
ARTICLE

Bilateral Cooperation as a Stabilizing Mechanism: Iran's Charm Offensive and Qatar's Strategic Balancing

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Abstract

A central question in understanding the agency and alliances of Qatar and Iran within regional politics is how these states respond to escalating or ongoing regional conflicts that have the potential to strain their bilateral relationship. This research contends that rather than fostering conditions for conflict, Qatar and Iran strategically leverage their relationship as a means of preserving a fragile equilibrium in the face of shifting regional dynamics and actors. The central hypothesis posits that Tehran and Doha are more inclined to pursue cooperative engagement when such collaboration aligns with their national interests and contributes to sustaining the regional balance of power. To explore their aversion to direct confrontation, this study analyzes the bilateral relationship through the lens of the foundational principles that guide each state's foreign policy amid regional tensions. I argue that Qatar-Iran relations embody a convergence of Iran's "charm offensive" diplomacy and Qatar's strategic balancing approach. Four overarching principles underpin their capacity for maneuver and cooperation: (1) avoiding conflict, (2) maintaining a balance of power within the regional hegemonic equilibrium, (3) Iran's foreign policy shaped by its Islamic revolutionary ideology, and (4) Qatar's tendency to align with the red lines of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The paper examines four critical political episodes that have profoundly influenced Qatar-Iran relations and carry significant regional or global ramifications: the collapse of the Iran nuclear deal, the 2017 Gulf Crisis, the U.S. assassination of General Qassem Soleimani, and the conflicts in Yemen and Syria. These events illuminate how the guiding principles of Iran's charm offensive and Qatar's strategic balancing are operationalized in practice, reinforcing the notion that bilateral cooperation serves as a stabilizing mechanism within an otherwise volatile regional environment.

Keywords

Iran, Qatar, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), charm offensive, foreign policymaking, strategic balancing

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Introduction

Iran's foreign policy toward Arab states is a significant topic in Middle Eastern studies. As a non-Arab, revolutionary, and anti-monarchy power, Iran has been actively engaged in regional and global affairs, reflecting its distinct political and sectarian characteristics. This research is an attempt to understand the mutually constituting process of foreign policymaking between Qatar and Iran, with a particular focus on policy preferences in both multilateral and bilateral relations. Given that Qatar is a small state and a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), its external relations with regional countries have been heavily influenced by Saudi hegemony, which has sought to dominate not only Qatar as a neighboring power but also the GCC as an institution. Highlighting the significance of this research, Iran-Qatar relations merit attention as they reflect broader political dynamics and the potential for cooperation despite regional rifts and hegemonic rivalries.

International relations is a mutually constitutive process between actors and structures. A state's policy preferences are legitimate and accurate within the social context that shapes its identity and interests, which, in turn, influence political tendencies.¹ This research seeks to understand the dynamic process of foreign policymaking between Qatar and Iran by examining the broader political context in which their relations emerge. Rather than offering a purely theoretical interpretation, this study adopts a conceptual approach rooted in the political history of the region, highlighting key milestones in their bilateral relations.

The central question of this paper is how Qatar and Iran respond to emerging or ongoing regional conflicts that have the potential to challenge their ties.² This inquiry offers a significant contribution to the literature for three key reasons. First, Qatar-Iran relations can be analyzed through multiple lenses: economic, political, sectarian, or societal. This paper examines their bilateral ties in response to regional developments, integrating various factors that influence foreign policy decisions. Second, Qatar-Iran relations are part of the broader Arab-Iranian geopolitical landscape. This study aims to depict the nature of these ties within the region's political complexities, emphasizing the historical context of Arab-Iranian relations. Third, understanding how Qatar and Iran navigate their relationship within regional politics requires an analysis of their respective foreign policy strategies and status as regional powers. While Iran is a middle power and Qatar exercises subtle

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power, both seek diplomatic and economic gains on the global stage without aspiring to regional hegemony—despite Iran's claims to the contrary.³ The regional issues affecting their cooperation do not constitute tangible or direct threats between them. Unlike traditional foreign policy strategies of balancing or bandwagoning, which require a direct clash of interests over shared political or material stakes, Qatar and Iran have largely refrained from perceiving each other as direct threats.⁴

Although Qatar-Iran relations have gained attention in the literature, few studies have conceptualized their nature.⁵ Notably, Mehran Kamrava observed that both states have consistently sought to “avoid conflict,” fostering a broadly amicable and non-confrontational approach despite their divergent policy preferences.⁶ This article expands on that analysis by identifying three additional dynamics that shape their bilateral ties and defining four key principles that govern their strategic maneuvering within regional politics: (1) avoiding conflict, (2) maintaining a balance of power within regional hegemonic equilibrium, (3) Iran's foreign policy shaped by its Islamic revolutionary ideology, and (4) Qatar's tendency to align with the GCC's red lines. I argue that Qatar and Iran utilize their relationship as a tool for an elusive balancing mechanism in regional politics rather than as a source of direct confrontation. The core hypothesis of this research is that Iran and Qatar are more likely to cooperate when necessary to serve their strategic interests within the regional balance of power. To explain their general tendency to avoid confrontation in bilateral ties, I analyze Iran-Qatar relations through these four guiding principles that influence their foreign policymaking amid regional rifts. Their relationship is characterized by Iran's charm offensive and Qatar's elusive yet strategic balancing act.

This article is structured as follows: The first section provides an overview of Arab-Iranian relations. The second section elaborates on the conceptual framework with introducing the four principles shaping Qatar-Iran bilateral ties and their connection to the concepts of charm offensive and strategic balancing. The third section examines four key geopolitical milestones that have notably impacted the Qatari-Iranian relationship within both regional and global contexts: the failed nuclear deal, the 2017 Gulf Crisis, the U.S. killing of Qassem Soleimani, and the wars in Yemen and Syria. By analyzing these regional developments, this paper highlights how Qatar and Iran navigate foreign policy through charm offensive and strategic balancing.

