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Looking towards the South: Qatar's National Vision and its Latin American Horizon

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Abstract

This purpose of this working paper is to offer policymakers and concerned actors in Qatar an overview of recent developments in Latin America that could influence Qatar's strategy towards this region, which is related to the ongoing project of nation building through the implementation of *Qatar National Vision 2030*, as well as its ramifications in the realm of foreign policy

About the author

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Introduction

The purpose of this working paper is to offer policymakers and concerned actors in Qatar an overview of recent developments in Latin America that could influence Qatar's strategy towards this region, which is related to the ongoing project of nation building through the implementation of *Qatar National Vision 2030* and its foreign policy ramifications.

In addition, this paper highlights the evolution of Qatar's approach towards that region in order to provide an overview of the existing diplomatic infrastructure and to assess how the different stages of Qatar's foreign policy, especially that which began in 2017 with the diplomatic rift with some of its neighbors, have impacted Qatar's approach towards Latin America.

In order to attain its purpose, this piece is divided into three sections. The first assesses the evolution of Qatar's foreign policy towards Latin America since the early seventies. The second section reviews some of the opportunities for Qatar in Latin America by emphasizing how this sub-region might contribute to the ongoing nation building process in Qatar. Finally, the third one analyzes the current political situation at the regional level in Latin America and their implications for Qatar's approach towards the region.

Developing an Agenda: Qatar's Foreign Policy towards Latin America since Independence

Mutual recognition during the first two decades

Due to a slow process of nation building and regional uncertainty, Qatar maintained a low profile in its international relations during the first two decades after its independence in 1971. Such a modest international engagement had an impact on Qatar's approach towards Latin America, which during those twenty years took place mainly under the umbrella of international organizations, such as the United Nations (UN), of which Qatar became a full member in 1971 and the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), which it had joined since 1961. During those twenty years, Qatar's interaction with Latin America took the form of attaining mutual recognition with its counterparts in that region.

Given the critical role of multilateral forums and international organizations for Qatar's engagement with the world in those two decades, it is not surprising that Venezuela, due to its government's role in the foundation of OPEC in 1960,¹ was the first Latin American country to establish diplomatic relations with Qatar in 1973. After Venezuela, then came Argentina, Brazil and Ecuador, with whom Qatar established relations in 1974, and Mexico, which followed suit one year later. Qatar then established diplomatic relations with Uruguay in 1987, Cuba in 1989, Peru in 1989 and Nicaragua in 1991. Thus, by mid-1990s, Qatar had established diplomatic relations with nine countries in the region.

From 1990 to 1995, Qatar's balance of trade with Latin America, which in that five-year period amounted to 300 US million dollars, registered a deficit, with imports from those countries amounting to 73 per cent of the value of Qatar's trade with the region. During those years, Qatar's major trading partner in Latin America was Brazil, which claimed 80 per cent of Qatar's total trade in the region. Then came Mexico and Argentina in second and third places, respectively.²

¹ Together with Saudi Arabia, Venezuela was the founding member of OPEC, an inter-governmental organization that emerged with the aim to defend the interests of oil-producing countries in the energy market.

² All the data on trade between Qatar and Latin America shown throughout this policy brief draws on the database *World Integrated Trade Solution*, which has been developed by the World Bank and the United Nations Conference

The first Latin American country to open an embassy in Qatar was Cuba in 1994, which was related to the need for the revolutionary government in Havana to find new international partners after the strengthening of sanctions by the United States. However, this move was not reciprocated by the opening of a Qatari embassy in that Caribbean country. Moreover, no Qatari head of state conducted an official state visit to Latin America during those years. Thus, during its first twenty-five years as independent state, beyond establishing diplomatic relations with major regional countries, Qatar did not have a remarkable presence in Latin America, something that would suddenly change at the beginning of twenty-first century.

