

# East Africa Report

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## Qatar's diplomatic incursions into the Horn of Africa

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### Summary

Although it is a small country in a dangerous neighbourhood, Qatar has regional ambitions. It punches above its weight diplomatically by acting as a mediator in conflicts in the Horn of Africa. The results have been mixed, with negotiations hampered by the centralisation of foreign policy in the person of the emir, who does not seek advice from his foreign affairs ministry. However, Qatar's successes have been impressive and among the underpinnings of its efforts are wealth, shared with its citizens – from huge natural gas deposits, security guarantees from the United States and a strong alliance with Turkey – and Qatar's position as the home of the media giant, Al Jazeera.

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AT JUST UNDER 12 000 square kilometres, Qatar is the third smallest country in the Middle East, after Kuwait and Bahrain. Only 250 000 of its total population of two million are Qatari nationals.<sup>1</sup> Thus nationals, who live mostly in and around the capital, Doha, constitute a minority, although a wealthy one – Qatar's average GDP per capita income is US\$140 000.<sup>2</sup>

Because it has too few recruitable nationals, Qatar's small military force mainly consists of foreigners, including numerous Pakistanis and Yemenis.<sup>3</sup>

The country, which attained its independence in 1971, operates in a geopolitically rough and economically competitive region.<sup>4</sup> It is bordered by Saudi Arabia and Iran, both of which are historically significant, more populous, geographically bigger, politically hostile, diplomatically influential and militarily stronger countries.<sup>5</sup>

Nonetheless, Qatar possesses the third largest reserves of natural gas in the world, after Russia and Iran, and its reserves are projected to last for decades to come.

Since 2006, it has emerged as the world's largest exporter of liquefied natural gas, which generates the bulk of its total export revenues.<sup>6</sup>

It is also endowed with a relatively young political leadership, which wants to 'play a greater role and mould regional politics according to [Qatar's best] interests'.<sup>7</sup>

This leadership chose not to pursue the softer and passive foreign policy of Kuwait and Bahrain, the Middle East's other small, wealthy countries.<sup>8</sup> Instead, it purposefully took a different route and pursued a distinctively energetic and self-determined foreign policy. Consequently, Qatar has ended up, in less than two decades, attaining an international significance considerably at odds with its youthful statehood, small physical size, small population of Qatari citizens, limited military capability and unfavourable geopolitical situation.<sup>9</sup>

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Qatar has begun to play an influential role in the Horn of Africa in security and diplomacy. It previously established close relations with Sudan and Eritrea, recently repaired its troubled bilateral relations with Ethiopia and provides financial assistance to the current government of Somalia. It successfully mediated conflicts between Eritrea and Sudan and Eritrea and Djibouti. Additionally, Qatar rather clumsily mediated Sudan's Darfur conflict.

This case study of Qatari engagement in the Horn of Africa highlights the evolution of its international role, bearing in mind its diplomatic rivalry with Saudi Arabia and Iran as well as the added value and limits of Qatar's mediation in the Horn of Africa's many intractable conflicts. And it underlines the gap between the decisions of a small country punching above its weight and the uninstitutionalised implementation of its broadest objectives.

The report is divided into three parts. The first part provides insights into the nature and operation of Qatar's foreign policy decision-making. The second part explicates the two main objectives of the country's foreign policy. It also outlines the three preferred instruments used by Qatar to achieve these objectives. The third part examines the relations of Qatar with countries of the Horn of Africa.

### A foreign policy centred on the emir

Qatar's ruling Al Thani family, currently headed by Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad, is one of the largest ruling families in the Middle East.<sup>10</sup> This extended family has had a long history of intense infighting, mainly over foreign alliances and for top political positions. The family is the centre of the country's politics and in a position of uncontested power, with absolute control over all existing institutions.<sup>11</sup> Thus appointments to the highest government offices are



QATAR'S RULING AL THANI FAMILY IS THE CENTRE OF THE COUNTRY'S POLITICS

usually based on personal loyalty to the incumbent emir, whose primary concern is the ongoing centralisation and retention of power.<sup>12</sup> The ability of potential rivals in the Al Thani family to oppose both domestic and foreign policies and to compete for political power has been effectively curtailed.<sup>13</sup>

Hiba Khodr, assistant professor of public policy and public management at the American University of Beirut, contends that, even if it is tricky to discern how policies are exactly formulated in Qatar, the political leadership, including the omnipresent emir and his restricted inner circle, 'has considerable autonomy and dominates the policy-making process'.<sup>14</sup> He argues that 'this elite group attempts to understand citizens' needs, articulates a national vision, sets the near-term political agenda and oversees policy implementation and evaluation'.<sup>15</sup> Yet, he notes, there are 'limited institutionalised channels of communication between citizens and the government, and, as a result, public officials do not appear to possess formal means of detecting the national mood or policy preferences of their citizens'.<sup>16</sup>

From 1995 when he captured power through a bloodless coup until 2013 when he unexpectedly abdicated, 64-year-old Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani had, without much political and bureaucratic turmoil, 'centralised power in his own hands'.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, 'all domestic policies, like their foreign counterparts, are top-down decisions made primarily by the emir [Hamad] ... [And, there was a visible] lack of public consultation on domestic and foreign policy [and a] lack of access to information on public affairs'.<sup>18</sup>

During Hamad's rule, four like-minded individuals played a vital role in Qatar's decision-making.<sup>19</sup> Apart from the emir himself, there was his second and favourite wife, Sheikha Mowza bint Nasser. She is portrayed by one interviewee as 'having politics in her blood, [as] being often unofficially involved in policy deliberations and key decisions and [as] the glue which holds the elite group together'.<sup>20</sup>

There was also Sheikh Hamad bin Jasim Al Thani, a distant cousin of Hamad, who served as prime minister between 2007 and 2013 and as minister of foreign affairs between 1992 and 2013. Jasim was a trusted aide whose opinions carried some weight. He was a forcefully supportive foreign policy second-in-command to

