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## ARTICLE

# Qatar's multifaceted humanitarian role in Afghanistan since August 2021

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**Abstract**

**Motivation:** Qatar's humanitarian role in Afghanistan, a less-explored example of a non-traditional actor, is crucial in understanding international responses to geopolitical crises. Examining Qatar's involvement provides insights into the complex dynamics of humanitarian assistance, diplomatic efforts, and post-crisis challenges.

**Purpose:** The study examines Qatar's multifaceted role in Afghanistan since 2021, highlighting its impact as a non-traditional actor in complex humanitarian operations and diplomacy.

**Approach and methods:** The research combines a desk review of online sources, academic literature, reports, non-governmental organization documents, and media articles with first-hand observations and informal stakeholder interviews. It also analyses international aid statistics from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs' Financial Tracking Service and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee.

**Findings:** Qatar emerged as a key humanitarian player in Afghanistan, adopting a whole-of-society approach. Its efforts encompassed emergency relief, evacuations, educational support, and humanitarian diplomacy, effectively bridging the Taliban with international actors after the takeover.

**Policy implications:** This research highlights the impactful role of non-traditional donors, as seen with Qatar in Afghanistan, emphasizing their potential in complex humanitarian scenarios. The study advocates recognizing and leveraging the unique capabilities of smaller states and non-traditional actors in humanitarian responses, promoting capacity building to harness their institutional agility and societal resources effectively.

**KEYWORDS**

Afghanistan, humanitarian action, humanitarian assistance, humanitarian diplomacy, Qatar

[Correction added on 13 september 2024 after the first publication: The author's affiliation and acknowledgements have been updated]

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 triggered an extensive international evacuation effort and resulted in a local humanitarian emergency. In this complex and shifting environment, Qatar assumed a key humanitarian role, spanning aid delivery, development support, and diplomatic engagement. This article provides a holistic assessment of Qatar's humanitarian role in Afghanistan since the Taliban's return to power. It situates this case study within research literatures on humanitarian action in highly challenging settings, on the role of non-traditional donors, and on humanitarian action in Gulf states.

Qatar's contribution to the humanitarian response to the Afghanistan crisis is not surprising. For over a decade, Qatar has been pivotal in Afghanistan's regional and international diplomacy. In 2013, the first Taliban Political Office was established in Qatar. Doha also hosted the US–Taliban talks, the intra-Afghan talks, and the signing of the US–Taliban agreement in February 2020. Nevertheless, the multifaceted role of Qatar in Afghanistan since 2021 represents an important case study of a “non-traditional actor” engaging in complex humanitarian operations and humanitarian diplomacy. Furthermore, the experience has been widely perceived to have brought about positive outcomes in a highly challenging context.

This article first outlines its theoretical framework. It then positions the study against Afghanistan's shifting backdrop under the Taliban and introduces Qatar's role as a humanitarian actor. This article uses mini case studies to showcase Qatar's diverse humanitarian actions in Afghanistan. This includes the delivery of aid by two Qatari humanitarian organizations, education in emergencies programming, the international evacuations of civilians from Afghanistan, and Qatar's role in humanitarian diplomacy. Finally, the article discusses the significance of the main findings and offers a brief conclusion.

This study adopted a multifaceted research approach, using various data collection methods to explore Qatar's humanitarian role in Afghanistan. Public online sources informed the desk review phase and underpinned the secondary data analysis. Sources ranged from academic works and official reports to non-governmental organization (NGO) documents and media articles. Primary research played a vital role in the study, in particular through author observations based on professional engagement with Qatari entities and informal interviews with key stakeholders such as agency officials, international experts, and NGO staff. The study used international datasets, including United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Financial Tracking System (FTS), and the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD-DAC), for aid statistics. Integrating these qualitative methods offered a comprehensive and nuanced insight into Qatar's humanitarian efforts.

## 2 | THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION AND RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

Studies on Afghanistan's humanitarian situation post-August 2021 have spanned multiple dimensions. Public health challenges have received significant attention, including deteriorating child and maternal health indicators (Rahmat et al., 2023; Rubenstein et al., 2023) and the near collapse of the health system (Arif et al., 2023; Quadri et al., 2022). The intersection between humanitarian action and women's rights has also emerged as a critical research area, highlighting the vulnerabilities and needs of Afghan women and girls (Akbari & True, 2022; Akramy & Aiyaz, 2022; Hashemy et al., 2023).

Furthermore, recent research has focused on the politics and ethics of continued international engagement with the Taliban authorities in response to the humanitarian crisis (Fishstein & Farahi, 2023; Jackson & Weigand, 2023; Slim, 2023; Strand & Suhrke, 2021; Yousaf & Jabarkhail, 2022). Research has also examined the roles and responsibilities of regional and international actors in Afghanistan under the Taliban as primarily addressing political dialogue, monitoring mechanisms, and aid delivery (McKechnie et al., 2022). However, in-depth analyses of individual humanitarian contributors remain scarce, with exceptions including studies of China and

Indonesia (Masdar et al., 2022; Niu & Huang, 2022). This article contributes to filling this gap through an in-depth examination of Qatar as a single humanitarian partner within the Afghan context.

Moreover, there has been a growing recognition of the inadequacy of purely humanitarian interventions. Scholars have argued for longer-term developmental approaches that tackle the complex, interconnected challenges facing Afghanistan, underscoring the need for a more integrated and sustainable strategy (Abawe et al., 2022; Bizhan, 2022; Bowden et al., 2022). This article contributes to this evolving understanding of humanitarian action in complex political emergencies, particularly in the context of Afghanistan, where unrecognised *de facto* authorities govern. This offers a powerful illustration of both the obstacles to and opportunities for constructive humanitarian and development engagement and the multifaceted nature of the response required.

This research enhances the comparative study of what is termed “non-traditional donors,” a field that includes a diverse array of state actors such as BRICS nations, Turkey, and Gulf states. These donors are frequently contrasted with “traditional” OECD-DAC donors, typically based on factors influencing their humanitarian and development aid methodologies (Kragelund, 2011). However, often such comparisons do not delve deeply into the specific practices of these donors or fully consider the complex environments in which they operate (Brezhneva & Ukhova, 2013; Gong, 2021; Özerdem, 2019). Moving past the binary label of “non-traditionality,” this study offers an in-depth examination of Qatar’s distinctive approach within its geopolitical sphere, thereby enriching the body of knowledge on the sophisticated strategies and evolving roles of Gulf states in the domain of foreign aid (Ulrichsen, 2024). The nuanced analysis provided here underlines the importance of contextualized understanding in appreciating the full spectrum of international donorship dynamics.

