ISSN: 0972 5563

Journal of Peace Studies

A Peer-Reviewed Quarterly



Journal Homepage: https://www.icpsnet.org/journal-of-peace-studies

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To cite this article: Malla, M. W. (2026), "Meditation as Statecraft: Qatar's Foreign Policy, Strategic Autonomy and the Search for Peace", *Journal of Peace Studies*, Vol 33, Issue 3, 69-84, July – September 2026. DOI: doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23663382

© 2026 Published by Centre for Peace Studies (CPS), New Delhi.

Published: 30 September 2026.

Submit your article to this journal

Vol. 33, Issue 3, July – September 2026

CENTRE FOR PEACE STUDIES, NEW DELHI, 110070
Website: www.icpsnet.org

Meditation as Statecraft: Qatar's Foreign Policy, Strategic Autonomy and the Search for Peace

Mohmad Waseem Malla *

Abstract

For more than three decades, mediation has been central to Qatar's efforts to establish a distinctive international role for itself. In Article 7 of its Permanent Constitution, the country has identified the peaceful settlement of international disputes as a guiding principle of its foreign policy – a commitment that Doha has gradually translated into diplomatic practice over these years. This foray into mediatory roles also serves another strategic purpose: for a small state like Qatar, which is surrounded by bigger regional powers like Saudi Arabia and Iran, it creates influence through access, relationships and the ability to bring adversaries to the same table. In this context, this article explores the dual role of mediation for Doha by examining three cases in which its mediation has been substantial in recent years: Afghanistan, Hamas-Israel, and the ongoing confrontation between Iran and the United States. In each of these cases, Qatar has drawn on relationships that other actors have struggled to maintain, backed by its financial resources and close security ties with Washington. The cases also show where mediation reaches its limits, as a mediator can help secure an agreement, arrange hostage releases or keep communication alive during a crisis but it cannot ensure that an agreement is implemented or persuade parties to compromise when they see little reason to do so. Qatar's experience shows how peace-making can serve as an instrument of small-state statecraft provided that access, credibility and the parties' willingness to engage remain in place.

Keywords: Qatar, mediation, foreign policy, strategic autonomy, Afghanistan, Hamas, Israel, Iran, United States

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DOI: doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23663382



1. Introduction

Qatar has transformed into an important regional player with a growing international profile. It has emerged as a significant mediator with involvement across both West Asia and North Africa (WANA), from Sudan in the early 2000s to Afghanistan, Palestine-Israel, the Taliban and the former Afghan Republican government, and Afghanistan-Pakistan. While its mediatory involvement has achieved varying degrees of success, this transformed role raises questions in the study of small states about how a country with limited territory and population can gain influence in conflicts dominated by much larger powers. The short answer is that Doha has pursued that influence by maintaining relationships across political divides, offering a venue for negotiations and using its financial and humanitarian resources to sustain diplomatic engagement. As such, mediation has provided Qatar an opportunity to insert itself in disputes and conflicts where military strength alone would have offered little leverage.

The mediatory role that Qatar has assumed did not emerge from blue or by accident. It has been integrated into the country's policymaking as an important instrument to secure regional relevance and international visibility. This small emirate sits in a region where larger powers, particularly Saudi Arabia and Iran, have been competing for influence over the many decades. To navigate this difficult neighbourhood and mitigate the security implications of limited strategic depth, its leadership has pursued security through carefully nurturing external relationships and diplomatic flexibility, while concomitantly building extensive international presence and profile by exploiting its vast wealth generated from its hydrocarbon resources .

