

# Evolution of Qatar's foreign policy in Afghanistan

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**Abstract:** The author divided the evolution of Qatar's foreign policy in Afghanistan into four stages. The emirate purposefully increased its efforts in the Afghan track, wisely using its existing capabilities. No less importantly, Qatar took into account the shortcomings of its policy in a number of countries (Syria, Yemen, Sudan, and partly Palestine). As a result, for some time the Emirate became the center of attraction for the international community on almost all key issues related to Afghanistan.

The article also paid attention to the intricacies of diplomatic work on organizing a political office of the Taliban Movement in Doha, which became a turning point for Qatar's policy in Afghanistan.

**Keywords:** Qatar, Afghanistan, Taliban, conflict, negotiations, settlement.

**Introduction:** Currently, the system of international relations is undergoing a radical transformation. Geopolitical confrontation between the main centers of power is intensifying. Against the backdrop of a gradual weakening of the role of the United States, the process of transition from a unipolar to a multipolar world is underway. Russia, China, Turkey and a number of other countries are increasingly persistently promoting their interests on the world stage.

In these conditions, the role of medium and small countries, which previously were assigned an insignificant, and sometimes absolutely no role in global politics, is increasing. One of them is the state of Qatar, located in the Persian Gulf. Occupying an area of 11 thousand square kilometers and having its own population of 400 thousand people, the emirate is pursuing an ambitious foreign policy, seemingly disproportionate to its indicators.

The main priority of Qatar's foreign policy is the peaceful settlement of disputes through mediation. In this regard, Doha has recently sought to play an important role in resolving a number of conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa (Lebanon, Sudan, Yemen, Palestine).

In this context, the emirate has made the most progress in Afghanistan - since 2013, the Taliban Movement's political office has been operating in Doha, in February

2020, a peace agreement was signed between the United States and the Taliban in the Qatari capital, and in September 2020, Qatar hosted historic peace talks between the government of Afghanistan and the Taliban.

Qatar's role in Afghanistan has especially increased after the fall of Ghani's government and the Taliban's rise to power. Doha played a critical role in the evacuation of thousands of Afghans and Western citizens, and also took on the role of the main mediator between Western countries and the new Afghan government.

At the same time, Qatar has managed to become one of the main players in the Afghan settlement in a relatively short historical period. Given this, it is appropriate to study the evolution of Qatar's Afghan policy. In chronological order, it can be divided into several successive stages.

## **The first stage - Qatar remains in the shadow of its Arab allies**

The first stage (1971-1996) of Qatar's policy in Afghanistan covers a fairly significant period of time - from the period when the emirate gained independence (1971) until the first coming to power of the Taliban (1996). At the same time, due to various factors, the emirate was unable to take an active part in the turbulent events unfolding in Afghanistan.

In December 1979, the USSR sent troops to Afghanistan, causing discontent and public outcry in Muslim countries. Soon, a global jihad against the largest atheistic state began in Afghanistan, in which a number of Qatar's neighbors in the Persian Gulf were involved in one way or another.

According to some reports, during the war in Afghanistan (1979-1989), Saudi Arabia provided military and financial assistance to the Afghan opposition in the amount of \$3 billion. In turn, Arab private donors and NGOs also provided generous financial assistance to the mujahideen, annually allocating about \$400 million [1].

According to various estimates, approximately 35 thousand foreign Muslims from 43 Islamic countries took part in the war. Among them were about 25 thousand Arabs from Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, Sudan and a number of other countries [2].

At the same time, Qatar was unable to take an active part in Afghan affairs. First of all, this is due to the rather difficult economic situation in which the emirate found itself due to the fall in oil prices in the 1980s. By 1986, prices for "black gold" reached below \$10 per barrel.

As a result, the emirate's budget became deficit in 1985 and, according to the Planning Council, in the 15 years leading up to 2000, only one fiscal year, 1990–1991, was profitable [3]. Real GDP per capita in the emirate fell by more than half, from \$31,000 in 1984 to \$15,000 in 1994.

