

Article

Qatar's public diplomacy, international broadcasting, and the Gulf Crisis

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Abstract

The Gulf Crisis, also known as the GCC Crisis, and Qatar Crisis, began when several countries - Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, and Egypt (henceforth 'the quartet') - abruptly severed ties with Qatar during June of 2017. This paper aims to analyse the GCC Crisis from a public diplomacy perspective, and will subsequently focus on four major themes. The first one consists of exploring the projects and initiatives implemented by Qatar, including its reliance on public diplomacy to build a more favourable image. The second theme will discuss the political warfare that unfolded after the start of the Gulf Crisis (24 May 2017). Thirdly, Qatar's response to the subsequent blockade imposed by the quartet will be investigated. Last, and stemming from the previous theme, this paper will also examine the international broadcasting aspect of the crisis, including Al Jazeera's (AJ's) reporting during the same period. Through the Gulf Crisis case study, this paper aspires to uncover the contours and limitations of public diplomacy in the context of inter-state political dynamics.

Keywords

Public Diplomacy, Qatar, Al Jazeera, GCC Crisis, UAE, International Broadcasting

Introduction

When Joseph Nye first coined the concept of soft power in 1990, it gained traction in academia, media, and governmental spheres. The author offered new perspectives on the power of attraction and positive nation branding, which, as he said, "gets others to want what you want" (Nye 1990, p. 167). Nye argues that this charm offensive stems from three key assets that a nation reflects: its culture and the attractiveness of it to others, its political values and their appeal nationally and internationally, and its foreign policy's legitimacy (Nye 2004, p. 11). Nye later added new aspects to his soft power definition, such as "the ability to affect others to obtain preferred outcomes by the co-optive means of framing the agenda, per-

suation, and positive attraction” (Nye 2011, p. 19). Concerning implementation, Nye highlighted four main channels, through which states can reflect their soft power, namely, “public diplomacy, broadcasting, exchanges, and assistance” (Nye 2011, p. 94).

The concept of soft power has also received its fair share of criticism from both officialdom (e.g. the former U.S. Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld) and academia. Some academics put forward concerns about the bluntness of the term (Lukes 2007), its lack of originality, and its close similarity with earlier propositions (Yukarıoğlu 2017). Other researchers highlighted the vagueness of the concept (Bially Mattern 2007) and the quasi-impossibility to quantify it (Xiangping 2016), whereas political scientist Todd Hall questioned the suitability of the concept as an analytic tool (Hall 2010).

Nye acknowledged the aforementioned critiques and recognised that his concept required further clarity (2007, p. 163). Consequently, he provided many iterations of the term’s definition over the past two decades. There is no doubt, however, that Nye’s paradigm is a very useful tool in the analysis of international relations, especially when considering that it has brought attention to a wide panoply of non-tangible resources that states can capitalise upon to influence the behaviour of others. It has also highlighted the existence of alternatives beyond the binary approach, involving either military force or economic payoffs, or as academic Todd Hall said, “the notion of soft power captures the idea that assets less tangible than bombs or chequebooks, such as culture and values, also act as power resources” (Hall 2010, p.189).

Academic contributions surrounding the concept of soft power and its implementation tend to focus on large states, such as the U.S., the European nations, Russia, Japan, and China, whereas the body of literature that scrutinises the soft power of smaller nations tends to be more limited. Nevertheless, several studies have examined Qatar’s soft power assets in the past decade (e.g. Barakat 2012, Gray 2013, Kamrava 2013, Roberts 2017, Ulrichsen 2014). Some of these publications focused more on the country’s modern political history, while others studied the foreign policy of Doha, the capital of Qatar, within particular contexts (e.g. the Arab Spring). However, they all contributed to the cumulative literature examining the rise of Qatar in the realm of international politics within the Middle East and beyond.

Since Nye (2011, p. 94) contended that there are four main conduits for soft power, namely public diplomacy, broadcasting, exchanges, and assistance. This paper aims to focus on Qatar’s public diplomacy initiatives and broadcasting aspects and explore the role played by these in shielding the nation during one of its most severe crises in recent history, namely the Gulf Crisis. The paper will also discuss

Qatar's response while scrutinising singularities and limitations amidst inter-state dynamics in the Gulf region.

Public diplomacy is a foreign policy tool, which has nonetheless received contributions from a multi-disciplinary perspective and attracted scholarly attention from different fields, such as communication, public relations, marketing, and international relations. Historian Nicholas Cull (2009) traced the origins of the concept to Edmund Gullion, dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. Gullion was the first who provided the elaborated meaning of the concept "public diplomacy" in 1965. His definition was the following:

"Public diplomacy...deals with the influence of public attitudes on the formation and execution of foreign policies. It encompasses dimensions of international relations beyond traditional diplomacy; the cultivation by governments of public opinion in other countries; the interaction of private groups and interests in one country with another; the reporting of foreign affairs and its impact on policy; communication between those whose job is communication, as diplomats and foreign correspondents; and the process of intercultural communications." (Cited in Cull 2009, p. 19)

This conceptualisation highlights the communication and persuasion aspects of public diplomacy, which are designed to influence the public and media agendas. In parallel, engagement with the public and elites in other countries offers foreign policy advantages outside of the traditional diplomacy tracks.

