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Priorities and challenges of Qatar's Humanitarian Diplomacy

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This Policy Brief analyzes Qatar's role in Humanitarian Diplomacy. It begins by defining the term Humanitarian Diplomacy and situating Qatar's interventions within broader trends of humanitarianism in the Gulf sub-region. The briefing then proceeds to examine Qatar's Humanitarian Diplomacy at the level of implementing agencies, the State, and global diplomacy. It then summarizes the impact of the Gulf Crisis on Qatar's Humanitarian Diplomacy and provides recommendations for strengthening its practice. Ultimately, the author argues that Humanitarian Diplomacy is a powerful concept for understanding Qatar's multi-faceted and sophisticated conflict and humanitarian response.

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The International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has identified 12 priority areas of action for Humanitarian Diplomacy:

- Disaster reduction
- Promoting Red Cross/Red Crescent auxiliary status
- Preventing diseases and other public health challenges
- Volunteer and youth promotion, protection, and recognition
- Legal frameworks for disaster response (e.g. disaster law) and disaster relief and reduction management
- Protecting the humanitarian space of the Red Cross/Red Crescent
- Climate change adaptation
- Food security
- Addressing migration and human trafficking
- Promoting non-violence
- Addressing urbanization and its humanitarian consequences
- Humanitarian sector reforms and cluster co-ordination

What is Humanitarian Diplomacy

Humanitarian Diplomacy (HD) 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 HD focuses on persuading decision makers, military and opinion leaders and increasingly militant non-state actors to act in the interests of vulnerable populations and with full respect for fundamental humanitarian principles while maximizing support for humanitarian operations and programs, and building the partnerships necessary for humanitarian objectives to be achieved.

In complex and protracted situations, HD 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 programs, promoting respect for international law and norms, and engaging in advocacy at a variety of levels in support of humanitarian objectives (Minear and Smith 2007).

Qatar and Humanitarian Diplomacy

Within the Gulf States, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait and Qatar have had visible roles in **humanitarian interventions** in conflict-affected and post-conflict environments over the last two decades, with a clear priority given to addressing crises in Arab, Islamic and African states. Traditionally, the emphasis has been on providing immediate relief (such as food distribution, medical aid and the construction of refugee camps and the provision of shelter) rather than longer-term development projects, as was illustrated by their interventions in Afghanistan (1990s), Bosnia (mid-1990s to 2000s), Lebanon (post-July 2006 conflict with Israel), and Gaza (after the 2008-9 Israeli incursions) (Barakat and Zyck, 2010, p. 3). However, with the arrival of the Arab Spring, the spread of state fragility and the growing controversy surrounding issues of accountability in humanitarian aid the balance seems to be shifting. Large grants, sometimes in the region of a $1bn or more are now more frequently allocated to stabilize economies, support governments and prevent crisis (e.g. Saudi Arabia and UAE's recent support to Sudan, Egypt, Yemen and Qatar's support to Jordan, Gaza and the Palestinian Authority).

By and large, Gulf States traditionally are less known for their **pro-active peace-making** efforts and more for their reactive acts of offering support for victims and their families. This trend has also been changing over the last five years. With greater concerns over regional stability and security, Saudi Arabia and UAE are taking much bolder interventions which range from the use of force, (as with efforts to restore 'legitimacy' in Yemen) to their 2018 mediation of a peace accord between the two former Horn of Africa enemies Ethiopia and Eritrea.[2]

Amongst Gulf States, Qatar stands out as the most actively involved in **mediation efforts** which it describes as both a moral obligation and a way of gaining broader strategic advantages (Barakat, 2014, p. 1). From the Qatari perspective, offering assistance in the resolution of armed conflict is reflective of a desire to uphold ethical standards rooted in deep religious conviction and a commitment to peace and stability. Qatar's commitment to conflict mediation 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" (Barakat and Milton, 2019). The decision to focus on conflict mediation as a major aspect of its international engagement forms part of Qatar's independent foreign policy, in which it strives

to keep a balance between its two large and powerful neighbors, Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Qatar's **foreign diplomacy** is characterized by a high degree of autonomy, showing a combination of considerable pragmatism but also an unwavering will to forge an autonomous and sovereign line of politics and international relations despite constant pressure (Hansen, 2013, p. 61; Coates Ulrichsen, 2014, p. 8). Qatar's ability to accept a higher level of risk is made possible by the **internal and financial stability of the country**. With one of the highest GDP per capita in the world ($63,505 in 2017, World Bank) and minimal civil society demands on foreign policy Qatar has taken little political risk and gained even more political capital in pursuing morally popular humanitarian interventions. Qatar's domestic stability was demonstrated in 2013 when Shaikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani abdicated the throne in favor of his son, Shaikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani in a rare smooth transition of monarchs. Uniquely in the region, the combination of stability, abundant wealth and determined autonomy has allowed Qatar to pursue objectives which can be construed as too controversial and where humanitarian action is constrained by international perceptions. This is evidenced by Qatar's **strategic dialogue with non-state actors** in such cases as with Hezbullah in South Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

Despite consistently utilizing principles of HD, Qatar, like many other non-traditional or OECD-DAC donors, has not formally recognized the term as an instrument of its foreign policy. However, a careful examination of its humanitarian interventions reveals three distinct levels of application where tools of diplomacy are integrated seamlessly within humanitarian interventions.