A Glance at Arab-Iranian Relations

A nuanced understanding of Arab-Iranian relations is essential to contextualizing Iran's ties with Qatar within broader regional and historical dynamics. The spread of Islam in Iran laid the foundation for early Arab-Persian interactions,

initiating a complex and continuously evolving relationship. During the Pahlavi era, regional politics were heavily influenced by the broader Cold War environment. U.S. strategy in the Gulf, encapsulated in the “twin pillar” policy, positioned Iran and Saudi Arabia as co-guardians of regional stability. Despite this strategic alignment, tensions persisted between Iran and several Arab states—most notably Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Iraq—stemming from territorial disputes. Moreover, Iran’s decision not to support the 1973 Arab oil embargo underscored its divergence from collective Arab action and contributed to a growing sense of mistrust among its regional neighbors.⁷ The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran resulted in a regime change that significantly impacted Arab-Iranian relations. As most Arab states were monarchies, Iran’s anti-monarchy rhetoric directly challenged their political structures. This ideological opposition, combined with the sectarian undertones of Iran’s foreign policy, heightened tensions with its Arab neighbors. In response, the Arab Gulf states unified under the GCC in 1981 to counterbalance Iran’s influence and mitigate the growing conflict.⁸ Iran’s policymaking has not only influenced Arab-Iranian relations, but has also reshaped intra-Arab dynamics, significantly affecting the formation of regional alliances.

The era of President Rafsanjani marked a shift in Iran’s foreign policy, characterized by a strategy of pragmatic coexistence rather than the aggressive, revolutionary approach that had previously defined its stance.⁹ President Khatami continued Rafsanjani’s pragmatic approach, emphasizing the “Dialogue of Civilizations” and promoting diplomatic rapprochement among various parties.¹⁰ During the summit of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) in Tehran in 1997, Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, as part of the Saudi delegation, became the most senior Saudi official to visit Iran since the establishment of the Islamic Republic.¹¹ The 2003 Iraq War introduced new tensions into Arab-Iranian relations, as the power struggle in Iraq became a pivotal factor. Iran’s growing influence in Iraq, fueled by the absence of a central government and the rise of a powerful Shi’a community, exacerbated strains in regional relations.¹² Then foreign minister of Saudi Arabia, Saud al-Faisal, encapsulated this new situation in Iraq in the following statement: “We fought a war together to keep Iran out of Iraq after Iraq was driven out of Kuwait. Now we are handing the whole country over to Iran without reason.”¹³

Following the Iraq War, President Ahmadinejad’s hardline policies had a significant impact on Iranian foreign policymaking between 2005 and 2013. Ahmadinejad became the first Iranian president to attend a GCC summit, which took place in Doha in 2008. This diplomatic engagement marked the beginning of a new chapter in Iran’s relations with the Gulf states.¹⁴ The Arab Spring, a pivotal moment in Iran’s relations with the Arab Gulf states, began influencing ties during Ahmadinejad’s presidency. However, it was under President Rouhani that Iran faced significant tensions with the GCC states, particularly regarding

the repercussions of the uprisings in Syria and Yemen. Both conflicts posed critical challenges to regional security due to Iran's direct involvement. In Syria, Iran emerged as a key military backer of the Assad regime, advocating for its readmission to the Arab League—an act that directly interfered with intra-Arab political dynamics. In Yemen, Iran's support for the Houthi movement played a decisive role in its military and logistical successes, further escalating tensions with the Gulf states.¹⁵ Although Rouhani partially embraced Rafsanjani's pragmatic approach towards the Gulf states, regional turmoil and the stance of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) on managing tensions in Syria and Yemen negatively impacted his reformist foreign policy agenda.¹⁶ Riyadh and Tehran relations experienced a sharp escalation in 2016 after Saudi authorities executed Nimr al-Nimr, a Shiite cleric and dissident, leading to protests in Tehran that resulted in the storming of the Saudi embassy.¹⁷ The execution had a more profound impact, further straining Saudi-Iranian relations beyond the earlier tensions surrounding Iran's alleged intervention in the 2011 protests in Bahrain.¹⁸

Rouhani eventually handed over the presidency to Ebrahim Raisi, who remained in power until his death in 2024. During his tenure, there was no significant shift in Iran's foreign policy towards Qatar or other Arab states. The most notable foreign policy development during his era was the Saudi-Iranian agreement brokered by China in March 2023.¹⁹ By 2021, Iraq and Oman facilitated talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran, marking a pivotal moment in their diplomatic relations. The resulting agreement, the Joint Trilateral Statement, outlined a road map for restoring full diplomatic ties between the two nations.²⁰ As Luciano Zaccara thoroughly explains, the 2023 deal reflected Iran's renewed engagement with the UAE beginning in 2022, continuing the policies of previous Iranian leaders who sought to de-escalate tensions with the Arab Gulf states.²¹ However, notably after the deal and the events of October 7, Raisi adopted a more assertive approach in his relations with regional states, including the GCC countries, which could be seen as a new form of charm offensive.

Conceptual Framework: Four Sets of Principles

Analyses of Iran-GCC relations and the foreign policymaking of Gulf monarchies often employ the concept of hedging to explain their elusive balancing strategies among conflicting parties and policies.²² Hedging, or strategic hedging, is a framework used to interpret the foreign policies of small states in power struggles, emphasizing their efforts to optimize power by balancing economic opportunities with strategic protection.²³ This approach enables small and middle powers to “cope with the threats and constraints they are likely to encounter under conditions of unipolarity while simultaneously

preparing them for new threats and opportunities that are likely to emerge as the system leader falls further into relative decline.”²⁴

While acknowledging the value of these analyses, this paper takes a different approach to Iran-Qatar relations. It examines how Qatar and Iran respond to emerging or ongoing regional conflicts that may challenge their bilateral ties. Even under anarchic conditions, states cannot engage in diplomacy without adhering to a set of meaningful norms and practices, as “actors develop their relations with, and understandings of, others through the media of norms and practices.”²⁵ Qatar recognizes Iran’s power and identity within the Gulf’s security landscape and structures its foreign policy accordingly.²⁶ The nature of Qatar-Iran relations has been constructed and transformed in response to both domestic and international circumstances. Their relationship is characterized by a mutually well-defined power and interest structure. I argue that four key principles underpin their diplomatic engagement, forming a structured and stable channel of communication. This diplomatic framework reflects Iran’s charm offensive and Qatar’s elusive yet strategic balancing act in their respective foreign policies. Before delving into their bilateral context, it is essential first to define the concepts of charm offensive and strategic balancing.