The shift in foreign policy took effect and subsequently accelerated after Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani removed his father, Sheikh Khalifa Al Thani, in a palace coup in June 1995. Sheikh Hamad took an integrated approach to save his seat, particularly after his father made a coup attempt in February 1996 to retake power with active 'encouragement' from Saudi Arabia whose foreign policy he had shadowed for decades. Sheikh Khalifa remained in exile in Europe before mending relations with his son and returning to Doha in 2004.m Khalifa's ceding of strategic autonomy to Riyadh-led consensus was one of the contentious issues

between the father-son duo. As such, Doha under Sheikh Hamad broke free from the Saudi sphere of influence and instead deepened ties with Washington, while also keeping channels open to Tehran and cultivating contacts with political movements that many governments were reluctant to engage with.[1] For Sheikh Hamad, mediation became one way of preserving room for manoeuvre. It allowed Qatar to offer a channel to parties that might otherwise struggle to communicate while giving the country a diplomatic profile far beyond what its size might suggest. Kamrava (2011) describes this as 'niche' diplomacy, defined as an approach in which a small state concentrates on areas where its particular resources and relationships can make a difference.[2] For Qatar, access itself became a form of political capital.

Mediation did not become merely a policy approach but was turned into one of the country's guiding principles for pursuing external relations. As a result, it was incorporated into its Permanent Constitution, adopted in 2004 following a 2003 referendum. In the Constitution, Qatar has identified the peaceful settlement of international disputes as a principle of foreign policy in Article 7, alongside support for self-determination, non-interference in other states' domestic affairs, and cooperation with peace-loving nations.[3] This commitment to play a constructive role in mediating conflicts has also been underlined in the Qatar National Vision 2030, which places it within a broader national ambition. The vision emphasises that the country will work to sponsor and support "dialogue among civilizations", promote "coexistence between different religions and cultures" and contribute "towards international peace and security through political initiatives and developmental and humanitarian assistance."[4] These declarations provide an important point of reference, but they do not, by themselves, explain why mediation has become so prominent in Qatari diplomacy. That development also reflects the country's strategic circumstances and the choices of its leadership.

For Qatar, mediation serves two interconnected purposes. First, it aims to help parties move towards peace, and secondly, to protect the country's strategic autonomy. As Doha helps adversaries negotiate, maintain contact and reach limited agreements, these efforts also strengthen its international standing, reinforce key security relationships and reduce its dependence on any single regional partner. While the two

purposes often support one another, they can also pull in different directions which therefore makes it necessary for any critical assessment of these mediatory efforts to consider both the outcomes it helps secure and the national interests that sustain its involvement.

This article examines three cases in which Qatar has played a role in facilitating communication between adversarial parties, eventually leading to face-to-face negotiations as well as agreements, both interim and otherwise. Afghanistan shows Qatar's role in hosting negotiations between the United States and the Taliban, as well as the gap between an agreement on military withdrawal and a wider political settlement. The Hamas-Israel case shows why access to actors without direct diplomatic relations can be useful and why maintaining that access carries political costs. The confrontation between Iran and the United States tests Qatar's approach in a conflict that directly threatens Gulf security. When these cases are analysed together, they help establish what mediation can achieve, what it leaves unresolved and why Doha continues to invest in it.

2.Mediation and the logic of Qatari foreign policy

Mediation is closely tied to Qatar's effort to preserve its independence in a difficult and volatile neighbourhood. Its natural gas-dominant hydrocarbon wealth, holding the third-largest proven natural gas reserves and being one of the leading producers globally, has financed its active international role, but money alone does not explain the form that role has taken. Qatar's location among larger powers makes a broad network of relationships strategically important. It hosts the forward headquarters of the US Air Force Central Command (USCENTCOM) at Al Udeid Air Base, which has anchored its security partnership with Washington. This US military presence has, though, brought it under crossfire in the ongoing US-Iran war, with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Air Force targeting the Al Udeid Air Base dozens of times, destroying critical American military hardware. Meanwhile, Doha has maintained relations with Iran and cultivated ties with a range of regional political actors including Palestinian Hamas and Afghan Taliban, both of whose political delegations it has hosted for years in Doha. Such a combination of political relations has afforded Qatar more room to manoeuvre its policy than reliance on a single partner would allow.[5]

This diplomatic approach extends into conflict mediation. By engaging

governments, armed movements and international organisations, Qatar can maintain relationships across divides and present itself as a place where adversaries can meet.[6] This tendency to play multiple sides has a historical precedent, as Allen J. Fromherz, in his account of Qatar's modern history, situates this kind of Qatari diplomacy within the pressures imposed by the peninsula's vulnerable geography.[7] Doha's contemporary policy reflects that history while making use of the opportunities afforded by the country's hydrocarbon-generated wealth, international networks and ability to host negotiations.

