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Qatar's Role in Resolving The Iran–U.S. Crisis

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Abstract: This article analyses Qatar's political and diplomatic role in reducing tensions between Iran and the United States. It examines how Iran's nuclear programme, U.S. sanctions, Gulf security and energy interests shape Qatar's foreign policy. Using the 2023 prisoner exchange and the negotiations and ceasefire processes of 2025–2026 as case studies, the article assesses Doha's ability to maintain communication channels, convey messages between the parties and coordinate practical mechanisms for implementing agreements. The analysis demonstrates that Qatar cannot resolve the conflict independently, but it remains an important mediator capable of limiting escalation and creating conditions for continued dialogue.

Keywords: Qatar, Iran, United States, Mediation, Nuclear Programme, Economic Sanctions, Persian Gulf, Al Udeid, Energy Security, Diplomatic Dialogue

1. Introduction

The confrontation between Iran and the United States of America is one of the most significant geopolitical factors affecting security in the Middle East. Iran's nuclear programme, U.S. sanctions, military tensions in the region, and security challenges in the Persian Gulf complicate direct dialogue between the two sides. Under such circumstances, the diplomatic role of intermediary states that maintain political relations with both countries becomes increasingly important.

Qatar differs from other states in the region in that it simultaneously maintains strategic security cooperation with the United States and continues to develop diplomatic and economic relations with Iran. This balanced policy enables Doha to facilitate the exchange of messages between the parties, organise informal negotiations, and coordinate practical mechanisms for implementing specific agreements. At the same time, Qatar's mediation capacity, the limits of its political influence, and its actual effectiveness in Iran–U.S. relations require separate analysis.

The purpose of this article is to provide a political and diplomatic analysis of Qatar's mediation activities between Iran and the United States, as well as to identify their principal opportunities and limitations. The study employs a comparative analysis of political processes, a systems approach, event analysis, and the synthesis of expert assessments. Qatar is considered not as a power capable of resolving the conflict independently, but as a diplomatic intermediary that contributes to rebuilding trust and reducing tensions under conditions of limited direct dialogue.

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2. Materials and Method

The Middle East is one of the most important regions in global politics. The principal reason for this is the concentration of vast oil and natural gas reserves within the region. These resources have a significant impact on the world economy, prompting major powers to devote particular attention to the Middle East. The region also occupies a strategic position linking Asia, Europe, and Africa, and contains major trade routes such as the Strait of Hormuz. It is also of profound religious significance, as it is home to sacred sites associated with three major world religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. At the same time, ongoing wars and conflicts in the region continue to affect international security.

Iran is one of the most influential states in the region. Drawing on its distinctive ideological orientation and military capabilities, it exercises considerable influence in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. For many years, Iran has been engaged in confrontation with the United States and its allies, particularly Israel and Saudi Arabia. Iran's nuclear programme has consequently become one of the central issues on the international agenda.

The United States maintains an active presence in the region through its military bases, alliances with Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and other states, as well as through its energy interests. Washington seeks to contain Iran, preserve regional stability, and protect its own strategic interests. To achieve these objectives, it employs diplomatic methods, economic sanctions, and, when necessary, military pressure. The continuing rivalry between Iran and the United States has a significant impact not only on the Middle East, but also on global stability.

The United States regards Iran's nuclear and missile programmes, as well as Tehran's support for armed groups in the region, as security threats. Iran, in turn, perceives the presence of U.S. military bases, economic sanctions, and American support for Israel as threats to its own security. Each side views its own actions as defensive and those of its opponent as offensive.

In his analysis of global politics, Zbigniew Brzezinski wrote: "Eurasia is the chessboard on which the struggle for global primacy continues to be played[1]." This perspective helps to explain Iran's geopolitical significance. The country is located at the intersection of Central Asia, the South Caucasus, the Persian Gulf, the Middle East, and South Asia. Consequently, for the United States, relations with Iran constitute not merely a bilateral issue, but also an integral part of a broader Eurasian strat.

The crisis between Iran and the United States is not limited solely to the nuclear programme. Its principal causes include U.S. economic sanctions against Iran, Tehran's military and political influence in the Middle East, its ballistic missile programme, its support for armed groups in the region, and the absence of direct diplomatic relations between the two countries. The contemporary phase of the crisis intensified further on 8 May 2018, when the United States withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, which had been designed to restrict Iran's nuclear programme[2]. Following the withdrawal, the U.S. administration reinstated sanctions that had been lifted under the nuclear agreement. In response, Iran began gradually increasing both the level of uranium enrichment and the size of its enriched uranium stockpile.

