



## Contemporary Dilemmas of Polish Foreign Policy Towards the Middle East. The case of Iraq and Qatar

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### Abstract

Poland is historically connected with the Middle Eastern states, and based on this fact in its foreign policy, it has regularly declared to achieve variable aims in the Middle East. Currently there are two kinds of interest which might be considered important in Polish foreign policy towards selected states of the Middle East. The first type is related to economic sphere when Poland tries to diversify gas and oil supplies, exemplified in agreements signed with Qatar. The second type refers to political interests, exemplified by the engagement of Poland in mission of stabilization in Iraq.

The aim of this paper is to show the real capabilities of Polish foreign policy in the Middle East and identify the key obstacles to reach many aims. The author will also try to answer whether Polish foreign policy in the Middle East is effective or not and what reasons are behind that. The short-term perspective for the foreign policy of Poland towards the two Middle Eastern states of Qatar and Iraq will also be outlined.

### Keywords

Poland, Foreign Policy, Middle East, Iraq, Qatar

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### **Introduction and Historical Overview**

The paper is related to two case studies. One concerns to Iraq, and the second selected case concerns Qatar. Poland formulated engagement in 21<sup>st</sup> Century towards both states, however in different circumstances. Iraq became a crucial partner in Poland's foreign policy after the Saddam Hussein was overthrown and the U.S. implemented the mission of stabilization. At that time, Poland, being a NATO member for just a several years, decided to stand by the U.S. Thus, relations with Iraq were mostly concentrated on political and military aspects, and after the mission of stabilization was over, Poland tried to develop economic bilateral relations. On the contrary, relations with Qatar were shaped on a different basis. Due to the adopted strategy of diversification of supplies of energy resources, Poland, in a relatively short period of time, tightened economic relations with Qatar. In result of this, Qatar has become a strategic partner which has become the most important LNG supplier to gas terminal in Poland.

The main thesis refers to the ability and also inability of pursuing by Poland effective foreign policy towards selected Middle Eastern states. Two questions related to this thesis were raised. The first concerns the issue of why Poland was unable to develop its relations with Iraq although many years of military and political engagement of Polish government and Polish military troops could have made a stable platform for highly intensified bilateral relations. The second is connected with the case of Qatar, and the question is formulated - why was Poland able to build strong platform for economic and political cooperation with Qatar that wasn't as close of a partner state for Poland as was Iraq?

In the methodological aspect, few theories and methods were used to conduct analysis in the paper. First, the paper is related to the domain of political science and international relations. Analysis conducted in the paper was based on the elements of theory of foreign policy. For the purpose of analysis, two states have been selected – Iraq and Qatar toward which Poland pursued active policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Basing the study on these case studies, the author applied the comparative method that revealed divergences and convergences between the analysed objects.

The issue of relations of Poland with Middle Eastern states was mainly examined by Polish researchers. Therefore, the majority of sources related to this topic are available in Polish. Others, written in English, were also useful but limited to the depiction of Iraqi or Qatari perspectives.

Taking into consideration the historical aspect of Poland's cooperation with many Arab and non-Arab states, a brief introduction should be presented. After the period of transition from 1989 to early 1990s, Poland reoriented its policy towards the Middle East. The new Polish government of the Third Republic of Poland desired to maintain positive relations with Arab states such as Syria, Iraq, Egypt or Libya, and on the other side, Poland re-established in 1990 diplomatic relations with Israel. Moreover, Poland leaned toward support of the Israeli – Palestinian peace process and thus became a significant political and economic partner for Israel and the Arab States. Poland's stance towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict assumed permanent regulation based on guaranteeing Jews and Palestinians the right to have their own state. As the Polish government underlined, Palestinian aspirations couldn't pose danger to Israel's existence; thus, each terrorist

activity and violence was condemned. Conversely, Poland recommended the Palestinian Authority to develop partnership with Israel for overcoming the difficulties and diversities with relations with Israel. It is also noteworthy that at that time Poland's capabilities to affect Israeli-Palestinian were limited, and its activities were really subtle. It was connected with the weak position of Poland in post-bipolar international relations in the early 1990s, in which Poland was slowly building mutual relations with many states in the new post-Cold War order (Lizak & Spyra 2002: 324).