Hamad,<sup>21</sup> who greatly relied upon his hard work, tactical acumen and extensive personal networks in power circles around the world.<sup>22</sup> Sir Graham Boyce, a former UK ambassador to Qatar, writes that Jasim had 'remarkable access to the leaders in every Western capital'.<sup>23</sup>

The current emir, the 36-year-old Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad, is the son of previous emir Hamad and his second wife, Sheikha Mowza. Like his father, Tamim went to the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst. He was appointed crown prince in 2003, gradually promoted to a leadership position and gained experience in international dealings.<sup>24</sup>

Tamim inherited and retained the weak and underutilised institutions that were characteristic of his father's long rule.<sup>25</sup> Foreign policy decision-making and diplomacy have remained the emir's prerogative and institutions 'hardly seem to matter'.<sup>26</sup>

In a slight departure from previous practice, in 2013 Tamim appointed deputy minister of foreign affairs Khalid Al Attiya, who is not a member of the Al Thani family, as minister of foreign affairs, a post he held until 2016.<sup>27</sup> An interviewee felt that Khalid 'did not challenge the decisions of his political master and kept his personal opinions in check'.<sup>28</sup> He was replaced by 36-year-old Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani, another discreet loyalist but a distant cousin of the new emir.

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Hamad exerted tight control over all aspects of foreign policy which emanated from his own personal intuition and perceptions. Making his own final assessment from the information gathered and presented directly to him, he micromanaged all tough decisions, foreign interventions and gruelling negotiations.<sup>29</sup> All matters of any importance had to be referred to him personally and, before either arriving at a decision on crucial issues or weathering an ongoing crisis, 'he only accepted advice from few trusted confidants and closest, most senior ministers who have only rarely direct impact on his final decisions'.<sup>30</sup>

Qatar's foreign policy became, in most cases, the casualty of the impulse and short attention span of the overwhelmed Hamad who could, as argued by analyst Sara Pulliam, 'afford to be flexible in ideology and actions without real risk of internal destabilisation'.<sup>31</sup> Qatari decision-makers developed the habit of oversimplifying complex problems of wider international politics and of making decisions on an ad hoc basis.<sup>32</sup> Sultan Barakat, director of research at the Brookings Doha Center, asserts that, as mediators, these decision-makers revert back to this adhocism and lack contextual understanding of the numerous political actors and interests involved in conflicts.<sup>33</sup> Analysts have additionally argued that foreign policy in Qatar was clearly not open-mindedly thought out, either in the short term or the long term.<sup>34</sup>

In an interview in Doha, a well-connected analyst concurred and emphasised that foreign policy decisions are formulated in Qatar without all available options being first weighed up<sup>35</sup> and the probable costs and risks associated with them.<sup>36</sup> In fairness to the Qatari leadership, the centralisation of decision-making and the lack of rigorous bureaucratic deliberations meant that foreign policy decisions could be taken without delay<sup>37</sup> and with greater agility and flexibility.<sup>38</sup> It is, however, noteworthy that this development adversely affects the substance of Qatar's foreign policy and frustrates its effective implementation by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>39</sup>

Qatari decision-makers developed the habit of oversimplifying complex problems of wider international politics

Even if there are very few details about the exact strength or organisational structure of Qatar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it is apparent that it is marginalised, if not entirely excluded, from foreign policy decisions. It is treated as a passive tool by Qatari decision-makers, who prefer oral communication. Moreover, most interviewees suggested that the dreadfully small ministry is overstretched. It has not been able to keep pace with Qatar's expanding international significance. Suffice it to say that it has only rudimentary information-gathering and policy-planning sections, which are more adversely affected by personnel turnover than is generally believed.<sup>40</sup>

It is also important to point out that the ministry does not have an adequate number of analytical employees. This is partly explained by the relatively small pool of qualified Qatari nationals available to staff the institution. According to many interviewees, current employees do not provide, at the right time, the right kind of first-hand information which could get Qatari decision-makers fully up to date on substantive and cross-cutting issues at stake, to make more informed decisions and to better prepare for upcoming negotiations. They also do not provide satisfactory historical and political analysis on regional and international situations and interactions.<sup>41</sup>



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Furthermore, the ministry does not have an adequate corps of professional diplomats who have the appropriate training and experience in the routine practice of international diplomacy. Qatari diplomats cannot adeptly operate diplomatic missions and establish contacts with partners abroad.<sup>42</sup> Finally, its analytical and diplomatic 'employees do not take decisions, both because they are powerless and because, in any case, they would not want to be held accountable'.<sup>43</sup>

## Punching above its weight

Qatar does not have a broad, overarching foreign policy strategy that provides consistency or direction. Instead it is guided by pragmatic geopolitical considerations and the ever-present need to ensure its security and stability in the volatile Middle East. The change in political leadership in 2013 only modified the style but not the substance.<sup>44</sup>

The reality of a very small state surrounded by two large and powerful neighbours, Saudi Arabia and Iran, determine Qatar's foreign policy orientation.<sup>45</sup> Qatar's political leadership wants to shape its own foreign policy and it does not want to submit to either of its neighbours.

In the first place, Qatar seeks to reinforce its autonomy vis-à-vis patronising Saudi Arabia, whose ageing political leadership 'has a more traditional outlook and strategy'.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, it seeks to present itself as a viable alternative to Saudi Arabia.<sup>47</sup> It is reasonable to assume that 'there may even be an element – never far away from Qatari policy – of doing the opposite to the Saudis'.<sup>48</sup>

And, although it is not always immediately obvious, Qatar has bigger regional ambitions. It wishes to have greater weight than Saudi Arabia, which 'faces heavy demographic pressure'<sup>49</sup> and also to assertively influence the course of events in the dynamically changing Middle East. It can be argued that, recognising the limits of Qatar's capacities and in order to contain the mounting diplomatic pressure applied by the resentful Saudis, Tamim engaged pragmatically in a tactful rapprochement with Saudi Arabia.<sup>50</sup>

Secondly and simultaneously, Qatar continues to reach out to Iran with which it shares the world's largest natural gas field. This policy was visibly fast-tracked after the 2013 agreement between the US and Iran over the

latter's nuclear programme which could potentially have further destabilised the entire Middle East.