Applying this framework of non-traditional donorship to Qatar’s activities offers a gateway to examining the broader spectrum of Gulf states’ aid practices, which have collectively emerged as a prominent and distinct group within the realm of non-traditional donors. Over the past few decades, the humanitarian roles of the different Gulf states have undergone a major transformation, shifting from primarily providers of ad hoc and largely discretionary assistance to become proactive humanitarian actors with myriad roles including humanitarian operations, advocacy, diplomacy, and education (Elkahlout & Milton, 2023). However, public perceptions have not evolved as rapidly to reflect this change, with the grouping of wealthy countries often perceived as mere funders rather than implementers, facilitators, and advocates in the humanitarian field. This article will demonstrate Qatar’s diverse roles, spanning aid delivery, development co-operation, evacuation efforts, and humanitarian diplomacy. This case study is notable for delving into these roles, whose breadth is unusual among emerging or “non-traditional” actors in humanitarian action.

Moreover, the article situates itself within a paradigm shift relating to Gulf states in humanitarian and development policy research. Historically, research in this field has centred on more generalized issues, such as identifying patterns in aid data or analysing Gulf aid through the prism of international relations theory, in particular the motivations behind aid based on interests, ideas, and institutions (AlMezaini, 2021; Barakat & Zyck, 2010; Kharas, 2015). Such frameworks, while insightful, often fail to capture the granular intricacies of aid delivery in particular geopolitical contexts. Recognizing this gap, a scholarly movement has emerged that looks to examine concrete aid practices in specific country contexts, including studies of Qatari and Emirati aid to Syria (Pericoli, 2023), Qatar’s humanitarian response in Darfur (Alarabeed, 2023), and Saudi aid to Yemen (Bordón & Alrefai, 2023). This evolving approach heralds a deeper understanding of how humanitarian and development initiatives are inextricably linked to the complex realities of the recipients and how these are negotiated within the ambit of global humanitarian principles and local conditions. In accordance with this research trajectory, this article explores Qatar’s varied humanitarian roles in Afghanistan. It transcends general analyses to concentrate on practical measures, strategies, and results, providing a rich, context-specific understanding of how one Gulf state operates within the challenging humanitarian landscape of Afghanistan. In doing so, the article makes both an empirical and a theoretical contribution, offering valuable insights into the dynamics and implications of this shift in humanitarian and development studies related to the Gulf states.

### 3 | CONTEXT

This section briefly outlines the context of Afghanistan as well as Qatar's humanitarian role in its changing political landscape after August 2021.

#### 3.1 | Afghanistan under renewed Taliban rule

On August 15, 2021, the Taliban seized Kabul, regaining control over Afghanistan. Afghanistan has endured conflict and unrest over the past four decades, spanning the 1979 Soviet invasion, the Soviet–Afghan war, and the civil war in the 1990s. Following the 2001 invasion, Afghanistan was the site of a major multinational military intervention aimed at stabilizing the country and defeating the Taliban, with large parts of rural and peripheral Afghanistan affected by the ongoing conflict. The Taliban takeover led to the withdrawal of US and allied forces and the signing of the US–Taliban agreement in February 2020 (Harpviken, 2023). A notable development following the return of the Taliban is the unprecedented security level in Afghanistan.

Despite this negative peace, Afghanistan faces a multidimensional crisis under Taliban governance (Jackson & Weigand, 2023). In the period 2001–2021, Afghanistan underwent extensive Western-led reconstruction, with around USD 4 billion in aid provided annually (Malejacq, 2020). Post-August 2021, the Taliban emerged as *de facto* rulers without international recognition or legitimacy. Sanctions, asset freezes, and aid cessation have drastically altered Afghanistan's socioeconomic landscape (Essar et al., 2022).

Consequently, the humanitarian and development situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated. The economy has declined significantly since the Taliban's return, in particular due to the fall in aid, which previously accounted for around 75% of government expenditure. The levels of unemployment and poverty have risen with the currency's fall. The healthcare system, which was heavily reliant on foreign aid, is facing collapse, with shortages of medical supplies and staff (Quadri et al., 2022). There is also a lack of funding for vital health programmes that were previously supported by international organizations. Education has also been affected, with the Taliban enforcing gender-segregated classes and, in some areas, banning girls from attending school past sixth grade (Ahmadi & Sultan, 2023). This has led to a generation at risk of a complete educational void. A displacement crisis unfolded as more than 200,000 Afghans fled, intensifying the “brain drain,” which further eroded Afghan national capacities and institutions (Sandvik et al., 2022).

This changed context of Taliban rule has created a challenging context for the international aid response in Afghanistan. The lack of Taliban recognition has halted conventional state-structured development funding, leaving only global humanitarian aid since August 2021 (Curry et al., 2023). Additionally, the Taliban's return has brought about complex regional and international political dynamics. Controversy surrounds the ethics of engaging with the Taliban to influence policies on fundamental issues of interest to international donors, such as human rights protections, inclusive governance, and education and employment for Afghan women and girls (Bateman, 2023; Strand & Suhrke, 2021).

Qatar's emergence as an important humanitarian actor in the Afghanistan crisis after 2021 should be understood within this context of Afghanistan becoming one of the world's worst humanitarian crises. Despite the challenging environment, aid continued to flow to Afghanistan with USD 6.9 billion in humanitarian assistance pledged by international donors from August 2021 to September 2023 (Qazizada, 2023). The leading donors to Afghanistan during this period included the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Japan, and the European Union. Although Qatari aid is less visible in OCHA tracking data, the following section offers an analysis of various aspects of Qatar's multifaceted humanitarian role in Afghanistan during this post-2021 phase.

## 4 | CASE STUDIES OF QATAR'S HUMANITARIAN ROLE IN AFGHANISTAN

This section presents mini case studies of Qatar's humanitarian role in Afghanistan since the Taliban's return in August 2021. It begins with the provision of humanitarian assistance, followed by combined humanitarian and development assistance, and then analyses Qatar's role in humanitarian diplomacy.

### 4.1 | Aid delivery

This section begins by presenting the overall trends and patterns in Qatar's humanitarian aid to Afghanistan since 2021. It then analyses the experience of the two main relief agencies, the Qatar Red Crescent Society (QRCS) and Qatar Charity (QC), in conducting aid operations in Afghanistan since mid-2021.

