

Soft Power of Qatar in Central Asia

Aitov Marat Rakhmatullaevich ^a
Independent Researcher, Russia

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Abstract: The author analyzes Qatar's efforts to promote “soft power” in the Central Asian region. The small emirate has recently significantly strengthened its presence in the Central Asian countries through the construction of various religious educational institutions, as well as the provision of humanitarian assistance. The author identified potential challenges and threats of such activities in the region, primarily through the promotion of Islam which is not typical for the region.

1 INTRODUCTION

Recently, the Arab States of the Persian Gulf have intensified their policies towards Central Asia. Countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Bahrain are consistently deepening cooperation with Central Asia in the political, trade, economic, cultural and humanitarian spheres.

The parties have started the process of institutionalization of their cooperation. In 2023, the format "Central Asia – Cooperation Council of the Arab States of the Persian Gulf" was launched and became fully functional. In 2021, the trade turnover between Central Asia and the GCC reached \$ 3.1 billion. Arab countries are increasing investments in energy, infrastructure and other areas.

At the same time, the presence of Arab states is felt not only in the economy but also in the spiritual and cultural life of Central Asia. They promote their culture and values in the region through "mosque diplomacy", which is based on the construction of mosques and schools, the preparation of imams, the distribution of textbooks and the financing of educational centres and cultural institutions.

In this regard, the activities of the small but economically developed State of Qatar are of interest. The Emirate pursues an ambitious foreign policy that affects the Middle East, South and Central Asia. In recent years, Doha has opened embassies throughout the region. The leadership of Qatar (the Emir and the

Foreign Minister) visited the Central Asian states 13 times. At the same time, most of the visits (8) occurred after 2012.


However, the emirate's economic presence in Central Asia remains rather weak. Qatar has a tiny trade with the region and can't compete with the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Despite this, the Qataris are consistently expanding their ideological influence in the region. Qatar allocates significant funding for projects related to humanitarian aid, development needs and support for Islamic culture in a region that is not part of its strategic interests.

In this regard, researchers are studying the reasons and factors that encourage Qatar to strengthen its presence in Central Asia, as well as the possible consequences of such a policy in the region.

2 THE IDEOLOGY IN QATAR'S FOREIGN POLICY

The Persian Gulf States represent a special region in which Islam has always played a dominant role. Being the cradle of this religion, the Gulf countries have always been regarded as the guardians of Arab-Muslim culture, its values and traditions. Consequently, the Islamic factor plays a crucial role in the foreign policy of these countries.

Wahhabi Sunni Islam prevails in Qatar. The ruling Al-Thani family traces its lineage back to the founder

^a <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-4513-2923>

of Wahhabism, Mohammed Abdel Wahab (1703-1787). It is believed that the current Emir of Qatar, Tamim bin Hamad, is his 18th great-grandson. According to the Qatari sheikhs, the at-Thani and Midadi clans brought the true ideas of Wahhabism to the Qatari peninsula, while the al-Saud tribe distorted it, giving features of isolation and religious intolerance (Al-Makbali, 2018 - Egorov, 2019). In this regard, the Qatari sheikhs believe that they deserve to be the rulers of the entire Arabian Peninsula and guard two of the three holy cities in Islam – Mecca and Medina (Al-Makbali, 2018 - Egorov, 2019).

Qatar positions itself as a centre for the revival of Arab and Islamic culture, where modernity, aspects of Islamic socialism, as well as the ideas of Wahhabism are successfully combined. The Qatari elite considers it their duty to propagandize and spread Wahhabism all over the world.

In particular, the Qatari Constitution emphasizes a commitment to "protect the identity of Arab and Islamic countries." (Al-Makbali, 2018 - Egorov, 2019) In this regard, Doha's foreign policy interests are primarily related to maintaining peace and sustainable prosperity in Islamic countries.