The nature of Qatar-Iran relations has been constructed and transformed in response to both domestic and international circumstances. Their relationship is characterized by a mutually well-defined power and interest structure.

The four sets of principles shaping Qatar-Iran relations represent shared foreign policy behaviors, though some apply specifically to Qatar while others pertain solely to Iran. Therefore, this analysis does not focus on one-sided policymaking but rather integrates the strategic calculations of both states in shaping their approach toward each other. Consequently, I conceptualize Iran’s regional strategy toward Qatar as a charm offensive, while defining Qatar’s approach toward Iran as strategic balancing.

A charm offensive is a “diplomatic technique countries may use to shift their international image through a strategic public relations campaign utilizing personal magnetism.”²⁷ Iran’s leaders—both reformists and conservatives—have engaged in a charm offensive to enhance their regional and global standing, emphasizing their willingness to cooperate on shared interests with other nations and media outlets.²⁸ In Iran’s diplomacy and international public relations, the charm offensive manifests as a broader strategy aimed at securing alliances, mitigating hostilities, and advancing Iran’s regional influence. Iran’s charm offensive also includes,

...other visible signs of geniality or warmth in public diplomatic settings. These amicable acts are performed for the international audience, and get extensively covered and circulated by international media on a variety of platforms, helping a country go through a swift, and often temporary, image-makeover.²⁹

In this paper, I use the term “charm offensive” as an umbrella term to define Iran’s foreign policy approach toward Qatar, which aligns with the four key principles outlined below.

For Qatar, its foreign policy toward Iran is characterized by a sustainable and elusive balance that accounts for its subregional, regional, and global interests. Previous studies have often framed Qatar’s approach as a form of hedging. However, by identifying four key principles that shape Qatar-Iran bilateral ties within the broader context of regional politics, I prefer to use the term “strategic balancing” to describe Doha’s foreign policy mechanism toward Tehran. Since this paper focuses on the structure of Qatar-Iran bilateral relations within the influence of regional politics, strategic balancing refers to Qatar’s foreign policy behavior that skillfully reconciles the often-contradictory interests of its regional allies—such as the GCC—and its international role as an independent state. Although strategic balancing is traditionally associated with mutual deterrence among great powers or nuclear states,³⁰ in this paper, the term is applied to Qatar’s policymaking toward Iran, guided by four key principles. Qatar’s strategic balancing involves maintaining a policy that avoids direct conflict with Iran while simultaneously preserving a balance of power within the regional hegemonic equilibrium. Additionally, this strategy accounts for Iran’s regime-oriented foreign policymaking and Doha’s diplomatic commitments to the GCC. Therefore, strategic balancing in this context encapsulates the principles that define Qatar’s foreign policy approach toward Iran, highlighting its nuanced and calculated diplomatic positioning in an evolving regional landscape.

Delving into the four sets of principles that define the nature of their bilateral ties, the foremost principle guiding Qatar’s and Iran’s foreign policy toward each other is avoiding conflict. Economically, Qatar and Iran share the world’s largest non-associated gas field—known as the North Field in Qatar and South Pars in Iran—divided by their maritime border.³¹ However, Iran has not been able to exploit its share of the natural gas field as effectively as Qatar. As a result, both sides have maintained a cautious diplomatic approach, with an emphasis on sustaining stable relations to avoid any conflict over resource extraction.³² In 2010, Qatar, Iran, and Russia established the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF).³³ In 2014, Doha and Tehran agreed to enhance bilateral trade and announced plans to establish three free trade zones: one in Iran’s Bushehr

port and two in Qatar's ports of Doha and Al Ruwais.³⁴ Politically, Iran and Qatar do not compete for regional hegemony or leadership. Iran's primary geopolitical rival is Saudi Arabia, while Qatar exercises influence over specific issues, such as its relationships with the Taliban and Hamas, and its active role in regional mediation efforts. Iran is not viewed as a direct competitor by Qatar. Instead, both states utilize their positions within the region's security architecture to balance power and advance their respective interests. Illustrative examples of their cooperative posture include President Khatami's visit to Qatar in 1999, President Ahmadinejad's unprecedented attendance at the GCC summit, the 2012 defense agreement aimed at enhancing maritime security and counterterrorism efforts, and Qatar's restrained diplomatic response following the 2016 attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran. Collectively, these actions underscore a shared commitment to de-escalation and pragmatic engagement.³⁵

The second principle guiding Iran-Qatar relations is the pursuit of a regional balance of power within the prevailing hegemonic order. Both states utilize their bilateral cooperation as a strategic foreign policy tool to counterbalance dominant regional forces, particularly U.S. and Saudi influence.³⁶ While Iran operates as a middle power and Qatar as a subtle or niche power, their policymaking toward each other and within regional politics remains significant—yet neither aspires to, nor occupies, the position of regional hegemon.³⁷ Examples of this balance of power strategy include Iran's support for Qatar in 1986 against Bahraini claims over the contested island of Fasht al Dibal; Qatar's outreach to Iran in 1992 amid escalating border tensions with Saudi Arabia; and (the Father Emir) Sheikh Hamad's 1997 criticism of U.S. policy toward Iran, which aligned with calls for rapprochement during the Khatami era.³⁸ Notably, upon ascending the throne, the Father Emir sought to establish and maintain stable diplomatic relations with Iran, recognizing that their shared gas field offered both financial leverage and political autonomy in Qatari foreign policymaking. Yoel Guzansky interprets the Father Emir's early policies toward Iran in the 1990s as hedging strategies aimed at balancing Saudi influence in the region.³⁹ Similarly, for Iran, its diplomatic engagement with Qatar has served as a strategic bridge to broader relations with the wider Gulf region.⁴⁰ In 2006, Qatar, serving as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, was the only state to oppose Resolution 1696, which sought to impose sanctions on Iran in response to its nuclear program.⁴¹ In recent years, Qatar has continued to support Iran on both regional and international fronts, often positioning itself

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as a mediator between conflicting parties. For example, following a diplomatic agreement between Iran and the U.S., Qatari banks were tasked with facilitating the transfer of Iran's frozen assets held in South Korea, thereby enabling Tehran to regain access to those funds.⁴² Although Iran does not have full access to its frozen assets and is only permitted to utilize them for humanitarian purposes, Qatar continues to serve as a mediator between the U.S. and Iran. These two high-level instances of diplomatic facilitation underscore Qatar's strategic and nuanced approach in maintaining a delicate balance in its relations with Iran.

