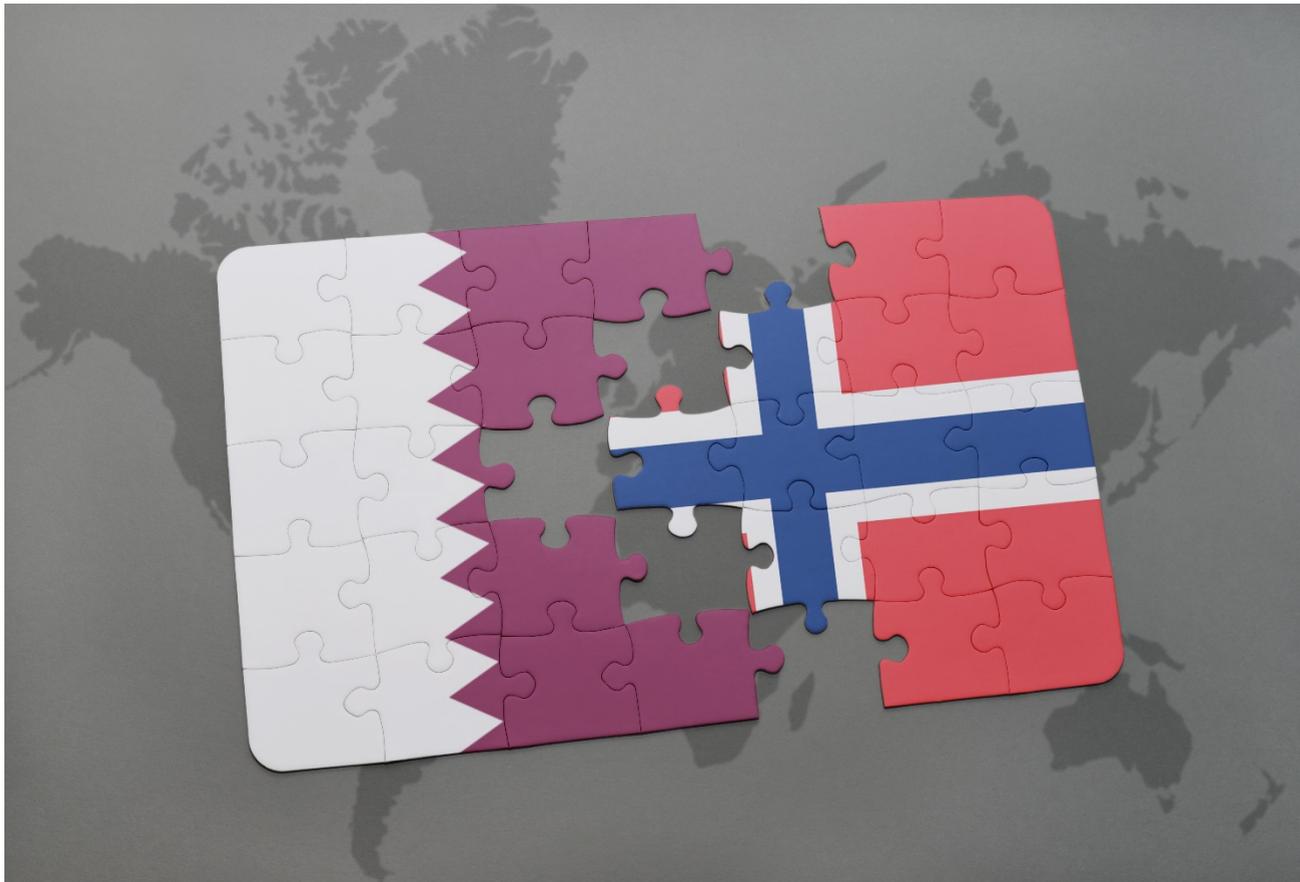


# Comparing Qatari and Norwegian Models of Small State Conflict Mediation

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Report from an Expert Workshop  
Oslo, 9–10 May 2017

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# 1. Background and Rationale

It is a foundational assumption of international relations theory that great powers with massive resources – such as the USA and Russia – are the only actors capable of effectively mediating conflict, while small states can aspire to be marginal actors at best (Lieb 2004; Neumann & Gstöhl 2004; Kamrava 2013). However, over the past decades, in particular since the end of the Cold War, several small states have carved out a niche role as conflict mediators.

Norway's hosting of the negotiations that produced the 1993 Oslo Accords and its involvement in a number of other peace processes, as well as Switzerland's role in sponsoring mediation efforts, are widely known. Research suggests that such small state mediators possess some comparative advantages over big states, including credibility, trustworthiness, and perceived legitimacy (Slim 1992; Coleman 2012, p.71; Barakat 2014). Most crucially, small states typically do not possess the 'hard power' resources utilised by large states in 'power mediation'; rather, they engage in 'pure mediation' where their capacity to influence outcomes lies in the power of persuasion (Fisher 1996, p.41). Such a non-coercive mediation strategy is commonly known as facilitation, distinct from the coercive manipulation strategy (Touval & Zartman 1985). Furthermore, due to their engagement in mediation activities, small states including Norway and Switzerland now possess considerable experience and expertise embodied in their diplomatic staff, and increasingly also within research institutes, NGOs, and think-tanks.