#### 4.1.1 | Qatari aid to Afghanistan

Qatar's assistance to Afghanistan began in 1984 during the civil war with the Qatar Committee for Orphan Sponsors (QC, 2022b). The organization's first office was opened in Pakistan and was later renamed Qatar Charity, now Qatar's leading NGO. Although it is challenging to track Qatari aid prior to 2019 due to uneven reporting, Qatar provided at least USD 13 million in humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan during the 2013–2019 period (OCHA FTS, n.d.). Qatar's modest contributions during this period were primarily routed through United Nations (UN) agencies, including the OCHA-administered Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund, the Afghan Government, and QRCS.

There is evidence that Qatar's humanitarian and development role in Afghanistan was increasing in the years prior to the signing of the 2020 Doha agreement between the United States and the Taliban, during which Qatar was heavily involved in mediation with Afghan parties. OECD data show that Qatar's total overseas development assistance (ODA) payments to Afghanistan amounted to USD 32 million during 2019–2021 (OECD QWIDS, n.d.). Furthermore, in 2019, Qatar provided USD 1 million for material relief assistance and services through the Qatar Fund for Development (QFFD). In 2020, Qatar's annual aid to Afghanistan was approximately USD 0.82 million, mainly distributed through QFFD and Qatar University to address COVID-19 needs and to promote education, respectively. For the same year, FTS OCHA reported the provision of 11 tonnes of personal protective equipment, medical supplies, and medical equipment valued at USD 0.854 million (FTS OCHA, n.d.).

However, Qatar's humanitarian role increased significantly after the return of the Taliban and the onset of the multidimensional crisis in Afghanistan. Qatar views itself as an actor with a pivotal role in the peace deal, helping those who had left Afghanistan and sending tonnes of aid to those who stayed (Afghan evacuees prefer life, 2022). This increase in humanitarian aid is clear from recent data.

Following the 2021 Taliban takeover, Qatari organizations provided substantial aid to Afghanistan. For instance, at the multilateral level, Qatar supported the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) via the UN Afghanistan Flash Appeal (OCHA FTS, n.d.). However, Qatar's total assistance to Afghanistan in 2021 is not accurately captured by FTS data, which only show contributions of around USD 0.85 million. Rather, in September 2021, Qatar's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs stated that Qatar's financial assistance to Afghanistan was expected to reach USD 50 million for 2021 alone (Qarjouli, 2021). The statement is reflected in self-reported aid from Qatari organizations on their websites. For example, QRCS reported budgets for its Afghanistan projects of QAR 55.2 million in 2021 (more than USD 15 million) and QC stated that it had donated 245 tonnes of relief to more than 60,000 beneficiaries in Afghanistan (CHS, 2022; QC, 2022a; Qatar Red Crescent Society. (n.d.-a)).

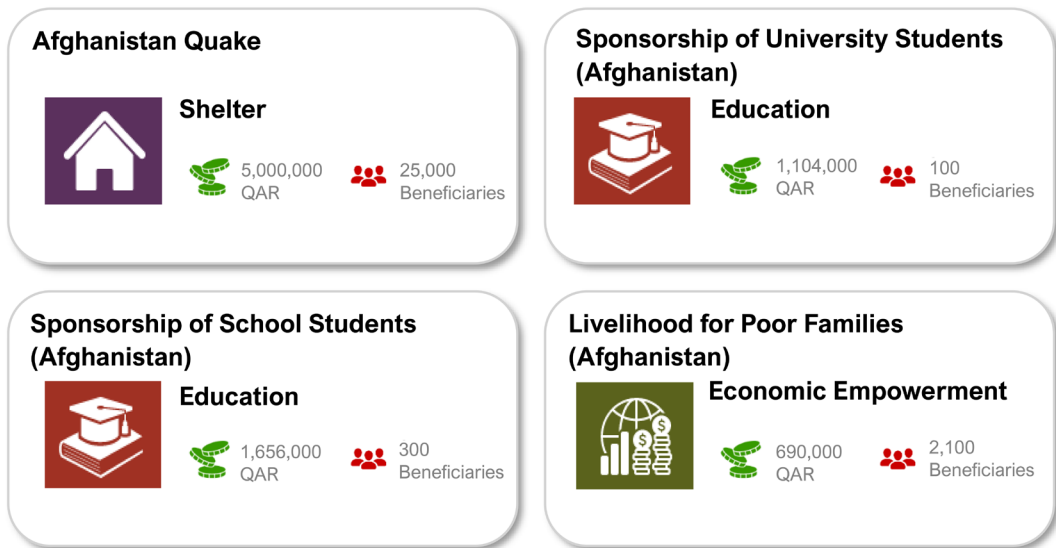


FIGURE 1 Qatar Red Crescent Society highlighted projects in Afghanistan (1 QAR=0.275 USD as of 2022). Source: QRCS n.d.-a.

The most substantial aid, totalling USD 30.2 million in 2021, was reported to OECD-DAC, predominantly for emergency response services (OECD QWIDS, n.d.). Part of the aid was the result of a partnership between the QFFD and UNHCR in December 2021 (QFFD, 2022; UNHCR, 2021). Emergency airlifts delivered vital supplies, such as solar lights and thermal blankets, to Afghan families enduring winter and worsening humanitarian conditions (QFFD, 2022). The rest of the aid provided was for basic health care (approximately USD 0.5 million), higher education (approximately USD 76,000) and vocational training (around USD 72,000). The 2021 Annual Report for QFFD lists continued support for the Digital Citizen Fund, as well as scholarships for the “Afghan Dreamers” girls robotics team to study at Qatar Foundation (QF) (QFFD, 2022).

As per 2022, FTS does not provide data on Qatar's donations to the Afghanistan Humanitarian Response Plan 2022, the major fundraising appeal launched by the UN that year (OCHA FTS, 2022). However, in March 2022, at the High-Level Pledging Event on Supporting the Humanitarian Response in Afghanistan, Qatar announced an additional pledge of USD 25 million for the humanitarian response in Afghanistan (MOFA, 2022a; UNOCHA, 2022).

Qatari organizations also consistently reported the provision of assistance to Afghanistan in 2022 after the increase in aid in 2021. The following section will document the unreported aid in more detail to accurately evaluate the scope of Qatar's assistance to Afghanistan (see Figures 1 and 2).

#### 4.1.2 | Qatar Red Crescent Society

The QRCS, which has been active in Afghanistan, offers country-specific reporting tools on its website. Table 1 shows QRCS assistance during 2021–2022, with no data available before 2021 as of June 2024. The 2022 data, regularly updated, record projects of QAR 15,441,100 (over USD 4 million), a beneficiary reach of 94,490 involving 38 partner organizations. The lack of detailed reporting on QRCS's site, however, leads to ambiguity regarding the cost and beneficiary framework. Notable weekly fluctuations in project costs are evident on the website, as Table 1 indicates.