The emirate pays special attention to the promotion of its "soft power" in Muslim-populated countries. More than a hundred Qatari charitable organizations finance the construction of mosques and madrassas around the world, religious education and various religious organizations (Al-Makbali, 2018 - Egorov, 2019). Only the NGO "Qatar Charity" carries out the construction of about 10 thousand mosques in more than 50 countries of the world, of which 7896 have already been commissioned (Al-Makbali, 2018 - Egorov, 2019).

As a result, Qatar's "soft power" extends far beyond the Middle East, making it one of the largest players among Islamic countries. Based on this, a small emirate competes with much larger Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey.

3 QATAR IN CENTRAL ASIA

As the geography of cooperation expands, Qatar is gradually strengthening its presence in Central Asia, with which it shares religious bonds. Doha has been pursuing an active foreign policy towards the region since the 2010s. The opening of the emirate's embassies also took place at this time – in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – in 2012, in Turkmenistan – in 2014, in Uzbekistan – in 2023 (in Kazakhstan, the embassy was launched a little earlier - in 2008).

Qatar's political cooperation with the countries of the region has also intensified. The Central Asian leaders have collectively visited Qatar 11 times. Of these, the President of Kazakhstan – four times (1998, 2007, 2015, 2022), Turkmenistan – three times (2010, 2017, 2023), Kyrgyzstan (2014, 2015) and Uzbekistan (2010, 2023) – twice[6]. In 2017, the President of Tajikistan E. Rahmon paid a state visit to the Emirate.

At the same time, Qatar has a relatively small economic presence in the countries of Central Asia. The trade turnover of the emirate with the Central Asian states is symbolic. By the end of 2021, Qatar's trade turnover with the countries of the region amounted to less than \$ 40 million, which is 0.03% of the emirate's foreign trade (\$115 billion).

The Emirate invests exclusively in those areas that are of interest to it (energy, Islamic banking, real estate, food). Qatari businessmen have invested \$500 million in Kazakhstan in a joint venture in the field of solar energy, which produces semiconductor wafers and solar cells for shipment to Qatar.

In Tajikistan, Qatar has invested in real estate. Qatar's state investment company "Diar Real Estate Investment Company" is building an elite residential complex worth \$180 million. Qatar's Izdon Holding took an active part in the creation of Tajikistan's first Islamic Tawhidbank (2019).

According to Kyrgyz media, Qatar has expressed interest in exporting organic agricultural products from Kyrgyzstan, especially honey and meat. In particular, the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic is negotiating with the Qatari company Khasat on the export of Kyrgyz agricultural products. In early March 2012, the Kyrgyz delegation visited Doha, where it reached an agreement on the creation of an investment fund of \$100 million for the implementation of various projects in the republic[10].

4 QATAR'S "SOFT POWER" IN CENTRAL ASIA

The emirate pays special attention to the promotion of its "soft power" in Central Asia. Qatari non-governmental organizations support believers and charity work in the region. Doha extensively finances the construction of Islamic educational institutions, mosques

One of the first regional projects supported by Qatar was the Nur Astana Islamic Cultural Center, for the construction of which \$6.8 million was allocated.

Work on the construction of the centre began in 1999 and was completed in 2005. The Center consists of the Nur Astana Mosque, designed for 5 thousand believers, the Center for Islamic Studies and a religious educational institution.

Kazakhstan also attracts Qatari funds for humanitarian and environmental projects. On September 1, 2018, the opening of the secondary school complex named after him took place in Nur-Sultan. Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani. The Emirate also contributed to the implementation of the project of a rehabilitation centre for victims of nuclear tests.

