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Duygu DERSAN ORHAN

Associate Professor, Department of International Relations, Atılım University, Ankara

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E-mail: uidergisi@gmail.com

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Strategic Hedging or Alignment? Qatar's Foreign Policy Toward Iran in the Wake of the Blockade Crisis

Duygu DERSAN ORHAN

Associate Professor, Department of International Relations, Atılım University, Ankara

E-Mail: duygu.dersan@atilim.edu.tr

Orcid: 0000-0002-0618-1530

ABSTRACT

The blockade imposed on Qatar changed the power dynamics in the Persian Gulf, increasing tension and insecurity in the area. Qatar's ability to overcome the blockade was largely due to its cooperation with Iran, and the two countries' ties grew as a result. This study investigates whether Qatar's long-standing hedging toward Iran has changed into an alignment in the wake of the 2017 blockade. The key conclusion of the article is that, despite Qatar's faint signals of alignment with Iran during the blockade, it did not entirely stray from its hedging strategy. Qatar-Iran relations has been selected as a case study to illustrate the effects of regional developments and security crises on the hedging strategy within the context of the Blockade Crisis.

Keywords: Small States, Gulf Cooperation Council, Emerging Partner, Regional Security, Economic Cooperation

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Introduction

Qatar, which has achieved a more independent, high-profile diplomatic standing since the change of power in 1995, attracts attention with its strong economy and controversial foreign policy moves. Despite being surrounded by two regional powers, Qatar has not entered the orbit of either Saudi Arabia or Iran. Qatar has demonstrated its independent stance for many years, while trying to act together with Saudi Arabia within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Qatar has also maintained its relations with Iran, which has been a serious threat to the Gulf countries, since the Islamic Revolution. While Qatar hosts one of the most important bases of the United States (US) in the Middle East, it also backs some anti-American elements like Iran, the Muslim Brotherhood, Hezbollah and Hamas. All of these contradictory foreign policy activities acquired new momentum after Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, and Egypt decided to boycott Qatar in June 2017, cutting off diplomatic ties with the country, and imposing an economic embargo on it. After the regional countries' decision to boycott Qatar, a new chapter opened in Qatar-Iran relations. Cooperation with Iran played an important role in Qatar overcoming of the blockade, and the two countries strengthened their bilateral relations.

This paper investigates Qatar's foreign policy toward Iran through the use in its theoretical framework of the concept of strategic hedging, which offers an explanatory tool in analyzing small states' foreign policy behavior. Hedging provides an analysis for regional actor shifts in certain regions, such as the Gulf, as well as changes in global power dynamics. The Qatar Blockade altered the balance of power in the Persian Gulf, increasing insecurity and tension in the region. This study examines whether, in the wake of the 2017 Blockade, Qatar's long-standing hedging policy toward Iran has evolved into an alignment. In this context, the model proposed by Lim and Cooper will be used to analyze Qatar-Iran relations during the Blockade Crisis. Lim and Cooper argue that different security results will occur in relation to hedging behavior, when a small state engages in significant and ongoing security disputes with a great/regional power.¹ This concept assumes that secondary nations in such a situation will send alignment signals to a friendly power. The study's main finding is that although Qatar gave weak alignment signals toward Iran during the blockade, it did not completely depart from its hedging strategy. Qatar is referred to as an 'emerging partner' of Iran, which responded to the Saudi Arabia threat in part by seeking to send weak signals of shared security interest with Iran. These can be summed up as supporting certain of Iran's security policies and criticizing some of Saudi Arabia's security policies in line with Iran's interests. However, as the blockade persisted, its engagement with Saudi Arabia through joining Saudi-led initiatives led it to re-send ambiguous signals in keeping with the hedging strategy. In the midst of the Blockade Crisis, improving ties with Iran was carried out in a more diplomatic and economic manner, with no overt security agreements between the two nations signaled. This strategy allowed Qatar to minimize its regional security risks while maximizing political and economic benefits from cooperation with Iran. It also provided the means for Doha to maintain strong and advantageous ties with other regional and international powers. It is reflected that Qatar's relations with Iran appear to have a limit, and that it would be likely to continue its long-standing policy of strategic hedging toward Iran, despite certain differences.

A mixed strategy of cooperation and conflict is included in strategic hedging, which provides an alternative to the dominant approach that limits small state behaviors to balancing and bandwagoning. This theoretical approach is mostly used to explain small state behaviors in the Asia Pacific region, but was recently presented as a theoretical framework for understanding the foreign policy strategies of the countries in the Gulf region, as reflected in the works of Guzansky,² Hamdi & Salman³ and El-Dessouiki & Mansour.⁴ The inclination to view the area as a single entity stands out in most of the theoretical works that concentrate on the foreign affairs of the Gulf countries. However, it is believed that this strategy is invalid due to the recent differences, particularly during the 2017 crisis, and that each regional country's foreign policy should be looked at separately. This study focuses on Qatar's bilateral relations with

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- 1 Darren J. Lim and Zack Cooper, "Reassessing Hedging: The Logic of Alignment in East Asia", *Security Studies*, Vol. 24, No 4, 2015, p. 709.
 - 2 Yoel Guzansky, "The Foreign-Policy Tools of Small Powers: Strategic Hedging in the Persian Gulf", *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 12, No 1, 2015, p. 112-122.
 - 3 Sofie Hamdi and Mohammad Salman, "The Hedging Strategy of Small Arab Gulf States", *Asian Politics & Policy*, Vol. 12, No 2, 2020, p.127-152.
 - 4 Ayman El-Dessouiki and Ola Rafiq Mansour, "Small States and Strategic Hedging: the United Arab Emirates' Policy towards Iran", *Review of Economics and Political Science*, 2020.