But mediation involves more than providing a venue or lending a process diplomatic visibility. A mediator may establish contact where direct engagement is politically costly, clarify proposals, help sequence concessions or resolve disagreements over how an agreement should be implemented. Qatar's resources and willingness to host delegations have allowed it to perform these practical tasks. At times, its relationships with political actors have mattered more than formal diplomatic recognition.

Those same relationships raise questions about impartiality. While these ties to different parties can invite suspicion, they can also explain why Doha is accepted as an intermediary when other channels are closed. A mediator need not be free of political interests to be useful; rather, the parties need to believe that engaging through mediation offers a better option than the alternatives. Milton and Elkahlout (2026), in their research on Qatar's role in the 2023 Hamas-Israel hostage negotiations, capture this tension, highlighting how political connections can help deliver practical results while remaining a source of controversy.[8]

As such, Qatar's credibility depends on managing this balance. Doha needs access to adversaries, yet its broader foreign policy may bring it closer to some actors than to others. Therefore, its standing rests on its ability to keep communication open, manage expectations and help shape arrangements that the parties are willing to accept. Although hosting talks can raise a country's profile, it is the work done through those talks that gives mediation its value.

3.Afghanistan: access, facilitation and the limits of an agreement

Afghanistan offers a good example of how mediation can expand the influence of a small state. Qatar became a venue for sustained contact

between the United States and the Afghan Taliban, including after the Taliban opened a political office in Doha on 18 June 2013. It must be noted that the presence of the Taliban representatives in Doha, as has been claimed by Qatari officials, was done with the acquiescence of Washington, which wanted a line of communication with the group amidst its efforts to disengage from Afghanistan.[9] Qatar's contribution was to host representatives, although politically sensitive, facilitate communication and keep a process going over several years.[10]

Over the next seven years, the US officials and Taliban representatives held regular talks in the Qatari capital, which eventually resulted in the Doha agreement, formally titled "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan", signed on 29 February 2020 in Doha. It was signed by Zalmay Khalilzad for the US and Abdul Ghani Baradar for the Taliban and set up a timetable for the withdrawal of US and allied forces and included Taliban commitments on security (disallowing Afghan soil to be used by individuals and groups for terrorism purposes) and negotiations with other Afghan parties.[11] As such, after nearly two decades of the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, Qatar provided the base and acted as a trusted emissary to bring the two sides to an agreement that helped Americans exit the country, and the Taliban set their sights back on Kabul. Although it also hosted talks between the Taliban and the Afghan republican government between 2020 and 2021, it failed to produce any tangible deal before the Islamist group finally marched on Kabul in August 2021, removing the US-supported government of President Ashraf Ghani.

For Doha, the agreement was a significant diplomatic achievement, helping broker an understanding between the world's most powerful military actor and an insurgent movement that had fought it for years. The process strengthened its reputation as a state willing to engage parties that other governments might avoid. It also showed the value of maintaining close ties with Washington while keeping a separate channel open to the Taliban.

The agreement also revealed how far a military withdrawal can fall short of a peace settlement. It did not establish a comprehensive political arrangement that involved Afghanistan's diverse political and social constituencies. Intra-Afghan talks that followed, as already alluded to above, failed to produce a durable power-sharing agreement, which eventually saw the Taliban

return to power in August 2021 as the Afghan republican government collapsed without even a fight as US and international coalition forces withdrew.[12]

Qatar's contribution needs to be assessed against the task the agreement was meant to address. Doha helped establish a framework for the American withdrawal, but it could not ensure that Afghanistan would emerge with an inclusive political order. The principal actors had incompatible aims, and the agreement did not create an enforceable settlement for the country's future. The outcome reflected the parties' priorities and relative power as much as the limits of the negotiations. Qatar could bring the sides into a process; it could not make the Taliban or other Afghan actors accept an arrangement they considered unnecessary or against their interests.