Against this backdrop, Emir Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad Al Thani was forced to implement austerity measures in the mid-1980s. Public discontent was growing in the emirate, and a series of strikes swept across the country, during which political demands were put forward.

Under these circumstances, Qatar could not afford to get involved in a costly adventure in Afghanistan. The young and immature state had to address more pressing socio-economic issues. Otherwise, Doha could face popular unrest.

Perhaps Qatar, which practices the Wahhabi sect of Islam, wanted to support the mujahideen in Afghanistan, but the emirate had neither the financial capacity nor the human resources to do so. In 1980, the population of the emirate was only 220,000 (including immigrants from other countries). Given this, the Qatari authorities would hardly have allowed even the most ideological of their citizens to risk their lives in Afghanistan

### **The second stage - Qatar seeks to find its niche in Afghanistan**

The second stage (1996-2010) is characterized by Qatar's attempt to take its place in the Afghan issue. Qatar maintained very close relations with the Taliban, although it did not recognize Taliban's authority during their first rule (1996-2001).

As one of the key US allies in the Middle East, Doha did not join the US-led military operation in Afghanistan in response to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. In this context, it is significant that on November 16, 2001, the Americans "mistakenly" dropped bombs on the offices of the Qatari satellite television channel Al Jazeera in Kabul. The Pentagon denied that the channel was deliberately targeted, but could not explain the reason for the attack [4].

After the fall of the Taliban regime, several high-ranking figures of the Movement even sought asylum in Qatar. Doha rejected them for a number of reasons, including the fact that the Taliban were on the UN/US sanctions list.

However, some lower-ranking Taliban managed to travel to Qatar and other Gulf states under the guise of ordinary Afghan workers and businessmen. Given the presence of Afghan diasporas in these countries, they could easily mix with them and live without attracting much attention.

However, after the sanctions were lifted, a number of high-ranking Taliban still emigrated to Doha. In particular, in 2011, former Guantanamo prisoner and Taliban ambassador to Pakistan Mullah Abdul Salam Zaif moved from Kabul to Qatar with his family [5].

### **The third stage – Doha's involvement in Afghan settlement issues**

In the third stage (2010-2021), the emirate becomes one of the key players on the Afghan track. This was primarily facilitated by the opening of the Taliban political office in Doha in 2013. Thanks to this, the Qatari capital is turning into a diplomatic hub in Afghan settlement issues.

The consolidation of Qatar in Afghanistan was largely facilitated by the US fatigue with the "endless war" in this country. The Americans imagined a new Vietnam, and, in an attempt to prevent it, Washington tried to set ground for establishing direct contacts with the Taliban.

In particular, in 2008-2009, the United States and its NATO allies began to attempt to start negotiations with the Taliban. In September 2009, German intelligence officers and diplomats met with the Taliban in Dubai. Over the course of the year, Germany held eight more meetings with the Movement.

This laid the foundation for the involvement of the United States in the negotiation process with the

Taliban. On November 28, 2010, the first direct meeting between the United States and representatives of the Movement took place near Munich. However, according to Pakistani journalist A. Rashid, the Taliban wanted to see a neutral Muslim country at the table, so they asked to invite Qatari officials to the meeting.

In February and May 2010, two more meetings between the United States and the Movement took place in Qatar and Germany. The parties tried to develop measures to strengthen confidence between the Taliban and the Americans, which included lifting sanctions on the Taliban, releasing imprisoned Movement fighters, and opening a representative office of the Movement [6].

In 2011, with the assistance of the United States and the government of Qatar, families of members of the Qatari political office were transported from Pakistan to Doha [7]. On June 18, 2013, the ceremonial opening of the political office of the Taliban Movement in Doha took place, which had far-reaching consequences for the Afghan settlement.

According to Afghan scholar O. Nessar, in addition to legalizing the Taliban's contacts with representatives of foreign states and international organizations, the opening of the office made it possible to partially remove the Taliban movement from Pakistan's influence. According to various sources, there were up to 500-600 Taliban and members of their families in the Qatari capital, led by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar. Before this, the families of leading Taliban figures were effectively hostages in Pakistan, which ensured the "good behavior" of the Taliban [8].