A third dimension of these non-adversarial foreign relations lies in Iran's revolutionary ideology-driven foreign policy. The Islamic Republic consistently prioritizes its ideological commitments in foreign policy decision-making, even when consolidating ties with Qatar. This divergence becomes particularly evident in the Syrian context, where Qatar has opposed the Assad regime's repressive policies, creating a clear point of contention. Notably, the collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024, the trajectory of Iran's strategy in Syria will be pivotal in shaping the prospects for either cooperation or conflict between Tehran and Doha over the future governance of Damascus. During the earlier phases of the Arab Spring, when Iran bolstered its influence through non-state actors in Syria and Yemen, Qatar—alongside other smaller Gulf states—adopted a strategy of strategic hedging to mitigate the risks of direct confrontation with Iran. However, as Guzansky argues, while hedging against Iran may safeguard certain interests in the short term, it fails to address adequately the long-term severity of the threat and the inherent uncertainty of the bilateral relationship.⁴³ By contrast, I characterize Qatar's approach to Iran's revolution-oriented regional policies as an elusive yet strategic balancing act, implemented through the articulation of four core principles. From Iran's perspective, its engagement with Qatar reflects a form of charm offensive, aimed not only at enhancing its image within Qatar's political landscape, but also at leveraging such alliances to maintain and expand its influence on the global stage.⁴⁴ In advancing their charm offensive—not only within the broader context of Arab-Iranian relations but also specifically in bilateral ties with Qatar—Iranian leaders have increasingly emphasized the diversity of their foreign policy positions. This charm offensive is not rooted in shared values or normative alignment with counterparts such as Qatar. Rather, it functions as a strategic instrument of propaganda, projecting Iran's international standing through an assertive branding of its revolution-oriented foreign policy. This approach reflects less a convergence of political ideologies and more an effort to legitimize and extend the Islamic Republic's influence through symbolic and rhetorical engagement.⁴⁵

The fourth principle highlights Qatar's cautious approach to foreign policy, wherein it seeks to maintain alignment with the broader strategic posture and red lines of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) while managing its bilateral

relationship with Iran—widely regarded by the Arab Gulf monarchies as a primary security threat. Although Qatar occasionally employs hedging strategies to moderate the GCC’s stance toward Iran, these actions do not signify a departure from the collective position of the council toward the Islamic Republic. For example, despite joining the GCC in 1981 and supporting Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War, Qatar’s narrative avoided framing its policy in anti-Shi’a or overtly anti-Iranian terms. Similarly, its support for GCC interventions in Bahrain and Yemen—contexts in which the regional cold war dynamics were especially pronounced—remained limited and largely symbolic. These four principles are rooted in the interplay between regional political dynamics and the national interests of both Qatar and Iran. Several key political milestones underpin these bilateral relations, reflecting a dynamic balance between Iran’s charm offensive and Qatar’s elusive yet strategic diplomacy. The following sections examine these milestones in detail, analyzing their implications for the evolution of Qatar-Iran relations.

The Failed Nuclear Deal

This section examines the impact of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—including Iran’s nuclear enrichment policy—and the subsequent post-withdrawal era on Iran’s relations with Qatar. The JCPOA, signed in 2015 between Iran and the P5+1 group (comprising the U.S., UK, France, China, Russia, and Germany), was designed with a clear set of conditions: Iran agreed to limit its nuclear program to peaceful purposes in exchange for the gradual lifting of sanctions, the unfreezing of assets, and access to previously blocked oil revenues.⁴⁶ There are various perspectives on the nuclear deal regarding its impact on Arab-Iranian relations. From a more negative standpoint, the JCPOA could be seen as a catalyst for what is often referred to as the “Arab Cold War,” exacerbating the Iran-Saudi rivalry. By granting Iran the opportunity to enhance its power projection and influence in the region, the deal may have intensified existing tensions between Iran and key Arab states, particularly Saudi Arabia.⁴⁷ In this regard, as Riham Bahi astutely argues, the nuclear deal heightened the sense of threat among GCC states by facilitating a new platform through which Iran could engage with the U.S.—traditionally the GCC’s primary ally—thereby potentially enhancing Iran’s influence on regional security dynamics. Given that Iran is perceived as a threat to the GCC due to its Shiite identity and anti-monarchy rhetoric, any expansion of its foreign policy maneuvering space is viewed by the GCC as a potential source of instability, capable of interfering in their internal affairs or disrupting their relations with the U.S. In other words, because Iran’s foreign policy is often interpreted by the GCC as a fusion of ideological and identity-based motives, any strategic advantage Iran gains only serves to amplify the perceived threat on the other side of the Gulf.⁴⁸ The nature of the Iran nuclear agreement was a primary concern for the GCC states.

Whether the agreement was perceived as transformational or transactional played a crucial role in determining its impact on the GCC. A transformational agreement, by its very nature, would require a shift toward legitimization and a reformist approach to Gulf security. Under such conditions, it would align more closely with the interests of the Arab Gulf states, fostering a framework for cooperation and stability in the region.⁴⁹

From a more positive perspective, the JCPOA is seen as a new opportunity to consolidate peace and diplomacy in the region. While it may have initially heightened tensions in the short term, its primary objective is to reduce the reliance on military options in foreign policy, fostering a more diplomatic approach to regional challenges.⁵⁰ The responses of the GCC states to the JCPOA were not homogeneous. Oman expressed strong support for the agreement, referring to it as a “historic win-win.” In contrast, Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir emphasized that “all of us in the region want to see a peaceful resolution to Iran’s nuclear program,” reflecting a more cautious stance within the GCC.⁵¹ Murhaf Jouejati of the Emirates Diplomatic Academy in Abu Dhabi echoed these positive statements, noting that while the deal could provide an opportunity for Iran to pursue nuclear weapons, the Arab Gulf states must remain vigilant and take all necessary precautions to safeguard their security.⁵² The Qatari officials characterized the agreement as an “important step.” Given that the deal emphasizes further diplomacy and dialogue, Qatar’s stance was clearly expressed: “The new deal is consistent with our long-standing position in support of diplomatic and peaceful means to resolve such issues.”⁵³