The QRCS site also breaks down the data by project, detailing beneficiaries and budgets (see Table 2). The projects cover the sectors of education, water, and sanitation, shelter, food assistance, and health. The 10 projects reach 63,190 beneficiaries with a budget plan of QAR 9.502 million (over USD 2.5 million), of which an estimated 1% is raised



FIGURE 2 QRCS projects in Afghanistan in 2021, 2022, and 2023 (1 QAR=0.275 USD as of 2022).  
Source: QRCS [n.d.-a](#).

TABLE 1 QRCS online reporting for Afghanistan as of October 27 and November 6, 2022.

Year	Project cost (QAR)	No. beneficiaries	No. partners
2021	55,238,688 (around USD 15 million)	449,930 beneficiaries	38 partners
As of October 27, 2022	15,441,100 (over USD 4 million)	94,490 beneficiaries	38 partners
As of November 6, 2022	10,569,000 (around USD 3 million)	47,450 beneficiaries	99 partners

Source: QRCS, [n.d.-a](#).

through the online platform (QAR 100,436 or around USD 27,000). This data is available on an online platform aimed at increasing public donations. It is presumed that the tallied amount represents funds from private online donations and excludes larger sums from private individuals off-platform as well as the core streams of government funding to QRCS.

Overall, these data are revealing in that they indicate that Qatar's aid to Afghanistan focuses on humanitarian aid, rapid relief, and educational investment. This relief aid is provided through multiple modalities, including food and shelter for internally displaced and poor people. Additionally, there is a prominent role of public fundraising to support QRCS operations in Afghanistan. For instance, based on the data available by November 16, 2022, QRCS launched the Afghanistan Relief Campaign that reached approximately 52,000 beneficiaries (QRCS, [n.d.-c](#)). Similarly, the Afghanistan Quake - Urgent Relief Fund was launched in response to the June 2022 earthquake and floods and aimed at raising QAR 9,315,600 (over USD 2.5 million) and reaching 65,350 beneficiaries (Qatar Red Crescent Society, [n.d.-b](#)).

Another emerging theme is the importance of partnerships for humanitarian access and aid delivery in QRCS operations. The QRCS operates extensively through the Afghan Red Crescent Society (ARCS) for the distribution of assistance. For instance, as part of the earthquake response in October 2022, 800 kits of non-food items were distributed to 800 families in co-operation with the ARCS (QRCS, [2022b](#)). Humanitarian partnerships have also involved other Red Crescent societies in the Gulf region. Between October 2021 and July 2022, 105 tonnes of miscellaneous foodstuffs and 18 tonnes of hygiene items were delivered, primarily to 31,500 people displaced by disaster or conflict in the provinces of Kunar, Takhar, and Zabul. The aid deliveries were part of an agreement between the QRCS and the Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) in co-operation with the ARCS (QRCS, [2022a](#)).

TABLE 2 QRCS online reporting for projects in Afghanistan in 2022 as of October 27, 2022 (1 QAR=0.275 USD as of 2022).

Project title	Sector	Beneficiaries	Raised funds/ QAR	Target budget/ QAR	% Raised
Sponsorship of University Students (Afghanistan)	Education	100	5,484	1,104,000	0.50%
Sponsorship of School Students (Afghanistan)	Education	300	12,320	1,656,000	0.70%
Digging of Artesian Wells with Solar Pumps (Afghanistan)	Water & Sanitation	15,750	40,844	1,870,000	2.20%
Blankets for Poor & Affected Families (Afghanistan)	Shelter	8,260	270	300,900	0.10%
Tarpaulins for Poor Families (Afghanistan)	Shelter	8,260	175	141,600	0.10%
Give Food to Internally Displaced Afghani Families	Food	7,500	17,445	600,000	2.90%
Relieve Internally Displaced Afghani Families	Shelter	15,000	12,265	1,155,600	1.10%
Food Parcels for the Poor & Displaced People (Afghanistan)	Food	6,370	530	364,000	0.10%
Cataract Surgeries (Afghanistan)	Health	1,500	773	825,000	0.10%
Cardiac Catheterizations for Children (Afghanistan)	Health	150	10,330	1,485,000	0.70%
Total		63,190 beneficiaries	QAR 100,436	QAR 9,502,100	1% (avg.)

Source: QRCS, n.d.-d.

Equally co-funded by QRCS and KRCS, the project cost totalled USD 548,000, which was not listed in the FTS reporting system for the year of 2022 (QRCS, 2022a; OCHA FTS, n.d.).

#### 4.1.3 | Qatar Charity

Qatar Charity is the country's largest charitable and humanitarian organization, with operations in many countries. Similarly to QRCS, the QC website also reports project- and country-level disaggregated data, although no data are available for Afghanistan. This is in part due to the limited presence in Afghanistan, with the 2020 annual impact report not mentioning assistance to the country directly, but rather through aid to Pakistan (QC, 2021a, p. 33). Reporting for projects in other countries also appears to have been scant, with missing variable entries, such as project description, justification, and expected results. Furthermore, the implementation period is unreported.

Despite the absence of online reporting, QC has been active in assisting Afghanistan since the Taliban returned in 2021. In early September 2021, QC delivered the first batch of 15 tonnes of food to support 10,000 families in Afghanistan via Qatar Airways (QC, 2021b). QC also continued partnering with UNHCR, UNICEF, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and OCHA for assistance to Afghanistan and Afghani refugees in other countries (QFFD, 2022, p. 40; Salari, 2022; Gulf Times, 2022; UNHCR, 2022).

On March 28, 2022, QC stated that it “continues to support the 10M children in need of humanitarian aid in Afghanistan” (QC, 2022c). In June 2022, it launched the Help People in Afghanistan campaign after the earthquake to provide for their immediate needs, which included food, non-food items, shelter, and emergency care. This included a shipment provided by QC in co-operation with QFFD, containing 13 tonnes of aid (MOFA, 2022b). Furthermore, in August 2022, urgent relief aid was provided to flood-affected Afghan refugees in Pakistan's Balochistan province bordering Afghanistan, which helped more than 9,000 Afghan refugees and individuals from the host community (QNA, 2022a).

Compared to QRCS, QC's presence and operations in Afghanistan appear relatively limited. On November 2, 2022, the Qatari ambassador to Afghanistan announced in a meeting with the acting Foreign Minister of the de facto administration that Qatar is interested in opening an office for QC in Afghanistan to better assist the country (Jafari, 2022).

