



Institute of Mediterranean and Oriental Cultures
Polish Academy of Sciences

Hemispheres
Studies on Cultures and Societies
Vol. 30, No. 2

THE GREATER MIDDLE EAST

Wydawnictwo Naukowe ASKON
Warszawa 2015

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This edition is prepared, set and published by

Wydawnictwo Naukowe ASKON Sp. z o.o.
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tel./fax: (48) 22 635 99 37
www.askon.waw.pl
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PL ISSN 0239–8818
ISBN 978–83–7452–086–7

HEMISPHERES is published quarterly and is indexed in
ERIH PLUS
The Central European Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities,
ProQuest Database and Index Copernicus

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Involvement of the State of Qatar in the Syrian Crisis

Abstract

By getting involved in the “Arab Spring”, Qatar was determined to continue waging its foreign policy aimed at strengthening the positions of the country combined with the intention to create corresponding markets outside the country for Qatari gas. The Russia-Iran-US agreement on the destruction of Syria’s chemical weapons, along with the newly-emerging Iran-US rapprochement, urged Qatar to re-think its Syrian agenda, especially in light of the diplomatic blockade by the Gulf states. It is concluded in the article that after the Syrian crisis, Qatar will continue seeking gas markets in order to ensure its national interests.

Introduction – Qatar’s foreign policy before the “Arab Spring”

Since the oil industry boom, Qatar has gradually paved its way towards regional and world geopolitics. During the Iran-Iraqi war (1980–1988), Qatar sided with Iraq. However, during the First Gulf War Qatar turned its back on the latter, joining the Western-led coalition.¹ In this operation Qatar lost two tanks and suffered three casualties.² Meanwhile, it became evident for the ruling circles of Qatar that having a small territory was fraught with serious consequences as was the case of Kuwait. This gave a new impetus to a proactive foreign policy.³ Amidst these endeavors, Qatar mediated the Libyan conflict in 2008, convening a conference in Doha which succeeded in terminating the 18-month-long political crisis in the country.⁴ On 16 May 2008 *Agence France Presse* wrote: “By hosting rival Lebanese politicians, the tiny gas-rich state of Qatar has successfully bolstered an active diplomacy which has often unsettled its neighbors, notably the regional heavyweight Saudi Arabia.”⁵ Indeed the strengthening

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¹ *Universal'naja naučno-populjarnaja onlajn-ènciklopedija “Krugosvet”* [Universal Popular Scientific Online Encyclopedia “Krugosvet”], http://www.krugosvet.ru/enc/strany_mira/katar.html?page=0.2 (accessed 3 December 2014).

² Norman Friedman, *Desert Victory: The War for Kuwait*, Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1991, pp. 353–356.

³ Lina Khatib, ‘Qatar’s Foreign Policy: The Limits of Pragmatism’, *International Affairs*, Vol. 89, No. 2, 2013, p. 417, http://iis-db.stanford.edu/pubs/24060/INTA89_2_10_Khatib.pdf (accessed 3 December 2014).

⁴ *The Daily Star*, ‘Qatar Increases Stature by Hosting Lebanese Dialogue’, 17 May 2008, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2008/May-17/51738-qatar-increases-stature-by-hosting-lebanese-dialogue.ashx#axzz30Ap4GIJ0> (accessed 3 December 2014).

⁵ See: *ibidem*.

of Qatari foreign policy, as well as the rise of its regional involvement, conflicted with Saudi Arabia's strategic interests. It can be explained by the very fact that Saudi Arabia has direct interests in the Middle East region, including the Lebanese crisis, in which it used to support Sunni forces against the Iran-backed Hezbollah.⁶

The following year Qatar launched new talks on the Arab-Israeli resolution, later known as the "Gaza Talks". Riyadh gave a hostile reception to this initiative, because by means of the geopolitical presence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Saudi Arabia retained its dominant positions in the region: thus Qatari involvement in that conflict threatened to change the power ratio in the Middle East. Besides, the Qatari initiative encompassed Iran, Syria and Hamas. That meant a possible alternative challenge to the Arab League summit, due to take place three days later, which also contradicted both Saudi and Egyptian interests in the region.⁷ This makes the statement by the Saudi foreign minister Saud al-Faisal quite explainable: "The Arab world is divided and the division is because of Palestinian-Israeli conflict and Israeli occupation."⁸ In this regard, London-based analyst Tariq Alhomayed wrote: "Their [Iranian-Syrian-Qatari alliance – E.E.] victory lies not in rescuing Gaza, or defeating the Israeli enemy; it lies in cancelling the active and trustworthy Arab role undertaken by Saudi Arabia and Egypt. That is all they want to do in Doha."⁹