As many analysts observe, this unconventional diplomatic stance unavoidably put Qatar at odds with Saudi Arabia, which is striving implacably to counter what it perceives as political and military threats emanating from Iran and to roll back its growing regional influence.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, Saudi Arabia and Iran are mutually engaged in a cut-throat struggle for ideological and geopolitical domination of the Middle East, reflecting the region's bitter Sunni-Shiite sectarian division which is currently unfolding in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Yemen.<sup>52</sup>

Qatar's political leadership adopted three instruments to achieve the above-mentioned foreign policy objectives. The first instrument was securing long-term military alliances with the US and Turkey.

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The US operates two military bases on Qatari soil. The US Central Command's forward headquarters at the Al Udeid air base south of Doha is the largest American base in the Middle East.<sup>53</sup> Qatar also hosts Camp As Sayliyah which was built in 2000 and is the largest American logistical base outside the US.<sup>54</sup>

Qatar has also entered into a close alliance with Turkey and the two countries have signed bilateral agreements on cooperation in military training and the defence industry. Moreover, the two countries announced in December 2015 that Turkish troops would be deployed in Qatar to protect it from possible external threats. It also emerged that Qatar and Turkey would improve bilateral cooperation in intelligence.<sup>55</sup>

Qatar's political leadership astutely adopted a second instrument to achieve its foreign policy objectives, the television channel Al Jazeera. By transmitting sensational images and one-sided reports 24 hours a day and seven days a week, Al Jazeera became the most influential media network in the Middle East. It attracted millions of viewers, provoked heated public debates and thereby attained a lasting reputation.

Even though it is privately owned, the media network is hosted, generously funded and thus controlled by the Qatari government.<sup>56</sup> Al Jazeera provides Qatar with increased international visibility. It also provides Qatar with a truly cost-effective platform through which it successfully disseminates its own interpretation of the domestic and foreign policies of its rivals.<sup>57</sup>

Al Jazeera also allows Qatar to promote an exceedingly positive image of the high-level mediation endeavours that it so frequently undertakes. Moreover, it allows Qatar to directly influence the decision-makers and opinion-makers of other countries in the Middle East itself and well beyond who use Al Jazeera to get information about critical political events including armed conflicts, military coups, invasions, revolutions and elections.

Qatar's seductively massive financial resources allow it to engage and cajole diametrically opposed sides

Last but not least, Qatar has embraced mediation as the third instrument to achieve its foreign policy objectives. It exploits its well-established position of neutrality and its seductively massive financial resources, which allow it to engage and cajole diametrically opposed sides. Speaking in the clearest terms, Boyce asserts that Qatar mediates because it 'has the money and time and the lack of any obvious bias towards any one party'.<sup>58</sup>

Qatar was able to enhance its image regionally and internationally by way of mediation. Indeed, it has been able to cultivate the image of a trustworthy mediator genuinely interested in peace and that of a regional hub of frantic backchannel and conference diplomacy driven by a fully dedicated political leadership.<sup>59</sup>

On the whole, Qatar's mediation has not always been successful because either it does not make immediate progress or it only ends in short-term solutions.<sup>60</sup> Its efforts have not managed to fundamentally transform the conflict dynamics where it has engaged. These efforts have not changed how things stand in conflicts, which are caused by too many factors and assume a life of their own. Nonetheless, this mediation drive was calculated in order to enable Qatar to exert, at the expense of its rivals and as far as possible, more influence in the affairs of other countries than would normally be the case.<sup>61</sup>



QATAR WAS ABLE TO ENHANCE ITS IMAGE REGIONALLY AND INTERNATIONALLY BY WAY OF MEDIATION

## Dealing with its neighbours: pragmatism and mediation

### Pragmatism and mediation in Sudan and Eritrea

Of all the countries in the Horn of Africa, it is Sudan that Qatar has the closest and longest relations with. Qatar and Sudan have recently maintained a high level of political contacts for largely pragmatic reasons. This was evident in the high frequency of visits at the head of state and ministerial level undertaken between the two countries. It should be noted that the political leaders and

populations of the two countries profess the same religion, Sunni Islam,<sup>62</sup> and that Sudan and Qatar are both members of the Arab League.

Although around 40 000 Sudanese live and work in Qatar, they are mostly educated white-collar employees and for the most part, 'they lack political and economic influence in Qatar and have not been able to play a significant lobbying role'.<sup>63</sup>

From Qatar's point of view, the relationship is largely pragmatic. By forging close relations with Sudan, Qatar has been able to acquire Sudanese farmland for food security purposes. It has leveraged Sudan to influence its own freight relations with Egypt.<sup>64</sup> It has also aimed at ending economic and military cooperation established in the early 1990s between Shiite-led Iran and Sunni Arab-dominated Sudan, which are both under US economic sanctions.<sup>65</sup>

Pragmatism cuts both ways. Sudan is facing many economic problems and Qatar has recently become its most prominent donor. After signing a series of agreements in 2011, Qatar invested in Sudan in the areas of mining, real estate, agriculture and banking.<sup>66</sup> By 2012 this investment came to more than US\$1.5 billion.<sup>67</sup> In early 2014, Qatar deposited US\$1-billion in Sudan's central bank and it has also made plans 'to invest in large agricultural and energy projects in Sudan'.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, in 2015, Qatar started providing 'Sudan with natural gas and [agreed] to boost military cooperation [including cooperation on training] with [it]'.<sup>69</sup>

A scholarly interviewee said that Sudanese President Omar Al Bashir 'is flexible and adapts fast. He is good at deceit and double dealing. He plays into intra-Arab politics smartly and keeps on changing alliances'.<sup>70</sup> For instance, the interviewee further highlighted, Al Bashir 'lowered cooperation with Iran, retained his good relationship with Qatar and raised cooperation with Saudi Arabia. He has smartly played the Yemen card with the Saudis who promised billions of US dollars in aid in exchange for Sudan joining their coalition and sending a few aircraft'.<sup>71</sup> It is remarkable that Al Bashir so easily altered his relations with Iran in order to solicit the phoniest relations ever with Qatar and Saudi Arabia, which are competing against each other.