Another step confirming Poland's change towards Middle East was the participation in the operation "Desert Shield" and "Desert Storm," which were conducted against Iraqi military forces after their invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Although the participation of Poland in anti-Iraq operations was symbolic, it showed the readiness of Polish government for peaceful engagement in political crises in the Middle East. After the Second Gulf War ended, Poland stood a chance at developing relations with the Arab Gulf states, which during Cold War were merely oriented at cooperation with the West (Lizak & Spyra 2002: 325). In result, Poland strengthened ties with Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia, with whom diplomatic relations were established in 1995.

In fact, in the years 1989-2003, ties between Poland and Arab states in the Middle East were eased due to different priorities and specific circumstances related to Poland's political and economic situation (Dzisiów-Szuszczkiewicz 2008: 148). Firstly, at that time Poland was heavily concentrated on joining NATO and the EU. It was the key imperative of its foreign policy, and finally, Poland became a NATO member in 1999 and joined the EU in 2004. Therefore, Polish aspirations of becoming a part of a military alliance and the European structure totally overshadowed and dominated different aspects of its foreign policy. Secondly, Poland had to deal with its post-transition period to strengthen its state institutions and implement economic reforms to function as a liberal state with free market. Moreover, the position of Poland in the international relations in period of 1989-2003 wasn't strong enough to allow the Polish government to make an effective impact on regions situated outside Europe.

### **Relations with Iraq**

Since 2003 Poland turned to the Middle East with more interest. After the al-Qaeda attacks on World Trade Center and Pentagon in September 2001, US president George W. Bush named Iraq, Iran, and North Korea dangerous rogue regimes that forged the "axis of evil." All these states were accused by U.S. government for supporting international terrorism and became the target of potential American military intervention. American concentration was narrowed to the Iraqi regime, and Iraq was hit by the U.S. with demands to reveal its arsenal of weapon of mass destruction. The Leader of Iraq, Saddam Hussein, resisted with American high pressure that led to military conflict. The U.S. started intervention against Saddam in 2003, and after 40 days, Iraqi forces defeated. After that, the arduous process of Iraqi transition began.

At that time, Poland faced the big challenge of its participation in the U.S.-led coalition occupying Iraq. As a new member of NATO, the Polish government stood by U.S. without any hesitation. In result, during the period of stabilization, the Polish military forces took responsibility for the Central-Southern sector with Karbala, al-Kut, and al-Najaf. Polish

military presence in Iraq continued till December 2011, and the highest amount of Polish forces was estimated at 2500 soldiers. At the last period, the military contingent was reduced to just a few dozen soldiers. However, in the years 2008-2011, the Polish mission in Iraq under auspicious of NATO was reduced to training missions only.

Involvement of Polish troops in Iraq was ambiguously evaluated. A flurry of critics was correlated with victims of the operation under U.S. leadership. In 2003-2008, 22 Polish soldiers died, mainly in result of military clashes with militant forces or landmine explosions. Moreover, in the beginning of the military intervention, it was said that Poland, alongside with states involved in Iraq, would have an opportunity to obtain lucrative contracts for the exploitation of oil fields or to invest in the Iraqi petrochemical sector. However, in 2008, when Iraqi government distributed concessions for oil exploitation, there was not a single Polish company among all the foreign companies. Such a disappointing situation deepened criticism over the purpose of the Polish involvement in Iraq (Lewandowski & Lewandowski 2009:19).

Some experts underlined that Poland's engagement in Iraqi mission was the opportunity to strengthen the U.S.- Poland partnership. Thus, Poland couldn't have had any choice but to participate in the coalition and stand by the U.S. It was a matter of honour, not one of economic or political business. Besides that, Poland's decision over taking part in the Iraqi mission fit in the strategy of security promoted by Polish government. The assumption might have been appropriate, but it was supposed that the military mission in Iraq would take a year maximum. Polish political leaders also believed in the effective and quick process of democratization of Iraq by joining the international security system. After that, when the end of mission was postponed from year to year, public opinion in Poland was raising a question whether this mission made sense at all (Hołdak & Konarzewska 2008: 96).