## 4.2 | Education in emergencies

Qatar's humanitarian role in Afghanistan has involved a particularly strong emphasis on education in the context of the humanitarian emergency and the wider displacement crisis. The past few decades have witnessed the evolution of education in emergencies and conflict as a professionalized sub-field of humanitarian response and education policy (Burde et al., 2017; Kagawa, 2005). Afghanistan itself has been an important case in the formation of this academic and practitioner sub-field, especially in relation to the role of education in post-conflict reconstruction and state-building (Rubin & Rudeforth, 2016; Spink, 2005). Following the return of Taliban rule in Afghanistan, a significant international education response emerged (Education Cluster & UNICEF, 2022). Education in emergencies responses in this environment has faced various challenges, including a decline in access and quality at all levels, major restrictions on girls' access to education, teacher shortages, and obstacles to international assistance with education support classified as developmental rather than humanitarian aid (Ahmadi & Ebadi, 2022; SIGAR, 2023).

During the past few decades, Qatar has emerged as a “non-traditional” humanitarian and development partner with a particularly strong emphasis on education at all levels. Qatar's commitment to education is evident in its nation-building strategy, which includes large-scale investment in its Education City and the World Innovation Summit on Education (WISE). This commitment to education is apparent in the multiple forms of education in emergencies programming and engagement carried out by Qatar in relation to Afghanistan since mid-2021.

First, Qatari humanitarian organizations have provided conventional forms of educational emergency assistance to Afghanistan since mid-2021. In March 2023, QFFD signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Afghanistan's Ministry of Education for new commitments to the out-of-school children's education project with the aim of enrolling 30,000 out-of-school primary children, 50% of whom are girls, in several provinces across Afghanistan (QFFD signs MoU, 2023). In April 2023, through the previously established airbridge for delivering humanitarian aid in 2021, QC and QRCS managed to deliver 60 tonnes of educational materials and food aid (Qarjouli, 2023a).

Second, Qatar's sizeable domestic educational infrastructure was mobilized as part of a whole-of-society response to Afghanistan's educational and evacuation crises. For instance, the all-female Afghan robotics team, known as the Afghan Dreamers, was evacuated from Kabul through the personal intervention of the Qatari ambassador to Kabul. The continuation of their education in Education City was jointly funded by QF and QFFD. That initiative has had a major impact on the lives of the recipients, with at least three of the young women securing places at universities in other countries after their year in Doha. The robotics team members cite the English language instruction and guidance in university application processes offered by QF as a major factor in navigating their path towards higher

education. A team member remarked that “it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say, Qatar has been the gateway to a better life and future for us” (QF, 2022). Additionally, a group of 111 Afghan schoolgirls attending a special leadership school in Kabul, sponsored by the Government of Qatar, was able to fly out to Doha (Aguilar, 2021).

Third, another significant Qatari contribution is in higher education, which is often neglected in emergencies response (Milton, 2017). On September 21, 2021, Education Above All, the QFFD, the Afghan Future Fund (AFF), Schmidt Futures, the Yalda Hakim Foundation, Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, and the Institute of International Education (IIE) announced the launch of the Qatar Afghan Scholarship Project (QASP) to provide an opportunity for Afghan students to continue their studies on full scholarships at more than 40 colleges and universities in more than 17 states in the United States (IIE, 2022; QSAP, n.d.). The first cohort of 250 displaced Afghan students was welcomed by QASP to US colleges and universities for the 2022–2023 academic year.

In addition to traditional scholarship programmes, Qatar uniquely facilitated the relocation of an Afghan university to Doha. After August 2021, Qatar evacuated hundreds of students and their accompanying family members from the American University of Afghanistan (AUAF), the leading private university in the country. Its existence came under threat in 2016 when the Taliban targeted it as a representation of American influence in the country (Osman, 2016). In October 2021, the Qatari Ambassador to the United States announced that the main campus of the AUAF would be relocated to QF in Doha. The QF spokesperson pledged that—as part of an agreement between QF, QFFD, and the AUAF—QF will relocate 200 AUAF students over a two-year period, who will continue their studies (Packer, 2022). In August 2022, 60 female AUAF students were turned back by the Taliban from flying to Doha without a male relative (*mahram*) (Latifi, 2022). The President of AUAF confirmed that “once the campus in Qatar is operational, all of the women who were enrolled at AUAF last spring will have left Afghanistan and, very hopefully, most or all of the men as well” (Latifi, 2022). Meanwhile, in 2022, the Taliban managed to establish the Afghan International University (AIU) by means of an expropriation of AUAF buildings on land leased by AUAF from the Afghanistan government in Kabul (Saif, 2022).

Fourth, Qatar has been at the forefront of international dialogue on the issue of the right to education for all Afghans. On June 14, 2022, Doha hosted a trilateral dialogue between Muslim scholars (*ulemas*) from Afghanistan, Indonesia, and Qatar on the theme of “Rebuilding Afghanistan through Education with Islamic Values,” which was attended by 19 scholars from the three countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2022). Later, in December 2022, Qatar and Indonesia jointly hosted a major international conference in Bali on supporting women's education in Afghanistan (MOFA, 2022g). Doha has also been the site of sensitive but constructive engagements with the Taliban authorities on the issue of education in Afghanistan (Qarjoui, 2023b). This educational dialogue forms part of Qatar's wider humanitarian diplomacy, which is explored in the next section.

### 4.3 | Qatar's role in civilian evacuations from Afghanistan

This section explores Qatar's involvement in civilian evacuations from Afghanistan and assistance to evacuees in Doha. It extends the analysis of Qatar's role beyond the traditional provision of aid and development co-operation into a complex, whole-of-society initiative that requires multi-actor co-ordination and sophisticated humanitarian diplomacy.

#### 4.3.1 | The international civilian evacuation effort

During the withdrawal of US and NATO forces at the end of the 2001–2021 war in Afghanistan, large-scale evacuations of foreign citizens and some vulnerable Afghan citizens took place. Following the Taliban's swift territorial advances in mid-2021, international allies scrambled to evacuate before the 10 September,

2021, deadline negotiated with the Taliban. With the Taliban controlling all of Kabul except Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA), hostilities ceased and the evacuation operations were implemented, constituting the largest airlifts in history. Before those events, processing for asylum applications for Afghan allies was hindered by bureaucratic delays for the previous two years in the US State Department, the UK Home Office, and elsewhere (Holland, 2022).