Small states clearly understand the difficult situation they face in international relations. As historian David Vital puts it: "the smaller the human and material resources of a state, the greater are the difficulties it must remount if it is to maintain any valid political options at all" (Vidal 1967, p. 33). Recognition by small states of their weaknesses leads them to step up their efforts to ensure their survival, seek alliances with larger powers, and consider any instruments that can magnify their importance in the international arena. Since the goals of public diplomacy include forms of communication, persuasion, and engagement with global audiences, small states tend to invest resources in this area to ensure their voices are heard.

Qatar's Hub Strategy

Qatar is one of the smallest states in the Middle East, and its total population totals about 2.6 million people, of which less than 300 thousand people are Qatari nationals. Conversely, it is also one of the wealthiest nations in the world with an annual per-capita income of \$130,000 (Champion 2017). Being an affluent yet small state is a dangerous prospect in the Middle East. This state of affairs obliged the Qatari leadership to adopt effective insurance strategies. Forging an alliance

with the United States and hosting one of the largest U.S. military bases overseas constitute one of these insurance strategies. However, since Western patronage is available to other Gulf neighbours as well, Qatar's leaders sought to create a comparative advantage through public diplomacy and international broadcasting.

The latter elements were considered as they provide Qatar with a distinctive brand and a competitive edge while boosting its image from that of a quasi-anonymous natural gas producer to a major player in the international community. It was against this backdrop that Al Jazeera media network was founded, and this initiative did not spring from a void. It was interwoven with Qatar rising economic output, relative political stability in a turbulent region, a relatively reasonable distribution of wealth, a good education system, and the political will to influence the hearts and minds of millions of people in the MENA region.

It all started with the coming into power of Qatar's previous Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani. The latter pursued his nation's interest by leveraging its capabilities and resources. One of his key decisions was to export liquefied natural gas (LNG) to the world via maritime routes instead of relying on conventional pipelines, which would have given Saudi Arabia the upper hand. In fact, the Saudis applied economic pressures when they blocked any Qatari attempts to export its gas by pipeline to other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Roberts 2012). However, thanks to a sophisticated LNG infrastructure, Qatar was able to capitalise on the basin it shares with Iran. The immense revenues that followed turned Qatar into the world's most prosperous nation.

These achievements irritated Saudi Arabia, who hoped to clip Qatar's wings and restore the status quo that existed pre-1990, in which Qatar was considered a mere Saudi vassal state (Hammond 2014). After a series of low-intensity confrontations between Qatari and Saudi border patrols in the early 1990s, the Saudis fomented an attempted coup d'état (jointly with the UAE and Bahrain) against Qatar's new leadership in February 1996 (BBC News 2000). This covert action severely affected Saudi-Qatari relations (Roberts 2012) and pushed the Qatari leadership to engage in diplomacy actively, as well as further widen its network with a multitude of international political players. Doha decided it was its safest bet to play a balancing act with its regional hegemons, Iran and Saudi Arabia. In this spirit, Qatar signed the Defence Cooperation Agreement with the U.S., befriended Iran, restored relations with Saddam's Iraq, and began to normalise ties with Israel.

Qatar's growing wealth within a volatile region led Qatar to put in place an ambitious plan for the future of the country via the enhancement of the nation's soft power assets and public diplomacy initiatives. The vision that emerged viewed the country as a multi-layered international hub, which would, in turn, attract

investors, scholars, professionals, activists, artists, and tourists alike. In a 2014-interview with Charlie Rose, Qatar's former Prime Minister, Hamad Bin Jassim Al Thani who is considered one of the key architects of Qatar's drive for regional influence, confirmed that the chief motivation of the Qatari leadership was to position the country as a leading power in the region regardless of its small size (Rose 2014). According to academic Kristian Coates Ulrichsen (2014, p. 35), Qatar's brand consists of promoting the country "as a neutral and progressive leader within the Arab and Islamic world, and to garner the support of the wider Arab region in addition to the broader international community."

The positioning exercise mentioned above delineated the contours of Qatar's national grand strategy, which then paved the way for its pursuit of several sub-strategies. One of the critical steps initiated in this regard consisted in transforming Qatar into a knowledge hub in the Middle East via a multitude of educational, scientific, and cultural projects led by the Qatar Foundation. The latter founded Education City, a fourteen square kilometre state-of-the-art campus that has hosted, and continues to host, eight international universities from the U.S., the U.K., and France, as well as local research centres and facilities.

Another sub-strategy consisted of establishing Doha as a hub within global air transportation networks by launching Qatar Airways in 1997. The latter was intended to become a leader in the airline industry. The Qatari leadership also envisioned the country's international airport as a connector between long-haul and regional flights. Needless to say, the rise of Qatar Airways (and other Gulf airlines) constitutes a direct competition with European airlines and their respective hubs, which were traditionally the recipient of traffic flows between East and West (Delfmann et al. 2005).