However, these interpretations were largely predicated on the assumption that the deal would be both sustainable and successful. In 2018, President Donald Trump withdrew the U.S. from the agreement, arguing that it failed to address

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Iran’s missile program and its growing regional influence. Following the U.S. withdrawal, Iranian foreign policy became more assertive, particularly in its involvement in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq. While the negative interpretations of the deal regarding its potential regional implications persisted, its impact on the bilateral relations between Doha and Tehran ceased to be a primary concern. From Qatar’s perspective, the agreement was not seen as a destabilizing factor, either domestically or regionally.⁵⁴ Following the U.S. withdrawal from the agreement,

the Qatari foreign ministry re-emphasized Qatar's position by stating, "The state of Qatar stresses that the primary priority is for the Middle East to become a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone and to prevent an arms race among regional powers."⁵⁵ While several GCC states expressed concerns about a potential U.S. alignment with Iran through the nuclear deal, Qatar maintained a moderate and supportive position, encouraging Iran's engagement with the international community and promoting diplomacy to avoid conflict. However, this approach was inherently elusive, as Qatar's support for regional denuclearization and Iranian engagement with regional powers was tempered by the broader GCC consensus that the balance of power in the region should not be sacrificed for the sake of a nuclear deal.⁵⁶ Therefore, Qatar's strategic balancing was evident, as it navigated four core principles while also accommodating Iran's attempt to use a charm offensive, positioning itself as a nation ready for a nuclear deal.

The Gulf Crisis of 2017

The Gulf Crisis of 2017 was a shocking regional upheaval, primarily affecting the GCC countries. The 13 demands issued by the Quartet states—Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt—called for Qatar to "downgrade diplomatic relations with Iran, expel Iranian military representatives from Qatar, and limit economic cooperation."⁵⁷ This marked a significant milestone in Arab-Iranian relations, as it openly forced an Arab country to sever ties with Iran, despite the fact that several other Arab nations had already developed closer relations with it. The underlying question of what made Iran's relationship with Qatar more complex than other bilateral ties remains an issue that is still seeking resolution.⁵⁸ This section examines the impact of the blockade on Iran's rapprochement with Qatar, highlighting how political and economic relations were positively affected during the siege.

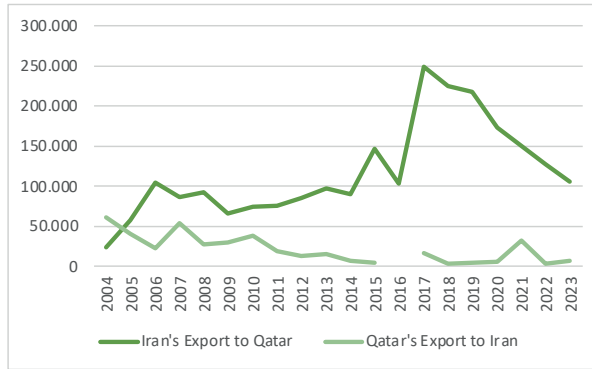
From a political perspective, on the very first day of the crisis, Iran promptly called for dialogue among the parties involved. Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Bahram Ghasemi stated that "the rising tensions among its Arab Gulf neighbors threaten the interests of everyone in the region."⁵⁹ The Qatari ambassador to Tehran had been recalled in January 2016. However, following Iran's swift and supportive responses during the blockade, Qatar resumed diplomatic relations with Iran, and its ambassador returned to Tehran on August 24. In addition to this significant step, Qatar's Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed emphasized in a speech in Washington that "Iran is our neighbor, [and we] must have a constructive relationship."⁶⁰ Iranian President Rouhani also stated that the siege of Qatar was "not acceptable," referring to Qatar as a "friendly nation." In response to Rouhani's positive remarks, Emir Tamim stated that "Qatar has open arms for interaction and cooperation."⁶¹

The power of practice lies in its ability to generate intersubjective meaning within a social structure.⁶² Qatar began leveraging the power of practice in regional politics, a move that also facilitated the strengthening of its bilateral relations with Iran during the blockade. In doing so, Qatar challenged Saudi Arabia's well-articulated subregional hegemony by offering an alternative approach to policymaking.⁶³ However, this shift has also led Qatar to face isolation from its neighboring countries. Sheikh Mohammed interpreted this isolation by the Quartet states, stating that "by their measures they are pushing Qatar to Iran. They are giving Iran, or any regional force, Qatar like a gift."⁶⁴

Iran's successful crisis management and consolidation of its relations with Qatar in the absence of GCC or Saudi hegemony was described as "Iran stands as the sole victor" of the Gulf Crisis of 2017 by Michael Greenwald, the former U.S. Treasury attaché to Qatar and Kuwait.⁶⁵ It is hard to say whether this statement holds true; however, Iran has certainly achieved a significant level of confidence-building with Qatar. A clear indication of this newfound diplomatic trust came when Qatar's Minister of State for Defense Affairs Khalid Al Attiyah stated that Qatar "will not take part in any action against Iran."⁶⁶ Al Attiyah further emphasized that the differences between the two countries did not imply that Qatar would "go and fuel a war" against Iran.⁶⁷ It is important to note that shortly after the blockade, Qatar reinstated its ambassador to Iran.⁶⁸

In terms of economic relations, as shown in Figure 1 below, Iran's exports to Qatar (across all products) saw a sharp increase in 2017, rising from US\$100 million to US\$250 million. Qatar's Salwa border, the state's only land border, serves as a main entry point for food and other materials. When the Quartet states imposed a land, sea, and air blockade on Qatar, this key land border was closed, blocking Qatar's primary route for food imports. As a result, Reza Nourani, chairman of the Iranian Union of Exporters of Agricultural Products, informed the press that Iran could deliver food shipments to Qatar within 12 hours. Given that the crisis occurred during the Ramadan, food availability became even more critical. During the first week of the blockade, five Iranian airplanes arrived in Doha on June 11, each carrying 90 tonnes of cargo, and three ships were dispatched, delivering 350 tonnes of food. Iran's food exports to Qatar continued with daily shipments of more than 1,000 tonnes of fruits and vegetables.⁶⁹

