

QATAR'S FOREIGN POLICY IN THE MAGHREB AND ITS ROLE IN TUNISIA'S POST-REVOLUTIONARY TRANSITION (2011–2016)

ԿԱՏԱՐԻ ԱՐՏԱՔԻՆ ՔԱՂԱՔԱԿԱՆՈՒԹՅՈՒՆԸ ՄԱՂՐԻԲՈՒՄ ԵՎ ՆՐԱ ԴԵՐԸ ԹՈՒՆԻՍԻ ՀԵՏՀԵՂԱՓՈԽԱԿԱՆ ԱՆՑՈՒՄԱՅԻՆ ՇՐՋԱՆՈՒՄ (2011–2016)

ВНЕШНЯЯ ПОЛИТИКА КАТАРА В МАГРИБЕ И ЕГО РОЛЬ В ПОСТРЕВОЛЮЦИОННОМ ПЕРЕХОДНОМ ПЕРИОДЕ В ТУНИСЕ (2011–2016)

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Abstract – Qatar's foreign policy in the Maghreb underwent a significant transformation following the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011. Tunisia, as the birthplace of the Arab uprisings, became one of the key arenas through which Doha sought to expand its regional influence and strengthen its position as a major regional actor. By employing a flexible foreign policy strategy anchored in soft power instruments – such as financial assistance, foreign direct investment, media influence via Al Jazeera, and targeted support for political Islamist actors – Qatar managed to solidify its presence in Tunisia during the country's post-revolutionary transition. This article examines Qatar's engagement in Tunisia between 2011 and 2016, focusing primarily on its relationship with the Ennahda movement and the role this partnership played in shaping Tunisia's transitional political landscape. The study explores the motivations, instruments, and political implications of Qatar's involvement in Tunisia within the broader framework of Doha's regional strategy in the Maghreb. Furthermore, it evaluates the opportunities and challenges of Qatar's policy, including its contribution to post-revolutionary stabilization, the backlash it provoked among secular domestic actors and rival Gulf states, and its overall impact on regional geopolitical rivalries in both the Maghreb and the wider Middle East.

Ամփոփում – 2011 թ. «Արաբական գարնան» մեկնարկից հետո Կատարի արտաքին քաղաքականությունը Մաղրիբի տարածաշրջանում ենթարկվեց էական վերափոխումների: Թունիսը, որպես արաբական ապստամբությունների սկզբնավորման առանցքային կենտրոն,

դարձավ այն հիմնական հարթակներից մեկը, որի միջոցով Դոհան ձգտում էր ընդլայնել իր տարածաշրջանային ազդեցությունն ու ամրապնդել դիրքերը՝ որպես ազդեցիկ տարածաշրջանային դերակատար: Ընդունելով ճկուն արտաքին քաղաքական ռազմավարություն՝ հիմնված «փափուկ ուժի» գործիքակազմի, ֆինանսական աջակցության, ներդրումների, մեդիա ազդեցության և քաղաքական իսլամական ուժերի աջակցության վրա, Կատարը կարողացավ ամրապնդել իր ներկայությունը Թունիսում, հատկապես երկրի հետհեղափոխական անցումային շրջանում: Սույն հոդվածը ուսումնասիրում է Կատարի ներգրավվածությունը Թունիսում 2011–2016 թթ.՝ հատուկ ուշադրություն դարձնելով «Էննահդա» շարժման հետ նրա հարաբերություններին և այդ համագործակցության ազդեցությանը Թունիսի անցումային քաղաքական գործընթացների վրա: Հետազոտության նպատակն է վերլուծել Թունիսում Կատարի ներգրավվածության շարժառիթները, կիրառված գործիքակազմը և քաղաքական հետևանքները՝ որպես Մադրիբում Դոհայի առավել լայն տարածաշրջանային ռազմավարության բաղադրիչներ: Հոդվածում գնահատվում են նաև Կատարի քաղաքականության հնարավորություններն ու մարտահրավերները՝ անդրադառնալով հետհեղափոխական կայունացման գործընթացում նրա ունեցած դերին, աշխարհիկ քաղաքական ուժերի և մրցակից տարածաշրջանային պետությունների կողմից հնչեցված քննադատությանը, ինչպես նաև տարածաշրջանային մրցակցության սրման և Մերձավոր Արևելքում ուժային վերադասավորումների վրա դրա ազդեցությանը:

Аннотация – После начала «Арабской весны» в 2011 г. внешняя политика Катара в регионе Магриба претерпела существенные изменения. Тунис, ставший ключевым центром арабских восстаний, превратился в одну из основных площадок, посредством которых Доха стремилась расширить своё региональное влияние и укрепить позиции в качестве влиятельного регионального актора. Придерживаясь гибкой внешнеполитической стратегии, основанной на использовании инструментов «мягкой силы», финансовой поддержки, инвестиций, медийного влияния и поддержки политических исламистских сил, Катару удалось укрепить своё присутствие в Тунисе, особенно в переходный – постреволюционный период. В статье рассматривается вовлечённость Катара в события, имевшие место в Тунисе в 2011–2016 гг., акцентируется отношение Катара к движению «Ан-Нахда» и влияние данного сотрудничества на политические процессы в Тунисе. Цель исследования заключается в анализе мотивов, используемых инструментов и политических последствий катарского фактора в Тунисе как составной части более широкой региональной стратегии Дохи в Магрибе. Помимо этого дается оценка политике Катара, его роли в постреволюционной стабилизации, критике со стороны светских политических сил и конкурирующих региональных государств, а также его влиянию на усиление регионального соперничества и трансформацию баланса сил на Ближнем Востоке.

Keywords – Qatar, Tunisia, Maghreb, region, impact.

Հիմնաբաներ – Կատար, Թունիս, Մադրիբ, տարածաշրջան, ազդեցություն:

Ключевые слова – Катар, Тунис, Магриб, регион, влияние.

Introduction

This article examines Qatar's foreign policy in the Maghreb, with particular attention to its engagement in Tunisia between 2011 and 2016. It explores the motivations, instruments, and political implications of Qatar's involvement in Tunisia du-

ring the post-Arab Spring period. The study aims to analyze how Qatar, as a small but influential state, sought to expand its regional influence through the use of soft power instruments, including financial assistance, investments, media influence, and support for political Islamist actors. Special attention is devoted to Qatar's relationship with the Ennahda movement and the role this partnership played in shaping post-revolutionary Tunisian politics.

The conceptual framework of this study draws upon the theories of soft power and role theory. Joseph Nye defines soft power as the ability of a state to influence the behaviour and preferences of other actors through attraction rather than coercion. According to Nye, states exercise influence in international relations through coercive measures, material incentives, and the power of attraction, which encourages others to align with their interests (Nye 2008, 94). Role theory provides an important framework for understanding how small states define their positions in international politics and how they are perceived by external actors. It examines the roles states assume, such as "mediator", "regional leader", or "protector", based on both self-perception and external expectations. As K.J. Holsti notes, foreign policy behaviour is shaped by the interaction between internal identity and international recognition (Holsti 1970). Within this framework, Qatar sought to establish itself as an influential regional actor and a supporter of political transformation in the aftermath of the Arab Spring.

The research methodology is based on content and discourse analysis. The study relies on the works of M. Kamrava, D. Roberts, A. Ulrichsen, and other scholars who have extensively examined Qatar's foreign policy and regional ambitions. The article analyses Qatar's political, economic, and media engagement in Tunisia, as well as the regional reactions of Saudi Arabia and the UAE toward Doha's support for Islamist-oriented political actors.

Following the Arab Spring, Tunisia emerged as one of the key arenas of geopolitical competition in the Maghreb. As the birthplace of the Arab uprisings, Tunisia carried significant symbolic and strategic importance for Qatar's regional ambitions. Through financial assistance, infrastructure investments, diplomatic cooperation, and media support provided by Al Jazeera, Doha managed to strengthen its influence in Tunisia during the country's transitional period. At the same time, Qatar's growing role generated criticism from domestic secular actors and intensified regional rivalries with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, both of which perceived the rise of political Islam as a challenge to regional stability.

Qatar's foreign policy in Tunisia. Ennahda as a close political partner of Qatar

The unrest that began in the Maghreb in late 2010 provided an impetus for Qatar to expand its presence in North Africa. Doha has achieved this goal by providing financial, material, and political support to revolutionary forces. In this context, aid and investment are often intertwined, particularly in Tunisia, where assistance frequently took the form of infrastructure investments (Barnett 2013, 1).

