

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Qatar's foreign aid and political strategies in the Horn of Africa: The case of Somalia

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## Abstract

The purpose of this article is to analyse the relationship between Qatar's foreign policy and foreign aid in the Horn of Africa (HoA), with a particular focus on Somalia. Since the 2017 blockade, the HoA has become increasingly important to Qatar's foreign policy and aid efforts, intensifying political and economic competition with other Gulf players. This research describes Qatar's foreign policy strategies and tools in the HoA from 2011 to 2021, observing the evolution of humanitarian aid interventions in Somalia and the impact of Gulf competition in the country. The research aims to combine neoclassical realism with small-state theory in the analysis of foreign aid, examining Qatari foreign aid interventions in Somalia as a foreign policy tool for exercising autonomy and as an outcome of the Qatari elites' decision-making process.

## 1 | QATAR AS A HUMANITARIAN ACTOR: A SMALL STATE IN SEARCH OF AUTONOMY

This article examines how Qatar's foreign policy, and consequently its foreign aid practices, towards the Horn of Africa (HoA) have changed, with a particular focus on the case of Somalia. How have political events in the region affected Qatar's foreign policy in the HoA? Why does Qatar pursue different political strategies in the HoA to its Gulf neighbours? How did these dynamics affect Qatar's humanitarian aid strategies in Somalia? This research seeks to address these questions by considering Qatar's role as a humanitarian donor in the HoA and beyond.

Over the past four decades, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have been the source of large amounts of overseas development assistance (ODA)<sup>1</sup> and humanitarian aid through various channels, including bilateral, private and individual donations (Salisbury, 2018). Among them, Qatar has emerged as an important donor not only in terms of resources but more importantly because it has positioned itself as a 'diplomatic power broker' through its networks of relationships with states and non-state

actors (Barakat, 2012). This strategy has allowed Doha to transform its financial power into soft power and to exercise its autonomy in mediation efforts and aid interventions. The case of Somalia will show how aid allocation is linked to regional competition with the other Gulf donors and is the result of the political relations between Doha and the Somali central government during Farmajo's presidency (2017–2022).

The analysis of the role of Qatar as a donor and the evolution of its aid flows in the Horn of Africa requires a brief reflection on the connection between foreign aid and foreign policy from a small-state perspective. Following the analysis of Rickli and Almezaini (2016a), the definition adopted in this study of small states' foreign policy and, consequently, foreign aid strategies, is based on the concept of the power they can exercise. Power has two dimensions: it encompasses the capacity to modify the conduct of other states while preventing others from affecting their behaviour (Goetschel, 1998). Smallness does not stem from physical attributes such as the size or the population of a state, but from the lack of power that can be exerted.

Foreign policy and foreign aid relating to small states can be interpreted through these elements of autonomy and influence, reflecting the internal features of the

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state itself, reducing aid neutrality and increasing the politicisation of aid strategies. In this analytical framework, foreign aid becomes a way to exercise autonomy, elaborating aid policies and allocating resources to recipient communities according to particular interests. This last aspect is related to the donor's influence on the extent to which foreign aid allocated in particular areas or to particular actors is able to influence local dynamics, especially in fragmented or intra-state conflicts where state and non-state actors are competing for power in different areas (Meininghaus, 2016). The politicisation of aid by small powers, particularly by the Gulf states, leads to an understanding of how regional shocks or external factors have, at times, modified aid policies and strategies. The use of aid in the foreign policies of the small Gulf states evolved from being a tool to support countries in need to a tool of influence and change (Rickli & Almezaini, 2016b).

The analysis conducted by Dandashly and Kourtelis (2022) explores the motives of small Arab donors for the provision of foreign aid and highlights the main characteristics of the aid strategy pursued by small state donors (in particular Qatar, UAE and Kuwait). First, starting from the Arab uprising, foreign aid has been used for creating 'alliances and supporting friendly regimes' (Young, 2017:121). Examples of this situation are providing aid for regimes such as the al-Sisi regime in Egypt by the UAE or withholding it by Qatar after the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood government. Another example is the Qatari ODA to the West Bank, with Gaza under Hamas being among the main recipients. Moreover, development and humanitarian assistance are directed mainly towards the conflict-affected or post-conflict zones in Arab, Islamic and African states (Barakat, 2019; Barakat & Zyck, 2010). The last aspect regards the expertise these small donors have acquired in infrastructure building. The knowledge achieved enables them to contribute to large projects in the MENA and HoA (Dandashly & Kourtelis, 2022).

During the Gulf crisis, which started in 2017,<sup>2</sup> Doha and Abu Dhabi assumed some classic traits of the small states while trying to overcome their 'smallness' in order to impose their preferences upon the regional and global order. In the analysis conducted by Miller and Verhoeven (2020), the two authors identify Doha's security relationship with Turkey and Iran as a common behaviour in small state response to vulnerability. On the other hand, Qatar and the UAE have tried to promote their autonomous foreign policies, and foreign aid strategies, contrasting with fundamental tenets of traditional small-state literature. In some cases, they have demonstrated a refusal to use the constraints imposed by their 'smallness' in line with Henrikson's theory, in which the small size of a state is a consequence of its subjective perception, and it can differ greatly from a perception of other external parties (Henrikson, 2001). The Qatari proactive role in the region and beyond and

### Policy Implications

- Due to the high level of politicisation of aid in Somalia and the high competition for resources—between internal and external actors—donors should try to allocate aid more in line with the beneficiaries' needs than their political interests, especially in contexts affected by food insecurity, cyclic droughts and humanitarian risks.
- The competition among regional actors risks compromising aid effectiveness and affects stabilisation during a state-building process.
- The regional and extra-regional policymakers should consider the asymmetric interdependence between ME and HoA states when formulating and implementing regional policies. The Somali case shows that political stages in the Middle East can affect the Horn of Africa's stability. Periods marked by high competition (e.g., 2017–21) heighten instability in the Horn. Conversely, stages characterised by cooperation (2022 to date) foster a more cooperative attitude with and among the HOA countries.
- Looking at the aid policies from the small states' perspectives, the case of Qatar demonstrates that despite its smallness, in terms of traditional size-based indicators, the Sheikdom can exploit aid to pursue national interests and exert its autonomy from the other Gulf States.

its autonomous foreign aid strategies demonstrate that there is not 'a consistent correlation between traditional size-based indicators of power and the capacity of small states to act outside their borders' (Miller & Verhoeven, 2020:6).

