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Qatar's evolving role in conflict mediation

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ABSTRACT

Qatar's role in mediation diminished following the 2017 Gulf Crisis and the regional backlash to its interventionist policy during the Arab Spring. After the resolution of the Gulf Crisis in 2021, the Qatari role in conflict mediation re-emerged with a return to third-party mediation in the early 2020s, receiving widespread attention following the U.S.-Taliban agreement. The post-crisis return of Qatar to playing central mediator and facilitator roles in conflict management has, however, been subject to discontinuities as well as continuities in its mediation style as a result of the crisis in its international relations. This article analyses the evolution of mediation strategy, utilizing case studies of Qatar's mediation in Afghanistan, Chad, and Libya through a framework focusing on results, modality, acceptability and reception. The analysis identifies key comparative findings on Qatar's post-2020 renewed role in conflict mediation.

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KEYWORDS Qatar; conflict mediation; peacemaking; Gulf states; conflict resolution

1. Introduction

In the late 2000s, Qatar emerged as a leading peacemaker in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), playing multiple roles in conflict mediation, humanitarian assistance and post-conflict reconstruction. The brokering of peace agreements or ceasefires in Lebanon (2008), Yemen (2010), Darfur (2011), and Gaza (2012) gained headlines worldwide and contributed significantly to Qatar's rising reputation. The rapid transformation of Qatar from a quiet country to a high-profile state within regional diplomacy led to a concomitant increase in academic and policy analysis of the drivers and dynamics of Qatari mediation and foreign policy (Kamrava, 2011; Roberts, 2012). However, Qatar's role in mediation diminished following backlash against its interventionist role in the Arab Spring (Ulrichsen, 2014). This reached an apogee in 2017 when the blockade imposed on Qatar shifted analytical attention away from Qatar's role as a third-party mediator towards attempts by regional and international powers to mediate the Gulf Crisis

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between Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (Fraihat, 2020; Miller, 2019; Milton-Edwards, 2020).

The facilitation of the U.S.-Taliban talks that culminated in the Doha Agreement in February 2020 marked Qatar's return as a third-party mediator after the blockade. After the signing of the U.S.-Taliban agreement in 2020, Qatar positioned itself as a go-to regional third-party capable of neutral and trusted facilitation and mediation in a wide range of conflict zones and political crises (Alqashouti, 2021). In 2022, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, the Emir of Qatar, declared at the 77th UN General Assembly that 'mediation in the peaceful settlement of disputes' was at the centre of Qatar's foreign policy to 'solidify [its] reputation as an internationally reliable partner' (The Peninsula, 2022).

Whilst this new phase of Qatari conflict mediation has been subject to increased media and policy analysis, very little academic research empirically analyses the continuities and discontinuities in Qatar's mediation post-Gulf Crisis. This paper contributes towards filling this gap in the comparative knowledge base on the role of Qatar and the Gulf States more broadly in conflict mediation and theories of small states and emerging powers as mediators. It then presents a brief contextualization of the rise of Qatar and its role in conflict mediation and other forms of conflict response. The paper then presents a comparative qualitative study of three novel cases of Qatari mediation in the early 2020s that have not been widely researched in recent literature: the U.S.-Taliban and intra-Afghan peace negotiations, the Chadian agreement, and the Libyan political process. Finally, an analysis is then offered that identifies several key comparative findings on the continuities and discontinuities of Qatar's renewed role in conflict mediation. The analysis is supported by primary fieldwork research conducted through interviews with Qatari officials and with a range of policymakers, experts, and other individuals close to the various processes mediated by Qatar.

2. Theoretical contribution

The paper makes a theoretical contribution in relation to several research literatures. Firstly, the paper contributes towards research examining the roles of small states in the 'Global South' in conflict mediation, a subfield that has largely focused on small states in the 'Global North' (Zartman, 2013), despite the increasing relevance of small states to the contemporary mediation needs of complex and polarized conflicts. In contrast to the coercive methods accessed by great powers, the mediation strategies of small states draw on their perceived neutrality, non-threatening nature, and 'no legacies of foreign excess', (Jones 1999: 112), which lends itself to facilitative or procedural strategies sometimes described as 'pure' mediation. These strategies have

been found to produce more durable agreements with sustainable buy-in (Beardsley et al., 2006, p. 82). Qatari mediation offers an important hybrid case in that its sources of leverage in mediation, in particular its strategic use of finance, entail that it does not fit the classic typology of a small state mediator.

Secondly, the major focus of extant scholarship in the field has been on how variation in mediation strategy affects the results of the mediation effort (Beardsley et al., 2006; Eriksson, 2019). There has been relatively little attention given to the determinants influencing the mediation strategy of single actors and how these factors may change over time. Research into this issue has argued that mediation approaches are based on explanations endogenous to a given conflict, such as the mediator's epistemological understanding of the conflict, levels of conflict intensity, or explanations regarding the mediator's background and style (Heemsbergen & Siniver, 2010; Lindgren, 2016). Neither of these approaches adequately considers the role of variation over time or structural changes in the state's foreign policy. Qatar's renewed third party role is a unique case that enables analysis of how a state's mediation approach transforms in response to an international shock, such as the 2017 blockade that changed Qatar's position in the international system, with foreign policy a key tool utilized to overcome its effects (Al-Eshaq & Rasheed, 2022). Conceptually, a state's mediation style expresses how it views itself as an intermediary actor in international relations, choosing to depend, for instance, more on facilitative versus coercive instruments for brokering exchange. A crisis of regional exclusion amongst its neighbours offers analytical insights into how a state reformulates its mediation approach to enhance its comparative strengths and reduce the risks of third-party engagement.