At the level of implementing agencies

Today Qatar has only two major international implementing agencies, Qatar Charity and the Qatar Red Crescent Society (QRCS), with both engaging in HD. However, with its links to ICRC, QRCS uses HD extensively in its day to day operations, negotiating access to conflict affected populations in the most difficult of operational environments including Somalia, Sudan, Afghanistan, and most recently Syria. The war in Syria, has been particularly trying for QRCS, where they have lost a number of employees in 2013, 2014 and 2017. The organization has also needed to negotiate the release of their own workers and those of the Norwegian Refugee Council when in 2013 fourteen QRCS and seven NRC workers were taken hostage and held captive for 14 days.

In contexts of fragility, such as Sudan, QRCS utilizes skilled mediation to negotiate between communities in villages across the war affected region of Arara and Beida Districts in West Darfur to allow for the implementation of projects funded under the Doha Document for Peace in Darfur (DDPD). These projects provide basic services with the overall aim of contributing to reconstruction, stability, and welfare for returning internally displaced persons (IDPs). This type of engagement to deliver lifesaving emergency aid most often goes unreported due to the sensitive nature of contacts (almost always community based) and discussions. Qatari aid agencies have become even more reticent following the 2017 blockade of Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt. Some agencies go so far as to deny negotiating with governments and non-state rebel groups for fear of further reprisal from the region.

It is important to note however that Qatar's deployment of humanitarian assistance in support of conflict affected environments has not always been 'conflict sensitive'. Evaluations of Qatar's aid to Lebanon, for example, suggest that positive perceptions of Qatar have come at the expense of the Lebanese state (Barakat and Zyck, 2010, p. 43). Similarly, tensions in northern Yemen increased in 2008 when mediations failed and Qatar withdrew its aid offer. The 'already protracted conflict appeared to become further entrenched' as the tensions strained relations between militants and the Yemen's central government (Barakat and Zyck, 2010, p. 44).

At state intervention level

Qatar's independent international relations and foreign policy are also reflective in the State's application of HD. Unencumbered by the pressure of regional consensus, Qatar is free to parley with political or religious factions deemed by other states to be too controversial to engage in dialogue. Over the years, Qatar has negotiated the release of hostages and prisoner exchanges in Iraq, Syria, Sudan, and Gaza. Although Qatar does not allow the terrorist classifications generated by other states from preventing its own interaction or discourse (with the exception of the U.S. Department of State list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations), it does respect the United Nations Security Council Sanctions List and works within its limits.

As such, Qatar has emerged as a trusted third-party mediator successfully cultivating sophisticated engagements in peace and conflict issues and solidifying its reputation as a key global player in conflict-affected contexts. Between 2008 and 2014, Qatar has served as an impartial broker of approximately 10 regional and international conflicts including the Doha Agreement in the 2008 Lebanon conflict, the cease-fire agreement in Yemen in 2008 and in the North/South Sudan conflict in 2010, the Doha agreement in the Fatah-Hamas conflict in 2012, as well as conflicts in Western Sahara, Algeria, Eritrea/Ethiopia, Djibouti and Eritrea and Somalia (Windecker and Sendrowicz, 2014, p. 91; Haykel, 2013, p. 2; Barakat, 2014).

The Arab Spring in 2011 ushered in a sea change in Qatari foreign policy as it shifted from highly independent to a more partisan and interventionist

stance in an attempt to influence the outcome of the Arab uprisings. Qatar played an important role in the 2011 intervention in Libya, with its support deemed crucial by an international coalition that wanted to ensure that the intervention was not perceived as a purely Western-led mission with no buy-in from Arab countries. This was followed by the Syrian crisis, which morphed into a full-scale civil war throughout 2011. The estimated $3 billion financial commitment by Qatar over the 2011–2014 period to providing arms and training to Syrian opposition forces represents a sum larger than the annual average of Qatari foreign aid. Yet in contrast to the relatively short intervention in Libya, the Syrian conflict has become a protracted quagmire attracting more negative global attention to the role of Qatar and the Gulf states. It has also given rise to the accusations of terror financing, which have caused Qatar very significant reputational damage.