International assertiveness and increasing presence in Latin America

After the coming to power of Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani in 1995, Qatar's diplomacy went from a strategy of relatively low profile in the international stage to one of global assertiveness and regional prominence, which has continued under the government of his son, Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani.³ In this sense, Qatar became the host of international events, while it increased its relevance in the strategy of the United States in the Middle East and started playing a more active role in the Middle East through conflict mediation. Although it had attained membership in the UN more than two decades before, Qatar's identity as an independent nation-state, which some have labeled as "branding strategy",⁴ started taking shape after 1995.

The boost of Qatar's international presence under Hamad Al Thani implied outreaching regions that loomed distant, such as Latin America, whose relevance in Qatar's foreign policy astoundingly augmented by early 2000s. Moreover, the change in Qatar's foreign policy coincided with the turn towards the left by several Latin American governments that favored a new model of regional integration, known as "post-liberal" or "post-hegemonic", which had intra-South dialogue as one of its defining features.⁵ During this period, international forums continued to be an important framework for the procurement of inter-state relations between Qatar and its Latin American counterparts. However, beyond UN and OPEC, other international forums were the Summit of South American-Arab Countries (ASPA), which was created after the visit of then Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva to the Arab world in 2005, and the trade negotiations between the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the South Common Market (Mercosur).⁶

From 1996 to 2015, the total value of trade between Qatar and Latin America, which amounted to more than 8,105 US million dollars, equaled around 0.8 per cent of Qatar's total foreign trade. While imports from Latin America still exceeded Qatar's exports towards that region, the deficit in the trade balance began to decrease during those two decades, with imports

on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). More information can be found here: <https://wits.worldbank.org/Default.aspx?lang=en>.

³ An important boost for Qatar's diplomacy came from the resolution of its border dispute with Bahrain in the International Criminal Court in 2001 and the development of the extractive infrastructure in its North Field, which holds the third largest reserve of natural gas in the world. Those developments coincided with the unprecedented rise in the price of hydrocarbons in the early-2000s, which meant an abrupt increase of Qatar's government budget.

⁴ See, for instance: Peterson, J.E. (2006). "Qatar and the world: Branding for a micro-state". *The Middle East Journal*, vol. 60, no. 4, pp. 732-748; Reiche, D. (2015). "Investing in Sporting Success as a Domestic and Foreign Policy Tool: the Case of Qatar." *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, vol. 7, no. 4, pp. 489-504; Eggeling, K. A. (2017). "Cultural diplomacy in Qatar: Between 'Virtual Enlargement', National Identity Construction and Elite Legitimation." *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, vol. 23, no. 6, pp. 717-731.

⁵ On the emergence of a new model of regional integration in Latin America at the turn of the twenty-first century, see: Peixoto Batista, J. and Perrotta, D. (2018). El Mercosur en el Nuevo escenario político regional: más allá de la coyuntura. *Desafíos*, vol. 30, no. 1, pp. 91-134.

⁶ Contacts to sign a free trade agreement between the GCC and Mercosur, a regional block established in 1991 between Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay, began in 2005, when the Framework Agreement on Economic Cooperation between the GCC States and the MERCOSUR group was signed on the sidelines of the meetings of the ASPA Summit.

amounting to 66 per cent of the total value of trade. During that period, Qatar imported mainly agricultural products from Latin America, while it exported goods related to the petrochemical industry. Moreover, Qatar's major trading partner in that region continued to be Brazil, which claimed 77 per cent of the exchanges, followed by Mexico and Argentina in second and third places, respectively.

Qatar's bilateral relations with its Latin American counterparts grew exponentially after the coming to power of Hamad Al Thani. While during its first twenty-five years as an independent state, Qatar established relations with nine countries in Latin America, it established relations with thirteen countries in the region after mid-1990s. Furthermore, Qatar opened all of its thirteen embassies in Latin America after those years, as did virtually all Latin American embassies in Qatar. It was also during that period that official visits to Latin America began to take place, first those of Hamad in 2000, 2010 and 2013, and then those of Tamim in 2015, 2016 and 2018.⁷ In commercial terms, the total value of Qatar's trade with the region grew almost four times between 1990 and 2000.⁸ Thus, the Qatar known by Latin America is mostly the Qatar under the governments of Hamad and Tamim Al Thani.