By overthrowing Gaddafi, regional players won the struggle for influence in North Africa. The leading competitor, which had enough resources to "feed" half of the African countries, was removed from the path. Along with Gaddafi, his primary tool of influence in the form of numerous funds and banks remained in the past, so Qatar tried to take their place. Analysts expected a sharp "Islamization" of the region and an increase in Qatar's influence within the African Union. Doha has identified Africa as one of its priorities, considering the region's vast mineral reserves and its strategic logistical future (Bystrov 2011). Qatar considered uprisings in the Maghreb region as an opportunity to demonstrate its authority as an alternative guarantor in the Middle East. Given its long-standing ties to several Islamist opposition movements in the area, Doha has decided to support Islamist forces in their quest for power (Newlines Institute 2022).

As the birthplace of the Arab Spring, Tunisia held significant symbolic and strategic importance for Qatar's regional ambitions. The Tunisian revolution was the key that opened the doors to the Maghreb for Qatar. The State of Qatar, led by Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, provided significant support for the implementation of the revolution in Tunisia from its outbreak until its resolution. Qatar's involvement in Tunisian affairs began shortly after the first uprisings, resulting in what can be defined as a "Qatari moment" in the Maghreb region. In September 2011, the Emir of Qatar stated: "I believe that radical Islamists, whose views and ideologies were shaped under authoritarian regimes, can become constructive participants in political life if the promises of democracy and justice that emerged during the Arab uprisings are fulfilled. In that case, we may witness the transformation of extremism into civic engagement" (Khatib 2013, 424).

After Ben Ali, some parties were either banned or seriously discredited. The political landscape was almost entirely new. Many parties were newly formed, lacking established structures, organizational experience, and financial resources, while Ennahda had existed as a movement since the 1980s, although it had been banned for several years. It had a deep social base and organized networks. Ennahda was perceived as an opposition to the regime, a symbol of struggle and resistance. In addition, they promised to ensure reconciliation and national unity in Tunisia (Cavatorta; Merone 2013, 860–861).

The Tunisian revolution brought to power a "Troika" government (The Troika was a coalition formed by Ennahda Movement, Congress for the Republic (CPR) – a secular, center-left party led by Moncef Marzouki and Ettakatol (Democratic Forum for Labour and Liberties) – a social democratic party led by Mustapha Ben Jaafar), led by the moderate Islamist Ennahda party (Feuer 2014). In the October 23, 2011, Ennahda party won 89 of Tunisia's 217 seats in the Constituent Assembly elections. The Assembly drafted a new constitution and established a new executive branch of government (France24 2011). It is worth mentioning that Qatar's financial support for Ennahda was a key factor in the party's victory in the National Constituent Assembly elections (Borisov 2012). Doha also used one of its soft power tools, Al

Jazeera, to illustrate Tunisia's transition as a success story, giving favorable coverage to Ennahda and its partners (Cherif 2017, *The Gulf Crises*).

Through Al Jazeera, Qatar was able to shape regional narratives and present Tunisia's transition as a successful model of political transformation led by moderate Islamist actors. It should be noted that Ennahda's longtime leader, Rached Ghannouchi, was a frequent guest on Al Jazeera even before 2011. This fact also comes to prove the way Qatari media amplified Islamist voices and narratives (Khatib 2023, 62).

Ennahda's remarkable victory in Tunisia transformed the perception of the Gulf Arab monarchies within the country, significantly boosting favor for Qatar. Doha perceived Tunisia's Ennahda as a continuation of the Muslim Brotherhood (IEMed 2020). The electoral ascendancy of Ennahda, as Tunisia's dominant Islamist political force, created an ideologically conducive environment for the deepening of Tunisian-Qatari relations, which were further underpinned by Doha's strategic commitment to supporting Islamist actors as part of its broader regional foreign policy calculus (Barnett 2013, 5-6). Under Ennahda's leadership, Qatar became a significant backer of the Islamist administration, providing budget support and infrastructure investment in Tunisia to maintain political stability (Sons 2023).