Iran, rather than at the macro analysis level, which considers the foreign policy strategies of the small Gulf states as a component of the whole.

Qatar, one of the GCC nations, was chosen as a case study in order to evaluate how Qatar's relations with Iran, which is cited as the primary cause of the Blockade, have changed in the light of shifting regional balances and growing threats as a result of the Blockade Crisis. There are various studies on Qatar's foreign policy, and some authors —especially Kamrava⁵— tend to use hedging to explain Qatar's relations with Iran. Existing research, however, does not focus on if or in which direction Qatar's hedging behavior has been shaped in response to the regional security crisis mainly against the growing Saudi Arabia threat with the 2017 Crisis. This article examines Iran-Qatar ties in the context of the Gulf regional crisis, with the goal of exploring the effects of regional developments and security crises on hedging behavior.

This paper firstly addresses the literature on strategic hedging in International Relations (IR). The next section reviews prior studies on Qatar's foreign policy, primarily by concentrating on the dynamics of strategic hedging in its foreign policy. The historical context of strategic hedging in Qatar's relations with Iran is then analyzed. The impact of the Blockade Crisis on Qatar's strategic hedging policy toward Iran is investigated in the section that follows, from a theoretical perspective, by analyzing whether Qatar's long-standing hedging policy toward Iran evolved into an alignment in the wake of the regional crisis, and by examining the future of Qatar-Iran relations after the blockade's end. The findings of the article are compiled in the conclusion.

Theoretical Framework: Strategic Hedging

During the Cold War period, IR literature focused mainly on the policies of the great powers, and regarded small states as secondary actors. According to the realist theory, small states can pursue policies of either balancing or bandwagoning, which gives them a limited range of options. Hence, the realist theoretical framework has not been fully explanatory in analyzing the policies pursued by small states, as the number of studies focusing on small state behavior in the post-Cold War period increased⁶. The post-Cold War era led to the emergence of new theoretical frameworks. One of these theoretical approaches is strategic hedging. Strategic hedging literature is not restricted to the strategies followed by small states. The studies of Boon,⁷ Koga⁸ and Tessman⁹ show that many countries, whether small, middle or great

5 Mehran Kamrava, "Iran-Qatar Relations", Ehteshami, A., Quilliam, N., Bahgat, G. (eds.), *Security and Bilateral Issues between Iran and its Arab Neighbours*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p.167-187; Mehran Kamrava, "Qatari Foreign Policy and the Exercise of Subtle Power", *International Studies Journal*, Vol. 14, No 2, 2017, p.91-123; Mehran Kamrava, *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics*, New York, Cornell University Press, 2013.

6 Özlem Tür and Nuri Salık, "Uluslararası İlişkilerde "Küçük Devletler": Gelişimi, Tanımı, Dış Politika ve İttifak Davranışları", *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol.14, No 53, 2017, p. 3-22.

7 Hoo Tiang Boon, "The Hedging Prong in India's Evolving China Strategy", *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 25, No 101, 2016, p. 792-804.

8 Kei Koga, "The Rise of China and Japan's Balancing Strategy: Critical Junctures and Policy Shifts in the 2010s", *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 25, No 101, 2016, p. 777-791.

9 Brock F. Tessman, "System Structure and State Strategy: Adding Hedging to the Menu", *Security Studies*, Vol. 21, No 2, 2012, p. 192-231.

powers follow strategic hedging as an alternative to balancing and bandwagoning. Some of the scholars, like Medeiros¹⁰ and Foot,¹¹ analyze Sino-US relations through using hedging as a theoretical framework. The works published by Salman,¹² Salman et. al.,¹³ Salman and Geeraerts¹⁴ and Tunsjo¹⁵ also used the concept of hedging in the analysis of great power policies in later years. A second group emerged, studying the hedging strategies of small states facing challenges in the regional system. This group is mainly focused on the relations of small Southeastern Asian states with great powers - mainly with the rising China, as reflected in the works of Chung,¹⁶ Goh,¹⁷ Cheng-Chwee¹⁸ and Lim and Cooper.¹⁹ The concept was used as a theoretical framework, to explain state behavior in different regions like Europe, Eurasia, East and South Asia and the Persian Gulf. This paper concentrates on the latter, analyzing Qatar as a small state implementing a hedging strategy.

There is no clear definition of the term ‘hedging’ in IR literature. The term ‘hedge’ was originally borrowed from finance, and refers to an investment that protects your finances from a risky situation. IR scholars have imported the concept, to make sense of an alternative strategy different from balancing and bandwagoning that includes a mixture of cooperative and confrontational elements.²⁰ It is a situation where states are trying to find the middle ground.²¹ It is the strategy of a state facing a security threat to protect its own interests, without antagonizing the strong actors. Hedging reveals that states might cooperate with a rising power economically and diplomatically, while taking security measures against this power as a form of insurance.²² This strategy involves building strong ties with a menacing power, and at the same time forming different alliances against it.²³