More generally, this effort fell under Qatar's blanket policy of reducing the political influence, intelligence monitoring and naval presence of Iran in the Horn of Africa. After Eritrean President Issayas Afewerki's visit to Iran in May 2008, during which many bilateral agreements were signed, Iran and Eritrea, both under severe diplomatic US pressure, established a strategic partnership.<sup>72</sup> Eritrea was even accused of being a conduit to the Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen and of having passed valuable intelligence on to them.

Following Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's visit in February 2009 to Djibouti, Iran and Sunni-dominated Djibouti signed a number of cooperation agreements. In November 2008 Iran had even offered to mediate the conflict between Eritrea and Djibouti, citing its closeness to both countries.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, the Iranian navy had deployed two warships to fight piracy in 2009 off the coast of Somalia.<sup>74</sup> It is noteworthy that, after dubious backdoor deals with Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Djibouti and Somalia switched sides and severed diplomatic relations with Iran in January 2016.<sup>75</sup>

### Qatar's most visible mediation effort was the Darfur mediation

Eritrea severed diplomatic relations with Sudan in 1994. In November 1998 and in the midst of Eritrea's war with Ethiopia, Qatar started mediating between Sudan and Eritrea. An Indian analyst who worked in Eritrea in the mid-1990s suggested, even if one interviewee scoffed at the idea,<sup>76</sup> that 'the reason why Qatar took the initiative in bringing both [Eritrea and Sudan] to a settlement was because Qatar has a wide range of oil exploration interest in Sudan'.<sup>77</sup> Whatever economic or political advantage it sought, in May 1999 Qatar held a summit meeting between presidents Al Bashir and Issayas in Doha. A six-point agreement was signed and the two countries resumed diplomatic relations.

Qatar's most visible mediation effort was the Darfur mediation. Yet, 'broadly speaking, Qatar's efforts have not been rewarded by significant improvements in Darfur. Missteps in the mediation have also shown shortcomings in Qatari diplomacy'.<sup>78</sup> For instance, 'members of the Darfur negotiation team noted that proceedings even lacked an official note-taker, making it almost impossible

to recall exactly what was said in discussions or reflect on the process in the future.<sup>179</sup>

The Darfur mediation was doomed to failure from the start because Qatar was not able to build real political leverage over all the parties involved and because the talks had begun in an atmosphere of mutual suspicion. Qatar's decisions and proposals were not taken seriously by the parties. It follows that 'Qatar lost its credibility. Qatari mediators were making decisions and setting deadlines without properly thinking about enforcement mechanisms. And, they kept allowing deadlines to pass and ran out of options.'<sup>80</sup>

Despite their best efforts to obtain detailed knowledge of the situation on the ground, 'the Qataris did not know who was really in charge of what and where'

The Doha agreement was signed in March 2010 between the Sudanese government and the major rebel groups operating in Darfur. The agreement, which was meant to establish a lasting cessation of hostilities and to lead to a more comprehensive peace agreement, was given full coverage by Al Jazeera. But, the agreement did not achieve any consensus among the conflicting parties. Actually, the delegates on both sides were time-wasting opportunists. All the Sudanese government wanted to do was to finish off the rebels. And 'housed in Doha's luxury hotels for months on end',<sup>81</sup> the rebels kept backsliding on their previous commitments.

Qatar faced its greatest challenges in responding to the fragmentation of interests and the internal power struggles within and amongst the rebel groups. Despite their best efforts to obtain detailed knowledge of the situation on the ground,<sup>82</sup> 'the Qataris did not know who was really in charge of what and where. They did not know much about the character, thinking and interests of all the rebels. The Qataris were geographically and politically too removed from the conflict. They walked into a trap of their own making.'<sup>83</sup>

### **Ethiopia bolts and Somalia disappoints**

In April 2008, to the great surprise of Qatari officials who 'had not seen it coming',<sup>84</sup> the Ethiopian government severed diplomatic relations with Qatar. Ethiopia officially – and in harsh terms – accused Qatar of becoming 'a major source of instability in the Horn of Africa.'<sup>85</sup> Ethiopia referred to Qatar's strong ties with Eritrea and its alleged support for armed opposition groups across the region. An Ethiopian source added that Ethiopia was particularly 'concerned by financial flows from Qatar to the political elites in Somalia'.<sup>86</sup>

The Ethiopian government also suspected that Qatar was using Al Jazeera to undermine Ethiopian security. The media network had, in April 2008, aired a widely watched report on Ethiopia's own restive Somali-inhabited area. Having got exclusive access to areas controlled by the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), the report claimed that the Ethiopian government's brutal

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counter-insurgency actions were pushing the youth into the arms of the ONLF.<sup>87</sup>

In February 2012, Jasim, Qatar's former indefatigable prime minister and minister of foreign affairs, met with Meles Zenawi, the late prime minister of Ethiopia, in London on the sidelines of a peace conference on Somalia where it appears that the two leaders agreed to resolve differences and reestablish diplomatic relations.

In November 2012, Ethiopia and Qatar officially resumed full diplomatic relations. The two countries signed several agreements following Jasim's visit to Addis Ababa. These agreements were intended to primarily enhance economic cooperation and investment opportunities.<sup>88</sup> The reestablishment of diplomatic relations was completed by the official visit of the Qatari emir to Ethiopia in April 2013<sup>89</sup> and the opening of embassies in Addis Ababa and Doha in 2013.

It subsequently appeared that Qatar wanted to dilute Saudi influence in Somalia. It was optimistic about the prospects of building better institutions and rebuilding infrastructure and invested money and its reputation in the government of Hassan Sheikh Mohamud.<sup>90</sup> Nevertheless, to the great disappointment of the Qataris, Hassan Sheikh's government turned out to be as corrupt and structurally weak as the other Somali governments before it.

Qatar realised that, in the absence of a strong Somali leadership and government, the only feasible way to further its policy in Somalia was to actively engage Ethiopia.<sup>91</sup> Ethiopia is one of the major power players in the Horn of Africa which openly influences the East African trade bloc, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD).