Figure 1: Export Values, All Products, Total in US\$ Thousand



Source: Iran's Exports to Qatar and Qatar's Exports to Iran, International Trade Center, Trade Map, <https://www.trademap.org>

In October 2017, Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif visited Doha, where he held meetings with Emir Tamim and Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed. Following this visit, Iran, Qatar, and Türkiye signed a commercial agreement, which included a transportation deal and the establishment of a “joint working group to facilitate the transit of goods between the three countries.”⁷⁰ This agreement has facilitated the transportation process and reduced costs by creating a common platform for imports and exports. While there has been a general upward trend in the economic relations between the two countries, it is important to note that Qatar's share in Iran's overall exports remains limited, accounting for no more than 2%. It was 1% in 2016 and increased to 2% in 2017; however, the proportion of exports to Qatar remains relatively small in comparison to Iran's total exports.⁷¹ The alliances between Iran and Qatar have been reshaped by the new social intersubjectivity formed during the blockade era, leading to strengthened bilateral relations through increased economic ties and confidence-building. Three out of the four core principles remain relevant in Iranian-Qatari political relations in the post-blockade period: avoiding conflict, maintaining regional balance, and Iran's revolutionary identity in foreign policy. However, with regard to the fourth principle, since Qatar faced significant tensions with its GCC neighbors during the embargo—particularly Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain—its foreign policy no longer aligns fully with GCC priorities. Nevertheless, because

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Qatar did not entirely reorient its policy toward Iran despite the blockade, and cooperation between Tehran and Doha continued throughout the diplomatic crisis, the primary argument of this research remains valid: Iran and Qatar are more likely to cooperate when it is both possible and necessary to advance their interests within the regional balance of power.

The U.S. Killing of Qassem Soleimani

On January 3, 2020, the U.S. launched a surprise airstrike against Iranian forces in Iraq, resulting in the death of General Qassem Soleimani, the head of Iran's elite Quds Force. This sudden military action significantly escalated tensions between the U.S. and Iran. The killing of Soleimani not only had a profound impact on U.S.-Iran relations, but also influenced the position of the GCC states within this bilateral escalation, given their role as key U.S. allies. The event marked a pivotal moment, not only in the ongoing cold war between the U.S. and the Islamic Republic, but also in shaping the GCC's stance in the conflict. The aftermath of Soleimani's death prompted the GCC countries to assume a more active role in the U.S.-Iran confrontation.

Qatar, leveraging its diplomatic position, sought to mediate between the conflicting parties, adhering to the four guiding principles previously outlined—particularly those of avoiding conflict and fostering cooperation when possible. In the wake of the attack, the Qatari foreign minister visited Iran the day after Soleimani's death, and on January 12, Emir Tamim made a state visit to Tehran, becoming the first national leader to do so during the national mourning period. During their meeting, the two leaders underscored the importance of de-escalation, calling for dialogue to prevent further conflict and ensure security in the Strait of Hormuz and the Sea of Oman.⁷² Qatar's active role in the era following Soleimani's assassination to de-escalate the tension and to call for dialogue is important for two reasons considering the bilateral relations with Iran. First, Qatar's move as a representative of the council supported GCC-Iran relations and second, by communicating directly after the attack with Iran and acknowledging the importance of Soleimani's loss to the country, Qatar helped balance the U.S. role in the Gulf. It is possible to say that the killing of Soleimani encouraged Iran and Qatar to validate the prominence of cooperation and dialogue. Thus, so far, the current strain has consolidated the two countries' bilateral ties as partners avoiding conflict, whenever it is possible.

Wars in Yemen and Syria

The conflict in Yemen has had a significant impact on both Arab-Iranian and Iranian-Qatari relations, particularly in light of Iran's support for the Houthi movement and the Saudi-led coalition's military intervention in the country.⁷³ Since the onset of internal unrest in Yemen in 2004, Qatar has approached the conflict through diplomatic means. Former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh

invited Sheikh Hamad to mediate between the conflicting parties. Responding to this call, Qatar played an active role in diplomatic negotiations from 2004 to 2010, hosting multiple rounds of talks in Doha in 2007 and 2010. Alongside its political efforts, Qatar also pledged investment and economic assistance to support Yemen's stability.⁷⁴

Between 2015 and 2017, Qatar participated in the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen. However, following the imposition of the blockade against Qatar in 2017, the Quartet states accused Doha of sharing intelligence with Al-Qaeda, claiming that such actions contributed to the coalition's operational failures.⁷⁵ Qatari officials categorically rejected these allegations. Defense Minister Khalid bin Mohammed Al Attiyah clarified that Qatar's involvement in Yemen was confined primarily to securing the border. He emphasized that Qatar had merely aligned with the broader GCC consensus, despite holding a divergent view on resolving the conflict. Al Attiyah asserted, "We have our own opinion on how to solve the situation in Yemen. We always believe in dialogue. We always believe in development as the shortest way to solve issues such as the one in Yemen."⁷⁶

The literature generally identifies 2011 as the turning point for the expansion of Iran's role in Yemen, coinciding with the regionalization of the conflict.⁷⁷ Iran's ties with the Houthis trace back to 1979, following the Islamic Revolution, when members of the Zaydi community—including the current leader of the movement—began traveling to Iran for religious and ideological education. However, there is no concrete evidence of significant cooperation between Iran and the Zaydis until 2014. Even during the 2004 uprising, Iran's involvement remains unconfirmed and largely speculative.⁷⁸ According to a United Nations report published in April 2015, Iran's military support to the Houthis began as early as 2009, when Iranian weapons were transferred to Yemeni vessels in international waters. This support reportedly escalated in 2011, exemplified by the seizure of an Iranian fishing vessel carrying approximately 900 Iranian-manufactured anti-tank and anti-helicopter rockets. By 2013, further shipments were intercepted in Yemeni waters, containing both military and dual-use non-military equipment. These included man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS), 122 mm rockets, rocket-propelled grenade launchers, blocks of C-4 plastic explosives, and electrical components potentially usable in the assembly of improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Such transfers have reportedly continued into the present.⁷⁹