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- 10 Evan S. Medeiros, “Strategic Hedging and the Future of Asia-Pacific Stability”, *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No 1, 2005, p. 145-167.
- 11 Rosemary Foot, “Chinese Strategies in a US-hegemonic Global Order: Accommodating and Hedging”, *International Affairs*, Vol. 82, No 1, 2006, p. 77-94.
- 12 Mohammad Salman, “Strategic Hedging and Unipolarity’s Demise: The Case of China’s Strategic Hedging”, *Asian Politics & Policy*, Vol. 9, No 3, 2017, p. 354-377.
- 13 Mohammad Salman, M. Pieper and G. Geeraerts, “Hedging in the Middle East and China-US. Competition”, *Asian Politics & Policy*, Vol. 7, No 4, 2015, p. 575-596.
- 14 Mohammad Salman and G. Geeraerts, “Strategic Hedging and China’s Economic Policy in the Middle East”. *China Report*, Vol. 51, No 2, 2015, p. 102-120.
- 15 Øystein Tunsjø, “U.S.-China Relations: From Unipolar Hedging to Bipolar Balancing”, R. S. Ross and Ø. Tunsjø (eds.), *Strategic Adjustment and The Rise of China: Power and Politics in East Asia*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 2017, p. 41-68.
- 16 Chien Peng Chung, “Southeast Asia-China Relations: Dialectics of ‘Hedging’ and ‘Counter-Hedging’”, *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 2004, p. 35-53.
- 17 Evelyn Goh, “Meeting the China Challenge: The U.S. in Southeast Asian Regional Security Strategies”, *Policy Studies*, No 16, Washington, DC, East-West Center, 2005.
- 18 Kuik Cheng-Chwee, “The Essence of Hedging: Malaysia and Singapore’s Response to a Rising China”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 30, No 2, 2008, p. 159-185.
- 19 Lim and Cooper, “Reassessing Hedging: The Logic of Alignment in East Asia”.
- 20 John D. Ciorciari and Jürgen Haacke, “Hedging in International Relations: An Introduction”, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 19, 2019, p. 367-374.
- 21 Tessman, “System Structure and State Strategy”.
- 22 Medeiros, “Strategic Hedging and the Future of Asia-Pacific Stability”.
- 23 Guzansky, “The Foreign-Policy Tools of Small Powers”, p. 120.

Given that bandwagoning and balancing cannot adequately explain Qatar's foreign policy, this study uses hedging as its theoretical framework. Qatar historically refused to clearly align with either Saudi Arabia or Iran, and instead maintained its autonomy in the power struggle between the two regional powers. The Qatari leadership actively cultivated its ties with Iran, and has formed partnerships with countries that are at odds with Iran, primarily the US and Saudi Arabia. Academics have concentrated on theoretical concepts like soft power, smart power, and subtle power and hedging, to explain Qatar's convoluted foreign policy. The next section will discuss research into Qatar's foreign policy that has been published in the literature in this context.

Qatar's Foreign Policy

Qatar has received intense academic and media attention, as a result of the effectiveness of its foreign policies disproportionate to its population and surface area. Rende asserts that Qatar has a hyperactive foreign policy that is criticized by some of the world leaders as disproportionate to its size.²⁴ Qatar's wealth, derived from its natural resources, played a significant part in this situation, as Joseph Nye, the architect of the 'soft power' concept has argued: "Qatar has managed to find an important niche between the West and the Arab nationalist mainstream, which it backs up with its considerable financial sources".²⁵ In addition to its economic power, mediation efforts and nation branding in international diplomacy also played a major role, as Kamrava states.²⁶ Some diplomats and scholars link the achievements of Qatar's foreign policy to the Emir of Qatar's personal vision, as does Sir Graham Boyce, a former British Ambassador to Qatar. According to Boyce, Qatar's foreign policy is highly personal, based on "Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa's leadership as opportunistic, pragmatic and personal".²⁷ Zafirov also focuses on Sheikh Hamad's leadership strategies, based on a diversification of foreign policy.²⁸ Although small state literature focuses on the limitations of small states' room for maneuver and their vulnerabilities, Qatar's foreign policy is full of controversial and autonomous choices. According to Cooper and Momani, traditional IR theories are not able to explain Qatar's foreign policy, and the case of Qatar pushes academics to expand their frameworks of analysis.²⁹ Mohammadzadeh suggests that Qatar's controversial foreign policy cannot be understood only in terms of security and independence; rather it pursues a pro-active foreign policy through initiating and shaping political actions.³⁰ According to Khatib, the reason Qatari foreign policy is so challenging to evaluate is because it is incoherent in itself.³¹

24 Mithat Rende, "The Qatar Diplomatic Crisis and the Politics of Energy", *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No 2, 2017, p. 3.

25 "Qatar is a Diplomatic Heavy-hitter", *Al Jazeera*, 21 July 2008, <https://www.aljazeera.com/focus/2008/07/200872164735567644.html> (Accessed 5 March 2022).

26 Mehran Kamrava, "Mediation and Qatari Foreign Policy", *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 65, No 4, 2011, p.539-544.

27 Sir Graham Boyce, "Qatar's Foreign Policy", *Asian Affairs*, Vol. 44, No 3, 2013, p.365-377.

28 Miroslav Zafirov, "The Qatar Crisis — Why the Blockade Failed", *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 11, No 2, 2017, p. 191-201.

29 Andrew F. Cooper and Beesma Momani Qatar, "Expanded Contours of Small State Diplomacy", *The International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 46, No 3, 2011, p. 114.

30 Babak Mohammadzadeh, "Status and Foreign Policy Change in Small States: Qatar's Emergence in Perspective", *The International Spectator*, Vol. 52, No 2, 2017, p. 20.

31 Lina Khatib, "Qatar's Foreign Policy: The Limits of Pragmatism", *International Affairs*, Vol. 89, No 2, 2013, p.417-418.