Thirdly, the paper contributes towards the literature examining Qatar's mediation. In the early 2010s, a minor research agenda emerged that analysed the then-recent ascent of Qatar to the status of a new entrant to the fray of conflict mediation in the MENA region (Kamrava, 2011; Ulrichsen, 2013). This strand of research was quickly eclipsed by real-world events as Doha's interventionist and controversial role in the Arab Spring led to its mediation role being curtailed following the regional blockade imposed on Qatar in 2017 (Ulrichsen, 2014). Yet with renewed attention to Qatari mediation in the early 2020s, there is a need for research examining the continuities and discontinuities between the contemporary practice of Qatari mediation and its hyper-active mediation phase from 2006–2010. Most studies on Qatari mediation generalize from the empirical record focused on this 2006–2010 period – particularly, the cases of the Lebanese political crisis of 2008, the Houthi conflict in Yemen during 2007–2008, the Darfur peace process culminating in 2011, and, to a lesser extent, the 2012 Hamas-Fatah reconciliation agreement (Barakat, 2012; Barakat & Milton, 2011; Kamrava, 2011).

Lastly, the paper contributes to the broader literature on the Gulf states' contemporary mediation and peacemaking roles (Freer, 2023). Mediation has been a key tool within the repertoire of Gulf states peacemaking approaches, although they play very little role in what is conventionally defined as 'post-conflict peacebuilding'. For instance, Oman has been analysed as an 'interlocutor state' that aims to bridge 'East' and 'West', such as its role in facilitating the Iran nuclear deal in 2015 (Worrall, 2021). Moreover, the UAE has also recorded notable mediation achievements, particularly the rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea (Ylönen, 2018). Furthermore, the transformation of Saudi Arabia's regional profile in the early 2020s also involves a major role for mediation as a tool of foreign policy, notably in the Jeddah process aimed to resolve the 2023 war in Sudan.

3. International relations of Qatar

Qatar experienced a major transformation over the past few decades from a little-known Gulf state to a rapidly developing economy that occupies a key role in international trade as one of the world's largest natural gas producers (Chapa, 2022). Qatar's foreign policy ambitions in the region expanded at a rate outsized to its diminutive geography as its economic status expanded globally.

Qatar was incentivized to employ state branding and hedging strategies due to the 'structural constraints imposed by its small size and its unenviable geographic location' situated between powerful neighbours Saudi Arabia, with which it shares its only land border, and Iran, with which Qatar shares its largest gas field, the North Dome gas field (Kamrava, 2015, pp. 65–66). After moving out from under the geo-political orbit of Saudi Arabia, Qatar pursued a foreign policy centred around a hedging strategy and cultivating a range of alliances to balance the Saudi-Iranian regional rivalry.

Qatar also employed an active soft power strategy involving several tools, including establishing the Al-Jazeera media network, hosting mega-events including the FIFA World Cup 2022, and investing in culture and education through Qatar Foundation and other initiatives (Álvarez-Ossorio & Rodríguez García, 2021). The projection of international power through its foreign policy peaked in the early years of the Arab Spring when 'a combination of wealth and vision underpinned the success of Qatar's strategy and enabled it to eclipse the Arab world's traditional superpower' (Ulrichsen, 2014, p. 37).

Qatar's return to the mediation centre stage in the early 2020s is also connected to the rising power of the Gulf states. Russia's invasion of Ukraine necessitated a shift from Russia towards alternative sources of oil and gas, which solidified the Gulf states' power. Regarding this, Qatar and the Gulf states have been viewed as critical to stabilizing global energy markets and diversifying energy supplies to reduce Europe's dependence on Russian gas,

particularly due to sanctions on Iran (Jacobs, 2022; Motamedi, 2022). Within this context, Qatar's higher profile was evident in its facilitation of indirect communication between American and Iranian negotiators on renewing the Iran nuclear deal. The choice of Qatar, the world's largest liquefied natural gas (LNG) exporter, as the location for the talks underlined the G7's focus on strengthening relations with major hydrocarbon suppliers. Moreover, Qatar is the only Arab state whose economy depends on a pragmatic working relationship with Iran for trade agreements regulating fuel production.

4. Qatar's role in conflict mediation

The 2003 Qatari Constitution enshrined Qatar's commitment to mediation through Article Seven, 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'. This makes it one of the few states in the world with a constitutional commitment to peaceful conflict resolution rather than a loose foreign policy principle (Gulbrandsen, 2010).

Qatar's first reported mediation role was in the Hanish Islands dispute between Eritrea and Yemen in December 1995, shortly after Sheikh Hamad Al-Thani's succession as the Emir (Minich, 2015). Since then, Qatar's mediation portfolio expanded to include the 2008 Lebanese political crises, the 2007–2010 Houthi ceasefires in Yemen, the 2010–2011 Darfur peace process, the 2012 Hamas-Fatah reconciliation agreement, and the 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement. Other notable mediation efforts include the 2010 Djibouti-Eritrea ceasefire, the 2015 Tebu-Tuareg reconciliation agreement in Libya, the 2017 post-election crisis in the Gambia, the 2021 Somalia-Kenya border agreement, the 2022 Chad dialogue agreement, and the 2022 Libyan political proposal. Qatar has also been involved in specialized humanitarian accords for safe passage, such as the deal with Iran in 2017 that enabled the evacuation of four besieged towns in the Syrian civil war (Bellamy, 2022, p. 174; Elkahlout & Milton, 2023).

Previous research has identified a range of features of Qatar as a third-party mediator. Firstly, Qatar has an unusually large financial capacity in comparison to most small-state mediators. In various cases, Qatar offered significant funding as part of peace agreements or ceasefires that financially incentivize conflict parties to sign (Barakat & Milton, 2019). This led to criticism that Qatari mediation often leads to unstable, short-term financially-driven deals rather than resolving underlying conflict drivers (Ulrichsen, 2014). Secondly, Qatar's acceptability as a mediator in the 2006–2010 pre-Arab Spring phase is largely explained due to its then-widely perceived neutrality during a period in which it had cultivated an unusually independent foreign policy

(Kamrava, 2015). However, Qatar's intervention in the Arab Spring, particularly in Libya and Syria (Ulrichsen, 2014), tarnished its neutrality, restricting its acceptability as a third-party mediator in and beyond the region.

