

FROM STADIUMS TO SHUTTLE DIPLOMACY: QATAR'S EMERGENCE AS A REGIONAL DIPLOMATIC POWER

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Abstract

During the chaos of the Arab Spring, Western diplomacy was facilitated through the State of Qatar. The small country's rise into the apex of international relations did not occur immediately after the first sparks of the revolution. Rather, Qatar's leadership within the Middle East resulted from years of effort put in by their leaders into devising a foreign policy that emphasized building relationships and cooperation with Western countries and their Arab counterparts. Qatar's leaders specifically focused their efforts on enhancing their reputation within international sporting forums, and the business that resulted from it. Major athletic events like the Asian Games boosted the small country's profile around the world, and Qatar became known for their internationalism and cosmopolitan outlook. This work would pay off as soon as Arab governments teetered with the demonstrations in Egypt and Tunisia. Qatar's high profile status helped maintain the shuttle diplomacy that supported Western governments as they tried to contain and control the flames of revolution.

Key Words

Qatar, Middle East, Arab Spring, FTFA, sports diplomacy, East-West relations, geopolitics, globalization, nation branding

The 2011 Arab Spring protests proved to be a watershed moment for Arab foreign policy efforts. In the middle of the political chaos, Qatar became the focal point of diplomatic efforts within the Middle East. Western diplomats relied on Doha as a key partner in their discussions with Arab leaders and revolutionaries. For many commentators and analysts, Qatar's emergence as a regional diplomatic power was unexpected; how could a country with two million people punch so far above its weight within the region's geopolitics? The reality is that the seeds of Qatari diplomatic prowess were sown not with its recent political successes, but rather with its emergence as a sporting power. By winning the bids for and hosting major global sporting events, Qatar had positioned itself as a leading power broker for business, diplomacy, and foreign affairs between Western and Eastern states.

Qatar's rise to prominence through sports

Qatar's rise began on November 12, 2000, when the Olympic Council of Asia officially voted Doha as the host city of the 2006 Asian Games. Qatar was the first Arab country to host the games, and also has the honor of holding the

largest iteration of the competition to date, with over forty-five countries competing in over forty sports.¹ Doha was also one of the smallest cities ever to host the games; previous hosts, including Beijing and Bangkok, had populations larger than the state of Qatar. However, it was this announcement that began Qatar's transformation from an oil-rich Arab monarchy into a 21st century hub of international commerce and diplomacy.

For Qatar, sports represented perhaps the best means to showcase its aptitude at balancing the complex acts of business, diplomacy, and culture. While major businesses saw Doha as a potential engine of growth in the future, it did not have, and still does not have, the economic gravity of major metropolises such as New York, London, or Tokyo.² For Qatari leader Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, hosting a major sporting event would allow the government to demonstrate the progress the country had made towards modernization and economic development on a global stage.³ Using sports as the primary mechanism of diplomacy also made sense from a foreign policy standpoint. By itself, Qatar has little weight, both economically and militarily, in a region where powers such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran maintain a tenuous peace. Rather, Qatar's foreign policy strengths have come from the relationships it maintains with the West and the Arab world. It trades and conducts business with non-Islamic countries such as the United States, while supporting the Islamic Wahhabi faith that also belongs to neighboring Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. By hosting an international sporting event, Qatar proved that it could successfully merge the capitalist interests of the West, the cultural inclinations of the East, and its own domestic priorities- all through one globally broadcast event.

Qatar's approach towards sports diplomacy differs from other states' past attempts and is a better representation of its foreign policy intentions. States originally used sports diplomacy as a way to showcase raw power and industrial strength, something that would not necessarily apply in Qatar's case. Past examples include Adolf Hitler's use of the 1936 Olympics to show Nazi Germany's economic prowess after the economic depression of the preceding decade. The United States and the Soviet Union both used their hosting of the Olympics to make larger geopolitical arguments while demonstrating the success that their individual economic models had created. The 2008 Olympics in Beijing advertised China's power in a way that no diplomatic feat could have ever accomplished. Some commentators saw the spectacular opening ceremonies as a cue for rising Chinese nationalism.⁴ For a smaller state like Qatar, showing pure power would have been inefficient and possibly destabilizing for relations with their neighbors. Instead, they would have to use special events as a way to demonstrate their aptitude and capacity to work and cooperate with governments and businesses alike.

To that extent, Qatar has extensively relied on its influence within international sports and their related organizations as a means of promoting its political and business interests. This policy began with the election of Qatari official Mohammad Bin Hammam as the president of the Asian Football Confederation in 2002. It gave the Qataris a strong voice on the powerful Federation Internationale de Football Association (FTFA) executive committee, and a commanding podium from which they could promote the interests of Asian countries. Additionally, in 2002, Sheikh Tamim Al-Thani, the heir apparent to the Qatari throne and head of the nation's Asian Games bid, joined the elite International Olympic Committee (IOC), giving additional weight to the state's sporting ambitions.⁵ This came after the Doha Development Rounds that Qatar hosted in late 2001, that intended to bridge the interests of both established and emerging powers in a series of discussions on issues in international trade.