The theoretical discussions on Qatar's foreign policy mostly focus on soft power, to explain Qatar's rising international and regional influence. Antwi-Boateng provides a thorough analysis of Qatar's soft power. According to Antwi-Boateng, the attention on Qatar shows how a small nation can outperform its size by using soft power to influence events and change the course of history in the Middle East.³² He finds evidence of soft power in a variety of practices, including Qatar's military cooperation with the United States, income redistribution among its people, the higher education system, media sway, 'carrot diplomacy', its sports policy, and overseas aid. Following the Arab Spring, Qatar's soft power started to be questioned because Qatar's foreign policy approach, mainly based on the support of the Muslim Brotherhood, failed to produce the anticipated outcomes. Additionally, Qatar's reputation has suffered from the growing international criticism of Qatar's human rights record, in the context of the FIFA World Cup preparations. In this context, Windecker and Sendrowicz propose conceptualizing Qatar's foreign policy as one of "smart power"³³— another term used by Joseph Nye that refers to a nation's capacity to combine hard and soft power. As a third approach, Kamrava, suggested the idea of "subtle power," which is thought to more accurately explain Qatar's ascent to prominence as a major player on the world stage. According to Kamrava, small governments can exert subtle power — a less direct type of influence — through diplomacy, marketing, or having access to financial resources.³⁴ Kamrava argues that Qatar, as a subtle power, owes its active position in the international arena to strategic hedging.³⁵ Guzansky also argues that Qatar overcame the disadvantages of being a small power and its fragile position vis-à-vis regional powers by hedging.³⁶ According to Hamdi and Salman, the uncertainties involved in the hedging strategy that Qatar has followed for many years gives leverage to the country.³⁷

This article defines Qatar's foreign policy as hedging, which has provided the wherewithal for the country to maximize its gains and to minimize the security threats in the context of the Persian Gulf. Aiming to depict the differences in Qatar's hedging approach toward Iran throughout the regional security crisis in accordance with Lim and Cooper's model, this case study has been chosen. This goal will be achieved first by conducting a brief historical analysis, based on Qatar-Iran relations from a theoretical standpoint, in order to examine the variations in Qatar's strategic hedging toward Iran.

Background to Qatar's Strategic Hedging toward Iran

Qatar's friendly relations with Iran date back to the 1970s. Qatar's leader Sheikh Khalifah Bin Hamad Al-Thani was seen by Iran as a source of regional stability, and he openly expressed his

32 Osman Antwi-Boateng, "The Rise of Qatar as a Soft Power and the Challenges", *European Scientific Journal*, Vol. 2, 2013, p. 39-51.

33 Gidon Windecker and Paul Sendrowicz, "Qatar between Marketing and Realpolitik: A Smart Business Model for a Microstate?", *KAS International Reports*, No 1, 2014.

34 Kamrava, "Mediation and Qatari Foreign Policy", p.539-544.

35 Kamrava, *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics*.

36 Guzansky, "The Foreign-Policy Tools of Small Powers", p. 114.

37 Hamdi and Salman, "The Hedging Strategy of Small Arab Gulf States", p. 20.

admiration for the Shah's regime.³⁸ The overthrow of the Shah with the Islamic Revolution in 1979, which intended to export the revolution to the neighboring states, posed a direct threat to the other regional countries. Due to the integration of Shiites into Qatari society, and the close ties between Shiite businessmen and Qatar's royal family, the Qatari government was less concerned about Iran's Islamic Revolution than the other Gulf nations.³⁹

In the 1990s, while Qatar was cooperating with the US on security issues, it also negotiated with Iran on energy issues. The National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) discovered the South Pars gas field in 1990. After its discovery, it was announced that Iran and Qatar had agreed on a \$3 billion project to develop the South Pars gas field. Even though the project did not materialize, it became a turning point in the relations between Qatar and Iran.⁴⁰ In the early 1990s, talks were established with Iran to pipe water to Qatar.⁴¹

The great transformation in Qatar's foreign policy took place with the bloodless palace coup in 1995. After seizing power from his father, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani aspired to follow an independent foreign policy, and to make Qatar a regional power. While continuing its cooperation with Saudi Arabia within the framework of the GCC and hosting the US base, Qatar deepened its relations with Iran. Even when the US shifted more of its military operations from Saudi Arabia to Qatar in 2003, warming relations between Qatar and Iran persisted.⁴²

The 2011 Arab Spring sparked new conflicts between the Gulf countries and Iran. Saudi Arabia and Iran have engaged in proxy wars and confronted with each other since then. Qatar pursued a highly active foreign policy in the post-2011 period. The impartiality that Qatar pursued as a foreign policy objective also shattered with the Arab Spring.⁴³ Qataris supported the overthrow of the Mubarak regime in Egypt and its replacement by the Muslim Brotherhood. Qatari Air Forces participated in the anti-Qadhafi military campaign in Libya.⁴⁴ Problems began to emerge between Qatar and Iran, which differed on issues such as international intervention in Libya, the brutal suppression of Shiite protests in Bahrain, the Yemeni war and the Syrian civil war.⁴⁵ Although these developments caused tensions in the relations between the two countries, both sides made a major effort not to deepen the crisis. Despite all the opposing views, diplomatic relations between the two countries continued at the highest level in 2012-2013.⁴⁶

Qatar Blockade Crisis: From Hedging to an Alignment with Iran?