In recent years, Qatar has emerged as a hyperactive small state mediator across the Middle East. Amongst its successes, it has brokered peace treaties in Darfur, sponsored talks between Fatah and Hamas, and secured an agreement that averted the reversion into civil war in Lebanon. Qatar's rise has been rooted in a highly independent foreign policy – as evidenced by its hosting of controversial figures including the Taliban – which enables Qatar to maintain good offices with diverse protagonists in the most challenging conflicts without jeopardising its attractiveness as a mediator. While such impartiality is shared with many other small state mediators, Qatar in other ways breaks the mould of small state mediation. Small state mediators typically rely on trust and communication to mediate, while Qatar is unique in its willingness to draw on a vast financial capacity to back up agreements with a variety of 'carrots' that provide leverage over conflicting parties – even though the sustainability of this approach to mediation has been questioned (Barakat 2014). Furthermore, while many Western states are increasingly constrained in their mediation efforts by counter-terrorism legislation, Qatar, by contrast, can engage with a very wide range of non-state movements.

The ambitious peace-making roles pursued by both Norway and Qatar, two small states with some similar and more different traits, constituted the basis for an Expert Workshop<sup>1</sup> hosted in Oslo from 9–10 May 2017, with participants including officials from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of both countries, as well as scholars from CHS and PRIO. The Norwegian and Qatari models of mediation offer potential for a rich comparison that has not yet been undertaken. While on the face it, Norway and Qatar may seem to be a gulf apart, upon deeper reflection there are considerable similarities, and, by extension, potential complementarities. This report reflects the main insights from the May 2017 workshop, and is aimed not as much at developing conclusions, as it is at formulating

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<sup>1</sup> The Expert Workshop in Oslo, co-hosted by CHS and PRIO, engaged some 20 participants, including researchers from both institutions and officials from the Norwegian and Qatari Ministries of Foreign Affairs, in an open discussion about peace mediation in general, and about Norway's and Qatar's engagements in particular. The report seeks to present the diversity of insights that were tabled in the workshop, with a view to inspire future analysis. The workshop was not set up to develop a consensus, neither does the report seek to formulate one. The workshop was supported through a grant from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (under agreement QZA-15/0028).

questions and hypotheses that can inform the analytical framework, as well as the case selection, for a future comparative research project.

In the following, we will focus on a set of ten generic factors that received considerable attention in the course of the Oslo Expert Workshop and have the potential to provide common ground for comparison between the two countries. In the course of the workshop, the discussions were open, frank and transparent. Given the richness and wide-ranging nature of the views expressed, it is inevitable that this report may have missed out on some interesting insights or failed to capture some concerns raised by individual participants. Still, as co-hosts, we believe that this brief report illustrates well the richness of the workshop discussions, and we are eagerly looking forward to an opportunity to pursue a longer-term comparative project that could be informed by the findings from this workshop.

## 2. Ten Common Areas for Comparison between Qatar and Norway

### 1) Identity and Motivations

Both Norway and Qatar are small states with tall ambitions in the peace-making domain, and with ample financial resources, they are also states with very different identities and political cultures. Norway is a constitutional monarchy, with a stable democratic representative system, while Qatar is a stable monarchy with representative institutions whose role remains fairly limited. Both countries express a strong commitment to multilateral institutions and the respect of international law and regulations, and as small states, both have a clear interest in international cooperation. Nonetheless, the identities of the two countries – which are key to how they are seen by others (including conflict parties) – differ widely. Norway professes a strong commitment to human rights (although, as several participants noted, a mediating role may at times come in the way of human rights promotion), and while majority Christian, Norway leans towards a more secular, even multicultural, identity. Qatar understands itself first and foremost in religious terms, upholding Islamic values, although with a firm insistence that its humanitarian and mediation outreach is global. Ultimately, while identities differ – with the implications that has for trust and access – one clear motivation for both countries when engaging in peace-making (even if often discrete) is to cultivate their soft power.

### 2) The Role of the State

For both Norway and Qatar, the mediation engagement is a firmly rooted government policy. Norway, who now has pursued peace-making for about a quarter of a century, entered the field in large part through openings cultivated by various non-governmental (research or civil society) actors. Over time, with the establishment of a dedicated section at the ministry, and generally a different level of professionalization within the state bureaucracy, the relative role of non-governmental actors has diminished significantly. Qatar, though, entered the field driven by a commitment from the very top, and it is from its political leadership and state institutions that its peace-making initiatives have been pursued, with a limited role, at best, for non-state entities. This has, as we shall return to, implications for capacity (both to identify and to pursue opportunities), for coordination, and for the repertoire of contact-making that the two states are equipped with.