Thus, it can be concluded that allying with the West, especially the US, in addition to the active foreign policy waged by this tiny Gulf state, creates for Qatar an image of a transparent and liberal Arabic country.¹⁰ It is noteworthy that on the eve of the "Arab Spring", Qatar was determined to implement a foreign policy deviating from the pan-Arab general discourse, notwithstanding negative reactions from Saudi Arabia. The latter lost the status of being a fair mediator in the region, yielding that role to Qatar.¹¹ In its turn, Qatar beholds the mediation as a successful tool for gaining influence¹² and reducing the Iranian expansion in the Middle East.¹³

⁶ *CBC News*, 'Qatar to Mediate Deal for New Lebanese President', 15 May 2008, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/qatar-to-mediate-deal-for-new-lebanese-president-1.702761> (accessed 3 December 2014).

⁷ Grigorij Kosač, "'Soveščanje po Gaze" v Dohi: rabota, itogi, komentarii' ["Gaza Talks" in Doha: Work, Results, Comments], *Institut Bližnjega Vostoka* [Near East Institute], <http://www.iimes.ru/rus/stat/2009/17-01-09.htm> (accessed 3 December 2014).

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ *Asharq al-Awsat*, 'The Doha Theatre Show', 17 January 2009, <http://www.aawsat.net/2009/01/article55256278> (accessed 3 December 2014).

¹⁰ Qatar is one of the rare countries, hosting a "Taliban" movement agency in Doha (*The Telegraph*, 'Qatar Playing with Fire as It Funds Syrian Islamists in Quest for Global Influence', 27 April 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/qatar/10022759/Qatar-playing-with-fire-as-it-funds-Syrian-Islamists-in-quest-for-global-influence.html> (accessed 5 December 2014)), and keeping relatively warm ties with Israel (Khatib, 'Qatar's Foreign Policy...', pp. 419–420).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 417.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 418–419.

¹³ It is highly important to mention that Qatar has never had an open confrontation with Iran, officially keeping amicable-like relations.

The “Arab Spring” and Qatar

Since the beginning of the “Arab Spring”, Qatar supported anti-government movements in Arabic countries. The main reason that urged Qatar to rethink its former seemingly pacifistic foreign policy was the overall change of regional policy and the structure thereof. In the long-lasting period preceding the “Arab Spring”, the regional balance and stability were premised on the heritable power of ruling leaders. The visible tendency of change propelled Qatar to define its place in a newly-shaping system, preserving the title of West’s ally.¹⁴ With the persevering continuation of the “Arab Spring”, Qatar’s stance became rather obvious. It rapidly abandoned “mediation” in favor of more direct action.¹⁵

Qatar’s position is formulated in the official website of the country’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs: “The State of Qatar helped the Arab Spring movements since inception early in 2011. It took the initiative of supporting the Arab people in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya and Syria to achieve their aspirations. It has provided material and moral assistance for these revolutions. [...] With regard to the humanitarian assistance, the State of Qatar provided financial, in-kind and medical assistance to many Arab countries.”¹⁶ With reference to this citation, it is worth mentioning that shortly before the “Arab Spring” Qatari foreign policy had been built on three distinct pillars – high-qualified cultural and educational programs, humanitarian assistance (as stated officially) and the *al-Jazeera* satellite television network.¹⁷

In Syria’s particular case, the involvement of Qatar came to be much more evident and striking. According to the *Financial Times* by May 2013, “[...] Qatar has spent as much as \$3bn over the past two years supporting the rebellion in Syria, far exceeding any other government.”¹⁸ In addition to financing Syrian opposition, e.g. the Free Syrian Army (FSA), Qatar also undertook the forming of an umbrella structure – the National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (SNC) – in order to coordinate separate Syrian opposition forces (November 2012). Through this strategic step Doha put an end to the 18-month-long calls by the international community for the Syrian opposition to unite. Thus, Qatar put into practice its top three foreign policy priorities – regional leadership; international authority; and deterring Iranian influence in the region.¹⁹

In the first phase of the Qatari involvement in the Syrian crisis, the analytical discourse throughout the world mostly centered on the very notion of pan-Sunni

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 421–422.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 429.

¹⁶ *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Qatar*, ‘Arab Issues and the Joint Arab Action’, <http://www.mofa.gov.qa/en/ForeignPolicy/BilateralRelations/Pages/ArabBilateralRelations.aspx> (accessed 7 December 2014).

¹⁷ Khatib, ‘Qatar’s Foreign Policy...’, p. 425.