For Iran, its relationship with the Houthis is not merely a short-term tactical maneuver against Saudi Arabia, but rather a component of its broader, long-term regional power projection strategy. Consequently, Iran's engagement with the Yemeni conflict intensified notably after the Houthis seized control of Sana'a in 2014.⁸⁰ According to Thomas Juneau, Rouhani defined the Houthi takeover of Sana'a as a "brilliant and resounding victory."⁸¹ Furthermore, while

Iran has denied providing military support and claims that these allegations are fabricated, there has been a series of highly unusual and undeclared visits between the parties, which suggest involvement in Houthi training and arms transfers to Yemen.⁸² Given that Iran has intentionally incorporated an anti-status quo element into its foreign policy, its support for the Zaydis in Yemen is entirely understandable within the context of its broader regional strategies.⁸³

Although the Yemeni conflict has had a detrimental impact on Arab-Iranian relations, unlike the Syrian civil war, it has not caused a rift between Qatar and Iran. This is primarily because Saudi Arabia and the UAE are also heavily involved in the military intervention and have faced significant criticism for their failed attempts at achieving a peaceful resolution.⁸⁴ In other words, although Iran has faced criticism for its involvement and arms trade with Yemen, Qatar has not aligned itself with the anti-Iran bloc in the region. Instead, Doha has consistently advocated for a diplomatic solution over a military one, aiming for a sustainable peace.⁸⁵ Therefore, the parties have managed to avoid direct conflict by strategically balancing their positions within the regional dispute.

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In contrast, the war in Syria—and the governance of the post-Assad era—serves as a true political battleground for both Iran and Qatar, where their respective principles are at stake. At the outset of the Syrian conflict, the role of the Arab Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar, was influential, though not decisive.⁸⁶ From the perspective of the GCC states, Iran's involvement

in Syria was seen as an “interference in Arab affairs,” exacerbating sectarian tensions and contributing to the rise of extremist groups in the region.⁸⁷ Due to their geographic location, the Arab Gulf states were not directly affected by the border insecurities or refugee flows resulting from the Syrian conflict, which impacted the peace and stability of neighboring countries. However, Iran's involvement in Syria has posed a geostrategic threat to the GCC states, as it strengthens Tehran and its allies' influence in the region. Still, exceptions like Oman have pursued independent diplomatic efforts, seeking to normalize relations with the Assad regime and mediate between regional states and Syria.⁸⁸

Iran provided substantial economic and military support to the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria.⁸⁹ Iran's military involvement in Syria, particularly through the IRGC, draws on years of experience in extraterritorial conflicts (such as the Iran-Iraq War and Iraq) and cooperation with non-state actors, such as Hezbollah, who are both skilled in combat and logistics. While

Iran's domestic motivations, including its policy of exporting the Islamic Revolution, have driven its active engagement in Syria, these factors do not apply to Qatar. Iran has made substantial material and ideological investments in Syria, promoting a "credible narrative of success."⁹⁰ This marks the first significant divergence in the approaches of Iran and Qatar toward the Syrian conflict: Iran adopts a military strategy to protect the status quo, while Qatar offers political and economic support to the opposition, yet lacks the capacity to assist them fully logistically and militarily on the battlefield.⁹¹ Unlike Iran's expansive and multidimensional involvement in Syria, Qatar's role has been primarily logistical, focusing on providing political and financial support to the opposition.⁹²

For Iran, its military and political investment in Syria was driven by three main objectives: the defeat of terrorist groups (notably Daesh and Jabhat al-Nusra), the preservation of the status quo in Syria, and the safeguarding of state institutions. While the eradication of terrorism was a shared goal between Iran and Qatar, as reflected in the official statements of their leaders, the two countries did not define "terrorist groups" in exactly the same way.⁹³ Qatar has been supporting Jabhat al-Nusra, which has officially been running the Syrian transitional governance since December 2024. However, Iran has considered Jabhat al-Nusra an enemy since its military intervention in Syria. Secondly, as Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has stated, Iran has supported the Baathist status quo of the Assad regime, asserting that "changing borders will only make the situation worse."⁹⁴ In contrast to Iran, Qatar has advocated for a change in the status quo, not only in Syria but across the Middle East, since the outset of the Arab Spring.⁹⁵ This is also connected to Iran's third objective in Syria: the preservation of state institutions and the Assad regime. As part of Iran supporting the status quo, Iran views the strength of an ally's state institutions—particularly its military and intelligence services—as facilitating Tehran's broader goals in the region.⁹⁶ However, Qatar had no issue with a change in Syria's state structure and political elite.⁹⁷ Iran, on the other hand, aimed to protect its buffer zone and bridge to Lebanon and Hezbollah via its Syrian border.⁹⁸ In fact, President Rouhani had criticized the IRGC's role and financial support in Syria during his campaign in 2017, describing it as an "interventionist policy [that] generated negative publicity and triggered sanctions, which the country, still recovering from the nuclear sanctions, could not afford."⁹⁹ Ultimately, his era brought no change in the policymaking towards Syria, even after the elections.¹⁰⁰

Qatar's role in Syria was quite limited compared to Iran's, although Qatar's Foreign Minister Khalid Al Attiyah stated that "anything that protects the Syrian people and Syria from partition, we will not spare any effort to carry it out with our Saudi and Turkish brothers, no matter what this is."¹⁰¹ Yet, Tehran was a prominent part of the conflict with a military and political role. Iran

and Qatar have made efforts to prevent their conflicting policies in Syria from affecting their broader relations, taking numerous diplomatic steps to avoid direct confrontation. In 2011, the Father Emir visited Iran to encourage Iranian policymakers to exert pressure on Assad to end the conflict. Additionally, in 2014, Qatar's foreign minister stated that Iran was a crucial party in resolving the Syrian crisis.¹⁰² In the morning of the progress achieved by the Syrian opposition on the night of December 6, Qatar was among the initial states declaring its position in favor of the fall of Assad regime.¹⁰³ Majid al-Ansari, advisor to the prime minister and official spokesperson for the Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stated that Qatar "welcomed the positive steps taken by the opposition forces" viewing them as "the beginning of a new phase that allows the Syrian people to achieve their legitimate aspirations for freedom, justice and peace."¹⁰⁴ This firm support in the official Qatari narrative could be expected since the earlier protests in 2011 and the Syrian revolution had strengthened Qatar's role and position in the post-Assad Syria.¹⁰⁵

The fall of the Assad regime represented a significant strategic loss for Iran, particularly in terms of its foreign policy oriented around the Islamic Revolution. In contrast, Qatar pursued an independent foreign policy in Syria, as there was no unified stance within the GCC states.