In Somalia, Ethiopia has a steady political influence and a solid military presence which Qatar lacks despite all the money at its disposal. Indeed, Ethiopia is the only troop-contributing country of the African Union's peacekeeping mission to Somalia (AMISOM) which has, in recent times, reinforced and expanded its areas of operation in order to put pressure on Al Shabaab.

Moreover, Ethiopia 'can turn political situations in Somalia in its favour. It has managed to work with many political actors and influence political developments in its favour.' It can do so because 'it has an intimate understanding

about clan manoeuvres on the ground, [it] has a clear vision and troops on the ground and [it] has operatives deep down inside Somalia'.<sup>92</sup>

At this juncture, it seems that 'Qatar wants to use Ethiopia's power in the Horn of Africa to pursue its own objectives more effectively in Somalia'.<sup>93</sup> Analyst Nabil Ennasri agrees with this assumption. He asserts that Qatar had to take into account 'Ethiopia's dominant position as a major actor of the regional strategic equation'.<sup>94</sup> He added that it 'was essential for Qatar to rapidly resume cordial relations and not lock itself into an alliance with a strategic scope limited to Eritrea',<sup>95</sup> at the expense of Ethiopia.

It should be noted that Ethiopia understood that Qatar wanted to fundamentally change course. It went along because it did not want to jeopardise Qatari goodwill. It also understood that Qatar no longer wanted to change the current dynamics and balance of power in the Horn of Africa and that it did not want to antagonise Ethiopia any more.

### The Qataris feel that Ethiopia is too quiet and not forthcoming on Eritrea and Somalia

It also fitted in well with Ethiopia's policy of containing and isolating Eritrea to engage with one of its last diplomatic allies. Apparently, Qatar 'was fed up with [Eritrean president] Issayas who is displeased, at least uncomfortable, with Qatari rapprochement with Ethiopia'.<sup>96</sup>

However, there is still 'a feeling in Doha that they cannot understand Ethiopian views. The Qataris feel that Ethiopia is too quiet and not forthcoming on Eritrea and Somalia. They feel that Ethiopian policy is too secretive. They feel that Ethiopians are headstrong people who don't tell the truth to others.'<sup>97</sup>

On the other hand, in 2013, there was 'a feeling in Addis Ababa that Qatar's decision-making is done on a whim. There doesn't seem to be long-term planning and deep research. The foreign policy of Qatar is based on trust and a set of personal connections. The emir, his wife and their entourage think that they've figured out the Horn

[of Africa] perfectly.<sup>98</sup> But Qatar ‘is in over its head, arrogant and naive. I have the impression that Qatar’s ambitions run way ahead of its capacity to operate in the Horn of Africa and that it could come badly unstuck.’<sup>99</sup>

One interviewee with close ties to the Qatari government clearly indicated that ‘the Qataris do not have the susceptibility to investigate what happens in the Horn of Africa. I have only seen very weak assessments of complicated political problems in Sudan, South Sudan and Somalia.’<sup>100</sup> Another interviewee, deeply analytical, voiced his concern that ‘few Qatari diplomats are well informed about Horn of Africa issues. Few are on top of things. The more junior diplomats especially are not interested in details and ask me petty questions.’<sup>101</sup>

### The Eritrea-Djibouti mediation: a success

Issayas was introduced to Qatar’s ruling family by his Sudanese contacts in the late 1980s. Since then, he skillfully established a close friendship with Hamad. He is also a frequent visitor to Qatar, having been to Doha six times between 2014 and 2016. His government has benefited from Qatar’s unwavering diplomatic support and financial largesse, although the latter may have recently been trimmed. Moreover, he has been treated in Qatari, and recently in Saudi, hospitals.

One interviewee indicated that ‘the Qataris do not have the susceptibility to investigate what happens in the Horn of Africa’

The role of Qatar in Eritrea is mysterious. Qatar, where around 10 000 Eritreans live, funded the building of a large and modern mosque in the city of Keren which was inaugurated in December 2010. And the Qatari Diar Real Estate Investment Company spent nearly US\$50 million to build a luxury resort on the Dahlak Kebir island, off the Eritrean coast in the Red Sea. The resort was finished in October 2012 and was the subject of an Al Jazeera story in November 2010.

Qatar undoubtedly has high-level access to the Eritrean president, over whom it seems to have some leverage. Yet again, there was, in 2013, ‘a serious downturn in relations between Eritrea and Qatar. Some of the reasons are the deterioration of the political and economic situation inside Eritrea, the [counterproductive] inflexibility of Issayas and the problems between the US and Eritrea.’<sup>102</sup>

In a desperate effort to break out from its current international isolation. Eritrea has sought to extend its diplomacy by forging new alliances. It ‘raised its cooperation with Saudi Arabia, which Issayas visited in April 2015 and also with the United Arab Emirates, where he travelled twice in 2015. Eritrea may be getting some easy cash and possibly fuel supplies in exchange for basing rights.’<sup>103</sup> Yet, it remains that the new relationship with the Gulf countries is

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THE ESTIMATED NUMBER OF ERITREANS LIVING IN QATAR

largely short term and that it may not have a long-term impact on Horn of Africa politics.

There was a time when ‘Qataris were super-excited by the possibility of mediating between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Today, they have come to understand that fixing the Ethiopia-Eritrea problem is not possible under current circumstances. The Ethiopians told them that the obstacle for peace is Issayas. Other people, especially the Americans, told them that Addis Ababa is comfortable with the status quo and [that] Ethiopia does not trust Qatar handling its dispute with Eritrea.’<sup>104</sup>

Finally, in 2008, Qatar successfully mediated between Djibouti and Eritrea and, by doing so, it prevented any further military confrontation between the two countries. An agreement was signed by Eritrea and Djibouti in June 2010 on the back of former prime minister Jasim’s shuttle diplomacy.<sup>105</sup> Eritrean troops withdrew from areas under their control and Qatari military observers were deployed to the areas until a final settlement to the conflict could be found.