Thirdly, there is a debate in the literature over Qatar's motivations as a mediator. Various explanations focused on Qatari mediation as a means of pursuing economic or security interests or as a normative expression of the state's commitment to global peace and security (Alqashouti, 2021). Small states aim to project an image as peacemakers to increase their 'soft power' given their limited hard power in terms of military or economic capacity (Nye, 2008, p. 104), and research has focused on the extent to which Qatar's mediation policy is driven by state branding (Barakat, 2012).

An alternative explanation relates to the realization that high-level mediation bestows third-party states close diplomatic channels to the U.S. and other major international powers. Its re-emergence as the formal mediator from 2018 to 2020 of the U.S.-Taliban negotiations, and its later role as a facilitator in hosting the Afghan peace process, signalled that the U.S. and other major powers involved in Afghanistan shared mutual interest in Qatar's evolution into a trusted and impartial regional partner. The foreign policy interests of these powers became closely tied to the Afghan file, with Qatar's ability to broker peace through international diplomacy and supporting broader international coalitions in support of negotiations. The American security guarantee to Qatar, which involves hosting the Al-Udeid military airbase, was emphasized because of the direct mediation channel with the U.S. and the changed regional context of the 2017–2021 Gulf Crisis.

Qatari officials reiterate the soft power rationale and argue that Qatar's rise as a global power was motivated by adopting a resilient policy based on soft power, international law, positive neutrality, and international reputation (Al-Qahtani & Al-Thani, 2021). These factors are identified, in addition to religious and normative motivations, as the drivers behind Qatar's diplomatic efforts and its attempts to influence peace and conflict dynamics. This combination of soft power, diplomacy, and mediation has enabled Qatar to become 'an innovative, dynamic actor with the capacity to mediate in the various conflicts in the region, and to project itself onto the world stage' (Álvarez-Ossorio & Rodríguez García, 2021, p. 105).

Fourthly, another consistent finding in the research literature is that Qatar has lower levels of state capacity for mediating and facilitating peace processes in comparison to leading small-state mediators, such as Switzerland or Sweden, which possess long-established mediation support structures. Authority to lead mediation portfolios has been handled by a select few individuals, such as the former Prime Minister and Foreign Minister and the Special Envoy for Conflict Resolution. Particularly, weak capacities have been identified concerning post-agreement monitoring and implementation and

knowledge of best practices in mediation process structure and design (Barakat, 2014). Kamrava writes that Qatar's successes in mediation:

Are often checked by limited capabilities to affect long-term changes to the preferences of the disputants through power projection abilities, in-depth administrative and on-the-ground resources, and apparent underestimations of the complexities of the deep-rooted conflicts at hand. (Kamrava, 2011, p. 539)

Finally, Qatar engages in multiple forms of conflict resolution, including preventative diplomacy, third-party mediation and support for multi-lateral conflict prevention and peacebuilding. Despite courting controversy in its involvement in conflict zones, Qatar has emerged as a major regional player in conflict mediation and peacemaking over the past few decades.

5. Analysis: Qatari mediation post-2020

This section provides insight into Qatar's mediation of three conflicts, ordered chronologically, within its post-2020 phase as a third-party mediator: the U.S.-Taliban and intra-Afghan peace negotiations, the Chadian agreement, and Libya's political process.

5.1. Methodological framework

Qatar's changing strategy towards mediation post-Gulf Crisis is qualitatively analysed through an analytical framework focused on four indicators for mediation strategy and outcome (see [Table 1](#) below).

The four indicators jointly analyse the interaction between Qatar's reformulated mediation strategy in response to the international diplomatic shock of the Gulf Crisis and, subsequently, whether conflict actors and other third-party states have responded positively to Qatar's repositioning. The analysis of the results of the case studies links the state-specific analysis of Qatar's mediation style with the short-term and mid-term results in resolving or de-escalating the conflict.

The case selection criteria for the three case studies pick out those instances of Qatari mediation and facilitation that led to an agreement or

Table 1. Indicators for assessing Qatar's Mediation strategy.

Results	Short-term outcomes of the agreement such as signing of an agreement and the effects on conflict dynamics.
Modality	The 'how' of mediation, including balance of persuasion or incentivization, the individuals or organizations involved and use of mediation or facilitation.
Acceptability	The factors influencing the acceptability of Qatar's third-party role among the conflict parties.
Reception	How the mediation or facilitation was perceived by conflict parties, secondary actors and the global public.

prevented the outbreak of national violence. This criterion excludes the important yet inconclusive Qatari roles in facilitating the intra-Afghan talks after the Doha Agreement and the hosting of talks to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran to prevent nuclear armament that took place in Doha in June 2022. Furthermore, the designation of 2020 as the resurgence of Qatar's role in mediation should be understood within the geopolitical context of warming Saudi-Qatari relations and regional diplomacy throughout 2020 that culminated in the resolution of the Gulf Crisis on 5 January 2021.

5.2. U.S.-Taliban agreement

The Doha Agreement was signed between the Taliban and the United States on 29 February 2020 by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the movement's deputy leader in political affairs, and Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, in the presence of high-level representatives and foreign ministers of states and international organizations.