With a passenger fleet of 179 airliners serving about 150 destinations (February 2018 data), the end game is to transform Qatar's airport into one of the world's busiest and to attract, by the same token, hundreds of thousands of transit tourists. Such an influx would energise the local economy beyond oil and gas revenue and would have a substantial impact on the hospitality and entertainment industries, as well as the art and cultural scene. In fact, a study that measured the economic rate of return on investment in the aviation industry has revealed the existence of a correlation between air transportation connectivity, labour productivity, and GDP increase (IATA 2007).

Moreover, the plan for Doha was to not only become a vibrant cultural city by establishing a series of world-class museums but to rival Paris and New York (Batty 2012). This endeavour was spearheaded by the Qatar Museums, whose vision is to "be a cultural instigator" (Mirgani 2017, p. 3). With the organisation's Chairperson, Sheikha Al Mayassa bint Hamad Al Thani, intentionally referring to "the

soft power that Joseph Nye has spoken about," it seems that Qatar's cultural sector acts as a branding tool for the nation regionally and globally (ibid). Considerable financial means were mobilised to this end, and media reports suggested that the Qatari royal family has spent an estimated £1bn on art in the decade leading to 2012 (Batty 2012).

Allocating resources to sports diplomacy was an additional strategic area of focus. For this purpose, Qatar hosted the fifteenth Asian Games in Doha in 2006. It took seven years and \$2.8 billion to organise this event and build adequate facilities for it (Li 2009, p. 29). The Asian Games signalled the readiness of Doha to undertake mega-events, and the efficient organisation and highly creative visual effects of the inaugural ceremony impressed the sports community. This was merely the beginning of a long journey that aims to turn the country "into an unchallengeable global centre for sports and entertainment, culture and diplomacy. But especially of sports. And especially of football" (Lichfield 2013).

Concerning football, high profile actions that were undertaken ranged from the commercial sponsorship of FC Barcelona by the Qatar Foundation and Qatar Airways (which also sponsored later the Italian football club Roma) to the takeover of the iconic French football Paris Saint-Germain. This strategy reached its climax with the successful bid to host the 2022 World Cup (Reuters 2017). Along with football, Qatar showed increasing interest in other sports by organising recurrent events such as the Tennis ATP tour in Doha, the Qatar Masters golf tournament, the Tour of Qatar cycling competition, and the Formula 1 motor race, in addition to occasional reputable events like The 2015 World Men's Handball Championship which was held in Doha.

Additionally, Qatar used international investments as a key sub-strategy for mirroring its national brand. The state-owned Qatar Investment Authority (QIA) was set up in 2005 to play a leading role in managing Qatar's sovereign wealth fund and has since been involved in handling strategic investments overseas. According to the Sovereign Wealth Fund Rankings, QIA was ranked number ten in the world in 2017, handling 320 billion US Dollars in investments (SWFI 2017). Through the latter, QIA aims not only generate good monetary returns but also to create interdependencies with key international players in order to increase the leverage of Qatari authorities (McSparren, Besada & Savarade 2017, p. 5).

Some of QIA's most sizable investments have targeted some of Britain's renowned firms, with the likes of Barclays, Harrods, and the Canary Wharf Group Investment Holdings (London's largest property owner) to name a few. QIA has also put forward large-scale investments in some of Germany's most prominent companies, including Volkswagen Group, Siemens, Porsche, and Deutsche Bank. France also benefited from these ventures with multinational companies like

Total, GDF Suez, and France Telecom on the receiving end of substantial Qatari investments. Moreover, QIA purchased prime real estates in New York and Washington.

Last but not least, the sixth endeavour (and the first one chronologically) that was undertaken aimed at establishing Qatar as a political and media hub. Through this hub, the nation has the means to play a broader role as mediator and initiator of new collaborations and cooperation with the international community while also establishing a mighty media empire. Hence, Qatar has inserted itself into many conflicts, including Yemen (2007–2008), Lebanon (2008), Chad/Sudan (2009), Djibouti/Eritrea (2010), Sudan (2010, 2013), Afghanistan (2010–2011, 2018), and Israel/Palestinians.

Prior to these initiatives, Qatar was not known for being an established peacemaker. Thus, the country's political manoeuvres left at times many observers perplexed, as the balancing act between archenemies was undoubtedly delicate (e.g. between Israel and Palestinians, PLO and Hamas, U.S. and Taliban). The different sides did not always appreciate Doha's connections with their foes. Sometimes, the Qatari efforts backfired, and their brand image suffered, especially when rival forces (e.g. Saudi Arabia, UAE) spread unsubstantiated allegations that Qatar was supporting terrorist organisations or extremist movements. Having said that, as part of its outreach with all state and non-state actors in the region, Doha cultivated ties with some transnational political groups (e.g. Muslim Brotherhood). Such moves, though, were made for purely pragmatic and strategic reasons (Cafiero 2017).