There had long been tensions between Qatar and the other Gulf states, particularly with Saudi Arabia due to the historical border problems. Tensions further escalated with the establishment

38 Mehran Kamrava, "Iran-Qatar Relations", p. 171.

39 Henner Fürtig, *Iran's Rivalry with Saudi Arabia between the Gulf States*, Reading, Ithaca Press, 2002, p. 84.

40 Kamrava, "Iran-Qatar Relations", p. 174.

41 David B. Roberts, "Understanding Qatar's Foreign Policy Objectives", *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 17, No 2, 2012, p. 235.

42 Kamrava, "Iran-Qatar Relations", p. 175.

43 Roberts, "Understanding Qatar's Foreign Policy Objectives", p. 237.

44 Miroslav Zafirov, "The Qatar Crisis — Why the Blockade Failed", *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 11 No 2, 2017, p. 191-201.

45 Ibid.

46 Kamrava, "Iran-Qatar Relations", p. 177-178.

of Al-Jazeera, which allegedly broadcasts anti-Saudi rhetoric. After failing to fulfill the GCC agreement on security and stability, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain withdrew their ambassadors from Qatar in 2014. Alleged hacking of the Qatar news agency resulted in statements that the Amir of Qatar supported Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas and criticized US President Trump, which set the stage for the Blockade crisis.⁴⁷ Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates announced that they had cut their diplomatic ties with Qatar and placed the country under blockade from air, land and sea on June 5, 2017. Later, Yemen, Libya and The Maldives joined these four countries. The countries which put an embargo on Qatar, particularly Saudi Arabia, alleged that Qatar had been supporting some terrorist organizations financially and had collaborated with Iran.⁴⁸

The embargoing countries presented a 13-point request list for the crisis to be ended, with a ten-day deadline for compliance. The demands included: scaling down diplomatic relations with Iran, closing the Turkish military base in Doha, severing its ties with the terrorist organizations, specifically the Muslim Brotherhood, ISIL, al-Qaeda, Fateh al-Sham (formerly known as the Nusra Front) and Lebanon's Hezbollah, stopping funding for individuals, groups or organizations that had been designated as terrorists by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, Bahrain, The US and other countries, shutting down all news outlets funded directly or indirectly by Qatar, including Al Jazeera, and ending contact with the political opposition in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain.⁴⁹ Doha rejected all the charges and demands of the boycotters, and stated that it was a violation of its sovereign rights.⁵⁰

Although the blockade brought about a serious crisis within the GCC, Iran's assistance was crucial in ensuring Qatar's survival. In this case, it could be expected that the traditional hedging strategy of Qatar, which both protected itself from Iran and engaged with it, could evolve toward an alliance with Iran, according to the model proposed by Lim and Cooper.⁵¹ Lim and Cooper argue that hedging occurs when a smaller state will need to avoid strong alliances with one regional power and instead adopt an unclear policy with more than one regional power, even when there are no significant security disputes with the rival powers. To put it another way, a small power will participate in effective strategic hedging when it seems to take a neutral stance on security-related issues. However, different security results will occur when a small state engages in significant and ongoing security disputes with a great/regional power. In this case, three types of alignment can be expected to occur. The first category is called 'resolute allies', meaning that the small country aligns with one of the great powers due to a significant security conflict with another great power. These states are expected to strengthen their ties with the friendly great power in order to increase the security commitment and counteract a perceived rise in the menacing power's threat. Secondly, a state

47 Beverley Milton-Edwards, "The Blockade on Qatar: Conflict Management Failings", *The International Spectator*, Vol. 55, No 3, 2020, p.34-48.

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49 "Arab States Issue 13 Demands to End Qatar-Gulf Crisis", *Al-Jazeera*, 12 July 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/06/arab-states-issue-list-demands-qatar-crisis-170623022133024.html> (Accessed 2 April 2022).

50 Prasanta Kumar Pradhan, "Qatar Crisis and the Deepening Regional Faultlines", *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 42, No 4, 2018, p. 437.

51 Lim and Cooper, "Reassessing Hedging: The Logic of Alignment in East Asia".

will be referred to as an ‘emerging partner’ if it only has a weak alignment with one great power and still has significant security disagreements with a rival power. It is anticipated that these states will seek to build upon the weak baseline signals of friendly great power alignment in response to the increased danger in order to aggregate capabilities and raise the projected deterrent. The last and thirdly, small state will become a ‘reserved ally’ if it does not engage in a significant conflict with one of the major powers but instead forms a stable alliance with another great power. These states enjoy existing security agreements with the friendly great power and have less urgency to strengthen the alignment signals⁵²

Economic cooperation and diplomatic engagement are left out of the spectrum of alignment behavior in Lim and Cooper’s model. Secondary state-great power alignment is evaluated by security considerations. According to this framework, statements of support for security policies (or criticism of rivals); arms sales or military aid are listed as weak alignment signals. Moderate alignment signals are defined as routine joint training exercises, or combat operations; rotational troop deployments or limited access agreements. Permanent or semi-permanent military basing; formal bilateral or multilateral treaties (plus alliance bureaucracy) are categorized as strong alignment signals.⁵³

When the model proposed by Lim and Cooper is adopted in this paper’s case study, it can be predicted that the conflict between Qatar and Saudi Arabia during the Blockade would push Qatar toward a ‘resolute ally’, Iran.⁵⁴ However, Iran only sent weak signals of alignment in terms of security issues with Iran like supporting certain of its security policies, and criticized the security policies of the disputant power Saudi Arabia, consistent with the interests of Iran. Bilateral relations were mostly based on economic cooperation and diplomatic engagement. Thus, this paper argues that Qatar can be classified as an ‘emerging partner’ of Iran during the blockade, for a short period. However, Qatar returned to its traditional hedging strategy through joining Saudi-led initiatives, although the Blockade crisis was not yet resolved. Qatar-Iran relations during the Blockade Crisis will be explored within the context of the provided theoretical model in this framework.