Since 2013 Qatar's foreign policy shifted, suggesting a significantly reduced appetite for conflict mediation. With the exception of Gaza, where Qatar has maintained an almost routine role in conflict mediation, the state has by and large moved away from complex conflicts to single-issue mediation, mostly run by its Intelligence Department. Driven by humanitarian imperative, Qatar's recent mediation efforts have focused on prisoner exchange and release of hostages, such as when it facilitated the exchange of US sergeant Bowe Bergdahl for five Taliban prisoners from Guantanamo Bay in June 2014, or the release of 45 Fijian UN peacekeepers in November 2014, or the release of the captive nuns of Maaloula, also in 2014, both of whom were held captive by an al-Qaeda-linked Syrian rebel group, Jabhat al-Nusra. Several of these deals involved claims of direct payments to rebel groups, which Qatar has denied. Most recently, in October 2018, Qatar played a pivotal role in the release of Jumpei Yasuda, a Japanese freelance journalist who was held hostage by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, once known as al-Nusra Front. Such deals reinforced the popular impression that Qatar throws money around in its approach to such cases of HD. It appeared as if the days of high-profile mediation and involvement in foreign conflicts were over until Qatar announced its facilitation of the talks between the United States and Taliban (January/February 2019).

At the global humanitarian diplomatic level

Since 2012, through its membership in the International Humanitarian Law (IHL) Committee, Qatar has provided consistent support to ensure that IHL is adhered to nationally (through the training of its own armed forces) and regionally though supporting regional training activities including non-state actors, particularly in Syria. Some of those activities have been challenged recently by the 2010 United States of America, Holder v. Humanitarian Law Project, which considers any form of engagement with so-called terrorist groups as material support.

Arguably one of the most significant contributions made by Qatar was its support for the development of the **IHL in Islam**. Today, Doha hosts the Islamic Forum for International Humanitarian Law (IFIHL), an affiliate of the Islamic Committee of the International Crescent (ICIC), which undertakes research, training and advocacy for Humanitarian Protection through 'IHL and Islam,' exploring issues of crimes of genocide, forced disappearance, abduction, rape, sabotage, well poisoning, and environmental damage in times of armed conflict.

In addition, Qatar has supported various global instruments that feed into the concept of HD, including protecting education in armed conflict, the championing of Sustainable Development Goal 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions, and endorsing the Responsibility to Protect. All are areas that are usually avoided by other Arab countries because of the high risk involved.

In 2016 at the World Humanitarian Summit, Qatar pledged USD $10 billion in assistance over the proceeding decade and at the 2018 Doha Forum Qatar committed a further $500 million to various United Nations (UN) programs, not inclusive of the annual support Qatar provides to the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.[3]

A particularly effective form of global HD engagement comes through the soft power of the Al Jazeera media network, which Qatar used to help shape emerging narratives of protest during the Arab Spring (Coates Ulrichsen, 2014, p. 3; Echagüe, 2014, p. 11). It has established a unique position for itself by maintaining, over many years, a campaign for human rights and freedom of expression and by championing a number of humanitarian crises in the region and beyond. However, recently Al Jazeera has suffered a backlash as a result of a perceived bias in favor of the Muslim Brotherhood (Echagüe, 2014, p. 11; Roberts, 2013, p. 10). Still, it remains a very powerful tool, that can choose to draw attention to certain humanitarian crises (e.g. the plight of Myanmar's Rohingya Muslims and Afghanistan's civilian casualties).

The blockade of Qatar and change in priorities

The 2017 Gulf Crisis has proven to be one of the most challenging episodes faced by Qatar since its independence, with major economic, social, and political effects across the region. Resulting in a blockade of Qatar's land, air and sea borders, the crisis has impacted Qatar's humanitarian sector with a multitude of consequences that have called for a re-organization and an adaptation to weather the storm of the crisis. Still, Qatar's role as a humanitarian donor is

not under threat and it may even emerge from the crisis with a more sustainable and resilient humanitarian sector. However, what is under question is the degree to which Qatar would wish to pursue its interest in HD given the accusations of supporting terrorism that its humanitarian interventions have been subjected to by the blockading countries.

One of the most significant impacts of the Crisis has been the **contraction of the humanitarian landscape** in Qatar and across the Gulf. Prior to the Crisis, Qatar hosted one of the Gulf's largest humanitarian sectors in both number and **diversity of actors**. The once diverse humanitarian sector has as result of the crisis been minimized with only Qatar Charity and the Qatar Red Crescent Society (QRCS) as major operational humanitarian actors and Qatar Foundation as a donor for education support. Qatar now more closely resembles other Gulf states in the reduced diversity and size of its humanitarian sector. In the climate of accusations and PR warfare, organizations (and local philanthropist supporting them) are afraid to be included on terror watchlists and have become paralyzed with caution.