Business as usual amidst the intra-GCC dispute

The diplomatic tensions within the GCC that took place by mid-2017 and that have been known in Qatar as “the blockade” have impacted Qatar in many ways as they implied stopping any relations with most neighboring countries, the closing of its only land access and most of the air and sea accesses. In this sense, those developments have become a major event shaping political debates in Qatar and the Gulf, as it has boosted ongoing efforts to reinvigorate identification with the Qatari nation,⁹ and has accelerated efforts by the Qatari government in the field of food security. In the realm of foreign policy, those events meant the consolidation of Qatar's international alliances, especially that with Turkey, and the furthering of Qatar's efforts to solidify its bilateral relations and to become even more active in international forums. However, the diplomatic tensions with some of its GCC partners have not produced an unprecedented furtherance of Qatar's presence in Latin America. After 2017, exchanges between Qatar and its Latin American counterparts have still happened within the framework of international organizations. For instance, during her speech at the opening ceremony of the 2019 World Innovation Summit for Education (WISE) in Doha, the first lady of Paraguay explained how she met Sheikha Mozah in New York, during one of the UN General Assembly's sessions. However, there has not been any ASPA summit after the summit that took place in Riyadh in 2015, due in part to the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and the decline of enthusiasm for promoting intra-South dialogue in Latin America, which is related to the declining influence of the anti-hegemonic projects. Thus, while multilateral forums continue to be an important framework for promoting relations between Qatar and Latin America, the platforms where those exchanges could happen have not proliferated but have rather diminished.

The major event in Qatar's relations with Latin America after the start of the Gulf crisis was the official visit of Amir Tamim Al Thani to Ecuador, Peru, Argentina and Paraguay in October 2018. However, Qatar has not opened an embassy in Latin America and no Latin American country has opened a diplomatic representation in Doha since the start of the Gulf

⁷ Until mid-2020, Qatar Airways maintained direct flights to two major Latin American cities: namely, Buenos Aires and Sao Paulo.

⁸ Exchanges with the region went from 26 million of US dollars in 1990 to 60 million five years later and then to 220 million in 2000.

⁹ The reinvigoration of the national narrative underlined efforts to collect, preserve and display Qatar's national heritage through restoration of archaeological sites construction and redevelopment of museums (especially the National Museum of Qatar) and the reinvention of the celebrations around the national day.

crisis. Moreover, given that up until then it had established diplomatic relations with virtually all Latin American countries, Qatar only established relations with one Latin American country -Saint Kitts and Nevis- after 2017.

In 2017 and 2018, the total value of trade between Qatar and Latin America, which amounted to 3,560 million US dollars, equaled around 1.74 per cent of Qatar's total foreign trade. Qatar's balance of trade with Latin America has registered a surplus over that two year-period, as its exports equaled 62.4 per cent of the total value of its trade with that region. This trend had begun since 2012, when Qatar's exports of liquefied natural gas to the region increased. Qatar imported mainly agricultural products from that region, while it exported goods related to the petrochemical industry. Finally, while the total value of trade between Qatar and Latin America grew four times between 2000 and 2010, it only almost doubled between 2010 and 2018.¹⁰

Overall, the Gulf crisis has not triggered an unprecedented presence of Qatar in Latin America as exchanges with that region in the two following years have been consistent with the pattern established in previous years. Furthermore, while bilateral relations followed the same path of previous years, trans-regional relations lost momentum after the decline of the inter-regional forum inaugurated by ASPA. Similarly, while bilateral trade experienced an unprecedented growth in the early 2010s, the value of trade in the two years after the blockade slightly diminished as compared to the previous years.¹¹ In light of this, the purpose of the following sections is to instigate a deeper engagement of Qatar with Latin America in the context of intra-GCC tensions by providing, first, an overview of the opportunities for Qatar in Latin America and, second, an assessment of the implications for Doha's strategy of recent events in the region.