¹⁸ *Financial Times*, ‘Qatar Bankrolls Syrian Revolt with Cash and Arms’, 16 May 2013, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/86e3f28e-be3a-11e2-bb35-00144feab7de.html#axzz2emx8mHHI> (accessed 17 May 2013).

¹⁹ Khatib, ‘Qatar’s Foreign Policy...’, p. 422.

solidarity as the main incentive for Qatari actions.²⁰ Such an interpretation of the country's foreign policy should be regarded in the, then-prevailing, general view explaining the Syrian crisis as having arisen on (inter-)sectarian grounds. Indeed, the latter reason was one of the factors of the crisis. However it can hardly be regarded or defined as primarily being the leading one. As we may see, the Qatari involvement in the conflict was systematically misrepresented whilst trying to connect it with the Sunni-opposed stance of the Syrian government. Within the scope of this article the author proposes a thesis that, under the cloak of sectarian/religious reasoning, distinct geostrategic interests proved to be the bone of contention, thus conditioning the foreign agenda of the State of Qatar on Syria.

The changing image of region

On 3 September 2013, Michael Snyder published an article entitled *Is the United States going to go to war with Syria over a natural gas pipeline?*²¹ Scrutinizing the American and Qatari motives in the Syrian crisis, the author declares the gas factor as being of primary importance. It is our strongly held conviction, that energy resources and dominance over it are undoubtedly now the driving force behind world politics, and thus we should prioritize the investigation of this paramount factor.

On 6 August 2009, the Prime Minister of Turkey – Recep Tayyip Erdoğan – and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin, signed oil and gas protocols in Ankara. The Prime Minister of Italy, Silvio Berlusconi, was present at the ceremony.²² Through cooperation with Turkey in the energy field, Russia then aimed at: a) retaining Russian gas exports in the European market; b) circumventing Ukraine as an untrustworthy transit partner; c) countering the regional logistic giant of Nabucco.²³

Under the agreement provisions, the “South Stream” gas pipeline would reach Italy via the Turkish Black Sea economic zone. Putin also proposed a line parallel to Blue Stream 1 – Blue Stream 2. According to the *Anadolu* and *Interfax* news agencies,

²⁰ *The Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, ‘Qatar’s Strategy in Syria’, 19 September 2013, <http://www.defenddemocracy.org/the-syria-strategies-of-iran-saudi-arabia-qatar-and-turkey/> (accessed 7 December 2014).

²¹ Michael Snyder, ‘Is the United States Going to Go to War with Syria over a Natural Gas Pipeline?’, *The Economic Collapse*, 3 September 2013, <http://theeconomiccollapseblog.com/archives/is-the-united-states-going-to-go-to-war-with-syria-over-a-natural-gas-pipeline> (accessed 7 December 2014); Claude Salhani, ‘Will Saudi and Qatari Involvement in the Syrian War Impact their Economies?’, *OilPrice.com*, 10 September 2013, <http://oilprice.com/Geopolitics/Middle-East/Will-Saudi-and-Qatari-Involvement-in-the-Syrian-War-Impact-their-Economies.html> (accessed 21 March 2014).

²² *Sabah gazetesi* [Sabah Newspaper], ‘Türkiye’de 2009 yılı Ağustos ayı’ [August 2009 in Turkey], http://www.sabah.com.tr/Gundem/Dosyalar/2009/12/18/turkiyede_2009_yili_agustos_ayi (accessed 22 March 2014).

²³ *Komsomol skaja pravda* [Komsomol Truth], ‘Vladimir Putin – tureckim žurnalistam: “Ja byl v Sibiri, tam pljus 40!”’ [Vladimir Putin appeals to Turkish journalists: “I Was in Siberia, It Was +40°C There!”], 7 August 2009, <http://alt.kp.ru/daily/24339/530236/> (accessed 7 December 2014).

Erdoğan and Putin announced that natural gas would be transported from Ceyhan to Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Cyprus.²⁴ Turkey would benefit from making its territory a transit corridor for the South Stream and from the proposed Blue Stream 2. Moreover, the country's favorable geographic location enabled it to go on maneuvering between geostrategic energetic "nets". During the final press conference, PM Erdoğan postulated that, "Nabucco and the South Stream are not rivals and together they will offer diversity."²⁵