Interestingly, Qatar’s mediation provided for the appointment by a committee headed by the Qatari emir of an international firm to demarcate the border between Eritrea and Djibouti.<sup>106</sup> One complication was the prisoner issue, which was resolved when four Djiboutian prisoners of war held in Eritrea were released in March 2016, following the personal intervention of current emir Tamim.<sup>107</sup>

## Conclusion

There is no doubt that former emir Hamad revolutionised Qatar’s foreign policy, building up an international significance to be reckoned with. This was made possible by the security guarantees of the US, the sweeping Al Jazeera propaganda machine and the unavoidable power of Qatar’s own purse, which allowed Qatar a freer hand to venture farther afield and even play ‘the often unpredictable maverick’.<sup>108</sup>

Qatar’s foreign policy decision-making remains excessively personalised and it is not solidly anchored in institutions. The emir personally runs the country’s foreign policy and does not feel that he needs information, analysis and advice from informed advisors or seasoned diplomats.<sup>109</sup> Qatar mostly relies on staged

personal diplomacy, supported by Al Jazeera. Because of this, Qatar’s foreign policy is unpredictable.

Qatar has become actively engaged in the politics of the Horn of Africa at a time when tensions are mounting within and between countries, which are confronting a new set of geopolitical choices. These countries are mutually dependent but generally act as mortal enemies, which confront each other either directly or using proxies.

As luck would have it, Qatar heavily invested its political capital in tenuous relations with Sudan and, until recently, with Eritrea, two countries which isolated themselves regionally and internationally and suffered the consequences.<sup>110</sup> The alliance of Qatar with Sudan and Eritrea undermined its credibility and led to unpleasant aftereffects. Indeed, it led to a needless worsening of relations with Egypt and Ethiopia, which have close working relations with the US.

Qatar would be better served if it adopted an overall regional vision in the extremely long term

Yet, one cannot ignore that Qatari shuttle diplomacy and mediation helped materially to de-escalate matters between Eritrea and Djibouti twice, in 2008 and in 2010.<sup>111</sup>

Nonetheless, the Darfur mediation, supposedly Qatar’s flagship initiative, has turned out to be a complete failure. It demonstrated Qatar’s lack of knowledge and its inability to convince other political actors to endorse its positions, two qualities which are required to resolve such a complicated and longstanding conflict and which no amount of money could ever buy. Instead of strengthening Qatar’s role in the Horn of Africa, the Darfur mediation resulted in seriously damaging its credibility for a long time to come.

As a final point, this report would like to emphasise that Qatar should, in coming years, lower the level of its ambition. It should refrain from embarking on a go-it-alone policy and also from punching beyond its diplomatic weight too often. Qatar would be better served if it adopted an overall regional vision in the extremely long term. It should reorient its diplomatic actions and deploy its vast financial resources towards the consolidation

of a regional integration process under the institutional guidance of IGAD. This would, in turn, enable Qatar to claw its way back into the Horn of Africa, play a greater role in the region's geopolitical redefinition and give the punches that it will throw in the future more weight.