Firstly, regarding results, Qatar achieved some success in opening up the Afghan peace process. Doha was approached by the U.S. to facilitate negotiations with the Taliban and host a political office for the movement outside of Afghanistan, following the acceptance in some U.S. government circles in 2007 for the need to seek a negotiated solution given the low likelihood of absolute military defeat of the Taliban. Obstacles to Qatar's early facilitation ranged from the protracted process of establishing a political office in 2013 and securing the release of high-level Taliban prisoners from Guantanamo Bay detention camp in 2014.

During the official U.S.-Taliban talks, Qatari mediation was able to resolve key issues of dispute regarding counterterrorism obligations, the details of the ceasefire between the U.S. and the Taliban, and the phasing of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. An agreement was eventually signed on 29 February 2020 that provided a roadmap for the safe withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, a commitment from the Taliban to renounce Al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups, and that the Taliban would enter intra-Afghan negotiations.

However, the medium-term perception of the Doha Agreement changed significantly following the return of Taliban rule to Afghanistan on 15 August . The Agreement was received negatively in U.S. media and policy-making circles. David Petraeus, the former commander of U.S.-NATO forces in Afghanistan, called it 'among the worst diplomatic agreements to which the U.S. has ever been a party' (Petraeus, 2022). Rather than reflecting Qatar's third-party role in the peace process, the shortcomings of the Agreement on the intra-Afghan process stemmed from the alacrity of the

U.S. to exit in the short-term, and without deploying greater military troops in a bid to strengthen their negotiating position vis-à-vis Taliban.

Secondly, Qatar's role in the U.S.-Taliban negotiations was that of a mediator. Crucially, this third-party role was built over a long facilitation period, beginning in 2013 with the hosting of the Taliban Political Office in Doha and acting as a location for confidential dialogue between the Taliban and the international community. Qatar's third-party role in the negotiations involved hosting various rounds of talks in Doha, including technical and political support for Taliban leaders to travel to Doha for talks. Third-party support also involved chairing negotiation sessions and shuttle diplomacy between the two sides, particularly during sticking points in the negotiations (EIU, 2019). For example, when President Donald Trump cancelled the talks with the Taliban over the killing of an American soldier, Qatar brokered the release of a US citizen and an Australian citizen in exchange for three high-profile Taliban prisoners, enabling talks to resume (France 24, 2019). This deal involved several key actors within the government, including the Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani and the Special Envoy, Mutlaq Al-Qahtani. Qatari mediation also addressed less-reported disputes, such as the Taliban's demand for a guarantor and the U.S. unwillingness to grant a monitoring role to a foreign government, which was eventually resolved by the U.S. arrangement for 11 Taliban members to be temporarily removed from the UN Security Council travel sanctions list.

Regarding its post-agreement role, Qatar continued to facilitate intra-Afghan peace negotiations between the Taliban and the recognized government in Kabul. The facilitation arrangement primarily involved hosting the talks and convening a 'group of friends' of Asian and European states, namely Germany, Indonesia, Norway, and Uzbekistan. The talks themselves were Afghan-led without the presence of a formal third-party mediator, with no external party present in the room during the negotiations. The exception was a brief two-week period in mid-November 2020 when negotiating sides requested mediation assistance from Special Envoy Al-Qahtani to resolve the gridlock over the procedural rules. By the start of December 2020, the procedural agreement was reached, marking the then-most significant progress in the intra-Afghan peace process.

Following the Taliban's military takeover of Afghanistan on 15 August, Qatar extended its post-agreement role by assuming the large responsibility of facilitating the evacuation of thousands of international citizens and 60,000 Afghans via Doha over the next month, which involved complex on-the-ground coordination with the Taliban. The assistance to the U.S. and its allies' evacuation, in particular, led to international commendation for Qatar's role and the U.S. labelling Qatar as its 'protecting power' in Afghanistan.

Thirdly, regarding acceptability as a third party, as a rule, Qatar does not enter as a formal mediator until requested to by negotiating parties. The U.S. approached Qatar in 2012 to host the Taliban Political Office in agreement with the Taliban, who evaluated other regional third-party contenders and selected Qatar based on their acceptance of its pre-conditions and non-involvement in the Afghan conflict.¹ The importance of Qatar's strategy premised on an invitation is underscored by the UAE's failed attempt to intervene as a formal third party in the U.S.-Taliban negotiations and in the intra-Afghan process, where former President Ghani agreed to rotate the Doha process around the Gulf region.² In both attempts, the UAE was rebuffed by the Taliban, who refused to engage. Throughout the two tracks, the strong trust of the U.S. in Qatar's role is evident from several statements from the U.S. Department of State that thanked Qatar for its 'indispensable role' in the mediation and facilitation process (MOFA, 2020b). This trust was crystallized with the appointment of Qatar as a 'protecting power' of U.S. interests in Taliban-led Afghanistan, which included several consular duties in an established U.S.-focused section in the Qatari embassy in Kabul (MEE, 2021).

Finally, regarding reception, the Agreement was broadly welcomed by leading international actors in Afghanistan, including the U.S. and the U.N., for providing a pathway to end the conflict (U.S. Embassy in Qatar, 2021). Despite the high degree of media freedom relative to other Gulf states, the talks remained highly secretive and confidential, which enabled a productive exchange between both sides. The U.S.-Taliban Agreement, despite its unpopularity in Washington circles, has been vital to restoring Qatar's reputation as a key regional mediator. Following widespread news coverage of its third-party role in Afghanistan, international analysis of Qatar's role in conflict resolution in policy outlets has increased concerning Qatar 'carving out a leading role for itself within international diplomacy [...] through its mediation-oriented foreign policy' (Ardemagni, 2021).

However, the return of Taliban rule and the breakdown of the Agreement tarnished, to some extent, the reputational benefits that Qatar had accrued from the signing of the U.S.-Taliban agreement in 2020. Qatar's role has led some experts and media outlets to question its motivations and strategies, particularly the hosting of the Taliban Political Office in Doha. Nonetheless, the net effect of the facilitation has been to significantly enhance Qatar's profile as a third-party actor for conflict mediation in the region, particularly involving Islamist actors.