Some 11–12 days after the Russian-Turkish negotiations, Qatari-Turkish official talks commenced. In Bodrum President Abdullah Gul, alongside Erdoğan, held talks with the then-ruling emir of Qatar – Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani. A decision was made to establish an energy commission, in order to supervise the construction of a gas pipeline from Qatar to Turkey.²⁶ According to the first variant, the pipeline would reach Turkey via Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Iraq. The second option was in transit from Jordan into Syria and ultimately to Turkey.²⁷ The project corresponded thoroughly with the Qatari aspirations to double its gas exports.²⁸ It also boded well for Turkey, providing a chance to become a regional hub for gas pipelines. The Turkish *Zaman* referred to this event, asserting: "After the historic agreement signed with Russia, Turkey is going to collaborate in the same field with the gas-rich country of Qatar, thus aiming to become a transit country for energy supplies."²⁹ During the Bodrum talks, Erdoğan in his turn told al-Thani that Turkey had a unique position in transitory energy passages and it was desirable to include Qatar's energy resources in this network.³⁰

However, Saudi Arabia rejected the first variant of the pipeline, supposedly trying to curtail the rise of Qatar as well as preventing the transformation of Shia-dominated Iraq into a regional hub. Syria in turn refused the second variant, evading the shift of the country's Iran-Russia-friendly course into a Qatari-Saudi orbit. As mentioned above, the Qatari gas reserves are generally shared with Iran and the future flow of

²⁴ Ibidem; Vladimir Socor, 'Gazprom, Turkey Revive and Reconfigure Blue Stream Two', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 6, Issue 154, 11 August 2009, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=35394&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=da2f573c7c#.U2EWqPmSwsA (accessed 7 December 2014).

²⁵ *Bloomberg*, 'Turkey Offers Route for Gazprom's South Stream Gas Pipeline', 6 August 2009, <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=a.TM4QijmIMk> (accessed 7 December 2014).

²⁶ *Zaman*, 'Bir enerji hamlesi de Katar'la' [New Energetic Endeavors with Qatar], 18 August 2009, http://www.zaman.com.tr/dunya_bir-enerji-hamlesi-de-katarla_881729.html (accessed 7 December 2014).

²⁷ *The National*, 'Qatar Seeks Gas Pipeline to Turkey', 26 August 2009, <http://www.thenational.ae/business/energy/qatar-seeks-gas-pipeline-to-turkey#page1> (accessed 7 December 2014).

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ *Zaman*, 'Bir enerji hamlesi...'

³⁰ *Journal of Turkish Weekly*, 'Turkey and Qatar Agree to Build a Natural Gas Pipeline', 19 August 2009, <http://www.turkishweekly.net/news/87212/turkey-and-qatar-agree-to-build-a-natural-gas-pipeline.html> (accessed 7 December 2014).

Qatari gas to Europe could undermine Russia's energy interests in the region.³¹ To some extent the Chinese factor also conditioned the Syrian choice for an Iran-Iraq project (see below), taking into account the country's involvement in Syrian oil production.³²

The case of the Syrian choice can be elucidated with a general overview of the country's energy strategy. In 2009 Bashar al-Assad declared the strategy of "four seas" with a general purpose to turn Syria into a regional hub for geostrategic projects and gas and oil pipelines around the Persian, Caspian, Black and Mediterranean seas. This decision was arguably made as a result of the falling rates of Syria's own oil production, in decline since the 1980s.³³ One year later, in 2010, Syria and Iraq signed a memorandum of understanding to build two oil pipelines and Iraq's first international gas pipeline. Iraq would gain a chance to sell its natural gas in European and American markets, thus diversifying the country's Asia-oriented trade area.³⁴ In July 2011 Iranian officials announced a \$10 billion gas pipeline deal between Syria, Iraq and Iran that would transport gas from Iran's South Pars gas field through Iraq to Syria.³⁵ The pipeline was due to be constructed by 2016 with a perspective of continuation to Lebanon³⁶ and Jordan.³⁷ The West did not hail the Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline, called the Friendship Pipeline by the governments involved, in contrast to the moniker "Islamic gas pipeline"³⁸ applied by some Western sources, because it would obviously serve as an effective factor of Iran's further growth. Besides, it was designated to circumvent Turkey, an essential ally of the West and a member of NATO.³⁹ Thus, the Qatar-Turkey gas pipeline remained the only applicable route in the Middle East for diversifying Russian gas supplies to the West. Syria in turn was the sole block against that

³¹ *The Guardian*, 'Syria Intervention Plan Fueled by Oil Interests, Not Chemical Weapon Concern', 30 August 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/earth-insight/2013/aug/30/syria-chemical-attack-war-intervention-oil-gas-energy-pipelines> (accessed 7 December 2014).

³² *Reuters*, 'Factbox: Syria's Energy Sector', 14 August 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/08/14/us-syria-oil-idUSTRE77D15V20110814> (accessed 7 December 2014).