However, despite the difficulty of evaluating and measuring power and influence in a given context through aid interventions, the empirical evidence of Qatari aid in Somalia shows how foreign aid strategies are strongly linked to foreign policy and regional competition with other Gulf states as a tool to exercise autonomy.

The article contributes to neoclassical realism (NCR) and small-state theory in the analysis of foreign aid strategies. NCR is useful for understanding the importance of the elite's contribution to the decision-making process of aid allocation due to the high centralisation of the aid bureaucracy in the country (Lestra, 2017). On the other hand, small state theory can explain the willingness to exercise autonomy through aid strategies and resource allocation in light of the Gulf rivalry.

The first part of the paper will analyse Qatar's foreign policy and foreign aid strategies through the lens of NCR. The second section will describe Qatar's foreign policy towards the Horn of Africa, and the third part will observe the evolution of its foreign aid policy in the region. The fourth section focuses on the case of Somalia, looking at aid flows to the country from 2015 to 2021. The conclusion discusses the findings of the case study.

In terms of methodology, this research relies on a comprehensive literature review of small powers' foreign policy, incorporating relevant findings with empirical evidence from Qatari aid interventions in the HoA. The study's timeframe spans from 2011 to 2021. For the case study, Somalia was selected due to Doha's significant involvement in Somali domestic political affairs and its ranking among the top recipient countries of Qatari aid since 2017. Data analysis on aid flow from 2011 to 2021 is based on the Qatar Fund for Development (QFFD), Qatar Charity (QC) and Qatar Red Crescent Society (QRCS) Annual Reports and UN OCHA Financial Tracking Service, and covers five main parameters: implementing organisations, geographical allocation in the country, sectoral and channel allocation of aid and the total amount of resources allocated per year.

## 2 | READING QATAR'S FOREIGN POLICY BEHAVIOUR THROUGH A NEOCLASSICAL REALISM LENS

To better examine Qatar's foreign policy behaviour and changing strategy towards the HoA, the article adopts the lens of neoclassical realism (NCR). Building on the neorealist approach, NCR highlights the international system's role in shaping the constraints and opportunities that impact a state's foreign policy actions. Unlike neorealism, which emphasises the impact of the international system on foreign policy, NCR directs attention to how the interplay between systemic and unit-level variables influence a country's foreign policy decisions. In other words, NCR recognises the intricate relationship between systemic variables and the state's external outcomes, considering factors at the unit level. In this regard, NCR incorporates analytical framework variables from other theoretical approaches, such as domestic institutions (liberal theories) and the influence of ideational variables (constructivism). NCR revolves around two core principles: firstly, similar to Putnam's two-level game argument (1988), foreign policy is shaped by the interplay of international structure and domestic influences, considering the complex interactions between these two factors. Secondly, similar to the approach of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), the decision-making unit, whether it be an individual leader, a small group, or a coalition of actors, serves as

a channel through which other factors are transmitted and interpreted (Kaarbo, 2015: 206).

In their study on Qatar's foreign policy during the 2017 Gulf crisis, Al-Eshaq and Rasheed demonstrate why it is important to frame the analysis of Qatar's FP within neoclassical realism. Indeed, this theoretical framework can explain why and how Qatar, despite its small size, was able to use its foreign relations to offset the effects of the Gulf crisis. In this case, crisis management resulted from the interplay between international and internal structures. Coordination with Turkey and Iran and the ability to influence the Trump administration on the one hand, and the effort to liquefied natural gas, sports and humanitarian diplomacy on the other, prevented the crisis from escalating further (Al-Eshaq & Rasheed, 2022).

Moreover, neoclassical realism's focus on elite perceptions is important in the case of Qatar, where foreign policy decision-making is highly centralised, making elite perceptions crucial to understanding foreign policy (Al-Eshaq & Rasheed, 2022: 31). Reflecting the role of elite perceptions in policy-making towards the HoA and aid allocation, the high degree of centralisation in the decision-making process and the top-down approach to resource allocation have influenced Qatar's humanitarian behaviour in Somalia.

Following the selection criteria of NCR, the article has identified Qatar's foreign policy behaviour and the employment of foreign aid in the HoA as a dependent variable of a strategic policy tool. Hence, the perceptions of Qatar's leaders and elites regarding the external environment serve as a critical intervening variable. The leaders' and elites' assessments of the international and regional contexts shaped the country's foreign policy choices, leading to significant changes during the late 1990s and continued policy consistency after 2014.

## 3 | QATARI FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS THE HORN OF AFRICA

In the years following Qatari independence in 1971, Qatar's African policy was embedded in the more comprehensive pan-Arab policy. During that period, cultural affinities, both linguistic and religious, allowed the establishment of official relations only with Maghreb states. The prevalence of the pan-Arab approach was pointed out even with diplomatic structures. Within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Qatar, the Department of Arabic Affairs undertook relations with Africa. Qatari diplomats perceived Africa as a split continent: an Arabic North Africa and the rest. The American geo-strategic view and the legacy of the pan-Arab policies and narrative nurtured by Nasser determined the Qatari conception. The only exception was Sudan, where Qatar established diplomatic relations due to the increasing flow of workers to the Sheikdom (Augé, 2016). As a result,

relations between Qatar and the HoA's states remained limited until the new millennium.