5.3. Chad: the 2022 Doha Agreement

On 8 August, over 40 Chadian signatories signed the Doha Agreement that charted a pathway to the National Dialogue, constitutional reform, and national elections to transfer power to a civilian government. The agreement, mediated by Qatar, came during a political crisis that erupted when former President Idris Déby was killed on the frontlines of a counterinsurgency campaign in April 2021.

The announcement of President Déby's death was immediately followed by the formation of the Transitional Military Council (TMC), a military junta comprised of 15 generals loyal to the former President and chaired by his son, Mahamat Déby. The junta dismissed the government, dissolved parliament, and abrogated the constitution, replacing it with a new transitional charter contrary to the Chadian constitution (Mudge, 2022). Mahamat Déby, as the self-appointed *de facto* head of state, announced an 18-month transition ending in October 2022 to return power to a civilian government after an Inclusive and Sovereign National Dialogue (National Dialogue), which would be renewable if an agreement was not reached in that time.

As such, the Chadian government initiated negotiations with the rebel factions in the country to reach an agreement before the National Dialogue, in which the TMC would hold talks with the political opposition and civil society for a pathway to a democratic transition. The government postponed the talks from their initial agreed date of 27 February 2022 to 16 March in Doha, with more than 40 rebel groups invited.

On 8 August, following five months of negotiations mediated by Qatar, the Chadian government signed a peace agreement with more than 30 opposition groups. In addition to committing parties to a permanent cease-fire, the Agreement outlined a pathway for the transitional process of transferring power from the TMC to a civilian government through the National Dialogue, which committed to draft a new constitution and hold elections. The Agreement also committed the TMC to provide safe passage for signatories of the Agreement to return to Chad, not to conduct military operations against the signatory parties on Chadian territory or in neighbouring countries, and provides for the consensus to disarm the rebel groups and integrate them into the national army (The Africa Report, 2022).

Firstly, regarding results, the consensus on the agreement was a short-term success that led to an immediate end to the hostilities in Chad between the government and the rebel signatories, whilst the political opposition accepted the legitimacy of the National Dialogue created by the agreement. The phase of the peace process that the agreement sought to regulate, the termination of hostilities and the opening of a political inclusion pathway through an intra-Chadian political dialogue, largely remained in place in the months following the signing of the agreement. The Front for Change and

Concord in Chad (FACT), however, rejected the agreement and stated that the deal ‘follows the failure to take our demands into consideration’ (Diab & Busari, 2022).

The National Dialogue was important for Chad’s transition as ‘its recommendations will set in motion the drafting of a new constitution, a new timetable for the transition and the upcoming elections’ (Betinbaye et al., 2022). Concurrently, some of the outcomes of the National Dialogue, the key elements of the Doha Agreement for Chad, were criticized by Chadian parties and international observers. In early October 2022, the National Dialogue agreed to extend the transition period for elections to 24 months and ruled that Mahamat Déby is eligible to stand for presidential elections (Churm, 2022).

Secondly, Qatar played the leading formal mediator role and brokered the agreement. Initially, the talks commenced with Qatar’s role limited to that of a facilitator rather than a mediator. However, the conflict parties formally requested greater mediation support, which Qatar accepted. Qatar’s role was further commended by France, which maintains strategic relations with Chad, indicating that the mediation commenced without any reservations from Paris (Qarjouli, 2022b). Qatar’s Special Envoy Al-Qahtani was even reported to have stepped in as an official mediator to unlock the deadlock in the talks (France 24, 2022). The Qatari mediator was afterwards switched to Qatar’s Secretary of the Emir for Security Affairs (Al-Jazeera, 2022a).

The Doha Agreement for Chad is the most active and intensive mediation role Qatar has played in recent years, in contrast to the facilitation role it has mostly played since 2017. Many representatives from over 50 conflict parties, including the government, non-state military groups, and political factions, were present in Doha for months (Qarjouli, 2022a). As the opposition parties refused to negotiate directly with the government, Qatari mediation tactics initially involved housing the delegates in separate accommodations for weeks, whilst the mediator consulted them for a list of demands later structured into an agenda based on common ground. The extended timeline for this consultation period required postponing the initiation of the National Dialogue, on Qatar’s recommendation. The Qatari Envoy also brokered a key demand for the rebel groups in exile to be granted a guarantee from the government for amnesty when returning to Chad (The New Arab, 2022).

The scale of the talks and resources invested in the Chad mediation process constitutes one of the largest peacemaking processes ever hosted by Qatar. A media report noted ‘with more than 250 opposition and government officials staying in two luxury hotels, the Gulf state is picking up a mounting bill for its mediation’ (Witcher, 2022). It is thus comparable to the Darfur Track II negotiations for civil society in Doha in October 2009, which involved hosting more than 200 tribal leaders and civil society representatives (ReliefWeb, 2009).

Qatar's post-agreement role switched back to facilitation for the National Dialogue, which commenced on 20 August. The National Dialogue convened with over 1,400 participants, including delegates from the military, civil society, opposition parties, trade unions, and rebel signatories of the Doha Agreement for a dialogue on state reform and constitutional issues (Tantoh, 2022). Qatar's National Security Adviser continued to be involved in post-agreement activities, including attending the opening ceremony of the National Dialogue (MOFA, 2022). Yet Qatar sought to work collaboratively and to promote third-party support from other states and individuals in the post-agreement phase. Qatar appointed the former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Burkina Faso, Djibril Bassolé, as the facilitator for the National Dialogue process in N'Djamena. It is also reported that Macky Sall, President of Senegal and the African Union, took over the mediation dossier in terms of reaching out to FACT in the period immediately after the Doha-based negotiations concluded in August 2022 (Africa Intelligence, 2022).