However, the true test of Qatar's unique approach to international relations came as they hosted the Asian Games in 2006. Qatar passed its first test and surpassed all expectations; reporters hailed the event as an instant success. Not only had a country in the Arab world hosted a major sporting event, but it had done so without many of the fears of religious crackdowns and persecutions that its detractors had predicted.⁶ As Sheikh Tamim Bin Al-Thani

¹ Mahfoud Amara, "2006 Qatar Asian Games: A 'Modernization' Project from Above?" *Sport in Society* 8, no. 3 (2005): 493. Accessed April 9, 2012, http://ipac.kacst.edu.sa/eDoc/2006/157836_1.pdf.

² "MSCT to Continue to Review the Classification of the MSCT UAE and MSCT Qatar Indices in 2012," MSCT, written December 14, 2011. http://www.msci.com/resources/pressreleases/PR_Mkt_Class_20111214.pdf.

³ "His Highness Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al-Thani - Emir of the State of Qatar," Ministry of Foreign Affairs - The State of Qatar. Accessed May 26, 2012, <http://english.mofa.gov.qa/details.cfm?id=70>.

⁴ David Brooks, "Harmony and the Dream," *New York Times*, written August 11, 2008. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/12/opinion/12brooks.html>.

⁵ "IOC Members List," Olympic.org - Office website of the Olympic Movement. Accessed May 26, 2012, <http://www.olympic.org/content/the-ioc/the-ioc-institution1/ioc-members-list/>.

⁶ Larry Fine, "Asian Games Success Will Help Doha 2016 Bid," Arab News, written February 20, 2008, <http://www.arabnews.com/node/309048>.

said to a reporter, the games reinforced Qatar's status as a, "new centre for top-quality regional and international sport and showed how it could be done within the framework of Arab cultural interests."⁷ Qatar also passed its second major test when it hosted the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) Cup, the premier soccer tournament for Asian soccer, without any problems. Despite the fact that no teams from the Middle East made it to the tournament's final round, there was no doubt in the minds of many people that nations in the Middle East, like Qatar's influence in Asian football, had reached a new peak.⁸ Many commentators had expected that Qatar's bid for the 2022 FIFA World Cup would be contingent on its hosting of these games. FIFA gave its verdict in 2011, and Qatar now expects to host the Middle East's first iteration of the tournament in 2022.

Since these recent successes, Qatar's vast influence within the realm of sports and international relations has seen a significant rise. Al-Jazeera, a media conglomerate founded by Sheikh Hamad Al-Thani, began growing in importance following the attacks on September 11, 2001 in the United States, as Western viewers sought to learn more about cultures within the Middle East. It is now responsible for the broadcast of many European sporting events and grows as Western media outlets face budgetary constraints. Indeed, as Leila Abboud and Gwenaelle Barzic of Reuters argued, Al-Jazeera's use of sporting licenses have been a key mechanism at building their footprint within Europe, allowing them to compete with established giants such as Sky and Canal+. ⁹ Qatari sovereign wealth funds have also been on a continental shopping spree, purchasing teams within the English, French, and Spanish domestic leagues. The massive investment outlays in each team, one example being the English club Manchester City F.C, have brought in record revenues and, of course, title-ware!¹⁰ The shirts of the famous Spanish club F.C Barcelona no longer have the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) as the primary sponsor, but rather the Qatar Foundation, a state-sponsored nonprofit aimed at promoting educational interests. Indeed, for the average citizen, Qatar's influence has become a ubiquitous element. In France, Qatar-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have donated money to the French banlieues to promote economic mobility within depressed areas in the suburbs of Paris.¹¹

Implications for Middle East politics

Of course, the real dividends of Qatar's emphasis on sports diplomacy came with the events of the Arab Spring, when Qatar began actively brokering deals between teetering Arab governments and Western powers seeking to alleviate the chaos. Having had the experience of organizing deals in the complex world of sports diplomacy, creating similar conditions for stabilizing the Middle East would prove to be a challenge the Qataris could easily manage. Indeed, the stage was set nearly at the onset of the Arab Spring, when Qatari moves to manage and document the multiple crises were appreciated by Western observers.¹² Indeed, at the beginning of the Tahrir Square protests in late January 2011, it was Al-Jazeera that reported the massive protests happening there. Though Al-Jazeera's Cairo office was raided, it showed that the state was fully willing to report on its own to the public. Similarly, following the death of former Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi, Qatar's role in supporting the National Transitional Council, the Libyan rebel group, was advertised more publically.¹³ Even more shocking for observers of the Middle East, Qatar has become the host of nonstate actors that were considered persona non grata by many other governments. Following the unrest within Syria, the Qataris allowed the political operations of Palestinian group Hamas, originally based out of Damascus, to relocate to Doha and set up headquarters there.¹⁴ At the same time, they have allowed the Pashto militant organization, the Taliban, to conduct negotiations with the United States from Doha.¹⁵

⁷ Mahfoud Amara, "2006 Qatar Asian Games," page 506.