At times, the different protagonists shared some cultural and/or political affinities with Qatar, and subsequently related to these common grounds and either supported or at least tolerated Doha's mediation. This allowed "the Qatari government to burnish its diplomatic credentials and carve out an image as an important regional player" (Barakat 2012, p. 1). In its mediation efforts, Qatar could capitalise on four key advantages.

The first one is the political goodwill of the country's leadership to try to solve some of the burning issues in the region. Secondly, the diplomacy's sway of leading players in the region (e.g. Egypt and Saudi Arabia) steadily declined during the 2000s. Thirdly, the substantial wealth of the country has given more leverage to Qatar's royal family. Concerning the latter, some critics say that Qatar used its financial means to engage primarily in "chequebook diplomacy" (Rabi 2009, p. 451). For example, in its efforts to save Lebanon from the brink of yet another civil war, Qatar promised to put forward \$300 million in favour of reconstruction projects (ibid.). The fourth distinctive advantage stems from the protagonists' interest in gaining good publicity. This gave the Qatari negotiators the leeway "to

push the boundaries of impartial mediation, proposing their own solutions or offering financial sweeteners to achieve consensus” (Barakat 2012, p. 26).

Notwithstanding its aspirational character, Qatar’s grand hub strategy was not without flaws. Education City has yet to become an obvious global destination for tertiary education and knowledge economy. Furthermore, a higher education hub is presumed to create linkages and interdependencies with government and industries in order to make the concept economically enticing for employment, investment, and innovation. However, these aspects remain a work in progress in Qatar’s case. What is more, this type of hub is hugely costly and needs decades at the very least to break even. In the light of the fluctuating oil and gas prices, especially in the past decade, it has been asserted that such high spending commitments present a financial risk for Qatar (Bollag 2016).

The high financial costs combined with falling energy prices have similarly undermined the growth of the cultural sector, which prompted the restructuring within Qatar Museums and the closing of local exhibition centres due to lack of funding (Adam 2014). Additionally, frictions appeared between the local art scene and Western art exhibitions, which tended to be valued by the elites and thus, generally received more support. This led some academics to voice concerns about the tendency to emphasise engagement with Western audiences rather than local ones (Exell 2017, p. 49). Others have lamented that this burgeoning art scene is driven more by the will of the ruling elite than the cultural affinities of their people while also warning against the disappearance of local voices in the face of the commodification of culture and the “homogenising force of globalisation” (Batty 2012).

In the meantime, both Qatar Airways and Hamad International Airport have established good reputations for their superior services. Nevertheless, allegations of unfair competition have marred Qatar’s carrier. In fact, three key U.S. competitors (American Airlines, Delta Airlines, and United Airlines) have routinely alleged that Qatar Airways and other Gulf carriers receive letters of credit and subsidies from their governments (to compensate for fuel hedging losses). Subsequently, this led Qatar’s government to manage to reach an understanding with the U.S. over this matter in January of 2018. Under this framework, Qatar Airways will disclose financial statements that are sufficiently transparent in conformity with internationally recognised accounting standards (Casey 2018).

Al Jazeera and Qatar’s International Broadcasting and Media Footprint

Qatar’s media hub project was initiated when 150 former staff members of BBC Arabic were hired by Qatar, which led to the establishment of AJ in 1996. This move allowed the Qatari leadership to venture into international broadcasting,

as well as to create a comparative advantage for Qatar over its neighbours by enhancing the nation's brand internationally, promoting its agenda, and seeking to achieve its public diplomacy objectives (Zayani 2008). Following its inception, anchors went on to explore controversial political, social, and religious issues in ways, which were simply unthinkable at that time. The wisdom of the Qatari leadership consisted in minimising any government interference with the network's affairs. Therefore, AJ looked – in its first decade – more like BBC rather than a state-controlled Arab network (Schleifer 2001).

AJ has indeed raised the threshold of the freedom of expression in the Arab World, especially in its formative years (1996–2005). Al Jazeera Arabic (AJA) anchors went on to explore controversial political, social and religious issues in ways, which were simply unthinkable at that time. As journalism professor Philip Seib observed, “On Al-Jazeera, everything from the role of women to the competence of governments is addressed, often loudly. The station's motto is “the opinion, and the other opinion,” which might seem commonplace in the West, but is exceptional in the Arab media world” (Seib 2005, p. 601). Prior to that, as political scientist Marc Lynch argued, official Arab television media seldom tackled any sensitive issues. It consisted mainly of boring and repetitive coverage, which sung the praise of the rulers' daily activities (Lynch 2005, p. 40).

Was AJA critical to Qatar's policies as well during the aforementioned period?¹ Occasionally yes. For example, firebrand Syrian anchor Faisal al-Kasim, who had previously worked for the BBC for many years, discussed Qatar's overtures to Israel in an episode titled ‘Why is Qatar crawling toward Israel?’ as part of AJ's flagship programme “the Opposite Direction” (still airs nowadays). Al-Kasim hosted a professor of political science at Qatar University, heavily and openly criticised his government's policies (Al-Kasim 1999). The same show invited Abdullah Al Nafisi, a Kuwaiti intellectual, on 13 July 1999. The latter launched a salvo of criticisms against the Gulf monarchs, including Qatar.