The result of the poorly planned, haphazard evacuation from the most international military intervention in recent history was that many foreign states converged to approach Qatar for support in evacuating their civilian nationals and asylum applicants out of Afghanistan via Doha.<sup>1</sup> Qatar was the logical choice to support the large-scale evacuation effort, due to the open access it held with the Taliban Political Office hosted in Doha, the greater capacities of the national airline, Qatar Airways, as well as the presence of the US military base, given that the United States was at the forefront of the evacuation. The United States led evacuations before August 17, after which Qatar took the lead. Qatar managed the evacuation process from start to finish through co-ordination with the Qatari Embassy in Kabul by establishing communications and focal points with sponsoring entities, screening the documents of asylum applicants, escorting applicants to airport checkpoints and managing civilian evacuation flights. Assistant Foreign Minister Lolwah Al-Khater was designated Qatar's co-ordinator for evacuation and humanitarian efforts.

This process was further complicated by the increased security threats at the launch of the co-ordination on August 17, when erratic shooting broke out on airport grounds, and by the complexity of the co-ordination arrangements. Confusion emerged from different checkpoint locations and uncommunicated changes, such as the United States handing a checkpoint to Turkey without Qatar's knowledge. The process was slowed by necessary airport equipment often being lost or destroyed. Co-ordination with Taliban field commanders was necessary to secure escort protection and airport access, while movement was hindered by breakdowns in the chain of command and the absence of efficient sharing of internal information. The relevant individuals in the movement did not receive orders from senior Taliban officials to permit evacuees through. For example, the Qatari ambassador was personally involved in evacuating the *New York Times* staff from Kabul, and even at that level, the process took 18 hours. To regulate the flow of civilians allowed onto airport grounds, the Serena Hotel was set as an evacuee checkpoint, until it was leaked by the *Washington Post*, forcing Qatar to cancel missions.

From August 17, only Qatari and US military flights operated daily out of Kabul. After the withdrawal of US troops was completed on August 31, the process changed, and civilian flights resumed to and from HKIA in Kabul. To manage the heavy load of evacuees, some planes arrived in Doha, offloaded the evacuee passengers, changed pilots, and then immediately returned to Kabul. Qatar independently oversaw chartered flights, aiding the Taliban's efforts to re-establish civilian airport operations. The first commercial flights resumed on August 31, followed by the first Qatar Airways flights on September 9 and several times throughout the subsequent week. During the same period, four to five humanitarian flights to Kabul carried aid from the QRCS and the World Health Organization (WHO), in collaboration with other Qatari and international agencies, as MOFA personnel at the evacuation compound confirmed in the course of being interviewed in September 2021.

Throughout its engagement with the Taliban authorities, Qatar prioritized maintaining freedom of movement into and out of Afghanistan. In principle, the Taliban agreed, but took issue with the unplanned way that the evacuation was conducted and the way that many Afghans without legitimate documents were transferred out by other foreign states, although not by Qatar. This resulted in the Taliban often refusing to let evacuees through to the airport due to the lack of necessary travel documents. Qatar sought to resolve this issue by co-ordinating with the Taliban's Ministry of Interior and foreign states to issue the necessary passports and documents to those without papers. This was made more difficult by the closing of Western embassies that were requesting Afghan evacuees, rendering them unable to stamp the required visas into evacuees' passports.

<sup>1</sup>The information for this section draws on data gathered from interviews conducted with officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 16 to 23 September, 2021.

### 4.3.2 | Provisions for evacuees in Doha

The transit of evacuees in Qatar was initially planned as a brief stopover until the documentation and logistical arrangements for their final destination flight were determined. After the chaos of the first couple of days post-takeover, when civilians rushed onto empty aircraft, Afghan evacuees were not accepted onto the evacuation flights to Doha if they did not possess a valid visa or approval from a final destination state that would accept them. The evacuees' stay in Doha extended for weeks due to the difficulty faced by sponsoring entities in obtaining visa approvals and flight confirmation from their respective national asylum-processing systems.

More than 60,000 evacuees transited through Doha, and in mid-September Qatar was handling a further 6,154 evacuation requests and 5,383 safe passage requests in Kabul, with many people still blocked by the Taliban authorities from accessing the airport if they could not show official evacuation support. Evacuee numbers in Doha surged, rising as high as 43,000. Consequently, Qatar relocated evacuees from air hangars to closed residential compounds. The compounds offered better living conditions with upscale accommodation and amenities, including a supermarket, medical clinic, day-care centre with classes for young children, entertainment rooms, a tennis court, and *majlis*-style tents. Special events were regularly hosted, such as football tournaments organized by Generation Amazing in September 2021 in which the President of FIFA participated. Events were carefully organized with a view to addressing the psychosocial needs of the evacuees and providing some semblance of normalcy during a potentially highly traumatic life event. COVID-19 protocols included testing evacuees on arrival, during their stay, and before departure. Notably, there were only two confirmed positive cases of COVID-19, according to clinic staff interviewed in September 2021.

Addressing unaccompanied and vulnerable minors' needs was a major challenge for evacuation organizers, as most of them had been separated from their families during the mass crowding at the airport in August. A MOFA worker interviewed in September 2021 stated that there were 210 unaccompanied minors, of whom 12% were girls—whereas about half the accompanied minors were girls. Qatar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs established a family reunification programme with various institutions, including UNICEF and the IOM, in line with international child protection frameworks. In one week, 62 unaccompanied minors were united with families in Germany, Finland, Canada, and elsewhere. The unaccompanied minors were housed separately with round-the-clock personal carers from QC and Eid Charity, trained in psychosocial support for traumatized children, who would provide them with structured daily routines. Some children showed signs of trauma, with boys showing different symptoms to girls. A mental health department was established in September 2021 alongside the clinic, with staff estimating around 90% of the evacuees were in need of mental health support.

Qatar discovered through its role in the civilian evacuation from Kabul that the operations carried both collateral damage and collateral benefits. The operations were on an unprecedented scale in the history of Qatar's humanitarian operations, with approximately 43,000 Afghans in Qatar at one time due to the backlog in obtaining approvals from final destination states. The operation faced security threats such as illegal trafficking of weapons, cash, drugs, and gold. Furthermore, with the negative international press surrounding the haphazard planning for the evacuation, particularly in the United States and several European countries, Qatar began to experience the side effects of that public scrutiny with respect to the overcrowding and poor conditions at Al-Udeid and As-Sayliyah military bases. This led to the decision to open the two compounds to maintain minimum humanitarian standards for the evacuees. However, the collateral benefits entailed highly positive, and almost unprecedented, recognition by the United States and its allies of Qatar's support for the Afghan peace process and humanitarian interests in Afghanistan. In November 2021, as a direct result of its generous support for the evacuation operation, Qatar was requested to represent American interests as a "protecting power" (Beitsch & Rai, 2021).