³³ Amrit Naresh, 'Syria's Transit Future: All Pipelines Lead to Damascus?', *OpenOil*, 28 March 2012, <http://openoil.net/2012/03/28/syrias-transit-future-all-pipelines-lead-to-damascus/> (accessed 7 December 2014).

³⁴ *Bloomberg*, 'Iraq, Syria Agree to Build Cross-Border Oil, Gas Pipelines, Official Says', 16 September 2010, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2010-09-16/iraq-syria-agree-to-build-cross-border-oil-gas-pipelines-official-says.html> (accessed 7 December 2014).

³⁵ Naresh, 'Syria's Transit Future...?'

³⁶ *Al-Jazeera English*, 'Syria's Pipelineistan War', 6 August 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/08/201285133440424621.html> (accessed 7 December 2014).

³⁷ Olgu Okumuş, 'Some Reasons to Materialize Iran, Iraq, and Syria's Gas Pipeline', *Natural Gas Europe*, 11 February 2013, <http://www.naturalgaseurope.com/iran-iraq-and-syria-gas-pipeline> (accessed 7 December 2014).

³⁸ Sargis Grigoryan, 'Մտեսակո՞րս ցերեկային սիրական չարգացմանը' [Economic Factor in the Current Syrian Developments], *Panorama – Armenian News*, 13 March 2014, <http://www.panorama.am/am/politics/2014/03/13/sargis-grigoryan/> (accessed 13 March 2014).

³⁹ Okumuş, 'Some Reasons...?'

pipeline.⁴⁰ We believe that by getting involved in the Syrian crisis, along with other objectives, Qatar was determined to “remove that block”.

Defining Qatar’s new role in the region

The Qatari policy strictly fits with the general foreign policy agenda, including the protection of the country’s geostrategic interests with a strong emphasis on energy issues. Besides, the Qatari policy on Syria can be regarded in the general paradigm of Qatar’s active foreign policy, stretching from Britain to Africa and Afghanistan. It has an intention to use the advantages of the country’s geographical position as well as natural resources to create necessary political infrastructures and a platform outside the country that will add to the tiny state’s overall potential, thus making it possible to overcome the disadvantages of its small population and in spatial terms its relatively narrow territory. This quotation by *The Telegraph* briefly depicts the case: “Engagement with Syrian rebels is seen as part of a wider effort by the Emir of Qatar to acquire greater influence for his kingdom, assisted by the riches from the world’s largest natural gas fields just off its coast.”⁴¹ It should be noted, that Qatar’s policy especially focuses on diminishing possible threats from Iranian and Saudi actors. In these endeavors Iran can be described as a “foe enemy”, while Riyadh is a “friend enemy”.

Qatar once again faced this dilemma in the context of the Syrian crisis. On the one hand it had to repel energy threats stemming from Iran, whilst on the other trying not to yield to Saudi Arabia in the race of regional competition. The main discrepancy between the two Arabian states over the Syrian issue, was comprised of the very problem over whom in Syria they should regard as a legitimate opposition fighting al-Assad. Qatar used to support the Muslim Brotherhood during the Libyan and Egyptian movements. As long as this policy went on in Syria, Riyadh gambled on the moderate secular opposition in Syria.⁴² The latter, as it became evident in 2013, ostracized the Muslim Brotherhood in terms of an intra-oppositional political struggle.⁴³ Somehow it prepared the grounds for attempts of Saudi-Qatar joint operations. In

⁴⁰ Eric Zuesse, ‘Weapons for the Islamic State (ISIS), Weapons and Sanctions against Russia: Obama Prioritizes Weakening Russia, over Weakening ISIS’, *Global Research: Centre for Research on Globalization*, 3 March 2015, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/weapons-for-the-islamic-state-isis-weapons-and-sanctions-against-russia-obama-prioritizes-weakening-russia-over-weakening-isis/5434466> (accessed 27 March 2015).

⁴¹ *The Telegraph*, ‘Qatar Playing with Fire...’.

⁴² *The Telegraph*, ‘Saudi Arabia Backs Push to Carve Out Liberated Southern Syria’, 5 April 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9975211/Saudi-Arabia-backs-push-to-carve-out-liberated-southern-Syria.html> (accessed 9 December 2014). Soon after the Egyptian events, Saudi Arabia became cautious of the Muslim Brotherhood, regarding it as a strong political adversary. Regardless of the episodes of cooperation, Riyadh cut many of its ties with the organization, eventually declaring it a terrorist group in December 2014.