During the second half of the Nineties, the right conditions arose for Qatar to reconfigure its foreign policy. Internationally, the end of the Cold War, combined with bilateral defence agreements between the United States and the Gulf monarchies as a result of the first Gulf War (Scholvin, 2009), created a safer and more permissive regional environment for actors seeking greater visibility and activism. Domestically, the bloodless coup of the ambitious Emir Hamad bin Khalifa al Thani also marked a turning point in Qatari politics. The change in leadership brought new ideas and energy by revitalising the country's foreign policy (Roberts, 2017). The new Emir promoted a radical reform of Qatar's international agenda to gain more autonomy from its powerful Saudi neighbour. Specifically, three factors were determinants in establishing a new foreign policy: i. the vast resources from hydrocarbon revenue sales; ii. the security umbrella provided by the U.S. military base at Al Udeid; and iii. the rise of a new elite led by the Emir (Tok et al., 2016). Entering the new millennium, Doha sought to increase its footprint, especially towards the HoA through diplomatic hyper-activism. Behind the Qatari decision to direct its efforts towards the region, there were several rational evaluations. First and foremost was its geographical proximity, compared to other regions such as West Africa. Besides its geographical proximity, Qatar has cultural affinities with Muslim communities spread throughout the area (O'Bright, 2017). Another motivation lies in the structural traits of the region that make it permeable to extra-regional influence. These include the endemic fragility typified by the high number of conflicts—inter-states and intrastate—and the presence of some weak and failed states, the considerable disparity in wealth, the dependence of fragile local economies on external assistance, and the increasing centrality of the Red Sea in global geopolitics (Woodward, 2013).

Strategically, the Qatari policymakers conceived the HoA as an opportunity to develop greater regional autonomy and increase international visibility. Since the reform promoted by Sheikh Hamad, Qatar has adopted a proactive international stance. Such attitude marked a difference from the stance adopted by other small Gulf monarchies, such as Kuwait and Bahrain, who follow bandwagoning strategies (Tok et al., 2016). The core of Qatar's foreign policy has been the implementation of dynamic diplomacy. The goal is to carve out a space on the international stage. Doha's activism was made possible by using its massive resources to develop soft power toolkits (Ulrichsen, 2014). Three distinct but interconnected dimensions have characterised Qatari soft power: branding, mediation and investment (Kamrava, 2013). Qatar's employment of humanitarian interventions cuts across these three dimensions of soft power.

Since the late 1990s, branding diplomacy has played a prominent role in Qatar's strategy. The primary tool is the Al Jazeera television channel. Through the opening of Al Jazeera, Qatar sought to increase its international visibility, especially among the wider Arab public (Miller & Verhoeven, 2020). The launch of Al Jazeera in 1997 had a revolutionary impact on the Arab media landscape, comparable only to that of the Sawt al-Arab radio station during Nasserism. The so-called 'Al Jazeera effect' allowed Doha to gain and exert a regional influence that far exceeded the expectations of a small state (Powers & Gilboa, 2007). Through an innovative style and unmistakable populist editorial line, embodied in the slogan 'the opinion, the other opinion', Sheikh Hamad's media creation epitomised the new Qatari identity and its achievements (Antwi-Boateng, 2013). The TV channel has provided global coverage of HoA affairs by becoming a sounding board for regional issues.

The second dimension of Qatar's soft power has been the mediation efforts in regional and extra-regional affairs. Like other small powers, Qatari policymakers judged the commitment to conflict resolution as a way of overcoming the limited material capabilities. The relevance attributed by Qatari policymakers to mediation is enshrined in the decision to include it in an article of Qatar's 2003 Constitution.<sup>3</sup> Doha's approach, known as 'carrot diplomacy', is based on promoting peace through economic incentives such as development and humanitarian aid (Kamrava, 2011). At first, Qatar acted as a mediator in some Middle Eastern disputes. Subsequently, Doha used the tool to increase its influence in the HoA. The first Qatari mediation effort dated back to 1996 with the dispute between Eritrea and Yemen over the Hanish islands (Minich, 2015). The crisis allowed Qatari policymakers to practice their conflict resolution skills and get access to the region. Later, Qatar attempted its most ambitious brokerage in the Darfur conflict. After showing their neutral attitude and having earned and partly won (carrot diplomacy) the trust of the contenders, Qatar invited all parties to Doha to start direct talks. At that time, a ceasefire agreement was reached, and Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir declared the end of the conflict (Barakat & Milton, 2019). Finally, Doha mediated the Ras Doumeria territorial dispute between Eritrea and Djibouti. The controversial movement of Eritrean troops across Djiboutian soil triggered some low-intensity clashes. The two countries chose Qatar as a mediator by allowing it to deploy peacekeepers. The dispute ended with the Doha Agreements (2010).

Regardless of the tangible results achieved in mediation, the Qatari attempts and the media coverage assured by Al Jazeera raised the country's international profile (Ulrichsen, 2014). Doha complemented the mediation with the work of its two humanitarian agencies—Qatar Charity and Qatar Red Crescent Society—able

to create a favourable ground by winning the parties' trust (Barakat & Milton, 2019).

Moreover, Doha coupled dispute settlement with the promotion of massive investments. These constitute the third pillar of Qatar's foreign policy. Since 2005, the leading actor in the sector has been the Qatar Investment Authority (QIA) sovereign fund. Among the Gulf monarchies, Qatar was one of the last to start investing in hydrocarbon annuities, particularly liquefied natural gas (LNG), to pursue geopolitical goals. Qatar's international investments are complementary to foreign policy aims and, for this reason, the QIA portfolio spans a variety of fields. Along with the QIA, the Qatar National Bank also plays an active role in investment programs. Beyond the economic payoff, Doha's goal is the return in terms of reputation (Szalai, 2021). The sectors in which Qatar has invested the most in the HoA are farming and banking (Mosley et al., 2021). The purchase of agricultural land in Ethiopia and Sudan aims to secure the food security objectives defined by the National Food Security Programme (Meester et al., 2018).

The Qatari approach and its soft power tools contributed to the increase of Doha's footprint in the HoA. At the same time, the trend began to arouse tension and criticism from regional rivals such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE (Donelli & Cannon, 2021). One of the most prominent cases concerned Somalia. In Somalia, the activities of two small Gulf countries, Qatar and the UAE, have given rise to heated competition. Since 1996, Qatar has been among the extra-regional actors with the most influence over fragile Somali governments through a series of networks structured over the years around the Islamist components (Mosley et al., 2021). Over the years, Doha has increased its influence in the country through direct political ties—facilitated by the Somali political marketplace—and a series of humanitarian aid programs. Qatar avoided direct involvement, distributing aid through associations and charities connected to Al-Itihaad Al-Islam, a splinter group of a local Somali branch of the Muslim Brotherhood (Barnes & Hassan, 2007). At the end of the brief Islamic Courts Union (ICU)<sup>4</sup> experience and its subsequent collapse, Doha consolidated its ties with the Islamist factions including al-Islah party (the Somali branch of the Muslim Brotherhood). Many leading ICU figures, including Sheikh Sharif Ahmed, found refuge in Qatar, establishing a link between Doha and Somali politics (Cannon, 2019). In the years that followed, Qatar consolidated the established relationship and gradually increased its interest in Somali affairs. As the regional balance shifted after the Arab uprisings, these interests grew (Beck & Richter, 2020). There is plenty of evidence of Qatar's attempts to influence Somali politics between 2011 and 2021. For years, an important link between Qatar and Somali politics was provided by Fahad Yasin, a former Al Jazeera journalist who allegedly couriered Qatari money into Somalia during the