### 3) The Role of Civil Society and the Media

One crucial aspect is the extent to which civil society organizations – primarily those with an international orientation – work in tandem with the government to cultivate relationships, identify opportunities, and even conduct various types of contact-making. Such organizations have a considerable – albeit shrinking – role in the Norwegian case. They can be found working in different capacities, ranging from direct intervention on the ground, all the way to capacity building and monitoring progress. In addition, it is not uncommon for Norway to fund discrete private non-state

actors conducting Track II dialogues. In the Qatari case, such entities play, at best, a limited role (although the possible role of religious networks may be a partial exception). Qatar lacks civil society capacity in conflict mediation and has only just started supporting conflict management training at a postgraduate level. Most of its past interventions have relied on state capacity. In both countries, however, the level of popular commitment to the peace engagement may be questioned; in the words of one participant, 'street accountability' is low. The possible gains and costs, the risks, and the political dilemmas involved are poorly understood (but perhaps for different reasons). A particular resource of Qatar is its hosting of the Al-Jazeera television network, widely perceived to be the most credible media outlet in the Arab world – which has implications both for the way Qatar and its officials are understood abroad, and for domestic perceptions of the country's engagement.

#### **4) Regional Context**

The most striking contrast between Norway and Qatar is that whereas the former plays a mediating role virtually only in distant places where it has limited direct interests, Qatar has been engaging in a number of conflicts in its immediate neighbourhood. In one way, this is unsurprising, as the Middle East is currently host of the most intractable and deadly conflicts globally. Yet, the choice of engaging in processes within one's own region, where one is an established actor with a long-term perspective, presents both its own advantages and challenges. For Qatar, the ability to build on established relationships, to synchronize between peace-making and other forms of collaboration, and to leverage regional bodies (notably the Gulf Cooperation Council – the GCC) has been an advantage. Yet, being of the region also implies that the often-expected impartiality can be called into question. For Norway, of course, long-distance diplomacy means that the stakes are not similarly high, which could also translate into a lack of trust in its commitment, something that has been consciously addressed by cultivating the notion that once engaged, "Norway is in it for the long haul". For Qatar, its peace-making efforts have in themselves become the centre of an existential controversy with more traditional destinations for mediation, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The crisis between Qatar and other Arab countries have largely played out in the months after our Oslo workshop. The blockade imposed on Qatar by Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt and Bahrain made it clear that Qatar's active intervention and peace-making role in the region was seen as political and draws undesired attention from countries that do not see it to serve their interests.

#### **5) Global Powers**

While the regional situations of Norway and Qatar differ widely, both depend on strong ties to the United States. For Norway, while these ties are mediated through NATO, the US serves as the ultimate security guarantor, and a strong relationship is therefore essential. For Qatar, the relationship is primarily direct, and has been manifested in the country's hosting of a major US air force base, as well as support for various military expeditions. While Norway and Qatar take pride in acting independently on the peace-making arena, it is clear that to the extent that they can present contact opportunities and cultivate dialogues where others have been unable to do so, both countries carry valuable political capital in Washington (and, for that matter, other capitals around the world). So, while both countries may entertain possibilities about which the US or other allies are not fully informed, and they may at times argue in favour of initiatives not favoured by Washington, they both see the totality of their engagement in this area as strengthening alliances with the US, which is of a critical importance to them.

## 6) Economic Interests

Both Norway and Qatar, while being small states, are formidable economies, with large international investments as well as direct business interests. Both countries operate large sovereign wealth funds (built on hydrocarbon resources), for example. Economic resources, particularly when they come with a certain level of flexibility, are important in order to leverage peace-making, and may in part compensate for the lack of muscles that small states possess otherwise. In either case, the financial strength also affects how a country and its initiatives are perceived, by conflict parties and other relevant actors. The question is therefore how expectations are managed by Qatar and Norway, and whether there is room for mutual learning.

## 7) Aid (Humanitarian and Developmental)

It follows from the point above that both Norway and Qatar are susceptible to accusations of so-called ‘check-book diplomacy’ – of using large aid donations to reward actors in conflict for engaging in peace processes. While long-term commitments of support may be important for building faith in the sustainability of a given peace process – and the ability to follow up a settlement with effective implementation – there are also risks. Quick rewards to conflict actors, for example, may just become another element in a dynamic war economy, encouraging engagement without genuine commitment to a final resolution. In the humanitarian domain, in particular, initiatives – such as vaccination ceasefires or food corridors – are not infrequently used in order to build mutual confidence. This constitutes a political instrumentalization of humanitarian aid, otherwise staked on neutrality, which can potentially backfire, particularly in complex conflicts with many actors and shifting alliances. These are genuine ethical dilemmas which both Norway and Qatar face regularly, and which need further reflection, assessing the potential pros and cons of various practices.