Iran’s actions were among the key justifications for building up the accusations of the blockading countries. According to Zaccara, Iran was an instrumental factor behind the blockade, to compel Qatar to reduce its ties with Iran.⁵⁵ The remarks claimed to have been made by Qatar’s Amir Tamim Al-Thani at a Police Academy graduation ceremony were the immediate cause of the diplomatic conflict. Al-Thani purportedly alluded to Iran as “a big power in the stabilization of the region” in one of these speeches, criticizing the escalation of tensions with Tehran, as later released on the Qatar News Agency website.⁵⁶ In fact, when sanctions were imposed on Qatar, official diplomatic relations had already been suspended between Qatar and Iran. Qatar had recalled its ambassador from Tehran in 2016,

52 Ibid., p.711.

53 Ibid., p. 704.

54 Hamdi and Salman, “The Hedging Strategy of Small Arab Gulf States”, p. 14.

55 Luciana Zaccara, “Iran and the Intra-GCC Crisis: Risks and Opportunities”, *IAI Papers*, No 19, 2019.

56 “Qatar Says State News Agency Hacked After Report Cites Emir Criticising US”, *BBC News*, 24 May 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40026822>. (Accessed 8 April 2022).

after the Iranian attacks on Saudi diplomatic facilities, and had suspended their diplomatic relations.⁵⁷

Iran condemned the countries imposing an embargo on Qatar, calling for this to end quickly. Iran gave its full support to Qatar at the onset of the crisis.⁵⁸ This support was very meaningful, because Qatar's air and sea area were closed, while in addition, food imports from Saudi Arabia, which constituted about 40 percent, had stopped. Iran opened up the airspace and the maritime route, and sent five planeloads of food to Qatar to prevent the country from being affected by the crisis.⁵⁹ Claims that Qatar's import-based economy could not endure the blockade were unfounded, and Iran's support to Qatar proved beneficial.

It is clear that Iran-Qatar economic relations gained a new dimension with the crisis. Iran's exports to Qatar increased by 181 percent between 2016 and 2017.⁶⁰ Iran-Qatar non-oil commodity trade doubled.⁶¹ Although the trade volume between the two countries increased after 2017, it did not reach the expected level. The most important reason for this is the sanctions imposed on Iran. In addition, the Iranian market failed to meet the increasing demands. Turkey benefited economically much more from the economic embargo on Qatar.⁶²

Bilateral relations also progressed on the diplomatic level. Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif visited Doha on October 2, 2017 for the first time, and met with Qatar's Amir Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani to discuss how to establish better ties between the two countries.⁶³ In response to Iranian support, the Qatari authorities reported on August 23, 2017 that its ambassador would return to Tehran, to resume his diplomatic duties, and full diplomatic relations with Iran were restored.⁶⁴

The issues mentioned so far have been considered within the scope of diplomatic engagement and economic cooperation, but do not include any security dimension. According to the theoretical model, some security signals are required, to claim that Iran became an emerging partner of Iran during the blockade. In the area of security, an agreement was made in April 2018 by Qatar and Iran, to expand coordinated patrols of

57 "Qatar Recalls Ambassador to Iran", *Peninsula*, 7 June 2016, <https://thepeninsulaqatar.com/article/07/01/2016/qatar-recalls-ambassador-to-iran> (Accessed 8 April 2022)

58 "Iran Calls on Persian Gulf States for Restraint", *Islamic Republic News Agency*, 5 June 2017. <https://en.irna.ir/news/82554945/Iran-calls-on-Persian-Gulf-states-for-restraint> (Accessed 13 January 2023);

59 "Qatar Blockade: Iran Sends Five Planeloads of Food", *BBC News*, 11 June 2017 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40237721> (Accessed 10 April 2022).

60 Thierry Coville, "Update on Trade Relations Between UAE/Iran and Qatar/ Iran", *Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique*, April 2019, <https://www.frstrategie.org/en/programs/observatoire-du-monde-arabo-musulman-et-du-sahel/update-trade-relations-between-uaeiran-and-qatariran-2019>. (Accessed 18 April 2022).

61 Giorgio Cafiero and Andreas Paraskevopoulos, "GCC Dispute Pushes Iran and Qatar Closer but with Caveats", *Atlantic Council*, 17 June 2019.

62 Ibid.

63 "Iran's Foreign Minister Meets Qatar's ruler in Doha", *Reuters*, 8 March 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-qatar-zarif/irans-foreign-minister-meets-qatars-ruler-in-doha-idUSKBN16F1IL> (Accessed 10 April 2022).