2012 elections and ran Farmajo's 2017 campaign.<sup>5</sup> The GCC's rift heightened competition between Qatar and other Gulf monarchies, exacerbating previous tensions in the HoA. In a few weeks, all the shortcomings of the Doha African agenda emerged. Several East African countries, including Djibouti, Eritrea and Comoros, were persuaded by KSA, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt to break relations with Doha (Miller & Verhoeven, 2020). However, the regional environmental changes created favourable conditions for Qatar to revise its foreign policy agenda. Doha has benefited from the Arab Quartet's blockade by giving further stimulus to its African policy. The quest for alternative sources of supply and political support highlighted a significant difference between Qatar and its Gulf neighbours (El Berni, 2021). Doha did not demand exclusive relations but accepted that HoA states maintain political and economic ties with its regional rivals, an approach that contrasts with those of the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

#### 4 | THE EVOLUTION OF QATARI AID FLOWS IN THE HoA

The Arab uprisings influenced drastically the foreign policy and aid trajectory of the tiny Sheikdom. The outbreak of regional instability has forced countries like Qatar to remodel their foreign policies through mediation and foreign aid to optimise their gains from the turbulent political environment (Manjang, 2015). In absolute terms, the volume of Qatar governmental aid had substantial growth in 2011 compared to 2010, and this trend has continued. The foreign policy efforts aimed at supporting Arab countries in transition during troubled times, especially Egypt, Syria, Palestine and Libya (Bashir & Abdelsalam, 2021). After an initial period of caution in January 2011, Qatar decided to assume the direction of change compared to the other states in the Gulf, which resisted the popular pressures unleashed by the Arab Spring. Qatar's foreign and aid policies represented its interests in the various countries experiencing unrest. Doha pursued direct and indirect intervention in Libya and Syria in the name of an Arab solution for Arab problems and mobilised economic assistance in Tunisia and Egypt (Ulrichsen, 2014). Doha decided to back the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) due to the important links between Qatar and MB, and the presence of its members in the bureaucratic and administrative system of the country (Roberts, 2014). According to the study conducted by Kharas based on the Minister of Foreign Affairs' internal data, in the period 2010–2012, the top recipient countries of Qatari foreign development assistance were: Egypt, Syria, Sudan, Tunisia, Palestine and Libya (Kharas, 2015). In other words, the Arab uprisings represented the chance for Qatar to fulfil and maintain its role as an ambitious regional player and foreign aid was the key to

enhancing the Qatari political values and establishing allies. In this period, the HoA did not appear as a priority in the Qatari agenda.

However, in 2011 Qatar Red Crescent Society joined the coalition led by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Somalia. In 2011, the OIC intervened in Somalia to respond to the huge famine in the country. The organisation here played several roles, as a diplomatic actor, a technical and operational actor and a donor. The Department of Humanitarian Affairs (ICHAD) established the Humanitarian Coordination Office—the OIC's sole office in Somalia—in Mogadishu in March 2011. The other major OIC institution in Somalia is the so-called OIC Coalition, a coordination mechanism modelled on OCHA comprising around 40 aid agencies and civil society organisations. All are either Somali and/or based in OIC member countries. The coalition included foreign aid agencies such as the Qatar Red Crescent Society, the International Islamic Relief Organisation (IIRO) and the Turkish Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH) alongside smaller Somali organisations. The OIC's involvement in Somalia had a catalytic impact, leading organisations from OIC member countries to establish or reinforce operations there and join the OIC-coordinated NGO coalition, including Qatar (Svaboda et al., 2015).

The turning point of aid interventions implemented by the Gulf states and Qatar in particular in the HoA is represented by the blockade in 2017. Regarding the impact of the Gulf crisis on Qatar's humanitarian sector, the volume of Qatari aid has not declined, but there was a shift in the resource allocation from bilateral to multilateral channels, to improve accountability and transparency (Barakat, 2019). Analysing the period 2016–2020, the Annual Reports provide data on the total funds (grants and loans) of the Qatari foreign aid in humanitarian and development intervention. The flow maintains a constant trend except for 2017 when there was an increase in the funds allocated to aid. In 2020, Qatar provided US\$533 million representing 0.30% of the gross national income (GNI). Regarding the sectoral allocation in this period, there was a great investment in the infrastructural sector in 2017 and a growing trend in humanitarian aid starting from 2018, with a peak in 2019 (53.3% of total funds in this year were allocated in the humanitarian response). The main recipient countries from 2016 to 2020 were Palestine, Syria, Sudan, Somalia and Yemen in particular for the humanitarian response. In these 5 years, Doha implemented and financed different programmes in Sudan and Somalia for humanitarian response and infrastructure support. As underlined in the analysis of Dandashly and Kourtelis (2022), in both these countries infrastructural programmes were the priority between 2016 and 2019. In both cases, Sudan and Somalia, Doha was involved in diplomatic mediation and a strong relationship with the central governments.