### 4.3.3 | Qatar support for the repair and secure management of Kabul Airport

Following the Taliban's takeover, one of the primary responsibilities assumed by Qatar was operating and securing the international airport in Kabul. Qatar and Turkey proposed to manage and secure the airport, maintaining global civilian flight connectivity. On January 20, 2022, Turkish and Qatari firms signed an MoU for joint airport operation in Kabul, along with four other airports in Afghanistan, under an interim Taliban administration (Gumrukcu, 2022). This role involved international monitoring and the provision of bilateral training to ensure that the security of such a sensitive asset remained in line with international standards. The airport also needed to repair equipment due to damage incurred during the withdrawal and evacuation. In response, Qatar deployed a technical team that played a vital role in the repair and rehabilitation of Kabul's primary airport.

However, despite this initial role, a longer-term agreement for Qatari support to Kabul airport was not reached. Negotiations between the Taliban and the Turkish–Qatari consortium for airport management eventually reached an impasse. This was due to the Taliban's insistence that its fighters would take control of the airports, with Turkish and Qatari companies ultimately in charge of the technical aspects but not assuming responsibility for airport management (Escalonilla, 2022). After months of stalled talks with Qatar and Turkey, the Taliban announced in August 2022 that it had agreed to sign a series of contracts with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) for the management of three airports in Afghanistan (Taliban agree with UAE, 2022). The UAE seized the opportunity from the stalemate in negotiations and leveraged its long-standing contacts with Sirajuddin Haqqani, the Acting Minister of the Interior, whose mother was from the UAE. The UAE, unlike Qatar and Turkey, allowed the Haqqani network to manage airport security.

In conclusion, the large-scale international civilian evacuation organized by Qatar, in close communication with both the Taliban authorities and international representatives, demonstrated the unique potential of Qatar as a third-party facilitator in future humanitarian action, also displayed in its role in the preceding peace process. Qatari technical teams, in co-operation with Turkey, operated Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA) and four other airports and played a vital role in enabling the flow of humanitarian assistance into Afghanistan in the crucial months following the return of the Taliban until early 2022. This case study of Qatar's facilitation of international evacuations from Afghanistan emphasizes Qatar's wider role in humanitarian diplomacy for Afghanistan, discussed further in the following section.

## 5 | QATAR'S ROLE IN HUMANITARIAN DIPLOMACY AFTER AUGUST 15, 2021

The role of Qatar in humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan was transformed after the takeover of the Taliban on August 15, 2021. As discussed in previous sections, Qatar went from being a relatively minor aid donor to Afghanistan to playing a major role in the civilian evacuation and humanitarian response. Alongside this, Doha also emerged as one of the most important sites for conducting humanitarian dialogue with the de facto authorities in Afghanistan.

Following the return of the Taliban government to Afghanistan, many countries closed their diplomatic missions in Afghanistan, including the United States, Canada, many European countries, the United Kingdom, and Japan. Furthermore, most of the major bilateral and some multilateral donors withdrew their delegations from Afghanistan. No country in the world recognized the Taliban government and its claim to legitimacy (Taliban delegation holds talks, 2022). However, the Taliban Political Office remained open in Doha, which allowed the withdrawn diplomatic delegations to continue bilateral dialogue in person with the Taliban on key issues of concern. As a result, many states relocated their Afghanistan diplomatic missions to Doha to avail themselves of the support that Qatar has given as a host in the Afghan file. In particular, however, a competition to provide such support

emerged, with Islamabad, Pakistan now a hub for various international organizations working on Afghanistan and the UAE seeking to provide a venue for further dialogue.

However, this allowed Qatar to become a hub for countries to maintain links to Afghanistan and to meet the Taliban. For example, Doha hosted representatives from the EU and the United States to meet Taliban members that sought to negotiate funding to tackle the humanitarian crises in Afghanistan, while the EU and US representatives urged Taliban members on the importance of improving the country's human rights record, particularly regarding women (Taliban delegation holds talks, 2022). Negotiations between the United States and the Taliban to release USD 9 billion of Afghanistan's Central Bank assets, which remain frozen in the United States, have continuously taken place in Doha.

With the protecting power agreement between the United States and Qatar, Doha became the default site for dialogue for American representatives engaging with the Taliban. Some of these sessions included meetings in February and June 2022 between the United States and the Taliban over expanding restrictions on the rights of women and girls, particularly in education and employment (Gul, 2022). In September 2022, the Deputy Prime Minister met the US Special Representative for Afghanistan on the sidelines of the 77th session of the UN General Assembly in New York (MOFA, 2022e). In August 2023, the first face-to-face meeting between American and Taliban officials took place in Doha to discuss confidence-building measures during the two-day talks, including the lifting of sanctions and travel bans, as well as the return of Afghan central bank assets held abroad (Taliban, US hold first official talks, 2023).

Beyond this role as a hub and facilitator of humanitarian diplomacy, Qatar also remained continuously engaged in humanitarian dialogue throughout the first two years of Taliban rule. Engagements include a meeting between Qatar's Assistant Foreign Minister and the Administrative and Financial Deputy of the Taliban's Acting Foreign Minister on October 10, 2022 to discuss education, security, and health and humanitarian assistance under bilateral co-operation (MOFA, 2022f). In July 2022, Qatar's Assistant Foreign Minister for Regional Affairs had a meeting with the Chinese Special Envoy for Afghan Affairs to discuss the situation in Afghanistan and future co-operation (MOFA, 2022c). Furthermore, on September 14, 2021, the CEO of QC met with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi, to discuss strategic co-operation over Afghanistan.

Although Qatar's aid co-ordination at country implementation level by its humanitarian organizations is relatively limited, it has great capacity for aid co-ordination at the multilateral level. Together with the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Qatar established a humanitarian trust fund for Afghanistan under the Islamic Development Bank to channel humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan (Qarjoui, 2022). On March 31, 2022, Qatar co-hosted the Afghanistan Pledging Conference with the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Germany, and the United Kingdom. This international visibility is in contrast to the lack of reporting of Qatari assistance to Afghanistan in 2022 at the non-governmental sector level.

Another area where Qatar remained consistent was in its humanitarian diplomacy in support of the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan. In July and September 2022, Qatar's Deputy Permanent Representative to Geneva delivered speeches to the UN Human Rights Council to affirm Qatar's support for the increased participation of Afghan women in the peacemaking and peacebuilding process, in addition to protecting their rights in equal education and employment opportunities (MOFA, 2022d). This continued support can be seen in the hosting of several high-level conferences and dialogues on the issue of women in Afghanistan, in particular, a major international conference held jointly with the Government of Indonesia on the topics of girls' education and the rebuilding of education within Islamic values (MOFA, 2022g). In June 2023, Qatar National Library (QNL) hosted a meeting of the Alliance for the Education of Women in Afghanistan, which discussed immediate and tangible projects to address barriers that hinder education for Afghan women and girls (QNL hosts meeting, 2023).

