also providing a model of progressive and open leadership of a Muslim country, Qatar is able to access and communicate with many of the groups that are reluctant to engage with the West.<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, Qatar can draw upon its status as a leading progressive Islamic country, with deep pools of religious scholarly knowledge and wisdom, to develop new conceptions of Islamic humanitarian diplomacy. Additionally, sponsored by the State, Qatari humanitarian and religious organizations have been working together to integrate Islamic values and principles into aid delivery and fundraising, addressing the need for a culturally appropriate aid model that is compatible with the financial and social expectations of Islam. Particularly important has been the effort of QRCS and the ICRC in exploring the overlap between IHL and the Islamic law of armed conflict, as well as providing combatants with IHL trainings framed in a religious context. The similarities between IHL and Islamic law are not coincidental; they demonstrate that

83 Interview with former Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, Doha, March 2019.

84 Alya Mohammed Ahmad, "Qatar's Strategy for Countering Terrorism: A Human Security Approach", PhD diss., Hamad Bin Khalifa University, Ar-Rayyan, 2018.

85 H. M. Alkhateeb (ed.), above note 58.



universal values exist and are a significant feature of most religious and non-religious worldviews.<sup>86</sup>

## Global outlook and promotion of dialogue

In the aftermath of 9/11, the State of Qatar launched the Doha Forum in 2003 with the aim of promoting dialogue amongst world leaders, policy-makers and academics. The Forum has been held annually ever since and has established itself as a leading platform for open discussion of critical challenges facing the world, including through engaging in diplomacy on humanitarian issues. In many ways the Forum came to build on the relatively new tradition of freedom of expression introduced to the region in the mid-1990s by the Al Jazeera news channel, which not only raised awareness among its regional audience of the cruelty of conflict (the Iraq War, the invasion of Afghanistan, the war in Syria, etc.) but also extended the opportunities for humanitarian diplomacy, with its journalistic reach extended to offering a platform for some of those actors who were deprived of the opportunity to present their views in the wake of the polarizing George W. Bush doctrine of “you are either with us or against us”. This even included Jabhat al-Nusra’s leader, Mohammed al-Jolani, who had his very first interview broadcasted to the world by Al Jazeera.<sup>87</sup> Far from being a mouthpiece for the Qatari government or a purveyor of the Muslim Brotherhood’s extremism, Al Jazeera has established itself as a niche platform for open media exchange that is unparalleled in the region.

Both the Doha Forum and Al Jazeera can best be examined as part of a wider policy to brand Qatar as an open and progressive country where dialogue can take place in the interest of regional and global peace and stability. This policy is also a reflection of the fact, that despite its relatively small population (2.36 million, of which only around 360,000 are Qatari nationals),<sup>88</sup> Qatar aims to be a highly connected country that can serve as a convening point for humanitarian dialogue. It is home to one of the highest concentrations of embassies in the region, with ninety-five foreign embassies and consulates from around the world. Qatar Airways also connects Doha to a vast range of destinations, which makes international diplomatic travel much easier. With advancements in aviation coupled with a high concentration of embassies, Qatar is positioned to be a facilitator of other diplomatic endeavours.

Assured by its internal political stability, Qatar has been able to offer a home to a collection of very diverse think-tanks and research centres whose work was highly political and has brought to Qatar accusations of bias and intervention in the affairs of other sovereign States. Such centres include the Brookings Doha

86 ICRC, “Islamic Law and International Humanitarian Law: Common Principles of the Two Legal Systems”, 25 November 2020, available at: [www.icrc.org/en/document/islamic-law-international-humanitarian-law](http://www.icrc.org/en/document/islamic-law-international-humanitarian-law).

87 “Al-Qaeda Leader in Syria Speaks to Al Jazeera”, *Al Jazeera*, 19 December 2013, available at: [www.aljazeera.com/news/2013/12/19/al-qaeda-leader-in-syria-speaks-to-al-jazeera](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2013/12/19/al-qaeda-leader-in-syria-speaks-to-al-jazeera).

88 Haley Hunter-Zinck *et al.*, “Population Genetic Structure of the People of Qatar”, *American Journal of Human Genetics*, Vol. 87, No. 1, 2010.

Center, which operated between 2008 and 2022; the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, established in 2010; and the Doha Interfaith Dialogue Center, which was launched in 2007.