Opportunities for Qatar in Latin America

Latin America has played an increasingly important role in Qatar's foreign policy since 1995, after the coming to power of Hamad Al Thani. As decision makers and concerned parties in Doha are well aware of, that region offers a number of opportunities for Qatar's strategies of nation building and economic diversification, and for its efforts to solidify its foreign relations and to increase its global visibility. Henceforth, increased links with Latin America would benefit the implementation of Qatar's *National Vision 2030*, which has as one of its main purposes the transformation of this country's role in the international division of labor by increasing the significance of knowledge-related economic activities in its productive apparatus.

Regarding nation building in Qatar, Latin America offers expertise in the realms of sports through hosting major sportive events and having a sports infrastructure that puts its national teams at the forefront of international competitions. Political experiences such as the Cuban Revolution have produced interesting results in sports and health, which have resonated even beyond the Cuban borders, an example of which is the opening of the Cuban hospital in Doha in January 2012. Furthermore, this sub-continent has also accumulated experience in the realms of culture, especially in developing and preserving tangible and non-tangible sites, as it hosts archaeological sites from ancient civilizations, such as the Inca in the Andean region, the Mayan in the Peninsula of Yucatan and the Aztec in the Valley of Mexico. Through all this accumulated experience, this region could support Qatar's efforts to promote the

¹⁰ The total value of Qatar's trade with Latin America went from 220 million US dollars in 2000 to 958 million in 2010, and then to 2,164 million in 2018.

¹¹ For instance, the average annual value of trade between Qatar and Latin America between 2012 and 2016 was 1,926 US million dollars. Similarly, it was 1,396 and 2,164 US million dollars in 2017 and 2018, respectively.

institutionalization of its sport, health and cultural sectors and, by so doing, help to ensure Qatar's viability as an independent and self-sufficient nation-state during the coming decades. Latin America's relevance for Qatar's strategy of nation building is also visible in the realm of economic diversification given the region's natural resources and its socio-economic conditions. In this regard, the Latin American market is an attractive one, given that it concentrates 9 per cent of the world's population and 6 per cent of the world's Gross Domestic Product. Existing frameworks of cooperation and regional integration, such as Mercosur, make it even more appealing, as do the existing free trade agreements with extra-regional states, such as the United States, Mexico and Canada Agreement (USMCA, formerly known as NAFTA), and the Association of Asia Pacific Countries (APEC).

The region, which accounts for 16 per cent of total global food and agriculture exports, could also help Qatar's efforts to attain food security through its vast agricultural land and diverse climate, where thirteen per cent of the Earth's land is concentrated, thirty-eight per cent of which is agricultural land. Simply put, investments and trade, which are an integral part of Qatar's economic diversification, can benefit from Latin America.

Furthermore, Latin America is relevant for Qatar's foreign policy strategy, especially as it comes to the diversification of its foreign relations and the increase of its global visibility. In this sense, the region consists of 13 dependencies and 20 countries, where the biggest in terms of GDP and population are Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and Mexico. Most of Latin American countries are active participants in contemporary frameworks of global governance, such as the Group of Twenty (G20) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Thus, Qatar's strategy to attain security through an assertive and active foreign policy can benefit from seeking a deeper engagement with the most influential Latin American states.

Recent Changes in Latin America and their Impact on Qatar's Foreign Policy

Recent events in Latin America unfolding over the year 2019, such as electoral outcomes in some major countries and popular protests in many others, point towards the possibility of important changes across the region in the coming years. One of the most visible of those changes is the shifting political orientation away from neoliberalism of some governments in the region, which could have an impact on both the national and regional realms, especially as it comes to the emergence of a regional block. Thus, it becomes important to reflect on how these changes might influence Qatar's positioning in Latin America and its bilateral relations with major countries in the region.

With the arrival of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States in 2017, the US policy of conciliation towards anti-hegemonic projects, such as revolutionary Cuba, was substituted by a policy of confrontation and hostility, which became more evident in the case of Venezuela.¹² Moreover, aided by the decline of popular support for many leftist governments and the implementation of a number of non-electoral measures, a wave of reactionary governments spanned throughout Latin America since around 2015. Since then, some initiatives have emerged, such as the Group of Lima within the Organization of American States (OAS) in August 2017, in order to shut down anti-hegemonic projects.