## 8) Third-Party Role

Both Norway and Qatar are known as countries that offer their capacity as third parties in various conflicts, and both receive regular requests to engage. One question is how to assess whether or not to engage, and if so, on what terms and in what particular role? The various factors discussed in this brief report are obviously part of the picture, but many other factors will come into play. Relatedly, there is also the question of what one offers as a third party, and what functions one does not take on, even when conflict parties insist. Various examples from Norway’s and Qatar’s peace-making experiences make it clear that the common pattern is that the role shifts over time, so that one may enter a process in a pure facilitation role, move on to be an active mediator, or even come to serve as an arbitrator. Understanding such shifts, and how transitions from one role to another take place in concrete peace processes, is of interest. Equally important is to understand when a third-party role becomes untenable. In other words, what are the criteria for which to assess whether or not to pull out of the third-party role altogether?

## 9) ‘Talking to All Actors’

Norway and Qatar are both known for being willing to talk to all actors (or at least to most). The fact that many countries are prohibited by various domestic or multilateral restrictions (US and EU terrorist lists, for example) gives a comparative advantage to some countries, including Norway and Qatar. Yet, there are dilemmas which both are acutely aware of, as the very gesture of being talked to tends to bestow a level of legitimacy on conflict actors. Undoubtedly, organizations that have adopted terror are in a particular category, but even for those contact may be preferable to no contact

(for example on humanitarian access; legal and ethical obligations; exchange of prisoners and/or hostages). When and how to engage is always a difficult judgement call, also because one form of engagement with a particular group may affect the possibilities to gain the confidence of others and play other roles in the conflict. A final element of considerable concern is who genuinely represents the parties to the conflict. One aspect is that only those representing groups with arms get a place at the table, at the cost of broader inclusiveness, a serious challenge in all peace-making. Another aspect is simply ascertaining the authenticity of those who claim to represent a particular conflict party (there have been cases of 'fake' representatives), yet another is not to unduly empower the most extreme representatives or, in complex conflict situations, the most extreme groups.

## **10) Capacity and Competence**

Both Norway and Qatar acknowledge that their ambitions in peace-making can only be fulfilled with the right set of competencies – both at the level of individuals, within the organization, and in relation to other relevant actors. Norway has a longer history in the field, and has sought to systematize experience in a dedicated section. For Qatar, the field is newer. Both sense a need to strengthen competence and see potential for working together on this. Importantly, the building of competence is not primarily a question of building a few individual peace-making champions (although that may have a role), but about building the institutional understanding and organizational culture that enables a coordinated and sustained engagement. Making sure that the whole system is informed and contributes was noted as one challenge. Likewise, developing a sufficiently solid competence base to allow for rotation within departments was seen as challenging, but important. The relationship to other actors, in civil society, in the research world, or otherwise, is also a challenge: on the one hand, the sensitivity of the processes and the culture for interacting across boundaries may be constraining, on the other hand, such interaction may be essential to enhance capacity and outreach.

### 3. Case Selection

While the focus of the Oslo workshop was not on the criteria for selecting cases, insights about particular intervention cases that could provide the ground for more systematic comparative studies were brought up, many of which will be helpful in determining which cases to look at in a future study.

A basic question is: what constitutes a case? For a study such as this, it could be a particular country, a distinct process (among several processes related to a particular conflict), or a particular phase of a process. It could also be how to deal with a particular type of actor across multiple conflicts (Muslim Brotherhood movements is an example). While either of these alternatives have their merits, the main sentiment was to define cases on the basis of particular conflict countries, and to think carefully about what part of the conflict's (and peace-making) trajectory to focus on.

Most importantly, of course, the factors (common areas for comparison) discussed above give multiple possibilities for what to focus on in a study. We have presumed here that the ideal would be to select a very small set of cases, in order to be able to capture the complexity and richness of each case, rather than to seek to impose a standardized framework within which the cases may sit uncomfortably. In the Oslo workshop, the distinction between acting as a third party within one's own region versus outside stirred much interest, and one suggestion would be that one selects at least one case where Qatar has engaged within its own region, and one where it has engaged outside.

This takes us to the question of whether to choose only cases where both Norway and Qatar have played a role. One argument for doing so is sheer research effectiveness (time and competence). A more important argument, though, is that such matching would enable direct comparisons of the experience in cases well known by both, and be helpful in inspiring mutual reflection among practitioners in both countries. Possible country cases mentioned included Afghanistan, Sudan/Darfur, Israel/Palestine, Somalia and Syria.

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