It was during this phase that AJA became a household name in the Arab World since it offered a platform for opposition personalities and controversial figures from all political persuasions. AJA also exposed the Arab regimes' human rights abuses and corruption. Notwithstanding its provocateur outlook, AJA became, as Lynch contended, “at the forefront of a revolution in Arab political culture... providing an unprecedented forum for debate in the Arab world that is eviscerating the legitimacy of the Arab status quo and helping to build a radically new pluralist political culture” (Lynch 2005, p. 36).

But AJA has also taken intense flak because of its programming, ranging from an-

¹ Similarly, Al Jazeera English (AJE) has aired several programmes critical to Qatar's treatment of migrant workers for example.

ti-Americanism and anti-Israel bias to being a mouthpiece for terrorists (Ricchiardi 2011). Further criticism centred on AJ's ownership issues, and the fact that the network was financed by a non-democratic government (Figenschou 2011, p. 368). Other critics highlighted the difference in the tone of voice between AJA and Al Jazeera English (AJE) (Fahmy & Al-Emad 2011). French journalist Olivier Da Lage (2005) went to the extent of affirming that Qatari leaders use AJ as part of the government's "double game", which consists of enhancing diplomatic and economic ties with the U.S. and Israel, while concurrently condemning these countries on the airwaves via AJ.

It should be noted, however, that AJA has shifted from its early days' editorial positions. At times, especially during the period 2014–2017, the channel looked more like a state-funded international broadcaster, encircled by red lines and no-go areas, chiefly vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia. The regional backlash, which Qatar suffered from its Arab Spring policies (Ulricksen 2014b, p. 4), restricted AJ's room for manoeuvre too. By that time, though, AJA provocative editorial line had already caused some serious damage to Qatar's relations with other governments. Several Arab regimes recalled their ambassadors from Doha on various occasions. Also, in the aftermath of a critical coverage of the Iraq War in 2003, it was suggested that President George W. Bush considered the possibility of bombing AJ's headquarters in 2004 (MacGuire & Parry 2006). In addition, the withdrawal of the Saudi, UAE and Bahraini Ambassadors from Qatar in March 2014 was a major warning sign for the ongoing GCC Crisis.

In contrast to AJA, which caters for Arabic-speaking audiences, AJE (founded in 2006) did not utilise any particular national lens in its editorial line. Rather, it positioned itself as representative of the global south and its peoples. AJE's tone of voice tends to be more neutral in comparison with its Arabic sister channel. Also, AJE gave precedence to alternative news so as not to merely echo other Western mainstream media. This strategic positioning gave AJE even more appeal with international audiences, earning the channel more than 150 prizes, medals and awards (as of May 2017). In the end, as contended by media professor Tine Ustad Figenschou, "the alternativeness of AJE is serving Qatar's public diplomacy" (Figenschou 2011, p. 368).

AJA, AJE, and AJ+ (AJ's premier online publication) merely constitute the perceptible part of Qatar's media empire. Qatar launched in 2014 another media group, which includes a satellite broadcasting television, a newspaper, and a current affairs website entitled "Al-Araby Al-Jadeed" (in Arabic) or "The New Arab," which is based in London. The latter's driving engine behind the new station is Azmi Bishara, the Palestinian director of the Doha-based Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, and a close advisor of Qatar's emir. Furthermore, it is also believed that Doha funds several news outlets internationally, such as

Mekameleen TV, which is a Turkey-based satellite television channel, run mostly by exiled Egyptian activists. Likewise, Qatari funding is understood to support a constellation of international electronic media, such as Arabi Post, Arabi 21, and the Middle East Monitor to name just a few.

The Gulf Crisis

Diplomatic quarrels in the Arabian Peninsula have a long history, and some of these disputes have turned into military conflicts in the past (e.g. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait). The leadership change, which took place in Qatar in 1995, brought to power leaders who resented the Saudi hegemony in the region. Consequently, in the past two decades, tensions have simmered between Qatar and neighbouring Gulf monarchies over several issues, including - but not limited to - Doha's support of the Arab Spring. Other tacit reasons include the soft power competition between Qatar and the UAE, as both countries compete pan-regionally in different domains (Rappler 2017; Dorsey 2017).

The official start of the Gulf Crisis occurred when hackers took over the system of the Qatar National Agency (QNA) on the 23 of May at 11:45 p.m. and posted false quotes attributed to Qatar's Emir, which praised Iran while criticising the U.S. (Salisbury 2017). Despite official denials from the Qatari leadership, the quartet's media rejected the hacking story and continued to denounce Qatar.² In the meantime, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahraini authorities warned their citizens from expressing sympathy with Qatar on social media and imposed lengthy jail terms towards contraveners (DeYoung 2017).