The placement of the Taliban political office gave Qatar the opportunity to exert a certain influence on the parties to the Afghan settlement. Just a year after the Taliban office began operating, the Taliban exchanged prisoners of war with the United States (2014) through the mediation of the Emir of Qatar.

In response to the release of Sergeant B. Bergdahl, the United States released a number of high-ranking members of the movement from Guantanamo Bay. Among them were the former governor of Herat Province and one of the founders of the group, Khairullah Khairkhwa, the former commander of the army, Mullah Mohammed Fazl, the former civilian head of the northern zone, Norullah Nuri, and the former deputy head of intelligence, Abdul Haq Wasiq. [9]. All of them subsequently began working in the Taliban political office in Doha.

Not stopping there, Doha continued its activities in this direction. With the direct participation of the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hammad al-Thani, in the summer of 2015, the Taliban freed four Tajik border

guards who had crossed the border of Kunduz Province in search of firewood. In total, the soldiers spent more than 6 months in captivity.

It is quite natural that the presence of the political office of the Taliban in Qatar caused discontent in Afghanistan and a number of Arab countries of the Persian Gulf. In February 2017, the President of the IRA Mohammad Ashraf Ghani, participating in negotiations with the Qatari authorities, stated that the office of the insurgent movement should be closed if the Taliban did not abandon violent armed struggle [10].

Moreover, according to O. Nessar, the increasing influence of foreign countries on the peace process in Afghanistan and the Taliban caused concerns in Washington, which sought to maintain monopoly control over issues of war and peace in this country. In July 2018, the New York Times reported that "the Trump administration has instructed the State Department to prepare for direct negotiations with the Taliban." An important moment in this regard was the appointment of Z. Khalilzad as the US Special Representative for Afghan Reconciliation in September 2018. The emphasis was on the fact that Khalilzad is an ethnic Pashtun, knows Afghanistan well and is allegedly close to Afghan President Ashraf Ghani [11].

According to the US Congressional Research Service, two confidential meetings were held in Doha between US officials and Taliban representatives. The first was held with the participation of Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State E. Wells (July 2018), the second - with US Special Representative for Afghanistan Z. Khalilzad (October 2018). At the same time, Washington did not officially confirm the fact that the above-mentioned meetings were held [12].

Moreover, the United States also attempted to change the negotiating platform. This was facilitated by offers from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which promised to organize meetings with the "real" Taliban leaders. In 2018, Khalilzad held talks in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, which, however, ended in complete failure [13].

In October 2018, the Trump administration began formal direct talks with the Taliban in Doha, to which members of the Afghan government were not invited. A total of 9 rounds of talks took place, which lasted 18 months with varying success. On February 29, 2020, the United States and the Taliban signed a historic peace agreement in Doha. Its provisions included the withdrawal of all Western troops from Afghanistan, a promise by the Taliban to prevent al-Qaeda activity in areas under Taliban control, and negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government.

The agreement set a timeline for the withdrawal of American and coalition troops. In fact, it opened the

way for the complete withdrawal of Western troops, accompanied by the fall of the A. Ghani regime and the coming to power of Taliban. At the same time, it is quite obvious that the withdrawal of the American contingent from Afghanistan is not a direct consequence of the Doha deal, but of the miscalculations and mistakes made by Washington during its 20 years of presence in Afghanistan.

#### **Stage Four - Qatar's transformation into a key player on the Afghan track**

Stage Four (August 15, 2021 - present) marked the apotheosis of Qatari policy in Afghanistan. The Taliban Movement's rise to power in Afghanistan, considered a disaster by many countries, opened a new window of opportunity for Qatar. Taking advantage of its position in Afghanistan, as well as its connections with the Taliban leadership, the emirate stepped up its policy in this direction.