After the military mission was over and it turned into a training mission, the basic evaluation of Poland's involvement in Iraq became a matter of public debate. First of all, the mission was regarded as highly controversial (Wągrowka 2004: 3). It was emphasized that the Polish contribution to the stabilization of Iraq was disproportionately higher than its benefits, which were mainly in the military and political sphere and which were also hard to estimate. One might believe that standing by the U.S. would guarantee Poland's better position in the security system in international relations when Poland would be less vulnerable to threats and challenges posed by Russia, in particular. In fact, the Polish government didn't have an occasion to verify its strategic partnership with U.S under the auspicious of the NATO alliance; however, it can't be taken for granted that U.S. would do as much as they could to guarantee Poland's security.

Concerning military benefits, Polish military forces had an opportunity to verify the military operations management during the mission in Iraq. Servicemen always say that real conflict is the best way to check military forces capabilities and any form of training ground can't be treated as a partial substitute for war. Thus, the Polish military command experienced cooperation with NATO allies and took responsibility for the stability and security of its administrated sector. The participation of Polish troops in Iraq also inclined the Polish Ministry of Defence to reorganise the structure of the army and implement modern organisational solutions. In addition, military equipment used by forces in Iraq

was tested in conditions of war. According to data during the five years of mission (2003-2008), around 15 thousand soldiers participated in military contingents sent to Iraq from Poland and about 60 thousand underwent special training (Hołdak & Konarzewska 2008: 104-105; Chrzan 2012; 199-212).

In the aspect of political benefits, Poland participated in such a military operation in post-cold war era for the first time as a NATO member. It was considered proof of loyalty to the U.S and the rest of the NATO states even if many of them were against the action taken by the U.S towards Iraq. Moreover, being engaged in Iraq, Poland participated in the 'global war' with terrorists. In Iraq after toppling Saddam, a lot of armed groups appeared which used terrorist methods. Al-Qaeda evolved its branch in Iraq under the name of 'al-Qaeda in Iraq,' which later transformed into 'Islamic State in Iraq.' Military experience gained by Polish contingents in Iraq was used also in the simultaneous mission ISAF (*International Security Assistance Force*) in Afghanistan.

In 2014, Iraq was plunged into a conflict with the Islamic State, which seized control over Northern-Western Iraqi territory. In response to that, Poland decided to close down its embassy in Baghdad. Iraq expressed its huge disappointment over the decision of Polish government. Fortunately, in 2016, Poland re-opened the embassy in Iraq, and diplomatic relations came back to normal. However, two-year interval in diplomatic relations significantly restricted the Polish role and influence in Iraq (Repetowicz 2018).

In 2016, the Minister of Foreign Relations of Iraq, Ibrahim Al-Eshaiker Al-Jaafari, paid an official visit to Poland. His visit concentrated on talks related to the political situation in Iraq and the threat of terrorism, particularly. The Iraqi minister with his Polish counterpart, Witold Waszczykowski, discussed details about mutual cooperation, including the aspects of trade and investments (pulaski.pl 2016).

President of Iraq Mohamed Fouad Masoum Khader visited Poland in 2017 and declared gratitude for Poland's involvement in rebuilding Iraq and fighting terrorism on Iraqi soil. President Khader also invited Polish entrepreneurs to invest in the Iraqi economy, which was in poor condition and needed foreign assets for development (onet.pl 2017). This visit initiated many mutual contacts between businessmen associated in trade chambers. For example, Iraqi-Polish business meetings took place with the involvement of the Regional Industrial-Trading Chamber in Częstochowa, the Subcarpathian Economic Chamber, the Industrial and Trading Chamber of Southern Greater Poland, and the Regional Development Agency of Lesser Poland (Ministry of Entrepreneurship and Technology 2019).