⁴³ *The Atlantic*, ‘Why Qatar Is Quietly Supporting a U.S. Strike in Syria’, 3 September 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/09/why-qatar-is-quietly-supporting-a-us-strike-in-syria/279302/> (accessed 9 December 2014).

September 2012 they created a Revolutionary Military High Councils Command. The military councils responsible for supplies, were attached to Qatar, and the coordinating office responsible for communications and logistics, was attached to the Saudis. However a month later, while Qatar invited the commanders to Doha to pay them their salaries, the Saudis welcomed those who did not go to Doha.⁴⁴ This was another manifestation of the Qatari-Saudi rivalry over Syria.

In the autumn of 2013, amidst a possibility of US airstrikes against Syrian governmental military objects, Qatar could be identified as condemning the Syrian government over alleged chemical attacks against civilians and calling international actors for resolute counteraction.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, the Qatari policy towards the Syrian crisis gradually underwent some changes making it more moderate and even signaling something that could be defined as “retreat”.⁴⁶ The same tendency became peculiar also to Turkey, another meso-level player in the Syrian crisis. Such a change was conditioned by the agreement reached between the macro-level players – Russia, Iran, US – regarding the elimination and destruction of Syria’s chemical weapon stockpiles.⁴⁷ Our thesis can be factually substantiated by a piece of information provided by an anonymous Qatari official to the *al-Monitor* online newspaper: “Turkey and Qatar came to a conclusion that the only game in the town in Syria is [...] the political solution. [Therefore] they jointly decided to withdraw from the Syrian quagmire.”⁴⁸ It can be definitely concluded that both Turkey and Qatar were trying to retain geostrategic existence in post-war Syria by a renewed and more flexible methods.

Shortly after in October 2013, a Lebanon-based *al-Mayadeen* satellite television broadcaster announced that the Qatari Emir had dispatched a suggestion to Damascus on a restoration of diplomatic relations. Damascus replied with a calm appeal for “concrete steps” to be taken by Doha.⁴⁹ In the same period, a Turkish daily newspaper *Sabah* published an article *Does Qatar change policy in Syria?*, supposing that the “new Emir’s inclination can be described as a [...] new

⁴⁴ *Radikal*, ‘Suriye tahtaravallisinde Suud-Katar dansı’ [Saudi-Qatar Game in Syrian Seesaw], 15 April 2013, http://www.radikal.com.tr/yazarlar/fehim_tastekin/suriye_tahtaravallisinde_suud_katar_dansi-1129524 (accessed 9 December 2014).

⁴⁵ *Gulf Times*, ‘Qatar Renews Call for Global Action on Syria’, 9 September 2013, <http://www.gulf-times.com/qatar/178/details/365245/qatar-renews-call-for-global-action-on-syria> (accessed 9 December 2014).

⁴⁶ *The Atlantic*, ‘Why Qatar...’.

⁴⁷ Edgar Elbakyan, ‘The Kurdish Factor in Turkey-Syria Relations (2012–2013)’, in *INTCESS14 – International Conference on Education and Social Sciences Abstracts & Proceedings*, 3–5 February, Istanbul, 2014, pp. 712–713.

⁴⁸ Ali Hashem, ‘Katar Suriye politikasını yeniliyor’ [Qatar Lost the Syrian Game], *al-Monitor*, 14 December 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/tr/originals/2013/12/qatar-resets-syria-policy.html> (accessed 27 April 2014).

⁴⁹ *Russian News Agency “TASS”*, ‘SMI: Katar napravil sirijskim vlastjam predlozhenie o vosstanowlenii dipotnošenij’ [Qatar Suggests to Syria a Restoration of Diplomatic Relations], 19 October 2013, <http://itar-tass.com/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/692910> (accessed 7 June 2014).

endeavor to conquer Syria, strategically important transit country on oil and gas roads.”⁵⁰ We regard this opinion to be credible, since the change in Qatari policy was stipulated not only by objective factors, but was also a result of the new Emir’s ascension to the throne: on 25 June 2013 Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani abdicated in favor of his son – Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, whose foreign policy was more moderate.⁵¹

However, it would be wrong to insist that Qatar drastically abandoned its previous policy of gaining strategic advantages in Syria by means of supporting anti-government forces. Moreover, differences over these questions between Gulf Arab states resulted in a diplomatic crisis in the Arab Peninsula in March 2014. On 5 March 2014 UAE, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia recalled their ambassadors from Doha as a consequence of Qatar’s unwillingness to implement the agreements concluded in an agenda of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Qatar was generally accused of interfering in its neighbors’ internal affairs as well as supporting the Muslim Brotherhood.⁵² Before taking this step, during a GCC foreign ministers’ informal meeting, Saudi Arabia had threatened to blockade Qatar by land and sea unless it cut ties with the Muslim Brotherhood, closed *al-Jazeera*, and expelled the local branches of two US think-tanks, the Brookings Doha Center and the Rand Qatar Policy Institute.⁵³