64 Qatar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Qatar Announces Return of Its Ambassador to Tehran", 23 August 2017, <https://www.mofa.gov.qa/en/all-mofa-news/details/2017/08/23/qatar-announcesreturn-of-its-ambassador-to-tehran>. (Accessed 11 January 2023).

their maritime border.⁶⁵ High-ranking military officers have mostly visited, without giving a clear indication of the degree of military collaboration between the two states.⁶⁶ The US presence in the region prevented a more extensive military partnership between Iran and Qatar from materializing. According to the spectrum of alignment behaviors proposed by Lim and Cooper, “public statements of support for security policies or criticisms of a rival state’s security policies (consistent with the interest of the alignment state)” are the weakest alignment signals.⁶⁷ Qatar’s support for Iran’s nuclear dealings, and its challenge to the imposition of new sanctions on Iran after US President Trump’s decision to withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)⁶⁸, which was strongly supported by Saudi Arabia,⁶⁹ would be considered as a weak alignment signal during the blockade. The official statements made by Qatar’s foreign minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani on December 18, 2018, criticizing Saudi Arabia for continuing the war in Yemen, accusing them of killing the Prime Minister of Lebanon, and accusing the UAE of supporting brutal regimes, and the military takeover in Libya, destabilizing Somalia, and dividing Yemen, would also be seen as weak signals of alignment with Iran, because they are consistent with Tehran’s policy.⁷⁰

Despite the continued turmoil and increased collaboration with Iran, Qatar responded favorably to requests from the Gulf states regarding shared concerns, which is evaluated as the continuation of hedging strategy in this paper. Qatar joined Saudi Arabia for a joint military exercise on February 21, 2019.⁷¹ After the attacks on oil-pumping stations in Saudi Arabia and against oil tankers off the coast of the UAE, Saudi King Salman blamed Iran, and he organized three emergency summits in Mecca on May 29-31, 2019. In the concluding statement of the summit, in which Qatar was also a participant, Iran was condemned for the increased tensions.⁷² Qatar’s Amir Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, who attended the urgent summit organized by Saudi King Selman, stated that the results of the summit did not reflect the official foreign policy of Doha.⁷³ Despite the ongoing crisis with the Gulf countries, Qatar’s inclusion in joint

65 Prasanta Kumar Pradhan, “Qatar Crisis and the Deepening Regional Faultlines”, p. 439.

66 Saoud Al-Eshaq and Amjed Rasheed, “The ‘David’ in a Divided Gulf: Qatar’s Foreign Policy and the 2017 Gulf Crisis”, *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 29, No 2, 2022, p.30-45.

67 Lim and Cooper, “Reassessing Hedging: The Logic of Alignment in East Asia”, p. 704.

68 “Iran Willing to Deepen Ties with Qatar/Stressing Stronger Maritime Cooperation, Forming Joint Shipping Line”, *President of Iran website*, 26 August 2018, <https://www.president.ir/en/105819> (Accessed on 26 January 2023).

69 “Kingdom of Saudi Arabia’s Statement on the United States Withdrawal from the JCPOA”, *The Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in Washington D.C.*, 8 May 2018, <https://www.saudiembassy.net/news/kingdom-saudi-arabias-statement- united-states-withdrawal-jcpoa> (Accessed 26 January 2023).

70 “Qatari Foreign Minister Criticizes Iran Sanctions, UAE Foreign Policy as Destabilizing”, *CNBC*, 18 December 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/12/16/qatar-foreign-minister-on-gulf-blockade-saudi-arabia-and-us-sanctions.html> (Accessed 28 January 2023).

71 “Qatar Joins Saudi Arabia for Joint Military Exercise”, *Al Monitor*, 21 February 2019, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20190221-qatar-joins-saudi-arabia-for-joint-military-exercise/> (Accessed 11 April 2022).

72 “Iran: Rouhani Welcomes Developing Relations with Qatar”, *Al-Jazeera*, 6 June 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/06/iran-rouhani-welcomes-developing-relations-qatar-190605154738749.html> (Accessed 11 April 2022).

73 “Qatar Expresses Reservations over Mecca Summit Outcome”, *Al Jazeera*, 3 June 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/06/qatar-expresses-reservations-mecca-summit-outcome> (Accessed 15 April 2022).

military exercises led by Saudi Arabia, its participation in the meetings with the boycotted countries, and its critique of the anti-Iranian attitude among the participants are evaluated as an indication of a hedging strategy. To keep its autonomy, Qatar has adhered to its long-standing strategy of hedging, by giving mixed signals to both regional powers.

Top Iranian commander Qassem Soleimani was killed in a US airstrike in Iraq on January 3, 2020. Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani made his first visit to Iran nine days after the killing of Iranian general Soleimani by the US, and Iran's retaliatory attacks against US targets. It was the first time that a national leader of Qatar made an official visit to Tehran. Messages of friendship were exchanged during the visit, and it was emphasized that its aim was to de-escalate the tension in the region.⁷⁴ The timing of the visit sparked certain discussions. According to the NBC network, the US airstrikes that killed Soleimani were launched from the US military base in Qatar.⁷⁵ It is considered that the reason behind the visit of the Amir of Qatar was not to damage Qatar's relations with Iran in the face of these allegations, and to explain the issue to the Iranian administration.

In the face of allegations that Iran-Qatar relations have increased, and that the crisis with the Gulf countries would bring Qatar closer to Iran, Qatar rejected the charges that Qatar was very close to Iran. The Qatari Emirate announced that the two countries were maintaining their trade relations because they share the world's largest gas field, and they stated that the UAE has a much greater trade relationship with Iran. Doha also said that it demonstrated solidarity with its Sunni neighbors during disagreements with Iran, led by the Shiites, especially when Sheikh Tamim recalled Qatar's ambassador during the attack on the Saudi mission in Iran in January 2016.⁷⁶ These statements demonstrate that Qatar continued to follow a hedging strategy, by sending ambiguous messages about the degree of its security interests and those of Iran.