This media salvo may have been the prelude for a military invasion by Saudi / UAE forces, which was thwarted by the decisiveness of Turkey's leadership to send troops. There were also frictions at the higher level of the U.S. administration (Trump and Jared Kushner versus Tillerson and Mattis), which were believed to have stopped Saudi and UAE military movements alongside Qatar's borders (Emmons 2018). Nonetheless, tensions took the shape of a blockade imposed by the quartet against Qatar in July of 2017. The only land passage linking Qatar to the Arabian Peninsula was cut while airspace passage over the four countries was denied, forcing flights from Qatar to travel via prolonged routes.

The blockade led to the disruption of existing supply chains and the immediate halt of food supplies during the month of Ramadan (Gorvett 2018). In the meantime, Qatari nationals were expelled from the quartet countries, and nationals from the quartet countries living in Qatar were ordered by their respective governments to quit Qatar or face severe penalties (Falk 2018, p. 3). Shortly af-

² A Washington Post investigation, which referred to information obtained from U.S. intelligence officials, corroborated the Qatari version of events and confirmed that the hacking originated from the UAE (Nakashima & DeYoung, 2017).

terwards, the quartet issued an ultimatum of thirteen demands to be met within ten days. The list included closing AJ and all other news outlets that Qatar funds around the world, including Al-Araby Al-Jadeed and a myriad of electronic media outlets, severing ties with Iran and organisations such as Hamas, shutting down a Turkish military base, paying undetermined sums of reparations, and being subjected to monthly external audits. Several experts believe that these demands were designed to be rejected (Falk 2018; Law 2017; Ulrichsen 2017).

Soft Power Rivalry and the Gulf Crisis

Looking at the dynamics leading to the crisis raise few questions. For example, did the Gulf Crisis result from a heated soft power competition in the region? There is no doubt that the rivalry between Qatar and the UAE has exacerbated tensions between the protagonists to the point where the military option was seriously considered. The tilting point has undoubtedly been the Arab Spring, which started in Tunisia on the 18th of December 2010 and gave the impression that Qatar - thanks to its vast media footprint and strong connections with non-state actors - was able to change the situation on the ground in much larger and stronger Arab countries, such as Egypt. This new reality raised alarm bells in the Gulf region and prompted both the Saudis and the UAE to join forces to restore the status quo.

However, the rivalry is deep-seated and precedes the Arab uprisings. Both Qatar and the UAE competed for international recognition in similar domains such as education, air transportation, media, sports, and culture. For instance, Media City in Dubai is the media hub in the UAE (Subeh, 2017, p. 43). Substantial budgets were allocated to create Sky News Arabia (established in 2012), and before that Al-Arabiya (founded in 2003 by Saudi royals but is headquartered in the UAE) as tools to influence the Arab public opinion and to counter AJ's increasing influence (Worth 2008). The ensuing media competition between both sides represented a clash between two opposed visions about the region's future. In the end, the Arab Spring demonstrated that the Qatar-based broadcaster was the most popular. Suffice to say that the Saudi Prince Al Waleed Bin Talal described AJ as the channel of the masses, whereas Al Arabiya is the channel of the rulers (Assabeel 2017).

Competition in other fields was irritating for the UAE too. Qatar's successful bid to host the 2022 edition of the FIFA World Cup was not wholeheartedly accepted by the neighbours, especially the UAE which has also invested in hosting and organising several national and international sports events on its territory. Some of the major events included the FIFA World Youth Cup (2003) and the FIFA Club World Championship in 2009 and 2010 (Al Haddad, 2017). The fact that a top UAE official, namely Dubai's head of security, lieutenant general Dhahi

Khalfan, stated “the blockade of Qatar by its neighbours will cease if the country is stripped of or surrenders the 2022 World Cup” (Rumsby 2017) says a lot about the quartet’s motivations and the soft power connection.

Qatar’s Post-blockade Public Diplomacy

In the aftermath of the blockade, Doha proved to be much more resilient than the quartet had initially planned. The military agreement with Turkey (in addition to disagreements at the top of the U.S. decision making) prevented a swift Saudi military attack, and Doha moved to reinforce its alliance with Turkey and to a lesser extent Iran. Also, the country’s strong financial reserves mitigated the immediate consequences of the siege. More importantly, Qatar’s first move was to operate within the international law framework, pursuing a policy of self-restraint and open dialogue, which offered the country even more respectability in the international arena. Claiming the moral high ground also made Doha’s primary discursive tactic, i.e. the adoption of the victim frame, quite effective. It was indeed more manageable for large sections of the media to view Qatar’s position through the prism of victimhood and injustice. As a small country bullied and blockaded by its larger neighbours, the imagery that was conveyed reflected an “underdog” status (Cafiero 2018).

Equally important, Qatar flexed its soft power muscles to prevail against the quartet. Qatar investments abroad were a good starting point, and it was no coincidence that Doha received diplomatic support from Germany whose Foreign Minister was among the first international diplomats to try to defuse the crisis (Reuters 2017). The Saudis, who resented the German efforts, not only withdrew their ambassador from Berlin but also banned German firms from bidding for government contracts in Saudi Arabia (Koelbl 2018). Similarly, in its quest to regain the initiative with powerful U.S. lobbies, the Qatari leadership initiated plans to invest \$35 billion in the U.S. by 2020, with an additional \$10 billion earmarked for infrastructure projects (Perlberg & Sergie 2018). It is believed that these investments, plus a myriad of other engagement strategies, brought Doha back into the political game in Washington (Harris 2018).