⁸ James Montague, "Five things we've learned from Qatar's Asian Cup - CNN.com," CNN.com International, written February 3, 2011. Accessed May 9, 2012, <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/SPORT/football/01/27/qatar.2022.asian.cup/>.

⁹ Leila Abboud and Gwenaelle Barzic, "Al Jazeera Expanding its Global Footprint Through Sports," Reuters via *Huffington Post*, April 2, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/04/02/al-jazeera-sports_n_1396749.html.

¹⁰ Greg Duke, "Cash for cups? Qatar's sporting influence spreads across the globe," CNN, written February 28, 2012. <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/02/28/sport/football/football-qatar-money-sport/index.html>.

¹¹ "Le Qatar drague nos banlieues a coups de millions," RMC.fr, written December 12, 2011, <http://www.rmc.fr/editorial/208943/le-qatar-drague-nos-banlieues-a-coups-de-millions/>.

¹² Zamila Bunglawala, "Ts anyone paying attention to the rise and rise of Qatar?" New Statesman Consumer website of the year, written September 05, 2011, <http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/the-staggers/2011/09/qatar-arab-international>.

¹³ Tan Black, "Qatar admits sending hundreds of troops to support Libya rebels," *The Guardian*, written October 26, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/oct/26/qatar-troops-libya-rebels-support>.

¹⁴ Houriya Ahmed and Julia Pettengill, "A New Home for Hamas?" *Foreign Policy*, December 13, 2011, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/12/13/a_new_home_for_hamas?page=0,1.

¹⁵ *The Economist*, "Flying-carpet diplomacy."

The policy implications for Qatar's role in the Middle East and their diplomatic powers foreshadow an age of Qatari shuttle diplomacy, where the concerns of the Arab World will be articulated and settled from Doha. In the manner that Qatar became the go-to country for officials seeking to manage issues within the world of international sports, international relations within the Middle East has the prospect of being conducted in a similar manner. It bodes well for all parties seeking to reach an amicable consensus. For Western governments, they see a development success, a country that has brought wealth from more than just natural resources, something that separates Qatar from its neighbors in the Middle East. As mentioned previously, Qatar's economic prosperity is a big reason it is able to have this unique hybrid foreign policy. Despite a slowing of growth in the last few years, foreign direct investment in Qatar has grown from U.S. \$3.7 billion in 2008 to over U.S. \$10 billion in 2010.¹⁶ It has given Doha the financial capacity to host aforementioned global sporting events and the subsequent political and economic clout to garner this middle ground between its Islamic heritage and reforms sympathetic to their counterparts in the West. Most importantly, though, is Qatar's emphasis on having a global outlook rather than a regional one.¹⁷ By hosting these major sporting and political events, Qatar can and will act as a diplomatic actor of major significance.

Conclusion

The State of Qatar's small geographic size does not speak fully of its vast capabilities as a state intent on bridging diplomatic divides. It has one of the highest per capita GDPs in the world, a modernized civil society that mixes Western pragmatism with traditional Islamic law, a savvy leadership capable of accepting change to fit its national interests, and a foreign policy agenda that merges these unique paradoxes. Qatar's strength as a diplomatic power in the Middle East is showcased by its recent hosting of various sporting events, such as the 2006 Asian Games, the 2011 soccer Asian Cup, and the upcoming 2022 FIFA World Cup. Such events are not granted to states lightly - Qatar's stance as a mediator between Eastern and Western nations provides testament to its ability to bridge vast borders.

Qatar's ability to find diplomatic consensus has major implications for politics within the Middle East. For now, it will be able to give hope for peace in a region that has been destabilized by a volatile history, religious fervor, terrorism, and now civil unrest. International actors will certainly look fondly upon Qatar as an actor that can help bring together the region to discuss solutions and encourage moderate political reform.

¹⁶ Amirah Tsmail, Michael Flamennbaum, and Kimberley Doyle, The Institute for Middle East Studies, George Washington University, 14.

¹⁷ Andrew F. Cooper and Bessma Momani, "Qatar and Expanded Contours of Small State Diplomacy," *The International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs* 46, no. 3 (2011): 114. Accessed May 9, 2012, <http://www.arts.uwaterloo.ca/~bbmomani/documents/TS-QatarandSmallStateDiplomacy.pdf>.

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