Tense relations, however, significantly thawed with the Qatari Foreign Minister Khalid bin Mohammed al-Attiyah categorically denying any differences with Saudi Arabia over the Syrian crisis. Moreover, “[...] good relations with Saudi Arabia are strategic importance for Qatar. Saudi Arabia is our strategic depth.”⁵⁴ This statement came at the end of the month – 22 March – during the annual Brussels Forum, organized by the German Marshall Fund of the United States. These words can be allegorically defined as a proclamation of a “ceasefire” by Qatar on the Syrian front.

Nevertheless, neither the “retreat” nor the “ceasefire” between Doha and Riyadh, changed the essence of the Syrian policy of Qatar. The post-March situation around Qatar can be outlined within two interconnected factors: the future of the Qatari Syrian policy and the security challenges of Qatar evoked by the failure in the

⁵⁰ *Sabah gazetesi* [Sabah Newspaper], ‘Katar, Suriye’de taraf mı değiştiriyor?’ [Is Qatar Changing Policy in Syria?], 23 October 2013, <http://www.sabah.com.tr/Dunya/2013/10/23/katar-suriyede-taraf-mi-degistiriyor> (accessed 9 November 2013).

⁵¹ *The Atlantic*, ‘Why Qatar...’.

⁵² *Financial Times*, ‘Diplomatic Crisis as Gulf States Withdraw Ambassadors from Qatar’, 5 March 2014, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/5e8103c4-a45b-11e3-9cb0-00144feab7de.html#axzz31Q6eXEKj> (accessed 5 March 2014).

⁵³ *Huffington Post*, ‘Saudi Arabia Threatens to Lay Siege to Qatar: Cooperation or Confrontation?’, 3 September 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-hearst/saudi-arabia-threatens-to_b_4930518.html (accessed 10 September 2014).

⁵⁴ *Kuwait News Agency*, ‘Qatar FM: Saudi Arabia is Our Strategic Depth’, 22 March 2014, <http://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=2368016&language=en> (accessed 28 December 2014).

previous phase of the Syrian crisis. The diplomatic isolation by the neighboring states made Qatar strengthen the alternative external sources of cooperation and legitimacy. In this context, it is important to mention that Qatar, hosting a US military airbase in the vicinities of Doha, has always tried to maintain normal relations with Iran.⁵⁵ This course remained unchanged even during the Syrian crisis. On 15 October 2013 Qatar's Emir on his own initiative, held a telephone conversation with Iran's president Hassan Rouhani "to felicitate him on the occasion of Eid al-Adha and to call for expansion of bilateral ties." Meanwhile, the Emir assured him that Doha was ready to expand its bilateral relations with Iran in all fields and that his country was ready to "expand its *cooperation with Tehran to tackle extremism, sectarianism, violence and terrorism* [Italics mine – E.E.] in the region."⁵⁶ It is necessary to stress that those words can hardly be described as merely diplomatic compliments, taking into account that there are both robust grounds and mutual interests for the aforementioned cooperation. 150,000 Iranian citizens residing in Qatar, are involved in the business, industry and the consultancy sectors, as well as in the gas production field, in stark contrast to the low qualified immigrants from Pakistan and India.⁵⁷ We may suppose that Qatar deems Iran to be an alternative gas market and/or a transit country to China.

However, Qatar and Iran remained at odds over the Syrian crisis, thus even in light of the diplomatic isolation of Qatar, Iran could not be the "alternative ally" thereof. Turkey – a long-time regional ally of Qatar – was the best choice for the tiny Arab state to handle its security and economic hardships. During high-level presidential meetings in September and December, Qatar and Turkey deepened their bilateral cooperation, especially in economic and productive spheres, being as such of vital importance for Qatar. When Erdoğan visited Qatar on 15 September, Turkey inked a one-year agreement to buy 1.2 billion cubic meters of liquefied natural gas from the gulf state.⁵⁸ Amidst the global energy downfall, it was a crucial step to uphold the Qatari gas market. In December, during the reciprocal visit of the Qatari Sheikh, Turkey and Qatar also signed a defense cooperation agreement.⁵⁹ Moreover, the Qatari leader once again reiterated the adherence of his country to the traditional course over Syria: "[...] standing together with the oppressed people of the world has always been our common concern [...] We criticized Syrian regime's attitude together. We had already warned that the violence of the regime

⁵⁵ *The Telegraph*, 'Qatar Playing with Fire...'