According to the International Atomic Energy Agency, in November 2024 Iran possessed 182.3 kilograms of uranium enriched to 60 per cent. By 8 February 2025, this figure had risen to 274.8 kilograms, representing an increase of 92.5 kilograms within a single quarter. On 17 May 2025, the stockpile reached 408.6 kilograms. The Agency later estimated that, prior to the commencement of military strikes in June 2025, Iran possessed a total of 440.9 kilograms of uranium enriched to 60 per cent. This material was not weapons-grade uranium, which requires an enrichment level of approximately 90 per cent; nevertheless, its technical proximity to that threshold generated serious international concern[3]. According to the Agency's criteria, if further enriched, such a quantity of

material could theoretically have been sufficient to produce up to ten nuclear explosive devices. At the same time, possession of a stockpile of enriched uranium does not mean that Iran has already developed a nuclear weapon, as this would also require a functioning weapon design, a detonation system, and an appropriate delivery capability.

Qatar occupies a distinctive position in this crisis because it is simultaneously a close U.S. security partner and a geographical neighbour of Iran. In 2022, the United States designated Qatar as a major non-NATO ally. Al Udeid Air Base hosts the forward headquarters of the United States Central Command and the Combined Air Operations Center. According to publicly available information from the U.S. Department of Defense, approximately 10,000 American military personnel were stationed at the base[4]. This figure does not represent a permanently fixed troop level, but rather serves as a publicly cited estimate of the base's regional scale.

Another important factor compelling Qatar to pursue a cautious policy towards Iran is energy geography. Qatar and Iran jointly exploit one of the world's largest natural gas reservoirs: the Qatari section is known as the North Field, while the Iranian section is called South Pars. According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, Qatar was the world's second-largest exporter of liquefied natural gas in 2024 and accounted for approximately 20 per cent of global LNG exports. In the same year, around one-fifth of worldwide LNG trade passed through the Strait of Hormuz, with Qatari gas shipments constituting the largest share[5]. Consequently, a war involving Iran would represent for Qatar not only a matter of military security, but also a threat to state revenues, exports, maritime routes, and the stability of the global energy market.

In his book *Prisoners of Geography*, British journalist Tim Marshall writes: "All state leaders are constrained by geography[6]." This observation helps to explain Qatar's policy. In security matters, Doha relies on its alliance with the United States; however, geographical proximity, the shared gas field, and dependence on the Strait of Hormuz compel it to preserve channels of communication with Iran. Fully aligning with one side would increase the threat posed by the other. Mediation has therefore become not only an instrument of Qatar's foreign-policy influence, but also a survival strategy for a small state.

Qatar's Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, formulated this approach as follows: "Small states can establish reliable channels of communication between countries." In his view, such channels create opportunities for ceasefires, political dialogue, and security agreements[7]. Mehran Kamrava, Professor at Georgetown University, likewise regards Qatar's mediation activities as an instrument for strengthening the security of a small state[8].

In a Chatham House publication, Kristina Kausch notes the growing influence of the Gulf states, including Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, in international mediation and regional politics. According to the author, these countries can use the prospect of normalising relations with Israel as an instrument of political influence by demanding more specific commitments and concessions regarding the Palestinian question[9]. The economic and diplomatic capabilities of the Gulf states may contribute to restoring the two-state solution to the political agenda.

According to the analysis of Professor Sultan Barakat, the principal strengths of Qatari mediation include substantial financial resources, the ability to maintain contacts with opposing political forces, and the direct involvement of the country's senior leadership in negotiations. At the same time, Barakat also identifies a weakness in Qatar's mediation experience: its limited capacity to provide long-term follow-up for certain agreements, monitor their implementation, and establish professional institutional mechanisms[10]. Qatar is therefore highly effective in initiating negotiations and bringing the parties closer together, but it cannot independently guarantee the implementation of agreements over subsequent years.

3. Results and Discussion

Qatar's practical role in Iran-U.S. relations was demonstrated particularly clearly during the 2023 prisoner exchange. Following several months of indirect negotiations, five U.S. citizens detained in Iran were released on 18 September 2023. The United States likewise released five Iranian nationals or granted them legal relief. Under the agreement, approximately USD 6 billion in Iranian funds held in South Korea were transferred to restricted accounts in Qatar. Doha established a mechanism under which the funds were not transferred directly to the Iranian government, but were instead used through a controlled financial channel to purchase food, medicines, and other humanitarian goods[11].