## Taking risks

Qatar has been able to engage in risky, yet potentially rewarding, forms of humanitarian diplomacy precisely because it does not shy away from dealing with unsavoury actors. Whilst many other States globally are increasingly constrained by anti-terrorism legislation and the risks of operating in conflict zones, Qatar has long felt unencumbered by the pressures of regional or global consensus and is free to parley with political or religious factions deemed by other States to be too controversial to engage in dialogue. Although Qatar does not allow the terrorist classifications generated by other States (including the US Department of State list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations) to prevent its own interactions or discourses, it does respect the UN Security Council Sanctions List and works within its limits.

By hosting the offices of controversial political and armed movements – principally the Taliban and Hamas – Doha has also emerged as a key capital in which NGOs and diplomats have gathered to engage these groups in dialogue over humanitarian access and related issues. Diplomatic hyper-activism is part of Qatar’s hedging strategy, allowing the country to maintain open lines of communication, if not entirely friendly relations, with international actors who are frequently antagonistic to one another.<sup>89</sup>

## Affordability

Qatar’s wealth and financial capacity allows its State institutions to rapidly disburse large sums of cash in order to facilitate dialogue and help reach deals. Qatar’s affordability played an important role in its bid to defuse the crisis in the war-torn Darfur region of Sudan;<sup>90</sup> committed to seeing the negotiations through, Qatar generously hosted large number of representatives from all sides, especially the organized armed groups, in Doha’s luxury hotels for months at great expense, thereby extending the periods during which opportunities for humanitarian diplomacy could arise. However, whilst Qatar’s wealth weighs heavily in many analyses of its outsized diplomatic clout relative to its small-State status, any suggestions that it engages mainly in “chequebook humanitarian diplomacy” would be highly reductive. Rather, Qatar possesses a wide range of social, cultural, political and diplomatic resources on which it can draw for its practice of humanitarian diplomacy.

89 Mehran Kamrava, “Qatari Foreign Policy and the Exercise of Subtle Power”, *International Studies Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 2017.

90 “Checkbook Diplomacy? Qatar Takes Aggressive Role in Region”, *Jerusalem Post*, 10 October 2006, available at: [www.jpost.com/middle-east/checkbook-diplomacy-qatar-takes-aggressive-role-in-region](http://www.jpost.com/middle-east/checkbook-diplomacy-qatar-takes-aggressive-role-in-region).

## Conclusion

Ultimately, the imprecise definition of humanitarian diplomacy grants it leniency in application and standard. However, various scholarly perspectives accept the range of humanitarian diplomacy to include negotiating the presence of humanitarian organizations in order to access innocent civilians in need of protection. This process encompasses the monitoring of assistance programmes, promoting respect for international law and engaging in advocacy in support of broader humanitarian goals.<sup>91</sup> The State of Qatar has spent the greater part of the last three decades positioning itself as a respected humanitarian actor and has utilized humanitarian diplomacy as an appropriate medium for achieving these goals.

Qatar has evidently engaged in a wide range of humanitarian activities that serve both the State and non-State levels. These engagements fall under the rubric of an expanded definition of humanitarian diplomacy and have evolved in response to the changing nature of conflict and humanitarianism in the Middle East. As a rising and significant humanitarian donor and host of several prominent humanitarian organizations, Qatar has not evaded the side effects of being involved in conflict. It has suffered impacts as a result of volatile conflict dynamics both in terms of military and political intervention and due to its role as an involved mediator.

While the empirical analysis of this paper focuses on Qatar, it remains relevant to other small States and non-traditional donors in the Middle East. Qatar's case highlights an attempt to navigate between global aid norms and defining an approach to humanitarian action that is commensurate with the country's unique socio-cultural identity and comparative advantages as an emerging donor. Qatar's evolving approaches to mediation have paralleled its growing role as a more recognized humanitarian donor, paving the way for its current humanitarian diplomacy in the region – a development that other regional actors can learn from.

Additionally, it is worth mentioning that despite Qatar's sustained humanitarian efforts and utilization of central concepts of humanitarian diplomacy, there has been a lack of formal recognition for its practices, even in terms of self-awareness. Due to the novelty of, and uncertain theoretical support for, humanitarian diplomacy as a concept, Qatar lacks a clear self-understanding of its humanitarian practices as they relate to humanitarian diplomacy. Thus, it is imperative to academically explore the complex framework for humanitarian diplomacy, especially with the diverse range of actors and intentions involved. Further research is necessary to investigate the broader implications of an evolving humanitarian architecture on the main ethos of facilitating access to aid in conflict settings. Additionally, deeper investigation is needed to explore how humanitarian diplomacy can affect the stabilization processes in the Middle East, particularly by facilitating negotiations between humanitarian organizations and political parties to the benefit of affected civilians in dire need of humanitarian aid and access.

91 L. Minear and H. Smith, above note 1.