⁵⁶ *Tasnim News Agency*, 'Emir of Qatar Asks for Broader Ties with Iran in Eid Felicitations Phone Call', 15 October 2013, <http://www.tasnimnews.com/english/Home/Single/167009> (accessed 4 April 2014).

⁵⁷ 'Katar vyxodit iz vojny v Sirii?' [Is Qatar Withdrawing from the Syrian War?], 8 March 2014, <http://voprosik.net/katar-vyxodit-iz-vojny-v-sirii/> (accessed 28 December 2014).

⁵⁸ *Anadolu Agency*, 'Turkey, Qatar Share Concerns in Syria, Iraq: Erdogan', 19 December 2014, <http://www.aa.com.tr/en/news/438088—turkey-qatar-share-concerns-in-syria-iraq-erdogan> (accessed 28 March 2015).

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*.

in Syria would lead to the rise of more violent organizations.”⁶⁰ Thus, the Syrian policy of Qatar remained unchanged. However, some modifications took place to adjust to a new regional reality. In this period, after the collapse of the Muslim Brotherhood, Qatar joined the US-Turkey joint efforts to support the moderate Syrian opposition. According to media reports,⁶¹ from May to November Qatar provided camping and training facilities to the Syrian rebels, mostly from the Free Syrian Army (FSA).⁶²

Conclusion

Summarizing the article we may draw some conclusions:

- 1) Qatar’s main goal in the Syrian crisis was the following presupposed chain of events: overthrowing the al-Assad regime – replacing it with Qatar-friendly forces – realizing the conveyance of Qatari gas to Middle Eastern and European markets.
- 2) Unlike other “Arab Spring” countries, Syria’s geostrategic utmost importance entailed a protracted war in the country with changing power ratios among the world leaders. Those factors prompted the micro-/meso-level players of the “Syrian game” to adjust to new realities. We believe that Qatar did not manage to adjust its policy according to the pre-determined purpose, which led to the fusion of purpose and method.⁶³ Some researchers, misled by such a policy of Qatar, even insist that “[...] the sole purpose why Qatar got itself involved in this war was replacing the [Syrian] government by Emir-backed Muslim Brotherhood [...] Qatar had no other purpose in the Syrian war.”⁶⁴ Nevertheless, current research shows that it was Qatar’s main method, rather than the overall purpose.
- 4) The half-military and half-diplomatic measures taken by the oil-rich Arab state proved unsuccessful and anachronistic because of the estrangement and decline of the Qatar-backed Muslim Brotherhood in the Middle East, particularly in Syria. The Russia-Iran-US agreement on the destruction of Syria’s chemical weapons, along with a newly-emerging Iran-US rapprochement urged Qatar to re-think its Syrian agenda, especially in light of the diplomatic blockade by the Gulf states. As mentioned above, nowadays Qatar conducts its Syrian policy in accordance with the American regional activities.

⁶⁰ Ibidem.

⁶¹ *PBS: Public Broadcasting Service*, ‘Syrian Rebels Describe U.S.-Backed Training in Qatar’, 26 May 2014, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/foreign-affairs-defense/syria-at-war/syrian-rebels-describe-u-s-backed-training-in-qatar> (accessed 28 March 2015).

⁶² *Reuters*, ‘Qatar Runs Covert Desert Training Camp for Syrian Rebels’, 26 November 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/11/26/us-mideast-crisis-qatar-syria-idUSKCN0JA1BX20141126> (accessed 28 March 2015).

⁶³ It is important to quote Sun Tzu – a Chinese military general and strategist – who warned commanders in his *The Art of War* about the perils of a protracted war: “[...] if the campaign is protracted, the resources of the State will not be equal to the strain” (Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, <http://classics.mit.edu/Tzu/artwar.html>) (accessed 23 March 2015).

⁶⁴ ‘Katar vyxodit iz vojny...’.

5) Qatar lost its reputation of a “sincere broker” in the region and involved itself in disagreements with neighbors, getting thus partly deprived of pan-Arab support. In this context we can explain why Qatar has augmented military expenses since the beginning of 2014. It is noteworthy that Qatar acquires both defensive and offensive weapons.⁶⁵ Foreign policy failures can certainly pose a threat to Qatar’s security, being surrounded by Saudi Arabia and Iran and occupying a territory of just 11,571 square kilometers.

⁶⁵ See more about Qatar’s military expenses on the *Razm.info* Armenian analytical website, under the “Qatar” hashtag, <http://razm.info/tag/puqpuq> (accessed 29 November 2014).