The Afghan experience also makes clear that mediation does not stop when an agreement is signed. During the evacuation crisis in August 2021, Qatar helped move foreign nationals and vulnerable Afghans and supported efforts to keep diplomatic channels open.[13] Its work shifted from facilitating negotiations to crisis management and humanitarian coordination.

Afghanistan highlights the difference between opening a diplomatic process and determining where it leads. Mediation can make talks possible and help settle particular questions, but the durability of an agreement depends on political decisions that the mediator may be unable to influence. Qatar emerged with a stronger diplomatic profile, while Afghanistan's subsequent trajectory showed how little an agreement can achieve when the underlying struggle over political authority remains unresolved.

4. Hamas-Israel: the value and cost of maintaining access

Qatar's mediation between Hamas and Israel has been shaped by a long history of conflict and a deeply contested political landscape. Hamas has governed Gaza since 2007, combining its role as an armed movement with its position as a political actor. Israel, meanwhile, has pursued policies and territorial practices that have drawn sustained criticism and remain a source of regional and international dispute. Their conflict has passed through several major rounds of fighting, including in 2006, 2008–09, 2012, 2014, 2021 and 2022. The war that began after Hamas's attack on Israel

on 7 October 2023, followed by Israel's military offensive in Gaza, brought the conflict to another devastating stage, with extensive civilian casualties and a severe humanitarian crisis.

Qatar's position as a mediator rests on several factors. Firstly, it has hosted Hamas's political office in Doha since 2012, when the movement's leadership, including Khaled Meshaal, relocated from Syria after it supported the anti-Assad Arab uprising in the country. Like in the case of the Afghan Taliban, Qatari officials have maintained that the arrangement was established in response to the request by the United States to provide a channel of communication with the group. Secondly, it has a strategic partnership with the United States, its security patron, which is also the security guarantor of the State of Israel, and is therefore able to maintain channels of communication with Tel Aviv despite the absence of formal diplomatic relations between Qatar and Israel.

By hosting a section of Hamas's political leadership, Qatar maintains direct access to a movement that Israel and several Western governments, including the United States, have designated as a terrorist organisation. During crises, that channel has been used in negotiations over hostages, ceasefires and humanitarian assistance. It has also fuelled criticism that Qatar's relationship with Hamas undermines its claim to mediate. This controversy is part of the political setting in which Doha operates and cannot be separated from an assessment of its role.

The negotiations after the Hamas-led attacks of 7 October 2023 and the subsequent war against Gaza by Israel have shown the practical value of Qatar's access to actors that many states could not engage directly. Doha worked alongside Egypt and the United States to facilitate talks between Israel and Hamas that produced the "Temporary Ceasefire" of November 2023.[14] It led to a brief one-week pause in the fighting during which a number of hostages held in Gaza and Palestinian prisoners held in Israel were released, and limited humanitarian aid was allowed by Israel into the Palestinian territory. Qatar also helped address implementation problems and disputes that threatened the arrangement.[15] As such, Doha's communication with Hamas was important as were Egypt's role and Washington's influence over Israel.

Although the November 2023 truce eventually collapsed and fighting resumed on 1 December 2023,[16] Qatar

remained actively engaged in subsequent negotiations. Along with Egypt and the US, it helped broker the January 2025 ceasefire agreement, which established a framework for a phase-wise hostage and prisoner exchanges, expanded humanitarian access, and further negotiations aimed at achieving a more durable cessation of hostilities. The agreement underscored Doha's continued value as an intermediary capable of maintaining contact with all parties to the conflict.