In the meantime, Doha carried on its actions aiming at minimising any negative impact that the blockade could bear on the nation’s image, chief among which was the unabated continuation of major projects. In this context, the Qatar Foundation organised a grand ceremony in April of 2018 for the inauguration of the Qatar National Library as the latest addition within Education City. Likewise, Qatar Museums invited Tom Brady, a US National Football League (NFL) star, to visit Doha in his capacity as Best Buddies Global Ambassador. These were all opportunities to invite highly mediatised international personalities, and thus to send a clear message to the world that business in Doha continues as usual.

Furthermore, Qatar Museums regularly organise a yearly constellation of events held in the celebration of friendship with a selected nation. The 2018 edition of the Year of Culture featured Russia, and the timing was perfect given that Qatar was courting Russia as part of its post-blockade efforts. This was one of the multiple avenues that Qatar used to upgrade its relations with Russia. Subsequently, Qatar's Emir visited Moscow while the Russian Defence Minister visited Doha in order to sign a military agreement (Gulf Times, 2018b). The synergy between both parties culminated at the end of the World Cup in 2018 when Russian President Putin handed over the mantle of the host to the Emir of Qatar, whose country will organise the next edition.

Qatari leading personalities, such as the Chairperson of the Qatar Foundation HH Sheikha Moza bint Nasser (the Emir's mother), were also involved in public diplomacy at the highest level. For instance, at a high-profile meeting organised in partnership with the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in Paris, Sheikha Moza used this opportunity not only to call on governments to respect children's right to education, but also to take aim at the quartet for "playing political games with education." Sheikha Moza went on to say:

"I think we would all agree that education is a human right. And as a human right, education should be above all and certainly above politics. But sadly, this is often not the case. During the current siege against Qatar, for example, many Qatari students who were enrolled in schools in the blockading countries were expelled including students studying at the Sorbonne Middle East campus. But the blockading states, with their irresponsible acts and reckless, ruthless games, did not stop there" (Qatar Tribune 2018).

Similarly, Qatar's National Human Rights Committee (QNHRC) became very active post-blockade and utilised its wide network, which was established during the previous decades with international NGOs specialised in human rights. These relationships were among the first that were solicited for help and were useful in mobilising the international community against the illegality of the blockade. Only a couple of months into the crisis, QNHRC jointly organised a large conference in Doha with the International Press Institute and the International Federation of Journalists. This conference, which was entitled 'Freedom of expression: Facing up to the threat,' gathered dozens of human rights bodies and media rights organisations, which were appalled by the direct threats that the crisis represented on media freedoms.

In another development, Qatar invited numerous delegations of Western representatives, politicians, journalists, and opinion leaders, compensating their fees, and giving them tours of the country with the possibility to engage with various

local officials, journalists, and academics in order to give them the full picture about the country and its policies. This method undoubtedly proved its worth in gaining friendly voices overseas. For instance, after visiting Doha, Harvard Law professor Alan M. Dershowitz became one of the prominent defenders of Qatar, calling for an end to the blockade (Dershowitz 2018).

Al Jazeera's Programming During the Crisis

Since the closure of AJ featured highly in the quartet's demands, this section briefly examines AJA's programming during the crisis as well, especially the fact that the network constitutes a key platform for conveying Qatar's positions to the world. It should be noted that the quartet's demand concerning the closure of AJ (and other media funded by Qatar) backfired, as it attracted the wrath of media NGOs worldwide. Organisations like the Committee to Protect Journalists, Human Rights Watch, and Reporters Without Borders have all noted this attack on media freedoms and condemned it with the strongest terms.

In its quest to discredit AJA via different means (e.g. censorship, flak, cyber-attacks), the quartet probably hoped to push AJA into adopting a clear-cut pro-Qatar propagandistic editorial line. However, AJA refrained for the most part from exaggerating its tone of voice in its coverage of this issue and maintained its journalistic norms. Its news reports broadcasted the statements of the quartet in toto and outlined allegations against Qatar without censorship. AJA producers would seek commentary from Saudi and UAE officials, but the latter decided from the onset to boycott the Qatar based channel, thus relinquishing their right for representation. Even so, AJA invited various commentators from non-quartet countries to debate the issues at stake and put forward the quartet's perspective.

AJA diversified its modus operandi too. For example, the channel delved into the use of satire through the program entitled "Above Power," which deconstructs the quartet's narratives via parody. While this program was initially launched in November of 2016, it gained popularity after the crisis began (The New Arab 2017). Another effective method was the insertion of brief news reports (of a 3-minute duration) at the beginning of AJA's talk shows like "Output of the Day." This method consisted of a short, yet sophisticated, rhetorical take on the event under scrutiny. Seasoned journalists with silky voices and excellent command of Arabic made this method very popular. Salim Azzouz, a columnist at the daily Al Quds, called these reports "Al Jazeera's heavy artillery" (Azzouz 2017).