Thirdly, Qatar's acceptability as a mediator by the Chadian conflict parties was demonstrated by their demand for Qatar to play a more active intervening role in the National Dialogue after the Doha Agreement, despite Qatar initially only offering to facilitate the talks. Trust in Qatar's neutrality developed over the years through its third-party support for conflict resolution in the region. In 2009, the Qatar-negotiated Doha Accord improved the relations between Sudan and Chad. This limited Chad's potential role as a spoiler in Qatar's ongoing mediation efforts in Darfur, in which former President Déby has been accused of permitting the recruitment of mercenaries for Darfuri movements in refugee camps in Chad (Marchal, 2006). In August 2017, Chad severed diplomatic relations with Qatar, which it accused of playing a destabilizing role in Chad. Whilst most media sources explained this as Chad supporting Qatar's blockade, there are claims relating it to Qatar hosting the exiled Timane Erdimi, nephew of former President Deby and the head of the Union of Resistance Forces – a rebel alliance formed in 2009 (ICG, 2021). However, Qatar-Chad diplomatic ties were restored eight months later in February 2018 and Erdimi was later granted political asylum to return to Chad for the National Dialogue (Al-Jazeera, 2018).

Equally important to domestic acceptability, Qatar's role as a mediator in Chad was enabled by Qatar's warm relations with Egypt. Relations between Qatar and Egypt strengthened greatly following the Al-Ula Summit in January 2021. Following that, Qatar supported the Egyptian Central Bank with \$1bn in deposits. Both countries also entered talks on a wide range of trade, diplomatic and other portfolios, including Qatari investment worth up to \$5 billion (Al-Jazeera, 2022b). Qatar's role in mediation factored into this renegotiation of bilateral ties. According to uncorroborated Egyptian security sources, it is reported that Qatar agreed to increase its presence in Ethiopia to counter-balance UAE

influence and support to Tigray and also to come to a unified position on Libya, - and that - in return for support in Libya and Ethiopia, officials in Egypt agreed to support Qatar's efforts to sponsor the Chadian national dialogue between the transitional military council led by Mahamat Déby and armed opposition forces. (Kassab et al., 2022)

Qatar's acceptance as a mediator by Egypt was thus a bargaining chip in a transactional relationship between the two countries – with Cairo aware of the strategic importance placed by Doha on bolstering its role as a regional mediator.

There is further evidence of the positive reception of Qatar's mediation in Chad. The key international actors in Chad, such as France, the African Union (AU), the U.S., and the EU, commended Qatar's role in mediating the deal between the parties, and the UN Secretary-General thanked Qatar for mediating the National Dialogue (UN, 2022). Some representatives of rebel groups welcomed the Agreement for its stronger obligations for international guarantees and third-party monitoring of its implementation against agreed-upon timelines and benchmarks.

5.4. De-escalation in Libya

Following clashes in Tripoli in August 2022 that led to over 30 deaths and threatened to tip the country back into outright civil war, a period of preventative diplomacy ensued in which Qatar played the leading role as a third-party mediator. In September 2022, Doha welcomed Parliamentary President Aguila Saleh alongside Belqasim Haftar, son of Khalifa Haftar – the first representatives from the eastern Tobruk-based Libyan government to visit Qatar since at least 2014, due to Qatar's general alignment with the Tripoli-based government. Just two days previously, Prime Minister Abdul Hamid al-Dbeibah of the Tripoli government also paid a visit to Qatar (Qarjouli, 2022c). After weeks of shuttle diplomacy, Saleh presented a political proposal to the Libyan parliament in a closed session in September based on the agreements that emerged primarily from the meetings in Doha (LNA, 2022).

The proposal outlined a new political framework in which parliamentary elections would be held before presidential elections to resolve the dilemma of rival administrations of Dbeibah and Bashhaga by tabling it for parliamentary approval. Saleh stated that the proposal was conditional upon creating a new three-member Presidential Council led by himself and including Khaled al-Mishri, the head of the High Council of State in the western government, and an unnamed representative from southern Libya (TLO, 2022). The proposal removed many of the prior restrictions on presidential candidates, such as the disqualification of dual nationals, which had been viewed as removing restrictions against General Khalifa Haftar to contesting the presidency in elections.

Firstly, regarding results, the third-party intervention averted large-scale violence and led to a relatively calm period. The proposal continued to hold the backing of Saleh and al-Mishri amid growing international support for the electoral arrangement, despite tensions between the two regarding compliance with the existing electoral law (Reuters, 2021).

Secondly, regarding modality, the mediation process was a brief case of shuttle diplomacy between the Tobruk and Tripoli-based governments, which featured the highest level of Qatari political involvement with meetings hosted personally by the Emir of Qatar himself. The distinctive element of Qatari support is the spoiler management of the process by achieving the buy-in of Mishri, with whom Qatar has maintained good relations. As the head of the High Council, Mishri was needed to appease Council members opposed to the return of a Haftar presidential bid, as Haftar's inclusion in the track one political process was necessary, given his past spoiler behaviour in triggering the Battle of Tripoli to block the national dialogue in 2019 (Wintour, 2019).

