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**Qatar's Humanitarianism:
Between Altruism and Realpolitik**
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Introduction

"Compassion is the basis of morality." Nineteenth-century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer considered compassion the prime mover of any humanitarian action. The concept of [humanitarian action](#) encompasses efforts to empower communities amid crises and disasters, aiming to safeguard their well-being, safety, and dignity. While not all acts of charity and humanity are driven solely by altruism, they are founded upon the principles of kindness and empathy. These values form the basis for such actions, reflecting a genuine concern for the well-being of others.

States, like human beings, exhibit behavior that reflect their inclination to assist others within the international system. However, a realist perspective on the international system suggests that states' fundamental objective is self-preservation, and their actions, including humanitarian endeavors, are primarily driven by calculations rooted in the ethics of survival. States collaborate with one another as long as it aligns with their interests. This theoretical outlook is not exclusive to the realist perspective; liberal schools of thought follow the

same yardstick to study states' behaviors in the international system. By examining the case of Qatar, I argue that studying humanitarian actions solely through the lens of realpolitik is insufficient to provide a comprehensive understanding. Merely considering humanitarian acts as instruments to further state interests do not fully explain Qatar's foreign policies.

Qatar's Humanitarian Engagement

In recent decades, Qatar, one of the smallest countries in the Middle East, has emerged as an active player in humanitarian efforts within conflict-ridden regions plagued by poverty and natural disasters. The country's policies prioritize promoting peace, providing humanitarian aid, and active involvement in conflict resolution, considering these endeavors as moral imperatives and [legal](#) obligations. In the aftermath of devastating earthquakes in Turkey and Syria, support poured from all over the globe. However, Qatar excelled over most of those states which pledged and gave support. Apart from being among the first countries to send aid to disaster-struck regions, Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani

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was the [first head of the state to travel to Turkey](#) and meet his counterpart to extend his support to the grieving nation. Qatar's ambassador to Ankara [said](#) this visit ". . .is a remarkable message of solidarity from the state of Qatar." The Emir has also [reportedly](#) donated almost \$14 million to those affected by the earthquake.

In addition to being the [sixth largest donor globally to the UN Development Program \(UNDP\)](#), Qatar's unwavering support to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) operations, such as UNHCR Refugee Zakat Fund and Eid Charity, through financial aid of almost \$96m has made it among the largest donors to the agency. UNHCR has [praised](#) Qatar's effort calling the country "...a strategic actor and a first responder to many emergencies globally."

The country's charity organizations also play a key role in providing humanitarian assistance around the globe. With their aid disbursement to needy populations in Yemen, Syria, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and many African countries, Qatar's aid agencies, Qatar Charity (QC), Qatar Red Crescent Society (QRCS), and Qatar Fund for Development (QFFD), have become some of the leading global [donors](#). Most of Qatar's humanitarian engagement is non-reciprocal, a defining feature of the Islamic concept of charity, referred to as *zakah*, obligatory almsgiving, and *sadaqah*, voluntary charity, both of

which stipulate no material return, only a unidirectional fulfillment of religious and moral duty towards those in need.

Despite facing [pressure](#) and scrutiny for its engagement with non-state actors such as the Taliban in Afghanistan, Hamas in Palestine, and Hezbollah in Lebanon, designated as terrorist groups by most developed states, Qatar remains committed to its principles. The decision to provide a platform and engage with these groups represents a daring undertaking for a small state seeking to integrate into the global economy. Moreover, Qatar's pivotal role in facilitating the US-Taliban deal stands as a remarkable [diplomatic feat](#), demonstrating its ability to navigate complex negotiations. In the wake of the Taliban's takeover, Qatar actively supported evacuation efforts, extending assistance to thousands of Afghan nationals seeking safety and refuge.

In analyzing Qatar's policies, it is essential to consider the significance of values. Its proactive engagement can be attributed to a combination of the altruistic principles rooted in Islam and the nation's significant wealth. Conflict resolution and mediation are not only enshrined in the teachings of the Quran but are also deeply ingrained in [Arab tradition](#). These principles, along with the concept of *the ummah*, emphasizing the unity of Muslims as one nation, provide vital insights into the motivations behind the peace-resolution efforts undertaken by Qatar.

Rigid Theoretical Assumptions

Qatar's humanitarian engagement is no doubt a complex interplay between the nation's values and strategic interests. However, academic discourse tends to interpret its actions through the lens of realpolitik primarily. This dominant realist perspective is a product of theories that argues that Qatar, similar to other small states, strategically uses humanitarian actions as a diplomatic tool to compensate for its limited geographical area, insubstantial human capital, and weak military. The stress on rational models to explain foreign policy obscures the fact that it is an arena that routinely manifests the ideological underpinning of the nation. On the one hand, theoretical assumptions rely on human nature to explain state behaviors; on the other, they favor a positivist paradigm dismissing kindness and empathy as irrational and fallacious analysis factors. The coexistence of such a contradictory approach has secularized the methodological approach to studying the state, stripping it of space that can acknowledge the role of values in explaining states' humanitarian endeavors. Furthermore, the role of values has been relegated to studying bad policy outcomes solely.

Conclusion

Dominant theoretical perspectives in international relations (IR)

often view humanitarian actions as strategic moves to advance states' interests. This perspective has led to Qatar's humanitarianism being perceived as a deliberate mechanism to bolster its global reputation and as a foreign policy tool to compensate for perceived weaknesses. While this perspective does shed light on the state's foreign policies to some extent, it also overlooks the significance of its traditional values. Humanitarian endeavors garner praise and attention, it would be fallacious to claim that they are the exclusive driving forces behind Qatar's engagement in such actions. While recognizing that political interests may indeed play a role, it is equally important to acknowledge that states, irrespective of their geopolitical power or global standing, are sometimes motivated by values derived from their own cultural, religious, and moral traditions. It is important to note that when states undertake humanitarian actions, it is not solely the decision of an abstract entity but that of an institution representing its citizens and leaders. Indeed, we cannot scientifically evaluate the intentions behind states' humanitarianism; however, by acknowledging the influence of values, we can develop a more comprehensive understanding of Qatar's humanitarian engagements and recognize the complexities that arise at the intersection of principles, strategic interests, and global dynamics.

About the author

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The "Gulf Insights" series is published by the Gulf Studies Center on a weekly base with the aim to promote informed debate with academic depth. The Gulf Insights are commentaries on pressing regional issues written by the GSC/GSP faculty, staff PhD and MA students, as well as guest scholars, and they can be between 1,200 to 1,500 words.

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