Even of great significance was the 1<sup>st</sup> Polish-Iraqi Business Forum held in Warsaw in 2018, which became an opportunity to tighten mutual business relations. During the event the chairman of National Investment Council of Iraq, Ahmed al-Zubeidi, stated that Iraq was widely open for Polish investors, whose activity in Iraq was at that time marginal. According to data from 2016, the investments of Polish companies were estimated around only 100,000 USD (Ministry of Entrepreneurship and Technology 2019). Al-Zubeidi also pointed that Iraq needed foreign investments in all sectors and after war-time and conflict with Islamic State were over, Iraq was supposed to be a 'promised land' for investors. Concerning Poland, al-Zubeidi underlined the long-lasting tradition of Polish

investments in Iraq, casting back to the 1970s and the 1980s in the last century. For this reason, Poland is still perceived as reliable partner and associates well with the Iraqi people. Despite al-Zubeidi's declarations, Iraq was a free-market state, and contracts for Polish entrepreneurs couldn't have been announced by the state arbitrarily but only as a result of foreign investments' competition (biznes.gazetaprawna.pl 2018).

According to economic data prepared by the Department of Trade and International Cooperation in the Ministry of Entrepreneurship and Technology, from 2012 till 2015, the export of Polish goods to Iraq increased from 92.5 million USD to 188.5 million USD, then decreased in 2018 to 115.9 million USD. Poland exported mainly food products, medical and veterinary equipment, mechanical tools, and agricultural machines. In the years 2012-2018, imports from Iraq reached their highest peak in 2015, rated at 683.6 million USD, and then in 2018, declined to the rate of 235.8. The only good imported from Iraq to Poland was oil, estimated at 99% of all imports (Ministry of Entrepreneurship and Technology 2019).

In the ranking of Polish world trade, Iraq was ranked in a distant place. In the category of exports, Iraq was ranked at 72 and, for imports, was 66. The participation of Iraq in Polish whole turnout was completely marginal, estimated at 0.04% of Polish export and 0.09% Polish import (Ministry of Entrepreneurship and Technology 2019).

Since Poland was engaged in the mission of stabilization in Iraq till the year 2018, the economic cooperation didn't evolve well, and Iraq has become a negligible partner in Polish foreign policy. It was the ample proof that Poland didn't capitalize on the five years of its participation in the mission of stabilization and the next few years of its contribution to training missions. In addition to what must be underlined, when the Polish contribution to the mission of stabilization came to an end, a lack of interest of Iraqi issues was reflected in official statements made by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Each year, the minister of foreign affairs of Poland delivers a speech to the parliament on the main directions and interests of foreign policy. After 2008, Iraq was barely mentioned. Moreover, in 2017, the Strategy of Polish Foreign Policy 2017-2021 was adopted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In the document, the Middle East is cited only in the context of conflict, instability, and the erosion of the social environment (Strategia Polityki Zagranicznej 2017-2021).

### **Relations with Qatar**

Poland established diplomatic relations with Qatar in 1989. However, the Embassy of Poland was opened in Doha in 2006, and the Embassy of Qatar began its work in Warsaw in 2008. Deputy of Minister of Foreign Affairs Andrzej Ananicz paid an official visit as a Polish diplomat in Doha in 1993 (Qatar, <https://www.gov.pl>). It was the first small step towards strengthening mutual ties, which evolved dynamically in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In the 1990s, Polish-Qatari bilateral relations developed slowly but with a few significant events. In March 1996, the Minister of Industry and Trade Klemens Ścierański visited Qatar as a special envoy of President of Poland Aleksander Kwaśniewski. K. Ścierański met with the Emir of Qatar and discussed the perspectives of supplying liquid natural gas to Poland (Qatar, <https://www.gov.pl>). This visit was of great significance for the further cooperation, particularly since Poland had adopted the strategy of diversification of

supplying energy resources within its economy. It also enabled more intensifying contacts between Qatar and Poland. In June 1996, Qatari diplomat and Minister of Energy and Industry Abdullah bin Hamad Al-Attiyah paid a reciprocal visit in Warsaw. Al-Attiyah delivered a message from the Emir of Qatar with his interest to come to Poland soon. In April 1998, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Qatar Hamad bin Yassim Al-Thani came to Poland, and it was the first visit of a minister of foreign affairs representing Arab Gulf States (monarchies) in Warsaw in its history. Yassim Al-Thani discussed with President of Poland A. Kwaśniewski future possibilities of mutual cooperation, and both parties signed a few agreements which have become the legal foundation of Polish-Qatari relations. Among the documents signed was the agreement on civilian aviation communication, the agreement on cooperation between trade chambers, and the memorandum of understanding on establishment embassies (Qatar, <https://www.gov.pl>).