End of the Blockade and the Future of Iran-Qatar Relations

After several international mediation efforts, notably those led by Kuwait and the US, to end the crisis, Qatar was invited to the GCC Summit held on January 5, 2021 in al-Ula city of Saudi Arabia for the first time in four years. One day before the summit, Saudi Arabia announced that it was lifting the economic embargo imposed on Qatar since 2017 and opening its borders and airspace to Qatar.⁷⁷ The GCC Summit would be considered as a success for Qatar, since it did not meet any of the 13 demands set forth by the blockading countries. Even though the key objective of the blockade was to reduce the cooperation between Qatar and Iran, it could not achieve this goal. On the contrary, Qatar has made it clear that the al-Ula Summit will not change its relations with Iran. Iran officially welcomed the al-Ula summit's outcome. Iranian

74 "Iran, Qatar Hold Private Talks", *Islamic Republic News Agency*, 4 January 2020, <https://en.irna.ir/news/83620191/Iran-Qatar-hold-private-talks> (Accessed 13 January 2023).

75 Nawal Sayed, "Analysis: Why Emir of Qatar Visited Iran?", *See News*, 14 January 2020, <https://see.news/analysis-why-emir-of-qatar-visited-iran/> (Accessed 15 April 2022).

76 Declan Walsh, "Qatar Restores Full Relations with Iran, Deepening Gulf Feud", *New York Times*, 24 August 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/24/world/middleeast/qatar-iran-boycott-saudi-arabia.html> (Accessed 18 April 2022).

77 "Saudi Arabia and Qatar Agree to Reopen Airspace and Maritime borders", *CNN*, 4 January 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/01/04/world/qatar-and-saudi-arabia-reopen-airspace-intl/index.html>. (Accessed 14 January 2023).

Foreign Minister Jawad Zarif welcomed the reconciliation through offering “congratulations to Qatar for the success of its brave resistance to pressure and extortion”.⁷⁸

After the al-Ula agreement, Doha continued to pursue an independent foreign policy and engaged in hedging, in order to secure its strategic priorities, while at the same time seeking to implement agreements with its neighbors as a way to alleviate conflicts. Although Doha-Tehran relations have gained a new dimension, the question is to what extent the two countries can improve their relations. One of the main problems in terms of Qatar’s foreign policy is to maintain its cooperation and pragmatic partnership with Iran, while avoiding damage to relations with the US administration. In this context, hedging is still a determining strategy for Qatar in its relations with Iran. This situation also creates an incentive for Qatar to mediate between the US and Iran. In accordance with that purpose, it is making efforts to lower the tension between Iran and the US. Qatar Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani openly expressed the contention that Doha is searching for mediation between Iran and the West through a political and diplomatic process.⁷⁹ The primary area of collaboration that will bring Doha and Tehran closer together in the future is the energy issue. Qatar announced in December 2018 that it was withdrawing from the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC),⁸⁰ an organization dominated by Saudi Arabia. Qatar follows a policy of developing the Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) sector. The country seems to be determined to follow a path independent of OPEC. Qatar and Iran are jointly working together to protect the North Dome/South Pars gas field, the world’s largest gas reserve, and collaborating significantly in the energy sector.

Conclusion

Lim and Cooper suggest that the hedging literature sheds light on the “responses of small states fostering bilateral relations with both regional (competing) powers”.⁸¹ In this framework, this study has focused on how Qatar shaped its relations with the regional power Iran against the rising security threat of the other main regional power, Saudi Arabia. After the 2017 crisis, Qatar fully exploited its previous hedging strategy through receiving diplomatic and economic aid from Iran, and developing other external alignments at the same time. Contrary to the expectations that Iran would be a strategic partner for Qatar, it preferred to follow an ambiguous policy toward Iran and to strengthen its ties with Turkey, the US and some European countries. In this way, Qatar did not block the way for reconciliation with Saudi Arabia, and continued to remain under the American protection shield. Qatar’s deeper cooperation with Iran would probably have

78 “FM Zarif Hails Qatar’s Resistance, Urges Concerted Action for Strong Region”, *Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, <https://irangov.ir/detail/355101> (Accessed 13 January 2023).

79 “Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Affirms Qatar’s Commitment to Carrying Out Mediation Efforts to Calm Conflicts”, *Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, 30 March 2022. <https://mofa.gov.qa/en/all-mofa-news/details/1443/08/27/deputy-prime-minister-and-minister-of-foreign-affairs-affirms-qatar’s-lack-of-hesitation-in-carrying-out-mediation-efforts-to-calm-conflicts> (Accessed 3 January 2023)

80 “Qatar Gives Notice of its Withdrawal from OPEC”, *OPEC Press Releases*, No 5/2018, 3 December 2018, https://www.opec.org/opec_web/en/press_room/5261.htm (Accessed 3 January 2023).

81 Lim and Cooper, “Reassessing Hedging: The Logic of Alignment in East Asia”, p. 724.

jeopardized its relations with the United States. This situation may also cause Qatar to lose its autonomous stance in foreign policy, which is the product of American-assured security.

Qatar, which has been pursuing a hedging strategy toward Iran for many years, seems to have gained from that strategy during the crisis with the other Gulf countries. This strategy provided Qatar with the means to use its positive relations with Iran as a leverage against the GCC countries. It might be questioned if hedging will continue over time. Even though alliance literature predicts high levels of alignment in the context of the Qatar-Iran relations, hedging will be less costly, including many options as possible for Qatar, which also provides it with the possibility of remaining under the American security shelter and to keep up dialogue with the GCC countries. In this context, strategic hedging can be expected to continue in Qatar's relations with Iran.

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