Qatar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs described the agreement as a result of the parties' confidence in Doha's neutrality and mediation. The Qatari leadership expressed the hope that the prisoner exchange would subsequently pave the way for a broader dialogue on Iran's nuclear programme. At the same time, some U.S. politicians and analysts argued that the transfer of funds might encourage Iran to continue using foreign nationals as instruments of political bargaining. Nevertheless, the agreement demonstrated two important capabilities: Qatar was able to transmit messages in the absence of direct dialogue and to provide the financial infrastructure required to implement a political agreement.

By 2025, the Iran-U.S. crisis had entered a new phase. On 12 April 2025, indirect negotiations between the United States and Iran on the nuclear issue began under Omani mediation. Both parties described the first meeting as constructive and agreed to continue the talks. Serious disagreements nevertheless persisted during subsequent meetings concerning Iran's right to enrich uranium, the lifting of sanctions, inspections of nuclear facilities, and the Iranian missile programme. Oman, rather than Qatar, served as the principal official mediator in this process. Doha maintained parallel political contacts and functioned as an additional channel that could be activated in the event of a further escalation of the crisis[12].

The sixth round of negotiations, scheduled for 15 June 2025, was cancelled after Israel launched large-scale strikes against Iran on 13 June. The Iranian side described the negotiations as "meaningless" while military attacks were continuing. The crisis subsequently moved beyond the framework of diplomatic negotiations and developed into a direct military confrontation[13].

On 22 June 2025, the United States carried out strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities at Fordow, Natanz, and Isfahan as part of Operation *Midnight Hammer*. More than 125 military aircraft participated in the operation, including B-2 bombers. Fourteen powerful GBU-57 bunker-busting bombs were used against underground facilities at Fordow and Natanz. More than 20 Tomahawk cruise missiles were launched from a submarine against infrastructure in Isfahan. The Pentagon initially stated that all three sites had sustained severe damage, although their complete destruction was not confirmed[14]. The question of how much enriched uranium remained intact and where it had been relocated also remained unresolved.

On 23 June 2025, Iran launched a retaliatory ballistic missile strike against Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar. U.S. Central Command reported that Qatari and American air-defence forces had jointly intercepted the attack and that no Qatari or U.S. military personnel had been killed. The incident represented a severe test of Qatar's balancing policy: Iran had attacked an American military base located on Qatari territory, yet Doha did not sever all diplomatic contacts with Tehran.

On the contrary, Qatar began working to de-escalate the situation on the same day. U.S. President Donald Trump telephoned the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, informed him that Israel had accepted a ceasefire proposal, and requested Qatar's assistance in securing Tehran's consent. The Qatari Prime Minister subsequently

contacted Iranian officials and helped obtain Iran's agreement to the U.S.-proposed ceasefire.

As a result, despite the strike against its own territory, Qatar became one of the principal operational channels of communication between the parties. This demonstrated that Qatari mediation was based not only on neutrality, but also on the preservation of direct, high-level personal contacts.

On 30 June 2025, Qatar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that Doha was maintaining contact with all parties in an effort to achieve a broader agreement on the Iranian nuclear issue. Qatar's role in 2025 therefore unfolded in three stages: political support for the negotiations led by Oman, the maintenance of communication with both the United States and Iran during the period of military escalation, and direct assistance in securing agreement on a ceasefire.

In early 2026, Qatar continued its diplomatic engagement. On 31 January, the Qatari Prime Minister met in Tehran with Ali Larijani, a senior Iranian security official, to discuss ways of reducing regional tensions. On 11 February, the Emir of Qatar held a telephone conversation with Donald Trump, during which regional stability and a diplomatic settlement of the Iranian nuclear issue were discussed[15]. During the same period, Larijani met the Emir of Qatar in Doha. These contacts demonstrate that Qatar was engaging simultaneously with Washington and Tehran in an effort to prevent another military confrontation.

However, the renewed military confrontation that began on 28 February 2026 disrupted Qatar's diplomatic efforts. In response to the actions of the United States and its regional allies, Iran carried out missile and drone attacks against Qatari territory. According to official information submitted by Qatar to the United Nations and the UN Security Council, 92 ballistic missiles and 17 drones launched towards Qatar were detected between 28 February and the morning of 1 March. During the initial attacks, 81 missiles and 11 drones were intercepted, two missiles struck Al Udeid Air Base, and one drone targeted an early-warning radar installation. Sixteen people were injured when debris fell on residential buildings, warehouses, and other civilian facilities.