¹² In January 2019, the U.S. Department of State appointed Elliott Abrams, who had been implicated in the *Iran-Contra affair*, as Special Representative for Venezuela. After the appointment of Abrams, the US government recognized Juan Guaidó as president, froze the assets of the state-owned company Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA) in the United States, resumed the sending of "humanitarian aid" to the Colombia-Venezuela border, from which a failed coup was later launched, and charged Nicolás Maduro with drug trafficking.

However, the intermittent shift towards the right by many governments of Latin America since the 2010s seems to be fading by the end of the decade. In this sense, those governments have been unable to appease public discontent, which has become more evident since 2019, when popular protests that had at the forefront feminist and indigenous collectives, have taken place in countries such as Ecuador, Chile, and Colombia. Moreover, the electoral wins of leftist governments in key countries, such as Mexico, with the nationalist revolutionary leader Andrés Manuel López Obrador, and Argentina, with the *Peronista* Alberto Fernandez, might inaugurate a new period in the political history of the region. In spite of the differences and contradictions between all of these developments, their presence shows the ephemeral and unsustainable character of the shift towards the right that has taken place in Latin America since 2010.

In this context, those regional frameworks of cooperation, such as the Group of Lima, created during the last decade in order to push for a right-wing dominated order in the region have lost influence. Relatedly, new frameworks of cooperation are emerging, the most prominent of which is that led by the governments of Mexico and Argentina. In this sense, one of the first actions of Fernandez as elected president of Argentina was to visit Mexico in November 2019, when he gave a speech at National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) about “Latin American integration” (*integración latinoamericana*) and launched the Group of Puebla, a regional organization of leaders and former presidents of Latin America. Such a visit served to delineate areas of cooperation of an emerging regional block led by Mexico and Argentina, which is likely to increase its influence as Mexico assumed in January 2020 the Pro Tempore Presidency of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC).¹³ Thus, as mid-2020, Latin America is going through a process of regional change that has implied the gradual emergence of a leftist regional block that might favor intra-South dialogue.

Recommendations

In order to deal with Latin America, taking into consideration the potential impact of current events and the institutional platforms for dealing with the region, this paper suggests the government of Qatar and other actors interested in the region could benefit from the following advice. In this sense, this policy brief aims to put forward the following three recommendations.

First, apart from carving bilateral relations, Qatar's diplomacy in Latin America should engage the region as a whole. Even though they are far from being a monolithic, Latin American countries share a number of cultural and historical features that produce a shared space of political experiences. In this sense, concerned actors in Qatar, especially those involved in the making of the state's foreign policy, should be attentive to developments at the regional level in Latin America, such as those highlighted in the previous pages. Looking at the regional level would allow policy-makers in Qatar to engage with Latin America as a block, rather than as a number of isolated countries. In terms of policy-making, this recommendation implies, on the one hand, an open attempt by the state of Qatar to position itself in the agenda of the two emerging leading countries in the region, Argentina and Mexico, and increasing its presence in regional frameworks of cooperation.

As mentioned before, the most important regional developments since 2019 in Latin America have been the widespread mobilizations in several countries that have served as backdrop for the emergence of a regional block led by the governments of Argentina and

¹³ Founded in December 2011, CELAC is the only multilateral forum that brings together the 33 countries that make up the Latin American and Caribbean region

Mexico. Thus, in order to position itself in the emerging regional order, the government of Qatar should increase its relevance in the agenda of those two countries by using several diplomatic tools, such as cultural and educational exchanges, sports diplomacy, visits by high-level officials and public relations campaigns. Moreover, the government of Qatar, through the American Affairs Department in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, should be attentive to the regional developments in the near future in order to trace the evolution of this emerging regional order and to assess the possibility of its expansion through the eventual arrival of governments that favor such initiatives.