The fall of the Assad regime represented a significant strategic loss for Iran, particularly in terms of its foreign policy oriented around the Islamic Revolution. In contrast, Qatar pursued an independent foreign policy in Syria, as there was no unified stance within the GCC states. Nevertheless, the principle of avoiding conflict and

maintaining a balance of power within regional hegemonic structures remained central to their bilateral relations, despite the shifts in Syria. For example, in February 2025, Emir Tamim visited Iran to meet with Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's spiritual leader, and President Masoud Pezeshkian, acknowledging the regional tensions and emphasizing the need for coordination among the parties.¹⁰⁶ Despite the clear divisions in Qatari and Iranian policies in Syria, President Pezeshkian stated that the two countries maintain strong relations and share "similar viewpoints on regional and international issues," particularly with regard to "the unity of Syrian territories and the participation of all groups in Syria to determine their future."¹⁰⁷

Conclusion

Iran's relationship with Qatar is a crucial factor in the complex security dynamics of the Gulf. This research examined the mutually constitutive process of foreign policymaking between Qatar and Iran, situating their relationship within the broader political context from which it emerges. Rather than adopting a purely theoretical framework, I employed a conceptual approach rooted in the political history of the region, highlighting significant milestones in Iran-Qatar bilateral relations. This study, thus, made a vital contribution to the literature on Middle Eastern geopolitics by offering a multidimensional analysis of Qatar-Iran relations. It situated their bilateral ties within the broader context of regional developments, accounting for economic, political, sectarian, and societal dynamics that shape foreign policy. I also framed the relationship of these two states within the wider Arab-Iranian geopolitical framework, emphasizing the historical depth and complexity of inter-Arab and Iranian interactions. This analysis, thus, highlighted the distinct foreign policy postures of both states—Iran as a middle power and Qatar as a subtle, non-hegemonic actor—each pursuing diplomatic and economic advantages without seeking regional dominance.

Qatar and Iran utilize their relationship as a strategic tool to sustain a delicate balance amid regional political rivalries, rather than fostering conditions for conflict. I primarily argued that their cooperation is most likely when it aligns with their respective interests and contributes to preserving the regional power balance. To understand their consistent tendency to avoid direct confrontation, I analyzed Iran-Qatar relations through the core principles that govern their foreign policy decisions in times of regional tension. The two states share four key principles in their foreign policymaking that shape their threat perceptions and bilateral relations: avoiding conflict, maintaining a regional power equilibrium, Iran's Islamic Revolution-driven foreign policy, and Qatar's alignment with the GCC's red lines. These principles intersect with major regional turning points, including the failed nuclear deal, the 2017 Gulf Crisis, the U.S. assassination of Qassem Soleimani, and the wars in Yemen and Syria.

The paper concluded with four analyses on these regional issues and their implications on bilateral ties. In regard to the first key milestone in Qatar-Iran relations, namely the failed nuclear deal, while many GCC states expressed concerns about a potential U.S.-Iran alignment, Qatar adopted a moderate and supportive stance, advocating for diplomacy and Iran's broader engagement with the international community. However, Qatar's approach was nuanced, balancing support for regional denuclearization and Iranian diplomacy with the GCC's broader concern about maintaining regional power dynamics. Ultimately, Qatar's strategy was a delicate balancing act, navigating its

principles while accommodating Iran's charm offensive and its readiness for a nuclear deal. In respect to the second regional issue, the 2017 Gulf Crisis, Iran's effective crisis management and the consolidation of its relations with Qatar undoubtedly reaffirmed a significant level of confidence-building between the two countries. I argued that the blockade era reshaped the Iran-Qatar alliance, strengthening their bilateral ties through increased economic cooperation and political dialogue. Three key principles—avoiding conflict, maintaining regional balance, and Iran's revolutionary identity—remain central to their political relations. However, Qatar's foreign policy diverged from the GCC's priorities due to tensions with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain during the embargo. Despite this, Qatar did not fully reorient its policy toward Iran, and cooperation between the two countries continued throughout the crisis. This supports this research's main argument: Iran and Qatar are more likely to cooperate when it is necessary to advance their regional interests. The third regional issue analyzed was Qatar's diplomatic engagement following the assassination of Qassem Soleimani which was significant in reinforcing its bilateral relationship with Iran. By promoting de-escalation and dialogue, Qatar not only supported GCC-Iran relations but also balanced U.S. influence in the Gulf through direct communication with Tehran. The crisis highlighted the mutual interest of both countries in prioritizing cooperation and conflict avoidance, further consolidating their partnership amid regional tensions. The fourth regional complex, the wars in Yemen and Syria, has significantly impacted the bilateral relations between Qatar and Iran. While the Yemeni conflict has strained Arab-Iranian relations, it has not caused a rift between Qatar and Iran, primarily because both Saudi Arabia and the UAE, also involved in the military intervention, have faced criticism for their failure to achieve peace. Despite criticism of Iran's involvement in Yemen, Qatar has not sided with the anti-Iran bloc, but has consistently advocated for a diplomatic solution. In contrast, Syria presents a deeper political battleground for both countries, with their competing principles at stake. The fall of the Assad regime marked a strategic loss for Iran, undermining its foreign policy tied to the Islamic Revolution, while Qatar pursued an independent stance, unaffected by the GCC's lack of consensus. Despite these differences, both countries have sought to avoid direct conflict, emphasizing the maintenance of regional power balance through continued political dialogue during these wars. In conclusion, Iran-Qatar bilateral ties illustrate Iran's charm offensive and Qatar's strategic balancing, both of which are articulated through the four guiding principles that shape their external affairs.

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