Thirdly, regarding acceptability, the Libyan mediation marks the re-emergence of the perception of Qatar as a neutral and trusted mediator in one of the key post-Arab Spring contexts in which this very same reputation was tarnished after 2011, when Qatar supported the Security Council resolution 1973 to impose a no-fly zone on Libya and contributed in the operation and provided humanitarian aid and logistical support to anti-Gaddafi forces. Following the second Libyan civil war in 2014 and the emergence of two rival governments in Libya, Qatar became associated with support for the western Tripoli-based, internationally-recognized government, which it had been the first Arab country to recognize (Nuruzzaman, 2015, p. 228). Consequently, the eastern Tobruk government and the parliament led by Aguila Saleh in the east cut diplomatic relations with Doha due to Qatar's political and financial support to the Shoura Council forces in Benghazi, who fought against the forces commanded by the Egypt- and UAE-backed General Khalifa Haftar (Reuters, 2017). Haftar and the Egyptian media subsequently promulgated the narrative that Qatar supported the Muslim Brotherhood, which affected Qatar's reputation amongst sections of the Libyan public. This perception that Qatar supported one side in the Libyan political scene entailed that it did not have the neutrality and acceptability by conflict parties to serve as a third-party mediator in Libya's national-level peace process. At the regional level, Qatar also stood in a conflicting position with Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Egypt, in particular during their 2017-2021 blockade of Qatar (El-Gamaty, 2017). After January 2021, the regional détente with the lifting of the blockade led to a new mode of communication between the conflict parties and external actors in their reception of Qatar's role in Libya.

Qatar was however not completely out of the Libyan political scene despite not having a major role since 2014. One instance of Qatari mediation

came in 2015 with the brokering of a local peace agreement, signed in Doha, between the Tebu and Tuareg groups in southern Libya for the reopening of the second largest oilfield in the country (the Sharara Oilfield), which involved agreement on a ceasefire, the withdrawal of combatants, and the return of thousands of displaced civilians (EIU, 2015; MOFA, 2015). Furthermore, Qatar was involved in a supporting capacity to several multi-party mediation initiatives, including the Deputy PM's statement for German mediation efforts in Libya (MOFA, 2020a).

Qatar's entry as a major third-party mediator in the Libyan political crisis was also enabled by the geopolitical context of warming of ties between Qatar and Turkey on one hand and Egypt on the other. In President Sisi's first visit to Doha on 13 September 2022, Libya was presumed to be high on the agenda (The Arab Weekly, 2022). This produced a broad agreement amongst these key regional parties on a vision for the future of Libya. Whilst Russia and the UAE both backed the spoiler efforts of General Khalifa Haftar in 2019, Russia, in mid-2022, scaled down the presence of the mercenary Wagner Group in Libya due to the Ukraine crisis, whilst the UAE maintained a low profile in the Libyan file. Qatar's acceptability as a mediator also appears to be related to the strengthening ties between Doha and Washington in co-operation over peace and security issues (U.S. Embassy in Qatar, 2020). Since the Libyan uprising of 2011, the U.S. has followed a policy of 'leading from behind' in the conflict, with other actors playing the key public-facing roles in the Libya post-intervention and subsequent attempts at diplomacy and mediation (Gros, 2012).

Fourthly, the reception of the Qatari role was largely positive. The Qatari proposal received strong backing amongst international actors, with statements released in January 2023 from the U.S., who urged that there is 'no reason to delay', and the U.N., who 'strongly encourage[d]' the finalization of the agreement (TLU, 2023; U.S. Embassy in Libya, 2023). Support for the Qatari-mediated proposal continued to strengthen in early 2023 through Egyptian mediation (MEM, 2023).

In sum, whilst the Libyan case is a minor episode within Qatar's historical record in third party mediation, and ultimately did not lead to a wider settlement of the political crisis, the case highlights the analytical point that Qatar in the new phase of its mediation was able to enter the fray once more as a mediator in the very same contexts in which its activist role in the Arab Spring led to the decrease in Qatari mediation.

6. Analysis

This section analyses several significant trends that emerged from comparing the three cases presented in the paper: Qatar's renewed reputation as a skilled third-party mediator; the restoration of Qatar's widely perceived

neutrality as a third-party mediator; Qatar's shifting modalities of mediation that no longer primarily rely on financial inducements; and role diversification within Qatari mediation practice.

Firstly, Qatar post-2020 regained its reputation as a skilled third-party mediator capable of facilitating challenging peace processes and political agreements. The mediation role in the U.S.-Taliban negotiations is a key example of skilled mediation that involved developing trust and knowledge of the conflict parties over a long period of facilitation from the opening of the Taliban Political Office in Doha in 2013. Despite various obstacles repeatedly marring the process, such as President Trump cancelling talks in 2019, Qatar was able to effectively step in to broker a prisoner release and a ceasefire to bring the parties back to the negotiating table. Though its role in the intra-Afghan negotiations was facilitative, the brief period of mediation in November that swiftly resulted in overcoming the procedural rules deadlock suggests that a more active mediator role would have led to greater progress in the negotiations. Similarly, a new level of mediation skill is demonstrated by the Emir's rapid intervention to de-escalate the risk of civil war resurgence in Libya.

Secondly, Qatar's latest mediation phase has repaired its reputation for neutrality as a third-party mediator. Qatar's diplomacy in the Libyan political crisis was the case in which a perception of its neutrality can be observed. Some analysts allege that Qatar was partisan in the case of Afghanistan, but this is out of a misunderstanding of why the U.S. agreed to the major compromises of its deal with the Taliban, whose causes lie in two successive presidents' desire for a total military withdrawal in the short-term, rather than in Qatar's mediation approach. The U.S.-Taliban agreement was another major turning point in the general reception of Qatar's non-interventionist role in facilitation and mediation, and resulted in the Qatar's status being upgraded to 'major non-NATO ally' with the U.S. in 2022. Qatar's regained neutral stance as a mediator should be understood within the political context following the January 2021 al-Ula summit and rapprochement with Saudi Arabia following the Gulf Crisis.

Qatar's role in helping bring the Taliban to the table with the U.S. has been positively received by various conflict parties themselves, particularly in conflict contexts where non-state armed movements labelled as 'extremist' or 'terrorist' seek to negotiate, such as in Mali and Syria. Due to their unique position of trust with the Tuareg separatists and the Al-Qaeda-linked Ansar Dine, Qatari non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were often the only humanitarian organizations granted access to north Mali under rebel control (Allemandou, 2013).