Qatar's mediation efforts have, however, produced only limited and often temporary reductions in violence as hostilities repeatedly resumed with Israel's military operations in Gaza generating extensive civilian casualties, displacement, and humanitarian suffering. These actions have prompted allegations from a number of states, international organisations and human rights groups that Israel's conduct may amount to genocidal violence – a matter currently under adjudication before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in the case Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip filed by South Africa.[17] In addition, despite a ceasefire in place, the situation in Gaza remains fragile with Israel continuing military operations, though at a smaller scale, besides competing plans for Gaza's future.[18] As such, reaching an initial agreement is one task but turning that into a lasting settlement is another.

Nevertheless, this case challenges the idea that mediation can work only when the intermediary is wholly impartial. While Qatar's relationship with Hamas often prompted concern from the Israeli side, it also provided a channel that other actors could not easily replace. The key issue has been whether Doha can use that access to help secure outcomes the parties will accept. Qatar's role is as such best understood as sustained crisis mediation rather than resolution of the conflict itself. Doha can facilitate contact, negotiate exchanges and help keep diplomatic channels open but it cannot settle on its own the questions of Palestinian statehood, Israeli security, control of Gaza or Hamas's political future. Any headway on these issues would depend on decisions by the parties and sustained engagement from states with enough leverage to influence them.

This case study also helps explain the strategic logic behind Qatar's approach of mediation even as it has seen Israel carry out a military strike targeting a Hamas leadership

meeting discussing a US ceasefire proposal in the Leqtaifiya district of Doha on 9 September 2025,[19] raising concerns about the impact of such actions on ongoing mediation efforts. Despite such challenges, by keeping contact with Hamas while maintaining working relations with the United States and communication with Israel, Doha has become a channel through which negotiations can take place. While this brought diplomatic recognition and influence for Qatar, it also underscored the vulnerability of its mediation efforts to military actions that cannot only undermine the very channels through which negotiations are pursued but also its sovereignty and security.

5. Iran-United States: mediation under the shadow of war

The confrontation between Iran and the United States, which started with the US and Israeli strikes in Tehran on 28 February 2026 that killed Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has placed Qatar's mediation approach under greater strain. For Americans, the dispute centres on the status of Iran's nuclear programme, including the future of its enriched uranium stockpile and nuclear facilities, the security and control of commercial shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, while for Iranians, it seeks to have crippling economic sanctions lifted and its frozen assets held by Western governments released. Washington has also sought restrictions on Iran's regional activities and the groups it supports, while Tehran has defended its right to nuclear enrichment, demanded an end to US and Israeli military operations, and called for compensation for wartime damage.

These competing demands reflect a wider disagreement over regional security and the distribution of strategic influence in West Asia. It may be noted that Qatar is not the primary mediator in the conflict, with Pakistan assuming a larger role, yet its role has been significant in facilitating the exchange of messages between the two sides.

Qatar has a strong interest in de-escalation as its security and economic prospects depend on Gulf stability and uninterrupted maritime trade, even as its relationship with Iran coexists with a close security partnership with Washington. This position gave Doha a strong incentive to facilitate dialogue, even as the opposing parties' demands regarding nuclear restrictions, sanctions, maritime security, and regional military activity make a negotiated settlement difficult to achieve.

The US-Iran war has sharpened these concerns, as shipping and energy flows through the Strait of Hormuz have been disrupted, exposing Gulf states to broader economic and security risks. While negotiations on maritime security and reopening the strait remained stalled, Qatar and Pakistan have continued their intermediary roles and have helped the parties exchange messages.[20]

Qatar's response follows the same diplomatic logic seen in its earlier mediation efforts. Despite its Al Udeid air force base, which hosts American forces and military hardware, being repeatedly targeted by Iranian forces, it has maintained channels to Tehran. On 6 October 2026, Ibrahim bin Sultan Al Hashmi, Director of the Media and Communication Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Qatar, affirmed that mediation between the US and Iran was "ongoing and uninterrupted", with messages passing between the parties and Qatar acting as an intermediary.[21] Doha's public calls for a peaceful solution have been accompanied by efforts to bridge differences and keep diplomacy moving.