Comparing this approach with that of the other Gulf states, the involvement of the UAE in Somalia, especially in Puntland, had the main aim of mitigating the Somali piracy issue, which undermined the security of transportation in the Gulf of Aden and the wider West Indian Ocean. Therefore, since 2011, the UAE has become the main supporter of the Puntland Maritime Police Force,<sup>6</sup> in charge of combatting piracy both on the land and off the shores of Somalia, and in 2014 Abu Dhabi increased its cooperation with the Somali government in the field of security and military issues (Cannon & Donelli, 2020; Marsai & Szalai, 2021). After the deterioration of the relationship between Abu Dhabi and Somalia during Farmajo's presidency, in 2022, with the new President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, links with the UAE started to improve with an agreement for expansion and upgrade work at the Port of Bosaso.<sup>7</sup>

## 5 | THE POWER OF AID: THE CASE OF SOMALIA

The aid flow in Somalia reflects the Qatari aid strategies towards the Horn of Africa, especially from 2017 when the Gulf states' rivalry led to new approaches and resource allocation in the region. Resource allocation impacts the recipient context and can exacerbate or reduce fragmentation, especially where statehood is weak or absent and other external actors compete to impose their influence. As seen, Qatari activism in Somalia rose in 2006, following the brief ICU experience. The ties established by Doha with key ICU figures, including the leader Sheik Sharif, facilitated the opening of the first Qatar Red Crescent Society office in Mogadishu. Simultaneously, Qatar intervened to mediate between the ICU and the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and maintained a will to unify the various Somali opposition factions (Dahir, 2022). In 2017, two significant events modified the complex relationships between the Gulf states in Somalia enhancing the prominent role of Qatari ties with the central government: the election of Mohammed Abdullahi Mohamed aka Farmajo as the president of Somalia, and the Gulf crisis.<sup>8</sup> The election of Farmajo contributed to the deteriorating relationship with many Gulf countries because of his nationalist campaign against all foreign interventions in the country, and the accusation of the strong support given by Doha to his electoral campaign (Cannon, 2019). The decision of the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) to remain neutral in the Gulf crisis was interpreted by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi as Mogadishu betraying their common efforts and instead backing the pro-Brotherhood alliance (Cannon & Donelli, 2020; Marsai & Szalai, 2021). Saudi Arabia used financial aid pressure to force the President to cut diplomatic relations with Qatar, while

the semi-autonomous states decided to support the Saudi-led coalition against Doha. Somaliland and Puntland announced their support for the UAE and Saudi Arabia and reasserted their autonomy from Somalia in June 2017 (Kabandula & Shaw, 2018). The Somali president's decision to resist pressure from the Arab Quartet came with political costs, but also with material gains. In fact, during Farmajo's presidency, Qatar's aid to Somalia increased.

Following this brief historical description and the political impact of the Gulf crisis in the country, the research here aims to trace the rationale behind the aid allocation in the territory. Tracking funds from 2012 to 2021 on the OCHA Financial Tracking Service, the Qatari effort in Somalia started in 2015, with a growing trend in aid resources from 2017, in line with the political needs and the shift in aid strategies after the blockade described before. In 2015, the Qatari Government intervened in the country through the Qatar Red Crescent Society with a financial contribution of 1.4 million dollars (OCHA, Financial Tracking Service). The OCHA Report<sup>9</sup> on the humanitarian situation in Somalia in 2015 highlighted the severe drought and famine in the country, with a growing number of people displaced due to continuous military operations. In this scenario, the Somali government largely failed to provide security or protect rights in areas under its control and respond to humanitarian needs. Aid in this case became an external tool for compensating the lack of government capacity in ensuring human security and for supporting the presence of the central power in a fragmented context. In 2016 there are no data available in QFFD Annual reports and OCHA Financial Tracking Service regarding aid allocation in the country.

Starting in 2017, aid interventions were conducted mainly through QRCS and Qatar Charity. These two implementing charities received a total of US \$2.6 million between 2017 and 2018, allocated mainly to the UN multi-sectoral appeal Somalia 2017 and Somalia 2018. In 2017, QRCS was the implementing actor of Qatari funds within the UN appeal, scaling up WASH interventions for the ongoing drought, and improving primary and secondary healthcare services and access to basic nutrition. The geographical allocation of funds was mainly focused on Somaliland, Hirshabelle and the Puntland states.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, in 2017, QFFD backed several projects in Somalia to build roads, including the 100 km Jawhar Mogadishu Road and the 22 km Afgoye Mogadishu Road. This was the result of the MoU signed between Qatar's Public Works Authority and the Federal Government of Somalia for the infrastructure of two roads for a total amount of US\$165 million. The Fund also helped to renovate four governmental buildings, including the presidential office building (QFFD Annual Report, 2017–2019). This infrastructural support, through the bilateral channel, was the confirmation

of a good relationship between Doha and the new government of Farmajo. Therefore, the effect provoked by the blockade on foreign aid consisted mainly in the increase of the resources allocated in Somalia, the spread of the geographical allocation of interventions (Somaliland, Puntland and Hirshabelle) and the amount of US\$165 million allocated directly through the bilateral channel (see Table 1). Conceivably, it represented an incentive to the Somali government to take the side of Qatar in the regional dispute with its neighbours or, at least, declare its neutrality. The central government also condemned the three semi-autonomous regions (Puntland, Hirshabelle and Galmudug) for cutting ties with Qatar.<sup>11</sup>

In 2018 and 2019, the Somalia Humanitarian Fund<sup>12</sup> financed Qatar Red Crescent and Qatar Charity for funding projects on food security and health mainly in Puntland (QRCS) and Mogadishu (Qatar Charity) with softly earmarked contributions, which allowed the donor to choose the sub-programme level. According to the OCHA Financial Tracking Service in 2020 and 2021 QC was the only organisation which had financed and implemented programmes in the country, especially in the Banadir region and Jubaland. However, in 2020, QFFD signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Ministry of Education, Culture and Higher Education of Somalia to support a local project by the Education Above All (EAA)<sup>13</sup> Foundation aimed at providing quality primary education to Somali children. In 2021, QFFD signed an agreement with the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) to help Somalia build climate resilience and take shock-informed anticipatory action.

The Annual Impact Report 2020 of Qatar Charity described all the early recovery and development initiatives in Somalia including education, economic empowerment, WASH, health and food security. The main target of early recovery activities is represented by children and IDP and returnee families with a total amount of US \$18.7 million of activities financed in 2020 (see Table 1). The Al Talib complex is a project implemented by QC in Kismayo, the capital of the Jubaland region, where a lot of Somali refugee families are coming back from Kenya. The UNHCR Protection and Return Monitoring Network, indeed, has registered a growing number of IDPs in the Jubaland region, from 37,000 in 2019 to 99,000 in 2022.<sup>14</sup>

The Al Talib residential complex is a 4400-square-meter development of 24 housing units. The project provides permanent shelter for displaced families and supports the Somali Federal Government in finding 'sustainable solutions for displacement' (QC Annual Impact Report, 2020: 57). Moreover, QC signed a cooperation agreement with the Ministry of Energy and Water Resources in Mogadishu to support the central government in providing water and energy to the population in the country.