The strikes also caused serious damage to Qatar's energy infrastructure. Attacks on LNG facilities in Ras Laffan disabled approximately 17 per cent of the country's liquefied natural gas export capacity. According to QatarEnergy's management, the complete restoration of the damaged facilities could take several years.

On 24 March 2026, Qatar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that Doha was not, at that time, directly mediating between the United States and Iran. Qatar nevertheless declared its support for all formal and informal diplomatic initiatives, emphasised its close contacts with the United States, and continued to seek a political solution capable of ending the attacks in the region. This did not signify a complete withdrawal from mediation, but rather a temporary shift towards a more cautious position following the strikes.

By May, Qatar had returned to active mediation. On 22 May 2026, a Qatari negotiating delegation arrived in Tehran in coordination with the United States. The discussions addressed the cessation of the war, the future of Iran's enriched uranium stockpile, sanctions, and the restoration of navigation through the Strait of Hormuz. Qatar continued this initiative despite the attacks on its own territory and gas infrastructure. This demonstrates that, for Doha, diplomacy was connected not only with its political role, but also with direct energy and economic imperatives.

During the preparation of the agreement, Qatari representatives reportedly made several secret visits to Tehran, met U.S. officials in Washington, and coordinated disputed provisions of the text by telephone. Pakistan and other regional states also participated in the negotiations alongside Qatar. The 2026 agreement should therefore be regarded not solely as an independent Qatari achievement, but as the result of cooperation among several mediating states.

On 15 June 2026, the United States and Iran reached a preliminary memorandum addressing unresolved issues, including the guarantee of freedom of navigation through the Strait of Hormuz. Qatar described the document as an important step towards strengthening sustainable peace and supporting regional and global economic growth. According to Reuters, the preliminary 14-point memorandum established a 60-day period for reaching a final agreement on complex issues such as Iran's nuclear programme, its enriched uranium stockpile, sanctions, and maritime navigation.

Nevertheless, developments at the end of June 2026 once again revealed the limits of Qatar's capabilities. U.S. and Iranian technical delegations were expected to arrive in Doha, but no direct high-level meeting between the parties took place. Iranian officials stressed that discussions were being conducted exclusively through intermediaries. On 30 June, Qatar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs likewise reported that no high-level negotiations were under way and that only technical meetings were continuing. The memorandum was therefore not a peace treaty that definitively resolved the crisis, but rather a temporary political framework for managing the conflict.

In his work *The Clash of Civilizations?*, Samuel Huntington wrote: "The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future[16]." Although ideological, religious, and political differences play a major role in the Iran-U.S. confrontation, Qatar's experience demonstrates that such fault lines do not necessarily have to result in continuous warfare. Where shared interests and a reliable channel of communication exist, it is possible—even under conditions of acute confrontation—to achieve a prisoner exchange, establish a humanitarian financial mechanism, secure a temporary ceasefire, and conduct technical negotiations.

Overall, Qatar is not a major power capable of independently and comprehensively resolving the Iran-U.S. crisis. Doha cannot lift U.S. sanctions, forcibly alter Iran's nuclear and missile policies, or compel the parties to comply with signed agreements, because it lacks sufficient political and military power. Qatar's principal strength lies in its ability to maintain simultaneous contacts with Washington and Tehran, transmit confidential messages, provide a secure venue for negotiations, administer financial and humanitarian mechanisms, and serve as an operational political channel when tensions reach a dangerous level.

In this sense, Qatar's primary role is not to conclude a final peace agreement between Iran and the United States independently, but to prevent the complete breakdown of dialogue, manage military escalation, and create the political conditions necessary for a broader agreement in the future.

4. Conclusion

Although Qatar is not capable of independently and comprehensively resolving the crisis between Iran and the United States, it plays an important mediating role in maintaining dialogue between the parties. Its security cooperation with the United States, together with its political and economic relations with Iran, enables Doha to engage with both sides.

The 2023 prisoner exchange, as well as the ceasefire initiatives and negotiations conducted in 2025–2026, demonstrated Qatar's practical diplomatic role. At the same time, Doha's capabilities remain limited: it cannot independently resolve such fundamental issues as sanctions, Iran's nuclear programme, and military confrontation. Qatar's principal task is therefore not to conclude a final agreement on its own, but to reduce tensions, preserve open channels of communication, and create favourable conditions for future negotiations.

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