This is a more difficult task than negotiating a discrete exchange or a timetable for withdrawal. Qatar can keep messages moving, convey proposals and help identify issues on which limited agreement may be possible. It may also encourage the parties to address immediate risks first, leaving more contentious questions for later stages of negotiation. These functions become especially important during war, when direct communication is politically difficult and a miscalculation can widen the conflict.

Qatar's own position sets clear limits on what it can do. It hosts a major American military facility and relies on regional stability to sustain its energy exports and economic model. Doha is closely tied to the security order built around the United States, but it cannot ignore the consequences of confrontation with Iran, as has been revealed by the Iranian strikes on the American military infrastructure inside the country. As such, its mediation reflects a direct national interest in containing a conflict that has exposed its security and left its infrastructure and economic links greatly vulnerable.

The Iran-US case tests whether Qatar can keep diplomatic channels open during direct confrontation, in which its own security has been collateral damage. It demonstrates the value of the relationships that Doha has built but also how little influence a mediator may have when

the core security concerns of the adversarial parties remain unresolved. Therefore, Qatar can keep diplomacy alive, but decisions in Washington and Tehran will determine whether that effort produces an agreement.

6. Conclusion

Across the cases of Afghanistan, Hamas-Israel and Iran-United States mediation, Qatar has used its financial resources, diplomatic relationships and willingness to engage competing actors to secure a role beyond what its material power alone would suggest. While Article 7 of its Constitution places peaceful dispute resolution among the country's stated foreign-policy principles, mediation has, over the years, become a means for Doha to protect its strategic autonomy and remain relevant in international affairs.

The three cases reveal different forms of mediation and different limits to its achievements. In the case of Afghanistan, Qatar helped facilitate an agreement on the withdrawal of US forces, but the process did not produce an inclusive political settlement, with the Taliban marching on Kabul and undoing two decades of the American democratic experiment in the country, which collapsed without even putting up a fight against the Taliban. Likewise, access to Hamas has helped Qatar make hostage negotiations and temporary ceasefires possible in case of a Hamas-Israel conflict; its channels have supported communication and de-escalation efforts in the ongoing Iran-US hostilities even as the competing security priorities of Tehran and Washington continue to obstruct a durable settlement.

When these three cases are analysed together, they suggest that mediation is best judged in practical terms. A state does not necessarily have to be free of political interests to act as an intermediary. Instead, what matters is whether the parties are willing to communicate through its channels and whether those exchanges can produce workable arrangements. For Qatar, peace-making and statecraft operate side by side. They can reinforce each other, although the pursuit of diplomatic standing may complicate perceptions of impartiality. Nevertheless, for a small state like Qatar, for whom mediation has become an important tool for operating among powerful rivals, its long-term credibility will depend on more than its visibility as a host for negotiations. It will depend on whether the agreements it helps broker endure and whether they open a path towards political settlement.

Acknowledgement: This paper draws on the author's doctoral research, titled "Media-Foreign Policy Discourse: Analysing Coverage of Saudi Arabia - Iran Rivalry by Al Jazeera English, 2006-2018", submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi, in 2022. The thesis is currently being developed into a book manuscrip. The present study paper builds on selected aspects of that research, while revisiting and extending its arguments and analysis for the purposes of the present study.

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We would request our readers and subscribers to take note of these changes and we would, as ever, encourage them to send in research articles for publication to us. The manuscripts of research papers submitted for publication should be neatly typed in double space and the length of the papers should be ideally between 3,000-5000 words including the references. They should contain an abstract and a short introduction of the author. The authors should use Harvard Manual Style for their references. The articles can be sent to us in an electronic format, preferably Ms Word. For detailed guidelines they may send their queries to us in the following address.

Journal of Peace Studies
Research Section

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Registered with the Registrar of Newspapers
RNI No. 57199/93



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