## Notes

- 1 'The numbers of Qataris and non-Qataris are disputed; these are conventionally cited figures, but official data is murky and secretive.' Email communication with an analyst based in Doha, Qatar, 29 June 2016.
- 2 For comparative purposes, the average GDP per capita income (in US dollars) of the countries of the Horn of Africa is presented from different sources as follows: 544 for Eritrea, 573 for Ethiopia, 1 813 for Djibouti and 1 975 for Sudan.
- 3 M Kamrava, *Qatar: small state, big politics*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013, 124; L Khatib, Qatar's foreign policy: the limits of pragmatism, *International Affairs*, 89:2, 2013, 417; J Gengler, The political cost of Qatar's Western orientation, *Middle East Policy*, 19:4, 2012, 70; G Cafieri, Is Qatar's foreign policy sustainable? *Foreign Policy in Focus*, 25 June 2012, 2.
- 4 D Roberts, *Qatar's international relations under Emir Tamim*, Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre Policy Brief, 2013, 2; B Haykel, *Qatar's foreign policy*, Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre Policy Brief, 2013, 1.
- 5 At present, Saudi Arabia and Iran enjoy a far greater military advantage over Qatar. Saudi Arabia has 20 times more troops, 13 times more tanks and 10 times more aircraft than Qatar, whereas Iran has 50 times more troops, 18 times more tanks and six times more aircraft than Qatar.
- 6 J Dargin, Qatar's natural gas: the foreign policy driver, *Middle East Policy*, 15:3, 2007, 136.
- 7 P Akpinar, Mediation as a foreign policy tool in the Arab Spring: Turkey, Qatar and Iran, *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 2015, 8.
- 8 A Cooper and B Momani, Qatar and expanded contours of small state diplomacy, *The International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs*, 2011, 46:3, 127.
- 9 B Roberts, *The Arab world's unlikely leader: embracing Qatar's expanding role in the region*, Project on Middle East Democracy Policy Brief, 2012, 1; B Roberts, *The Arab world's unlikely leader: embracing Qatar's expanding role in the region*, Project on Middle East Democracy Policy Brief, 2012, 2; G Cafieri, Is Qatar's foreign policy sustainable? *Foreign Policy in Focus*, 25 June 2012, 1.
- 10 Kamrava estimates that 10 000 to 15 000 Qataris are members of the extended Al Thani family, more than double the figure suspected or quoted in other sources. M Kamrava, *Qatar: small state, big politics*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013, 8.
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- 14 H Khodr, A Preliminary comparative study of policy making in two GCC countries – Qatar and Kuwait: process, politics and participants, *Politics and Policy*, 42:2, 2014, 285.
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- 17 B Haykel, *Qatar's foreign policy*, Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre Policy Brief, 2013, 1.
- 18 L Khatib, Qatar's foreign policy: the limits of pragmatism, *International Affairs*, 89:2, 2013, 429-430.
- 19 B Haykel, *Qatar's foreign policy*, Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre Policy Brief, 2013, 1; L Khatib, Qatar's foreign policy: the limits of pragmatism, *International Affairs*, 89:2, 2013, 418; M Kamrava, Royal factionalism and political liberalisation in Qatar, *Middle East Journal*, 63:3, 2009, 415.
- 20 Interview with a foreign national with deep links with the Qatari government in Doha, Qatar, 27 April 2016.
- 21 An analyst indicates that Jasim was 'an extrovert of a man who perennially sought to hog the limelight whenever possible.' D Roberts, *Qatar's international relations under Emir Tamim*, Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre Policy Brief, 2013, 3. Another analyst asserts that, before he was pushed into obscurity, Jasim was, along with the former emir, one of the architects and dominant figures of Qatar's foreign policy whose 'intensely personalised style of policymaking and vast range of contacts will be difficult to replicate.' K Ulrichsen, *Foreign policy implications of the new emir's succession in Qatar*, Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre Policy Brief, 2013, 2.
- 22 G Boyce, Qatar's foreign policy, *Asian Affairs*, 2013, 44:3, 376; M Kamrava, Royal factionalism and political liberalisation in Qatar, *Middle East Journal*, 63:3, 2009, 414; K Ulrichsen, *Foreign policy implications of the new emir's succession in Qatar*, Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre Policy Brief, 2013, 2; M Kamrava, *Qatar: small state, big politics*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013, 168.
- 23 G Boyce, Qatar's foreign policy, *Asian Affairs*, 2013, 44:3, 376.
- 24 A Hammond, *Qatar's leadership transition: like father, like son*, European Council on Foreign Relations Policy Brief, 2013, 8; M Kamrava, *Qatar: small state, big politics*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013, 242.
- 25 L Khatib, Qatar and the recalibration of power in the Gulf, *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 2014, 11.
- 26 E Woertz, Personalities vs. institutions: lessons from Qatar's transition, *Barcelona Centre for International Affairs*, 2013, 1.
- 27 A Hammond, *Qatar's leadership transition: like father, like son*, European Council on Foreign Relations Policy Brief, 2013, 8.
- 28 Interview with an academician in Doha, Qatar, 25 April 2016. This interviewee believes that these younger individuals were most probably selected because they had no pronounced views on Qatar's domestic and foreign policies. They also may not enjoy the full confidence of the emir, who seems slow to react which, according to the interviewee, may win him more enemies than friends.
- 29 G Boyce, Qatar's foreign policy, *Asian Affairs*, 2013, 44:3, 376; B Haykel, Qatar's foreign policy, Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre Policy Brief, 2013, 1; S Pulliam, *Qatar's foreign policy: building an international image*, Unpublished paper, 2013, 3.
- 30 Interview with an academician in Doha, Qatar, 25 April 2016. 'With national policymaking ultimately the preserve of the emir, based at most on advice from no more than a handful of individuals, and with a serious dearth of technical experts across the state machinery to provide input and advice upward, decisions are made without detailed study of their consequences.' M Kamrava, *Qatar: small state, big politics*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013, 242.
- 31 S Pulliam, *Qatar's foreign policy: building an international image*, Unpublished paper, 2013, 2.
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- 33 S Barakat, *Qatari mediation: between ambition and achievement*, Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper 12, 2014, 22-23.
- 34 G Boyce, Qatar's foreign policy, *Asian Affairs*, 2013, 44:3, 375; E Woertz, Personalities vs. institutions: lessons from Qatar's transition, *Barcelona Centre for International Affairs*, 2013, 1; L Khatib, Qatar and the recalibration of power in the Gulf, *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 2014, 12; M Kamrava, *Qatar: small state, big politics*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013, 239.
- 35 Boyce stressed the fact that 'the foreign policy options for a very small state in a dangerous neighbourhood are very limited'. G Boyce, Qatar's foreign policy, *Asian Affairs*, 2013, 44:3, 370.
- 36 Interview with a researcher involved in negotiation processes in Doha, Qatar, 25 April 2016.
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- 38 M Kamrava, *Qatar: small state, big politics*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013, 242.
- 39 Interview with a researcher involved in negotiation processes in Doha, Qatar, 25 April 2016; A Echague, *Emboldened yet vulnerable: the changing foreign policies of Qatar and Saudi Arabia*, FRIDE Working Paper 123, 2014, 10; L Khatib, Qatar's foreign policy: the limits of pragmatism, *International Affairs*, 89:2, 2013, 429.
- 40 Interview with a researcher involved in negotiation processes in Doha, Qatar, 25 April 2016; interview with a freelance journalist in Doha, Qatar, 26 April 2016.
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- 42 M Kamrava, Mediation and Qatari foreign policy, *Middle East Journal*, 65:4, 2011, 556; S Barakat, *Qatari mediation: between ambition and achievement*, Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper 12, 2014, 36.