Like many monarchies of the Persian Gulf, Qatar spares no expense on gigantic projects, especially for the maintenance of Islam. The Qatari authorities have allocated \$70 million. for the construction of the largest central mosque in the CIS in Dushanbe with an area of 12 hectares, which can simultaneously accommodate 115 thousand people (Al-Makbali, 2018 - Egorov, 2019)

The emirate's "mosque diplomacy" is most active in Kyrgyzstan. In recent years, Qatar has contributed to the construction of more than 40 mosques and religious educational institutions in this country (Al-Makbali, 2018 - Egorov, 2019). The Qatari charity organization "Qatar Charity" started working in the Kyrgyz Republic in 2003. It provides "social assistance to needy segments of the population – mothers, children and the disabled." According to the representative office of Qatar Charity in Bishkek, it pays monthly assistance to 2,100 orphans in 7 regions of Kyrgyzstan (Al-Makbali, 2018 - Egorov, 2019).

After the border conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (spring 2021), Qatar Charity organized the delivery of humanitarian aid to the Batken region. The organization handed over 110 tons of food to 2 thousand families and also allocated 100 thousand dollars for the construction of housing for victims of the conflict.

5 CHALLENGES AND THREATS TO THE REGION

Qatar's persistent promotion of its "soft power" raises concerns in a number of countries around the world. This is due to Qatar's history of interaction with extremist and terrorist groups around the world. In particular, the emirate was accused of moral and financial support for various groups in Chechnya, Libya, Syria, Egypt, Tunisia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia and a number of other countries.

According to numerous testimonies, Doha financed such groups as ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and Jabhat al-Nusra (later Hayat Tahrir al-Sham). Qatar provides patronage to the Muslim Brotherhood movement, which is the oldest and largest fundamentalist organization in the world. Qatar has granted asylum to the chairman of the World Council of Ulema, the spiritual leader of the movement Youssef al-Qardawi, the Chechen separatist Z.Yandarbiyev, the leader of Hamas H.Mashal and others.

There are opinions that Qatar's active promotion of its vision of Islam challenges the basic provisions and principles of local Islam formed in a particular country. Moreover, such activities can lead to a deterioration of interethnic relations in society, and an increase in radicalism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism.

It is noteworthy that similar concerns were expressed even in European countries. In particular, the UK government drew attention to the fact that in 2017-2018 the Qatar Charity provided about \$ 30 million to a number of conservative Islamic institutions. London stressed that Doha-sponsored institutions expressed anti-Semitic slogans, as well as showed intolerance towards Christians.

In Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan is the greatest threat in this regard. The number of mosques and religious centres in the country has exceeded the number of schools, which is paradoxical for a secular state. As of March 2023, there are 2.9 thousand Islamic organizations in Kyrgyzstan, including 2,669 mosques and 125 madrassas. Moreover, the number of mosques has increased 75 times compared to 1991. At the same time, the number of general education institutions in the country is significantly less – 2.6 thousand, and the total capacity is only 600 thousand seats.

No less important, there are more different religious Muslim movements in Kyrgyzstan. In particular, according to various sources, there are followers of at least 10 forms in the country. Given that Qatar actively promotes political Islam and supports numerous groups, its activities in Kyrgyzstan and in Central Asia should cause concern in the countries of the region.

6 CONCLUSIONS

Despite the fact that Central Asia is not a priority of Qatar's foreign policy, the emirate is gradually increasing cooperation with the countries of the region. At the same time, "soft power" is primarily used as an instrument of influence, the promotion of

one's own values based on the Wahhabi form of Islam.

At the same time, the strengthening of Qatar's "soft power" in the region causes concern in the countries of Central Asia. Experts warn of the possible strengthening of non-traditional trends of Islam in the region, which could lead to the radicalization of the population, and the spread of ideas of fundamentalism and extremism among them.

In this regard, Central Asian countries should carefully monitor the activities of NGOs and various charitable foundations supported by Qatar and other Arab countries of the Persian Gulf. Religious and educational institutions built with Arab money are of particular interest.

Another important task facing the Central Asian States is to encourage the development and popularization of enlightened Islam, a characteristic of the region. It is also necessary to strengthen the training of qualified clerics who can bring the true essence of Islam to the general population. The region should have its own authoritative representatives of the clergy who are able to rally believers around themselves.

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