**TABLE 1** Funds allocated in Somalia from 2015 to 2021 through different channels and sectors in the country.

Year	Donor	Implementing actor	Geographical allocation	Sectoral allocation	Channel of allocation	Total amount (US\$)
2015	Qatar, Government	QRCS	N/A	Health, Food Security, WASH, Agriculture	Zamzam Foundation UN Appeal Somalia 2015	1.4 million
2016	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
2017	Qatar, Government	QRCS Bilateral Agreement with the FGS	Somaliland, Hirshabelle, Puntland	WASH, health, nutrition, food security, IDPs in Afgoye.	UN Appeal Somalia 2017	1.7 million 165 million (allocated bilaterally)
2018	Somalia Humanitarian Fund Somalia Humanitarian Fund	QRCS Qatar Charity	Puntland (Bari region) Benadir region (Mogadishu)	Food security IDPs in the Benadir region	UN appeal Somalia 2018 (Softly earmarked <sup>a</sup> )	756.000
2019	Somalia Humanitarian Fund	QRCS	Puntland Puntland (Bari region)	Health Food Security	UN appeal Somalia 2019 (Softly earmarked)	889.000
2020	Qatar Charity Qatar Fund for Development	Qatar Charity Qatar Charity Education Above All	Banadir region (Mogadishu) Jubaland N/A	Food security, Covid response, Health Al Talib project Education	Earmarked contribution N/A	1.9 million 18.7 million N/A
2021	Qatar, Government Start Network	Qatar Charity Qatar Charity	N/A N/A	Emergency Shelter and NFI, Food Security	Earmarked contribution	360.000

Note: Elaborated by Author based on QFFD Annual Reports and data from OCHA Financial Tracking Service (2023).

<sup>a</sup>Softly earmarked funds are funds that are provided (mostly) at a sub-programme level.

## 5.1 | Aid to the periphery: Supporting the central government and containing the external influence

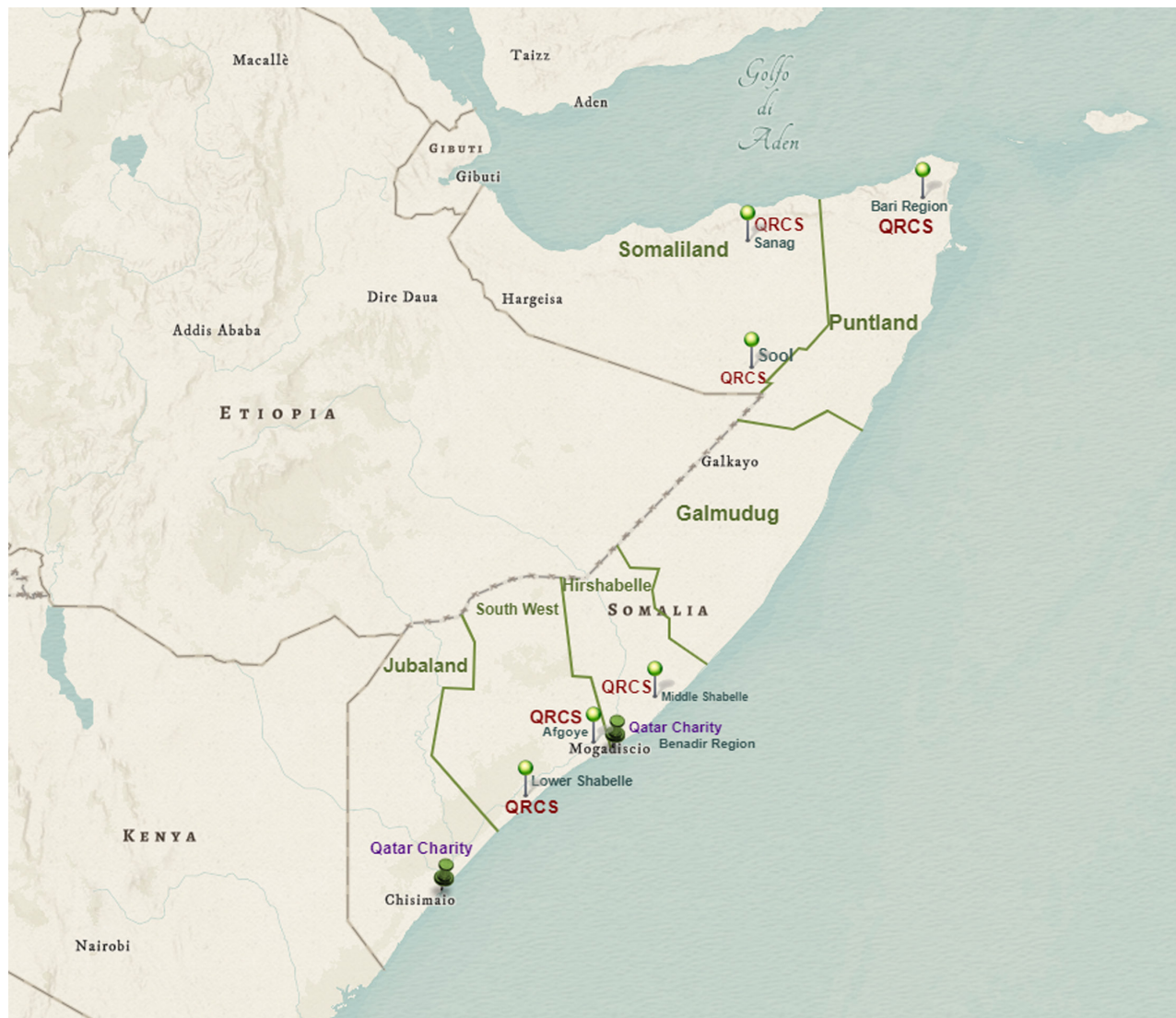
Analysing data from 2015 to 2017 on Qatari aid allocation in the country it is possible to identify some crucial aspects. The first one is related to the channel and sectoral allocation of aid mainly through Qatar Charity and Qatar Red Crescent Society as implementing organisations within the multilateral UN programs but, at the same time, through the bilateral support to the FGS from 2017, especially for infrastructural development and provision of social service in health, food security. This evidence demonstrates Doha's will to contribute to the state-building and stabilisation process of Somalia backing President Farmajo with development and humanitarian aid.<sup>15</sup>