Qatar also engaged in sports diplomacy with humanitarian objectives. On November 18, 2021, Qatar held a meeting between the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the Afghan Olympic Committee, which the IOC noted was an unprecedented move for co-operation between different members. The meeting agreed to protect

the right of all Afghans to practice sport, including girls, boys, and people with disabilities. This was followed up on November 20 with the visit of a FIFA delegation to discuss future co-operation for football and youth participation in Afghanistan (U.S. Department of Justice, 2022). Qatar also co-ordinated with FIFA to evacuate more than 150 female football and basketball players with their families to Doha, where they were offered training and tournaments by the Qatar Football Association (QFA), Qatar Basketball Federation (QBF), and Generation Amazing. A practice game was also organized between the Qatari and Afghan Youth Football teams (U.S. Department of Justice, 2022).

Alongside the state-level dialogue, there was also regular engagement with the ARCS after 2021 as well as the appointment of an Acting Director General (DG) for the organization by the Taliban. In March 2022, the Acting DG visited Doha to participate in the a round table talks on humanitarian concerns in Afghanistan, organized by QRCS in co-operation with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), and its Afghan counterpart (Doha hosts round table, 2022). Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and representatives from the American, British, Canadian, Dutch, German, Italian, Japanese, Malaysian, Spanish, and Swiss embassies in Doha participated in the sessions and round-table discussions (Doha hosts round table, 2022). Later that year, QRCS held a three-day ARCS partnerships meeting, with senior participants from the two National Societies, as well as representatives of the components of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (RCRC delegates from Canada, Denmark, Finland, Japan, Kuwait, Norway, Sweden, Turkey, the UK, and other National Societies; the IFRC, and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)) (QRCS, Movement partners eye ways to help Afghan people, 2022). Consistent in its humanitarian efforts, Qatar hosted some other roundtable discussions and partnership meetings in 2024 (Doha hosts partnership meetings, 2024). Qatar's role in humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan underwent a significant transformation following the Taliban's takeover in August 2021. Qatar not only became a crucial hub for diplomatic dialogue and humanitarian efforts, hosting key meetings between international representatives and the Taliban, it also actively supported women's rights, engaged in sports diplomacy, and fostered a continuous dialogue with the Afghan Red Crescent Society, exemplifying its multifaceted commitment to addressing the complex challenges in Afghanistan.

## 6 | CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

By analysing Qatar's multifaceted humanitarian role in Afghanistan post-August 2021, this article highlights the scaling-up of its aid operations, which saw Afghanistan become a primary recipient of Qatari aid. Despite under-reporting on global aid platforms, there have been significant Qatari aid initiatives since 2021. Qatar's humanitarian role extended beyond mere relief provision and involved mobilizing social capacities for evacuee support, education, and humanitarian diplomacy. In particular, Qatar played a key third-party convening role since August 2021, uniquely connecting Taliban representatives based in Doha with international representatives after the withdrawal from Kabul.

This case study is of especially broad interest due to the policy implications explored below.

### A Integrated approach to humanitarian and conflict response

This research highlights the emerging need for a cohesive, long-term developmental strategy to address Afghanistan's multifaceted challenges. Since August 2021, Qatar has played a crucial role in facilitating dialogue by acting as a bridge between Taliban delegates in Doha with global stakeholders following the international withdrawal from Kabul. The proactive mediation and sustained humanitarian initiatives of states such as Qatar offer insights into shaping effective international strategies during geopolitical upheavals. Qatar's involvement in Afghanistan exemplifies the potential of an integrated donor approach that combines immediate humanitarian aid with sustainable development efforts. An in-depth understanding of the contributions made by "non-traditional"

donors in conflict zones is essential to enhance “donor–donor” and “donor–recipient” collaborations, leading to more effective and synergistic humanitarian responses.

## B Synergistic whole-of-society strategy

This research indicates the benefits of a synergistic approach that involves government, NGOs, educational institutions, charities, and the private sector to effectively implement donor activities in complex environments. Qatar exemplifies the benefits of internal capacity building, leveraging its institutional agility and societal resources for efficient humanitarian engagement. The nation's small size and flexible institutional structure have been advantageous when it comes to adopting an integrated whole-of-society approach, demonstrating the coordination capabilities of smaller, non-traditional donors in managing humanitarian missions alongside diplomatic endeavours. The Qatari case highlights the effective management of intricate, co-ordinated field operations and the adept handling of multifaceted humanitarian roles, a model for donor efficiency in modern contexts. This case is particularly instructive for smaller states, such as Singapore or Iceland, which benefit from streamlined bureaucracies and more agile government bodies (Quah, 2018).

## C Small states as bridges for humanitarian access and dialogue

D **Refining policy through in-depth studies of Gulf aid practices** The involvement in Afghanistan of small states like Qatar underscores their distinct capacity to facilitate humanitarian access and political dialogue with de facto authorities and non-state armed groups. Such states can serve as effective intermediaries, navigating complex negotiations that larger powers may not be able to engage in as freely. Small states possess the agility to act as neutral bridges, providing the necessary diplomatic space to address and resolve issues that are critical for securing humanitarian aid routes and fostering essential discussions. This ability to mediate challenging engagements is invaluable, offering a strategic advantage in promoting sustained international co-operation and ensuring the delivery of humanitarian assistance in conflict zones.

The findings of this research underscore the importance of policy designs informed by a nuanced examination of Gulf state aid practices, moving beyond the conventional reliance on aggregate data. This study has demonstrated that Qatar's humanitarian engagement in Afghanistan involves a strategic orchestration of societal resources, education initiatives, and humanitarian diplomacy, which collectively amount to more than just relief efforts. Policy-makers would benefit from such a granular approach, with small, non-traditional donors like Qatar not being simply supplemental contributors, but pivotal actors with the capacity for targeted humanitarian interventions and the flexibility to adapt to the dynamic environments of active crises. The adoption of such context-specific research methodologies by policy-makers can enhance the effectiveness of humanitarian responses by aligning with the intricate sociopolitical tapestry of conflict-affected states. This understanding is key for designing policies that respond to the evolving challenges and opportunities within the humanitarian and development sectors.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available. Details about the data and how they were collected are documented within the manuscript. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

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