These visits in the 1990s paved the way for the official meeting between President of Poland A. Kwaśniewski and the Emir of Qatar Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani in Warsaw in 2002. The Emir was accompanied by a high-rank delegation and a group of businessmen. Meetings were concentrated on trade exchange and the activation of economic contacts. Two years later, president A. Kwaśniewski went to Doha with a reciprocal visit (Qatar, <https://www.gov.pl>).

President Kwaśniewski underlined the intensification of the balance of trade between Poland and Qatar that reached the amount of 5 million USD. In comparison to previous years, this rate increased tenfold although from Qatari perspective, it was just drop in the ocean. Developing bilateral relations were impacted by the engagement of Polish companies on the Qatari market, such as Polimex-Cekop, EXBUD, Gokard, and Mostostal Zabrze. According to president Kwaśniewski's statement, these companies built a bridgehead for the rest of Polish investors who consider business engagements in Qatar ([www.prezydent.pl](http://www.prezydent.pl)).

Qatar and Poland came to a real breakthrough when both parties signed a strategic deal on LNG supplies to Poland. Negotiations began in 2008, and finally, Polish Gas Company PGNiG and Qatar settled all conditions of the agreement in 2009. The contract was terminated for 20 years and envisaged supplies of 1million tons of LNG that equate with 1.5 billion cubic metres of natural gas. The first supply was supposed to be scheduled in the second part of 2014. The value of the contract was estimated annually at 550 million USD, and both parties assumed their readiness for increasing supplies at any time ([www.archiwum.premier.gov.pl](http://www.archiwum.premier.gov.pl)). Supplies of LNG from Qatar were supposed to be supplied to the Świnoujście terminal, but when the agreement was signed, the gas facilities in Poland weren't complete yet. Therefore, Poland accepted the formula when the first supply was scheduled in 2014. By this time, final construction of gas terminal in Świnoujście was delayed for over a year, and the Polish-Qatari accord couldn't be implemented. Finally in June 2016, the first shipment of Qatari LNG terminated at the Baltic coast gas terminal.

The gas terminal on the Baltic Sea has become a crucial element of the Polish strategy of the diversification of gas supplies. 5 years after the gas terminal was opened, Poland is more independent from its Russian supplies managed by Gazprom. In the perspective of final completion of the Baltic Pipe linking Norway and Poland through Denmark, Poland will have a secure position in guaranteeing itself a variety of supplies from different states in the world.

The Świnoujście gas terminal plays a significant role in the gas supplying system in Poland. According to data in the period of June 2016 – June 2021, 130 supplies of LNG were delivered to this terminal, which amounts to around 24 million cubic metres of LNG that, after the process of regasification, equated to 13 billion Nm cubic metres of natural gas. Most of the supplies came from Qatar and the USA, but some of them derived from Nigeria, Trinidad and Tobago, and Norway ([www.gaz-system.pl](http://www.gaz-system.pl) 2021).

After the gas contract was signed, prospects of business and trade between Poland and Qatar became more appealing. Polish companies and businessmen could offer products to Qatar in variable branches that, from the Polish perspective, could be defined as promising. According to the Polish edition of a guide for people willing to do business in Qatar, Polish entrepreneurs had an opportunity to be more active in the export of agriculture and food products, investments in the construction sector, and supplying machinery and tools for the building sector. In the three years of the second decade of 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the balance of trade in Polish-Qatari relations was increasing the same as the rates of exports and imports. In 2010, the balance of trade was rated at 14.2 million Euro; in 2011, it reached the amount of 19.2 million; and in 2012, it was estimated at 31.5 million Euro. It confirmed the boost in economic relations between Poland and Qatar (Rynek katarski 2013:3).