Despite increased economic uncertainty and a major geo-political stalemate, the volume of Qatari humanitarian aid has not declined. Rather, while Qatari humanitarian aid levels dropped in 2016, they returned to pre-blockade numbers in 2017, signaling that Qatar intends to uphold its international commitments and maintain its international and regional role through the blockade. What has been observed, however, is a shift in resource allocation with a greater proportion of Qatar's humanitarian financing channeled through multi-lateral organizations (43.53% of funds were disbursed through multi-laterals in 2017). This could be interpreted as part of Qatar's strategy of 'legitimacy through association' underscoring state commitment to multi-lateral cooperation and partnerships. Although the contributions increase transparency and accountability of Qatar's humanitarian funding, there is also a loss of risk taking which was a key component of Qatar's HD. Another trend created by the blockade is the very significant drop in unidentified funding, falling from a six-year mean average of 39.8% to 1.54% in 2017 to shield the state from allegations that its humanitarian efforts are subverted to other purposes. This could impact those HD interventions that often-required discrete action.

Conclusion

Qatar's active mediation between 2008 and 2014 resulted in varying levels of success as the State sought international recognition as a regional power player. Learning from previous failures and triumphs, Qatar's use of HD has evolved from employing reactive, short-term strategy to a more sophisticated approach of sustainable long-term programming backed by larger financial allocations. The State is institutionalizing

ways to leverage its soft power through its vast financial resources and use of the Al Jazeera media network to influence the geopolitical landscape.

Presented below are three recommendations to strengthen Qatar's practice of HD going forward.

1. Employ a humanitarian lens

The nature of contemporary complex conflicts has evolved beyond traditional methods of peace making and cannot be solved by hard power and intervention alone. The plight of those caught in the crossfire is not isolated to the affected country or region but is spilling over international borders in unprecedent migration flows seeking security and refuge. As a regional power player faithful to the humanitarian imperative, Qatar should intercede in conflicts as part of the Responsibility to Protect and by viewing all interventions through a humanitarian lens. With record levels of conflict driven displacement, the humanitarian need is at its greatest. Diplomacy with state officials, non-state actors and belligerents should focus on negotiating access and protection of vulnerable populations as a priority. Unmet humanitarian need has the capability to reignite tensions and create new problems with far reaching consequences.

2. Establish a Joint Committee

Although Qatar has been utilizing central concepts of HD, there has been no formal recognition of its practice. A formal adoption of HD would bolster the legitimacy of Qatar's contribution to global debates as well as international bodies and multilateral agencies. Furthermore, the contraction of humanitarian actors could ultimately strengthen the sustainability and efficacy of Qatar's humanitarian workforce by invoking HD as a policy. With fewer actors, Qatar has the opportunity to establish a coordinating body with participation of the Qatar Red Crescent, FA, Qatar Human Rights Commission to deconflict interventions and ensure compliance to International Humanitarian Law (IHL). Qatar should also use this body to capitalize on the religious aspect of humanitarian aid, integrating Islamic principles in aid delivery and provide combatants with IHL trainings framed in a religious context.

3. Continue to pursue an independent role and fill gaps

Whilst the blockade has not shaken Qatar's stance as a humanitarian actor, it has created a shift in Qatar's HD and a redirection of the country's humanitarian funds towards multi-lateral institutions. Although this response quells accusations of Qatar's funding of nefarious political groups under the auspices of humanitarian aid, it does not offer an ideal solution. The strategy does not address the UN system's constraints on aid delivery or resolve the need for

a culturally-appropriate aid model compatible with financial and social expectations of a Zakat fund.

Qatar has always pursued an independent humanitarian policy which has enabled frontline humanitarian responders to deliver critical, lifesaving aid in areas of crisis such as Palestine and Iraq. As capital transfers from Qatar have been impeded by restrictions, direct support to NGOs and CSOs operating in conflict zones such as Palestine and Iraq have been cut. If Qatar bows to political and economic pressure in favor of more conventional methods of humanitarian financing Qatar may leave disastrous gaps in humanitarian relief. Partnerships for accountability should not come at the expense of vulnerable populations.

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Endnotes

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2 https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/09/ethiopia-eritrea-sign-peace-deal-saudi-arabia-summit-180917055913813.html

3 Qatar and the UN: Overview on Qatar's partnership with the United Nations https://www.gco.gov.qa/en/focus/qatar-united-nations/