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# Qatar, Turkey and Germany: Doha Between Survival and Regional Ambitions

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Doha's foreign policy has been at the centre of the geopolitical storm since Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani removed his father from Qatar's throne in 1995 in a bloodless coup. To expand its regional influence, the new Emir used an array of soft power tools to brand a modern leadership on the right side of history and supportive of the 2011 uprisings. This has been eclipsed by a new, more assertive approach that bleeds soft and hard power together.

After 1996, Qatar has been carefully hedging between Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran, and has attempted to remain an indispensable ally of the United States (US), which relies on the Qatar-based Al-Udeid Air Base for most of its Middle East operations. Such balancing has been crucial, until now, to allow Doha to carry out an active foreign policy while avoiding the backlashes from the bigger powers. As a small state in a region in turmoil, Qatar cannot afford to alienate Saudi Arabia, a leader in the Arab world and in the Sunni Umma. On the other hand, Doha's economic prosperity and thus the legitimacy of Qatar's current leadership, depends on the South Pars gas field which is shared between Qatar and Iran.

### Closer to Tehran

The situation changed in June 2017 as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt and the UAE, interrupted diplomatic relations with Qatar accusing Doha of destabilising neighbouring countries and supporting an array of nefarious terrorist groups such as Hezbollah and the Muslim Brotherhood. The severing of relations included the closure of the Saudi-Qatar border, Qatar's only land border which is crucial in terms of food imports, and most of the air routes used by the national air carrier Qatar Airways. Iran successfully exploited Qatar's need for food supplies and import-export routes to attempt to drag Doha into its orbit. The 117% increase of Iranian exports to Qatar is a clear example of such strengthened ties to Tehran.

### Embracing Turkey

Doha identified an ever-closer strategic alliance with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Turkey—the two countries are also tied by the support they both give to the Muslim Brotherhood worldwide—the solution to resolve three major dilemmas. Ankara's protection allows Qatar

not to give in to the demands of the quartet, while avoid Tehran's embrace and shield itself from future decisions by the unpredictable Administration of US President Donald Trump regarding the Gulf crisis. As such, it is not a surprise that the two countries agreed on the deployment of 60.000 Turkish troops on Qatari soil. The importance of Turkish support for Doha was further underscored during the Turkish Lira crisis: the Turkish currency is currently facing a rapid and severe devaluation against the dollar due to the artificially imposed low interest rates, which caused hyperinflation over the long term, and the scarcity of foreign reserves in Turkey's Central Bank. The collapse of the Lira has been avoided, so far, thanks to Qatar's intervention. Doha has pledged a 15 billion (USD) investment to support Ankara's economy and is buying Turkish Liras at a fixed rate so that Turkey's Central Bank has enough Qatari Riyals to prop up its USD reserve.

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Internationally, the Gulf dispute has been characterised by lobbying efforts, to win the sympathy of key Western allies. Such lobbying was characterised, for instance, by massive Gulf investments in the US and the European defence industries. The US Administration, initially backing the actions against Doha, has used the intra-Gulf crisis to increase arms sales to all the countries involved with neither Doha nor the quartet able to obtain decisive backing by Washington in order to end the crisis in their favour. The other major interlocutor, the EU, has voiced its neutrality over the issue, however, like with other foreign policy issue the EU position is not necessarily a coherent synthesis of the foreign policy inclinations of all its member states. Germany, for instance, openly supports Qatar in this crisis. As soon as action against Doha was taken in June 2017, German Foreign Minister, Sigmar Gabriel, condemned the boycott of Qatar. He also blamed US President, Donald Trump, for prompting the intra-Gulf crisis with his rhetoric. In July 2017, he called on the quartet countries to respect Qatar's rights as a sovereign nation and applauded Doha's prudence in responding. Germany has also undertaken concrete actions to enhance Qatar's position internationally, such as encouraging Doha to increase its transparency on terrorism-related matters. As part of an effort to diminish its neighbours' and allies' concerns about its alleged funding of terrorist groups, in July 2017, Qatar agreed to provide German intelligence agencies with virtually all of its information and data. The two countries are also heavily cooperating in the energy sector, as Germany tries to diversify its gas imports away from Russia. The German company, Siemens, plans to participate in Qatar's LNG extension project and manufacture the turbines and compressors required. In addition, Qatar Petroleum is in talks with Germany's RWE and Uniper about the opening of a new local German LNG terminal. In September 2018 Qatar's Emir, Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, announced Doha's Sovereign Wealth Fund was investing 10 billion euros into

the German economy, with a particular focus on the financial sector, over the next five years. The latest investment pledge comes on top of 25 billion euros Qatar has already invested in key German companies such as Volkswagen AG, Siemens AG, Deutsche Bank. Qatar's investments come as Saudi Arabia relations to Germany are at an historic low, with Berlin inclined to halt arms exports to Riyadh as a result of the conflict in Yemen and Saudi Arabia ready to exclude German companies from all projects related to the Vision 2030 programme.

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Qatar's push to become an increasingly indispensable partner for both Turkey and Germany, while both Ankara and Berlin are at odds with the Trump administration on a variety of issues, does not necessarily mean that Doha has stopped seeking Washington's favour. In 2017 alone, Qatar spent \$16.3 million (USD), four times the amount it spent in 2016, in lobbying US policymakers. Rather, it is more likely that Doha is preparing for a future in which the US administration will be increasingly more aligned with the countries of the Quartet and in which financial investments in Germany and Turkey's military protection can guarantee, perhaps not the expansion of Qatar's influence, but at least the current position in power of the ruling branch of the Al-Thani family.