The second is related to the geographical allocation of aid from 2017 to 2021 (see Figure 1). The decision to allocate resources in Puntland and Somaliland, along with the Banadir region where the FGS is based, stems from the necessity to ensure the basic needs of the population in two areas where the central government is not able to deliver them and where, at the same time, the statehood is particularly weak or absent and local dynamics prevail over central power. Somaliland declared independence in 1991, although this has been never recognised by the international

community or the central Somali government itself. Puntland, instead, in addition to the jihadist threats and famine, is facing the return of piracy and the clan rivalries which have provoked the increase of armed groups (antipiracy militias and clan militias) linked to the clan politics whose loyalties have varied over time (Felbab-Brown, 2017). In the attempt to support the effort to reinforce the Somali Federal State, Doha has strategically allocated resources to those areas where the central government needed to support more local authorities and administration in providing social services. However, the dependence on aid flows has historically undermined the formation of a strong social contract between the citizens and the state in Somalia because service delivery is attributed to non-state actors or external ones (McLoughlin, 2015). The legitimacy of the federal government in Mogadishu, or the perception of its presence, can be reduced if external donors, Qatar in this case, are intervening to provide basic services on behalf of the central government. (Cloutier et al., 2022). As stated by Van de Walle and Scott (2011:7) 'Service provision is an inherently political process, even more so in fragile or state-building contexts'.

Moreover, the geographical allocation of resources should be read in light of the Gulf crisis. In 2017 these two federal states decided to back the Saudi-UAE coalition and the presence of Qatari resources





**FIGURE 1** Geographical allocation of programmes implemented by Qatar Charity and Qatar Red Crescent Society from 2015 to 2020.

and organisations (especially Qatar Red Crescent Society) might have been perceived as aiming to contain the spread of Emirati presence in the country. In 2017, the aid flow from the UAE to Somalia increased,<sup>16</sup> as did Qatari aid, probably with the same attempt to influence the Somali position in the Gulf rivalry. However, from 2018 to 2022, according to OCHA Financial Tracking Service, there was no allocation of resources in terms of multilateral and bilateral aid from the UAE to Somalia. Against this background, the foreign aid policy is just reflecting the relationship between these two Gulf States and their ruling royal families with the political elite in Mogadishu. In 2022, Hassan Sheik Mohamud came back to power after his first mandate (2012–2017) and re-established ties with Abu Dhabi, diverging from the policy adopted by his predecessor Farmajo. With this political alignment, humanitarian and development interventions from the UAE started to increase again.<sup>17</sup> In light of

the recent GCC's normalisation process, the rivalry in Somalia between 2017 and 2022 seemed more of a matter of political boasting among the Gulf monarchies. Therefore, as shown by the recent Donelli and Cannon (2021) research, the primary national interests of the Emirates or Qatar were not really involved. Whether the rivalry between the Gulf states has any real effect on Somalia and the HoA remains questionable. However, there is no doubt that such inter-Gulf rivalry was playing out in the HoA, becoming a new extra-regional factor to be considered in the study of regional dynamics.

## 5.2 | The political implications of foreign aid

Regarding the political implications of Gulf foreign aid and foreign policy in the country, the Gulf States' rivalry

exacerbated tensions between the central government and its federal states, especially in Somaliland and Puntland. This dynamic of fragmentation between the central government and its federal states, reinforced by Gulf powers, exposed weaknesses in the Somali federal system as well as intensified strained relationships with a negative impact on stability and human security (International Crisis Group, 2018). The competition between Qatar and the Quartet reflected in the country has represented an opportunity for local groups to use the support of foreign actors to maximise their power. In this framework, the clan-based composition of the country is also relevant when analysing aid distribution and strategies. The Somali elite (organised mainly along clan lines) with President Farmajo was backed by Turkey and Qatar while the Emirates and Saudi Arabia forged strong linkages with Puntland, Jubaland and most importantly, Somaliland (Cannon, 2019). Due to the lack of statehood and the presence of a clan-based system in federal member states, neutral intervention, including aid allocation, is not possible since each entity and organisation belongs to particular clans and religious groups and the involvement of foreign actors threatens the status quo (Marsai & Szalai, 2021). In the multiple overlapping social contract relationships in Somalia, at the national level citizen-state relationship is mediated by de facto authorities from clans, militias and member states while at the transnational level, it is interceded by donor interventions (Cloutier et al., 2022). Qatari interventions are implicated in this political and social framework where humanitarian and development aid implemented by different donors has an impact on political stability. The research conducted by the UN University World Institute for Development Economics Research in 2022 has underlined the necessity to limit the competition and fragmentation of support given by donors in the Somali context 'to avoid strengthening part of the elite at the expense of others or citizens and clans, which ultimately makes the situation more unstable and fragile' (Cloutier et al., 2022:16).

## 6 | CONCLUSION

The article has shed new light on Qatar's role in the HoA and contributed to the literature on small states and how they employ foreign aid as a foreign policy tool. The analytical framework applied to analyse small states' foreign policy and foreign aid relies on two main aspects to examine the power they exercise: autonomy and influence. From this perspective, the case of Qatar demonstrates that despite its size, in terms of traditional size-based indicators, the sheikhdom can exploit aid to pursue national interests and use humanitarian aid as a foreign policy tool.