A few different decisions also favoured economic growth in mutual relations. Since 2012, Qatar Airways launched a direct connection between Doha and Warsaw, and Polish citizens could enter Qatar with a visa on arrival. The visa requirements for Polish citizens travelling for 90 days were quitted in 2017.

The Emir of Qatar Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani travelled to Poland in 2011. It was his second official visit, but at that time cooperation between Poland and Qatar was highly advanced. The Emir came with an accompanying delegation (including the Deputy Prime Minister and Head of the Emir's Office, the Minister of Energy and Industry, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Minister of Economy and Trade, and the General Director of Qatar Holding). In result of the visit, Poland and Qatar signed a tourism cooperation agreement and established a Polish-Qatari Business Council (Qatar, [www.gov.pl](http://www.gov.pl)). In December 2013, a reciprocal visit to Qatar was paid by President of Poland Bronisław Komorowski, who during his meeting with the Emir of Qatar encouraged Qatari businessmen to invest in Poland ([www.money.pl](http://www.money.pl) 2013)

In 2017, the head of state of Qatar Sheikh Tamim ibn Hamad al-Thani visited Poland. The aim of visit was to tighten economic cooperation and sign agreements on economic co-operation in the field of health and health sciences and culture (Qatar, [www.gov.pl](http://www.gov.pl)). President of Poland Andrzej Duda emphasized growing Qatari-Polish cooperation. The extension of the agreement on LNG deal from 2009 was regarded as sufficient proof for strengthening mutual ties. ([www.gazetaprawna.pl](http://www.gazetaprawna.pl) 2017). Then later, Qatari representatives participated in the 2018 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Katowice, and the delegation of government of Qatar took part in the international conference “Ministerial To Promote A Future of Peace and Security in the Middle East,” organised in February 2019 by the Polish government (Qatar, [www.gov.pl](http://www.gov.pl))

Frequent reciprocal official visits paid by heads of state were connected with the intensification of economic ties and the growth of trade balance in Polish-Qatari relations.



In 2017, imports of Qatari products were rated at 500 million USD, but exports of goods from Poland to Qatar were estimated at 71.5 million USD. The trade imbalance was the effect of the signed LNG contract for supplies to Poland (Katar – strategiczny partner 2019).

According to recent economic data, overall imports of Qatar in 2020 were rated at 22.6 billion Euro. Poland was ranked at a distant place with exported products estimated at 161 million Euro, which was responsible for just 0.7% of Qatari imports. In turn, exports of Qatari products to Poland in 2020 were rated at 463 million USD, which pertained 1% of overall Qatari export.

### Conclusion

To sum up the analysis, a few aspects must be underlined here. First of all, Poland doesn't have the potential to expand the influence in the Middle East and thus can't be treated equally with powers for whom the Middle East region is the natural area of rivalry and cooperation. The Middle East in the foreign policy of Poland definitely plays a minor role; however, the Polish government often refers to occurrences in this region such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the war in Syria and its post-war consequences, and in the form of condemnation of any terrorist activity. Due to a lack of capability to pursue a comprehensive policy in the Middle East, Poland can only pursue an effective policy towards selected states within the area of mutual interests.

Therefore, the case of Polish - Qatari bilateral relations is an example of successful and effective policy based on economic interests which fits in the strategy of foreign policy of both states.

On the other side, Polish - Iraqi bilateral relations, which developed in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, and in comparison to Polish – Qatari relations, had a different political dimension. Being one of the militarily engaged states in post-Saddam Iraq, Poland wasn't able to strengthen cooperation with Iraq in order to a make real basis for further economic cooperation. Thus, after the mission of stabilization was over, Polish investors were completely unable to compete with variable foreign investors over the access to economic markets in Iraq. The decreasing of the trade of balance in 2018 between two states is sufficient proof for the decline of economic cooperation and also showed the inability to strengthen the position of Poland in Iraq, conversely to that what was envisaged before 2008.

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