Qatar played one of the key roles in the evacuation of foreign citizens and Afghans from Afghanistan. The emirate placed the evacuees at the Al Udeid military base, which became the main transit point for passengers from Afghanistan. According to Qatari data, more than 75 thousand were placed there in the initial stages of the seizure of power, according to American data - 58 thousand. In total, during this period, a total of 124 thousand people were taken out of Afghanistan [14].

In addition, Qatari officials secured a decision from the new Afghan authorities to extend the evacuation period for all those who wanted to leave the country. The Qatari ambassador to Afghanistan personally accompanied people leaving through Taliban's checkpoint.

Together with Turkey, the Qatari authorities, under security guarantees provided by the Taliban, restored the operation of the control and technical services of the international airport in Kabul, which allowed humanitarian and domestic flights to resume in early September 2021.

According to American analyst D. Esfandiari, "no country has managed to carry out a large-scale evacuation process without the participation of Qatar." The evacuation was carried out either by planes of the national carrier Qatar Airways, or through the American Al-Udeid airbase, from where foreign citizens could fly to third countries. Moreover, Qatar financed the construction of an emergency field hospital, shelters and toilets, and ensured the uninterrupted delivery of essential supplies [15].

Qatar's efforts were recognized by the United States. On August 20, 2021, then-US President Joseph Biden

thanked Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani for his assistance in organizing the evacuation. Biden noted that "this was the largest airlift operation in history, and it could not have been done without the assistance of Qatar."

Qatar received the greatest dividends in the diplomatic space. After the Taliban captured Kabul, most Western embassies - the United States, Great Britain, Italy, Japan and other countries - were moved to Qatar. Against this background, Western diplomats and politicians began to visit Doha more often.

In August-September 2021, the heads of the diplomatic missions of the United States, Germany, Great Britain, the Netherlands and Italy visited Qatar. Moreover, in November 2021, the United States and Qatar agreed that the Qatari embassy would represent the diplomatic interests of the American side in Afghanistan.

US-Taliban meetings in Qatar continued after the Taliban seized power in Afghanistan. On October 8, 2022, senior White House officials held their first talks with the Taliban in Doha since the elimination of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.

The American delegation included CIA Deputy Director David Cohen and Special Representative for Afghanistan Thomas West. The Taliban were represented by the head of the intelligence agency, Mullah Abdul Haq Wasiq. Thus, for a time, Qatar became the main mediator between the collective West and the new Afghan authorities. There has never been a precedent like this before or since in the modern history of Qatar. The emirate's diplomacy has reached unprecedented heights. For a state that was under economic and diplomatic blockade just a couple of years ago, this is a major achievement.

#### **CONCLUSIONS**

Qatar's foreign policy in Afghanistan has gone through several successive stages. The Emirate gradually increased its efforts in the Afghan direction, wisely using its existing capabilities. No less importantly, Qatar took into account some of the shortcomings of its policy (Syria, Yemen, Sudan, and partly Palestine), so it did not force its participation in Afghan affairs.

The turning point that determined Qatar's role in Afghanistan was the opening of the political office of the Doha. From that moment on, Doha actively joined the struggle for advanced positions in the Afghan track. The Emirate hosted the first intra-Afghan negotiations, facilitated the signing of a peace agreement between the United States and the Doha, and also provided a platform for negotiations between the Taliban and the United States and a number of other countries. During

the hasty and, frankly speaking, poorly organized campaign to evacuate foreigners and Afghans, Qatar played a critical role, allowing Western countries to withdraw thousands of people and save some face.

As a result, the emirate became the center of gravity of the international community on almost all key issues concerning Afghanistan. For some time, Doha became the main mediator between Western countries and the Taliban. After the fall of the A. Ghani regime, many Western embassies were relocated to Doha. Naturally, this status is temporary. Qatar does not have the strength or the ability to occupy such a position for a long time. However, the very fact that such a small state has received this status in such a complex case as the Afghan conflict seems to be a unique phenomenon that should be studied in the world's leading diplomatic academies.

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