This also relates to a key discontinuity, which is Qatar's high aversion to risk after the regional blowback to its interventionist foreign policy. Qatar is strongly committed to the principle that conflict parties should

request its intervention as a formal third-party rather than unilaterally enter the conflict resolution process. This risk aversion extends as far as a noticeable reluctance to accept the role of a formal mediator in peace processes, often preferring to merely facilitate, marked by low probabilities of durable success, where a failed peace outcome would reflect poorly on Qatar. This was the case with the intra-Afghan negotiations in Doha (2020–21), where Qatar did not push to play the formal mediator role because the parties did not request it, despite the clear need for one. Also, in Chad (2022), Qatar initially preferred to only facilitate and reluctantly accepted the role of mediator after receiving the request from the Chadian government and opposition groups. The hesitance to provide more substantive involvement is likely to be associated with a lower likelihood of successful outcomes in conflict cases if this policy is extended over the long term.

Thirdly, in the three analysed cases, Qatar did not offer major financial inducements to conflict parties as a ‘carrot’ to incentivize reaching an agreement. This demonstrates that one significant discontinuity in Qatar’s evolving role is no longer engaging in ‘chequebook diplomacy’. This charge was consistently applied to Qatar’s highly active mediation phase during the 2006–2010 period, including offering \$300–500 million for development in the Sa’ada governorate in Yemen in 2007 (ICG, 2016), offering \$250 million for humanitarian and reconstruction efforts in Gaza in an unsuccessful attempt to reach a multi-year ceasefire deal between Israel and Hamas (Rabi, 2009, p. 459), and most notably the substantial development funding package of \$2 billion to establish a development bank for Darfur, linked to the Doha Document for Peace in Darfur signed in 2010 (ReliefWeb, 2010). The return to quieter diplomacy and expert facilitation has eclipsed this modality of inducement. Yet whilst not offering large-scale funding as a ‘deal sweetener’, Qatar expended vast sums on facilitation. The 400-strong Chadian delegation staying at the JW Marriott Marquis hotel were largely present in Doha for months. Qatar also paid sizable bills for hosting Afghan delegations during the intra-Afghan negotiations.

Fourthly, Qatar’s practice of mediation is not pursued by one single actor or institution but is rather becoming a more diverse field. Of the three cases: Afghanistan was mediated or facilitated by the Special Envoy, the National Security Advisor, the Deputy Foreign Minister, and the Foreign Minister; Libya was mediated by the Emir; and Chad jointly by the Special Envoy and the Secretary of the Emir for Security Affairs. This contrasts with the highly active mediation period during 2006–2010 when nearly all third-party roles were handled by the then-Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, Hamad bin Jassim Al-Thani. This diversification of roles is likely related to a recognition that much of the specialist expertise of mediation is confined to a small team of individuals that imposes capacity constraints on Qatari mediation. The lack of

broader capacity had forced Qatar to turn down mediation offers between 2006 and 2010, for example in 2008 Qatar declined the invitation to mediate in Mauritania's post-coup crisis as its key personnel were occupied in Darfur (LeBaron 2008). On some mediation files, the lead Qatari mediators rotate every six months, as further evidence of efforts to deepen capacity given the concomitant need for multiple senior and experienced Qatari mediators to be capable of engaging in a wide range of conflict zones.

Finally, one emergent theme from this study is that Qatar, in its recent mediation or facilitation efforts, has supported agreements that do not include some of the major conflict parties. This charge is observed most clearly in the case of Chad and the non-signatory party of the FACT rebel group. A parallel to this type of criticism could also be made in the case of the U.S.-Taliban agreement in that it excluded the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan led by former President Ashraf Ghani. The Libyan political mediation was more inclusive by contrast, with key actors travelling to Doha. However, due to General Haftar's unclear role in the 2022 agreement, concerns have been raised about the comprehensiveness and inclusivity of the Qatari facilitation and mediation that laid the groundwork for the proposal's acceptance by various conflict parties.

7. Conclusion

Qatar's engagement in high-level conflict mediation after the 2017–2021 Gulf Crisis marked a significant re-entry into the mediation field of a distinctive third-party actor. Analysis of Qatari third-party engagement in the early 2020s revealed several continuities and discontinuities in the state's practice of international mediation in comparison with its earlier phase of mediation activity. The case studies of Afghanistan, Chad, and Libya provided evidence in support of Qatar regaining its reputation as a skilled third-party mediator capable of facilitating challenging negotiations and restoring its reputation for neutrality between conflict parties, particularly concerning the Emir's mediation in Libya.

The Qatari approach has departed from elements of its earlier practices by delinking mediation support to large financial incentives and distributing mediator roles across several officials in government, which are likely to be associated with more successful and durable future mediation outcomes. Two elements of its current approach that warrant further investigation to identify potential negative effects on the success of mediation consist of (1) the theme of supporting agreements that do not include major conflict parties, as observed in the Chadian process, and (2) the principle of offering third-party support only when the negotiating parties request it without inducement, as seen in the Afghan and Chadian cases, which verges on risk aversion to adopting more active mediator roles.

Over the coming period, the mediation politics of the Gulf region will continue to be a fruitful and rich field of inquiry for analysing the relationships between patterns of international relations and the determinants of how states develop mediation styles. The Gulf Crisis appears to have come full circle with reports that Egypt requested Qatar's support in September 2022 concerning imprisoned Muslim Brotherhood leaders. This suggests that Qatar, which facilitates humanitarian dialogue with Islamist groups in the region, may play an active role in emerging global norms of inclusiveness in peace processes.

Notes

1. Interview. Former member of the Taliban Political Office. March 2022.
2. Interview. Technical staff, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan's negotiating team. November 2021.

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