Meanwhile, AJA (and AJE) became a lot more critical of the Saudi-led coalition fighting in Yemen, providing substantial airtime to highlight the plight of civilians and the bombing of critical infrastructure (The Economist 2017). Also, AJA would frequently invite leading Saudi opponents to comment on episodes like the

Saudi purge at the Ritz Carlton, in which princes, businesspeople, and officials were detained in late 2017. AJA also used this episode to expose the Saudi Crown Prince's doublespeak, who imprisoned several personalities on charges of corruption and embezzlement on the one hand, and went on a wild spending spree (buying a 500 million USD luxury yacht) during his vacation in France on the other (Mazzetti & Hubbard 2016).

Conversely, the blockade seems to have moderated AJ firebrand style of journalism. The network's investigative unit spent a couple of years producing an undercover documentary which intended to expose the modus operandi of several pro-Israel advocacy organisations in Washington, D.C. including Stand With Us, The Israel Project, the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, the Israel on Campus Coalition, and the Zionist Organization of America. However, this broadcast was delayed indefinitely (Swisher 2018). In early February 2018, it was reported that Qatari leaders had hired lobbyist Nicolas Muzin to assuage the concerns of Jewish American organisations that AJ would not be airing the documentary (Tibon 2018).

Conclusion

This paper aimed to examine Qatar's public diplomacy initiatives during the blockade. Prior to the current crisis, Qatar's media apparatus and proactive diplomacy created a particular image of the country as a "pygmy with the punch of a giant" (the Economist, 2011). During that time, Doha widened its network and continued to engage with state and non-state actors, whether Shiite representatives like the Houthis in Yemen and Hezbollah in Lebanon or Sunni political forces like the Arab Spring activists. For two decades, this prevented any unwanted interference by regional forces and Qatar managed to preserve its sovereignty by playing a delicate balancing act between the different protagonists (e.g. Saudi Arabia and Iran).

In the post-blockade period, it would seem that soft power assets and public diplomacy initiatives created vast windows of opportunity for Qatar's diplomacy. The large diplomatic network that Doha built across the business, media, academic, and cultural spheres demonstrated its usefulness in times of need. Organisations such as QNHRC, the Qatar Foundation, and Qatar Museums to name just a few, mobilised their connections to spread awareness about the blockade faced by the country. Likewise, AJ displayed once more its public diplomacy usefulness. The Doha-based broadcaster maintained generally its journalistic norms even if some shortcomings were noted. Their reporting deconstructed the quartet's narratives at every turn and proved once more its effectiveness. Such coverage also made clear why the network was at the top of the quartets' list of demands. Ultimately, though, the quartet was not successful in forcing Qatar into submission.

Quite the contrary, Doha further strengthened its positions internationally, and its narrative had more reach, especially given the quartet's communication suffering from inconsistencies and imbalances (Harris 2018; Hassan 2018).

It must be said, however, that public diplomacy – in Qatar's case – was not the ultimate deterrent that stopped military aggression against the country. The military option was only discarded after the decisive move by the Turkish leadership to send military units, combined with frictions at the highest level of U.S. decision-making, in which both American secretaries of defence and state warned the quartet against any reckless action (Emmons 2018). In fact, Qatar beefed up its military arsenal and proceeded with the procurement of very advanced weaponry systems from the U.S. including a \$12bn deal to purchase F-15 fighter jets. Similar deals were also concluded with Britain and France for the purchase of Typhoon and Rafale fighter jets (Salacanian 2018, p. 6), whereas Italy agreed to supply seven navy vessels to Qatar (Defense News 2017). Beyond their real military deterrence and political value, such military contracts could also be interpreted as economic payoffs to powerful nations.

A final point is about the costs associated with the use of soft power assets to prevail geopolitically. Pre-blockade, Qatar's invested heavily in soft power assets to the point that its neighbours became deeply irritated. Consequently, smear campaigns targeted Doha well before the Gulf Crisis. These negative campaigns utilised various controversial topics (e.g. allegations of collusion with terrorist entities, migrant workers' welfare, and allegations of corruption during the bidding process for the 2022 FIFA World Cup bid). As a result, Qatar's reputation was dented internationally. Professor Simon Chadwick described this situation as "soft dis-empowerment," in the sense that the country incurred a loss of prestige, which contrasts with the desired effect (Sergie 2018).

Hence, beyond the often-praiseworthy commentary about the advantages gained through soft power assets and public diplomacy in international relations, there are also important considerations about the downsides of such policies, especially when intense inter-state competition takes place, and even more so when this competition is about soft power per se. Some authors have touched on the notion of "soft power games" (Rengma 2012; Van Herpen 2016). Nevertheless, more in-depth research is warranted about this subject, as it will provide additional tools to analyse the behaviour of small states.

Bio

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