The neoclassical realist's approach applied to the study of Qatari foreign policy proved particularly

appropriate, as it allowed for the analysis of the interplay between the international/regional and domestic/elite levels. While structural changes have created favourable conditions for a more active and autonomous foreign policy, the role of the ruling elites and their perceptions of the international context proved to be a determining factor. A variety of concrete and ideational factors, including ambitions, fears and interests, have determined the elites' decisions. In this scenario, the ideological element should not be considered the determinant variable in Qatar's foreign policy behaviour. However, the ideological affinities of the Qatari elites, in a centralised and personalised decision-making process within the small sheikhdom, played a role in their decision to invest significantly in Somalia. Therefore, Qatar's choice to invest in Somalia and Somali political Islam figures such as Hassan Sheikh Mohamud (2012) and Farmajo (2017) resulted from the convergence of structural dynamics and elite perceptions and preferences. While building ties with Somalia began as an opportunity for Qatar to expand its presence in the region, it became almost necessary in 2017 as regional pressures and isolation increased. Against an unfavourable regional backdrop, Qatar chose to strengthen one of the most effective tools of its foreign policy: foreign aid. Research findings show how Farmajo's victory and the almost simultaneous GCC's internal rift in 2017 have determined an increase in aid resources allocated by Qatar to Somalia (See Table 1). Qatar used the aid allocation to strengthen ties with Mogadishu and the elite's relationship with the Somali government was useful to expand aid resources in the country. Qatar's aid operations in Somalia, which were mainly implemented through Qatar Charity and QRCS from 2017 to 2021, focused on providing social services, including health, education, support for internally displaced persons in Jubaland and food security in Puntland, Somaliland and the Mogadishu region. In this way, Qatar supported the central government in fulfilling its role of meeting the basic needs of the population in areas where statehood was limited or where it needed to regain the loyalty of local elites. Investments in Somalia's periphery also had strategic political objectives. Doha wanted to counter the presence of its regional competitors, especially the UAE, whose investments in Somaliland and Puntland undermined Mogadishu's authority. However, these actions have weakened the Somali state-building process. Continued humanitarian and development assistance based on the political agendas of external donors could increase the fragmentation of actors in the country and risk undermining the stabilisation process.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no conflicts of interest.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Official development assistance (ODA) is defined as government aid that promotes and specifically targets the economic development and welfare of developing countries. (OECD definition <https://www.oecd.org/dac/financing-sustainable-development/development-finance-standards/official-development-assistance.htm>).
- <sup>2</sup> In June 2017, Saudi Arabia, Bahrein, UAE, and Egypt decided to cut diplomatic ties with Doha. This crisis in the Gulf differed significantly from previous outbreaks of regional discords among GCC states (Ulrichsen, 2020), and the forms of land, maritime and aviation closure imposed on Qatar were considered a major attack on national security interests. The 'Quartet' elaborated a 13-point list to push the country to align its foreign policy with other Gulf and Arab countries. They consisted of calls to demote diplomatic relations with Iran, close the Turkish military base in Qatar and end further military cooperation with Ankara, and cut ties with terrorist organisations such as the 'Muslim Brotherhood, Daesh, Al Qaeda, and Lebanon's Hezbollah' (Milton-Edwards, 2020).
- <sup>3</sup> According to Article 7 of the Qatari Constitution, Qatar's foreign policy shall be 'based on the principle of strengthening international peace and security by encouraging the peaceful settlement of disputes'. See (Barakat & Milton, 2019).
- <sup>4</sup> "The Islamic Courts Union (ICU) originated as a loose association of Islamic courts in Somalia, which provided security and managed crime after the fall of Siad Barre's authoritarian regime in 1991. Around 2000, the courts first united to form what would be called the ICU. It later evolved from a judicial system to a governing apparatus, eventually providing social services and implementing Shariah law in the territories under its control. The ICU maintained a powerful militia, which included the group that would later become known as Al Shabaab, and conquered Mogadishu and much of Somalia in June 2006. After ruling for several months, the ICU was defeated in December 2006 by troops from Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and Ethiopia, and the group was disbanded". (Stanford, Center for International Security and Cooperation, <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/islamic-courts-union>).
- <sup>5</sup> Wardheer 2018. 'Wardheer News Person of the Year 2018: Fahad Yasin', Wardheer News. 6/1/2018. URL: <https://wardheernews.com/wardheernews-person-of-the-year-2017-fahad-yasin/>.  
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- <sup>6</sup> <https://www.garoweonline.com/en/news/puntland/somalia-uae-confirms-to-continue-supporting-puntland-troops>
- <sup>7</sup> DP World and Puntland Government sign construction agreement to upgrade Port of Bosaso. Dubai, 8 december, 2022.
- <sup>8</sup> AA.VV. (2019), 'Qatar supports Somalia's budget with 20 mLn USD.' XinhuaNet, 28/2/2019. [https://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-02/28/c\\_137855526.htm](https://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-02/28/c_137855526.htm); <https://www.africaintelligence.com/eastern-africa-and-the-horn/2022/03/15/qatar-resumes-its-role-as-farmajo-s-number-one-ally>,109760685-art

- <sup>9</sup> OCHA Report, Humanitarian Bulletin Somalia, October 2015. Available [here](#)
- <sup>10</sup> UN OCHA Somalia 2017 Appeal
- <sup>11</sup> Al Jazeera, Somalia chides its regions for cutting ties with Qatar, 22 September 2017.
- <sup>12</sup> Somalia Humanitarian Fund is the multi-donor country-based pooled mechanism created in 2010 to allocate funding for the most urgent life-saving interventions in Somalia. With the SHF, governments and private donors can channel their contributions into a common, unearmarked fund to deliver life-saving assistance to people who need it most. However, since the Fund directly finances NGOs in the field, the allocation of funds is somehow influenced by NGOs' distribution at local level.
- <sup>13</sup> For details, see: <https://educationaboveall.org/media-centre/news/qffd-signs-mou-somalia-support-eaa-project-provide-primary-education-57000-oosc>.
- <sup>14</sup> <https://data.unhcr.org/en/dataviz/1?sv=0&geo=192>
- <sup>15</sup> The statement of the Director of the Department of International Cooperation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in December 2017 underlined the will to collaborate with the UN and national government of Somalia for humanitarian and development interventions. See: <https://www.mofa.gov.qa/en/all-mofa-news/details/2017/12/04/qatar-confirms-support-for-somalia-based-on-its-principled-position-on-global-commitments>
- <sup>16</sup> OCHA Financial Tracking Service, United Arab Emirates in Somalia (2015–2022).
- <sup>17</sup> Relief Web, UAE President orders provision of AED35 million urgent humanitarian aid to Somalia, May 2022.

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