Furthermore, beyond positioning itself in the agendas of the two emerging leading countries, the government of Qatar should attempt to continue increasing its presence in existing frameworks for regional cooperation. Such an objective could be attained by taking part as invited or observer country in the frameworks for regional cooperation, especially those that have been created as an alternative to OAS, which emerged as a continental initiative of the United States during the Cold War. Prominent among them are the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), and the Southern Common Market (Mercosur). Participating as invited or observer country in those forums would provide Qatar with an unparalleled platform to sustain its foreign policy towards Latin America as a region.

Increasing its presence in frameworks of regional cooperation could be a first step for Qatar to embark upon more ambitious initiatives with its counterparts in Latin America. One of those initiatives could be engaging in talks for signing a trade agreement with Mercosur, a regional economic block that brings together Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay and Paraguay. Between 1995 and 2015, Qatar's trade with those four countries, which amounted to 8,442.21 million USD, equaled around 63.75 per cent of its total exchanges with Latin America. Moreover, given the ongoing tensions within the GCC, initiating its own trade talks with Mercosur would be a sensitive choice for Qatar, especially because negotiations towards the signing of a free trade agreement between the GCC and Mercosur have now stalled. Deepening its trade relations with Mercosur would boost Qatar's trade with South America and would help carving an individual image of Qatar that is not reliant upon that of the GCC.

Second, the government of Qatar, in a coordinated effort from the ministries of education and foreign affairs, should promote the production of academic knowledge about Latin America. In order to sustain the foreign policy agenda of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and to provide its Diplomatic Institute with knowledge about that region, the government of Qatar should promote the establishment of an academic center for Latin American studies. This center, which could be attached to one of the universities in the country, would promote academic exchange between Latin America and the Gulf region and could engage with similar initiatives in that region. Some of the existing initiatives for the study of the Middle East in Latin America include the Center for African and Asian Studies at El Colegio de México (CEAA-COLMEX), the Center for African and Middle East Studies (CEAMO) in Cuba, the Institute of Studies of the Arab and Islamic World at Universidad de Rosario in Argentina, among others.

Finally, the third recommendation stresses evaluating the benefits of a reorganization of the internal structure of Qatar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In this vein, the ministry currently deals with Latin America through the sub-directorate for Latin America at the Department of American Affairs, which also deals with the United States. Given the importance of the United States in the foreign policy agenda of Qatar, it is expected that developments in this country capture the attention of this directorate, rendering Latin America to a secondary role within the Department. Thus, it is recommended that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is reorganized in order to include a department dedicated exclusively to Latin America. Elevating the importance of the region to the level of Department within the ministry

could help the government to follow more closely developments within that region and to explore the possibilities there for Qatar's strategies of diversification, branding and participation in frameworks of global governance.

Concluding Remarks

As discussed above, Qatar's approach towards Latin America went through an unprecedented period of expansion after the coming to power of Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani, when Qatar started to increase its presence in the international scenario and a new model of regional integration in Latin America favored inter-South dialogue. While the tensions with some of its neighbors, which led to the severing of relations by Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and UAE, has been a watershed in Qatar's foreign policy, such rupture did not trigger an unprecedented interest in Latin America. However, as policymakers in Doha are well aware, Latin America offers a number of opportunities for Qatar's foreign policy and nation building strategies, especially in the fields of food security, health, sport, as well as culture, heritage and tourism.

In order to exploit those opportunities, it has been recommended in this policy brief, state-owned companies, investment funds, as well as cultural, sportive and educational organizations, could continue working hand-in-hand with the Qatar's ministry of foreign affairs that has established a functional and wide diplomatic platform in Latin America. However, the government of Qatar and other concerned actors should be attentive to some regional developments that have taken place in Latin America since mid-2019, especially the changing orientation of regional governments and their implications in terms of regional integration. Failure to do so could probably have negative consequences for Qatar's strategy, while a correct reading of the situation could skyrocket Qatar's presence in that region. Such an engagement would greatly benefit from the production of academic knowledge about that region through the establishment of a center for Latin American studies in Qatar.