- 43 A Echague, *Emboldened yet vulnerable: the changing foreign policies of Qatar and Saudi Arabia*, FRIDE Working Paper 123, 2014, 10.
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- 49 Wikileaks, The rise of the Gulf states and the USG policy response, 14 April 2009, 3.
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- 51 A Cooper and B Momani, Qatar and expanded contours of small state diplomacy, *The International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs*, 2011, 46:3, 124; D Roberts, *Qatar's international relations under Emir Tamim*, Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre Policy Brief, 2013, 1; A Hammond, *Qatar's leadership transition: like father, like son*, European Council on Foreign Relations Policy Brief, 2013, 9.
- 52 A Echague, *Emboldened yet vulnerable: the changing foreign policies of Qatar and Saudi Arabia*, FRIDE Working Paper 123, 2014, 15.
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- 62 Interview with a scholar and former diplomat in Doha, Qatar, 27 April 2016. Former emir Hamad and former prime minister Jasim are the 'architects of Qatar's contemporary Sudan policy'. *Oxford Analytica*, Qatar-Sudan ties are laced with Doha pragmatism, 2 April 2014, 1.
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- 66 *Oxford Analytica*, Qatar-Sudan ties are laced with Doha pragmatism, 2 April 2014, 1-2.
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- 71 *Ibid.*
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- 84 *Wikileaks*, Qatar's reaction to Ethiopian announced break in diplomatic relations, 24 April 2008, 2.
- 85 *Associated Press*, Ethiopia breaks off diplomatic relations with Qatar, 21 April 2008.
- 86 Meetings with an Ethiopian analyst in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 4 and 6 May 2016. The analyst asserted that 'Qatar spent a lot of cash to get the votes for Hassan Sheikh in the elections in 2012. Hassan Sheikh promised that he would negotiate with moderate Islamist factions. He enabled some of the Islamists to set foot in his Hawiye-dominated government which does not have any structure and efficient people. When we saw him and others behind him associate with Middle Eastern partners like Egypt, Qatar and even Turkey, we understood that they wanted to pursue a Muslim Brotherhood agenda just like Morsi.'
- 87 *Al Jazeera*, Unrest simmers in Ethiopia's Ogaden, 15 April 2008.
- 88 *Agence France Presse*, Ethiopia, Qatar resume diplomatic ties, 5 November 2012.
- 89 It is important to point out that Issayas was in Doha exactly a week before Hamad traveled on 11 April 2013 to Addis Ababa. Issayas went back to Asmara on 5 April 2013. An interviewee said a Qatari source had told him that 'the meeting in Doha between Hamad and Issayas who has since then started sucking up to Saudi Arabia was terrible. Both of them were calling each other names and the note-taker was unable to properly take notes. The emir was apparently annoyed that the problem with Djibouti was not solved whereas Issayas got angry and insisted that there is no such problem.' Interview with a foreign diplomat in Doha, Qatar, 26 April 2016.
- 90 Interview with a close observer of Qatari foreign policy, in Doha, Qatar, 28 April 2016.
- 91 Interview with a close observer of Qatari foreign policy, in Doha, Qatar, 28 April 2016; interview with a scholar and former diplomat in Doha, Qatar, 27 April 2016.
- 92 Meetings with an Ethiopian analyst in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 4 and 6 May 2016. The analyst asserted that Qatar 'wanted to establish a backchannel with the highest echelons of government in Ethiopia. There were consultations on Somalia and sharing of information between the two states. Ethiopia's precondition was that the talks be kept secret.'
- 93 Interview with a foreign diplomat in Doha, Qatar, 26 April 2016.
- 94 N Enasri, Qatari-Ethiopian relations, *Al Jazeera Center for Studies*, 2013, 7.
- 95 *Ibid.*
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- 97 Interview with a close observer of Qatari foreign policy, in Doha, Qatar, 28 April 2016.
- 98 Meetings with an Ethiopian analyst in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 4 and 6 May 2016. The analyst added that 'they don't know an awful lot about the Horn'. For Ethiopian views on Qatar's engagement in the Horn of Africa, see M Tadesse, Qatar and the Horn, *Current Analyst*, 12 December 2010 and A Shiketa, Qatar: peacemaker in the Horn of Africa? *Horn Watch*, 31 January 2013.
- 99 Interview with a foreign diplomat in Doha, Qatar, 26 April 2016.
- 100 Interview with a foreign national with deep links with the Qatari government in Doha, Qatar, 27 April 2016.
- 101 Interview with a researcher involved in negotiation processes in Doha, Qatar, 25 April 2016.
- 102 Interview with a foreign diplomat in Doha, Qatar, 26 April 2016.
- 103 *Ibid.*
- 104 *Ibid.*
- 105 *Qatar News Agency*, Premier in Djibouti, Eritrea talks, 24 April 2010.
- 106 *Agence France Presse*, Qatar mediating Eritrea-Djibouti border dispute, 8 June 2010; M Saeed, Qatar mediating in Eritrea-Djibouti row, *The Peninsula*, 8 June 2010.
- 107 *Economist Intelligence Unit*, Qatari diplomacy in the Horn of Africa, 2 August 2013, 1.
- 108 *Wikileaks*, The rise of the Gulf states and the USG policy response, 14 April 2009, 3.
- 109 Kamrava wrote in 2013 that, in Qatar, there was a 'lack of institutional depth and the continued centrality of individual personalities as the founts of power.' M Kamrava, *Qatar: small state, big politics*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013, 170. Yet, a knowledgeable analyst who regularly travels to Qatar asserted that 'the role played by Egyptian and Palestinian employees and advisors on [Qatari] foreign policy on Middle Eastern and African issues should not be underestimated. Sudanese nationals, former ministers and ambassadors also have influence on Qatar policy in Africa. To a limited extent, Somali nationals play a similar role.' He added that, 'like the current emir, young professional Qataris trained in the West are taking some of the directorate level positions'. Email communication with an analyst based in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 1 July 2016.
- 110 It has to be acknowledged that Eritrea and Sudan are the Horn of Africa's geopolitically and militarily disadvantaged countries struggling to get out of the US line of fire. After having recently dumped Iran, these two countries have gotten themselves involved, as pawns, in the intriguing geopolitical game between Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Moreover, Eritrea and Sudan are governed by authoritarian regimes cut from the same cloth which present an external façade of normality but are, in reality, frozen in time and incapable of change. The consequent domestic difficulties have made the regional positions of Eritrea and Sudan even more precarious which, in some sort of vicious circle, allowed their manipulation by these Middle Eastern countries. An interviewee who is well-networked within Qatari diplomatic circles wondered how 'the Qataris felt when dealing with unsavoury figures like Bashir and Issayas. These master manipulators move to their own tune and [they] are looking out for their own agendas. They have policies of advances and retreats and [they] get involved in unpleasant disputes with different neighbours at different times.' Interview with a close observer of Qatari foreign policy, in Doha, Qatar, 28 April 2016.
- 111 One interviewee thinks that 'the Qataris had pulled off a major diplomatic coup with the Eritrea-Djibouti agreement. If the Darfur mediation ended in disappointment, the Eritrea and Djibouti agreement gave Qatari diplomacy the lift it [desperately] needed.' Interview with a close observer of Qatari foreign policy, in Doha, Qatar, 28 April 2016. Another interviewee observes that 'Issayas is their man so who else could get him to withdraw his soldiers? And they only defused the conflict, they did not solve it.' Interview with a foreign diplomat in Doha, Qatar, 26 April 2016. The author of this report tends to agree with the foreign diplomat's observation that Qatar's involvement merely produced a momentary sigh of relief.

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## About the ISS

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