The first anniversary of the "January 14 Revolution" was celebrated with great pomp in Tunisia. Among the high-ranking guests at the event was the Emir of Qatar Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani. The Emir and the Tunisian Prime Minister Hamadi al-Jebali, oversaw the signing of several agreements and MoUs to strengthen cooperation. It is not a coincidence that Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali, one year after the revolution, thanked the Emir and the Qatari people for their continuous support of the Tunisian Revolution and the Arab Spring movement (Gulf Times 2012). Later that year, Qatar agreed to provide Tunisia with a \$1 billion loan and promised to create job opportunities for 20,000 Tunisian graduates (Laghmari 2012). Half of the loan aimed to bolster the Tunisian Central Bank's reserves, with Qatar subscribing to \$500 million in five-year Tunisian treasury bonds at a 2.5% interest rate (Reuters 2012). In November 2013, the other half was set aside for infrastructure investment, so strengthening Qatar's position as a strategic partner and enhancing the Ennahda-led administration's credibility in addressing Tunisia's financing challenges (The Peninsula 2013). Qatar has had a broad and strategic economic presence in Tunisia, combining targeted investments in several important areas with direct financial assistance. In addition to stabilizing Tunisia's economy during an uncertain post-revolutionary time, this strategy established Qatar as a major player in the political and economic restoration of the nation (Barnett 2013, 6-7). Beyond the economic domain, bilateral cooperation extended into the security sector. In November 2012, Tunisia and Qatar signed two military protocols and cooperation agreements aimed at strengthening bilateral military ties (North Africa Post 2015). The signing of the military cooperation agreements showed the further institutionalization of the Qatar-Tunisia strategic partnership.

The Maghreb emerged as a new theatre of geopolitical confrontation among Gulf states as a result of Qatar's Islamist agenda in the region. Unlike Qatar, the other Gulf states' positions in Tunisia weakened during the Ennahda years. Qatar's support for the Ennahda led to a competition with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which considered the Tunisian revolution a serious threat. One of the reasons for this kind of attitude and position of these countries was that during the Ben Ali regime, they had significant influence in this country. As a result of the revolution, their positions and interests in Tunisia were being undermined. It is worth mentioning that Saudi Arabia granted political asylum to former President Ben Ali and his family, highlighting its preference towards the traditional regime. While Saudi officials framed this move as humanitarian assistance, a deeper historical and geopolitical analysis reveals its broader implications for the evolution of Saudi-Tunisian relations at the time (Geopolitical Monitor 2020). The UAE and Saudi Arabia were also concerned about the large number of Tunisians joining al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Syria, Iraq, and Libya (Malka 2018). Tunisia's relations with the UAE deteriorated in 2013 due to a deep ideological rift triggered by the political rise of the Ennahda Movement (Sons 2023). The Ennahda-led government in Tunisia was widely perceived as being politically aligned with the Qatar-Turkey-Muslim Brotherhood axis (Cherif 2017, Tunisia's Fledgling Gulf Relations). The UAE viewed the situation in Tunisia as part of a regional Islamist resurgence, which it actively sought to counter. The UAE scaled back its investments and diplomatic engagement with Tunisia during this period (Steinberg 2014). Tunisia's relations with the UAE soon deteriorated to the point that it recalled its ambassador from Tunisia in September 2013 (Sons 2023).

In 2013, the pressure from Saudi Arabia and the UAE on Qatar was at its highest. Saudi Arabia and the UAE perceived the rise of political Islam after the Arab Spring as a direct challenge to regional stability and monarchical governance. They insisted that Qatar change its course and sever ties with the Brotherhood. On November 23, 2013, the GCC adopted a declaration (the first Riyadh agreement) urging Qatar to stop supporting groups destabilizing the Arab world. The declaration stated that if Qatar continued supporting the Muslim Brotherhood, the issue of suspending Qatar's membership in the GCC and the League of Arab States would be raised (Sargsyan 2024, 48). In March 2014, the three member states of the GCC and Egypt withdrew their ambassadors from Doha, expressing disagreement with how Al Jazeera had reported on the events following the military coup in Egypt (Alkinani 2022). Saudi Arabia and the UAE attempted to convince Qatar to alter its foreign policy by ceasing its support of political Islam actors, who pose a security threat to the GCC states. Due to Kuwait's mediation efforts, the dispute was resolved by signing the third "Riyadh Agreements" on November 16, 2014 (Gaver 2020).

Despite the agreements, Qatar continued cooperating with political Islamists in the region. The underlying issues that caused the tensions were not addressed, and Qatar's ambitions remained unchanged (Sargsyan 2024, 48). At the height of Tunisia's

political transition, Qatar played a crucial role by offering both investment and political backing, which significantly strengthened Ennahda's ability to govern (Newlines Institute 2022). This strategy reflects Qatar's broader utilization of political Islam as a form of soft power to expand its influence in areas undergoing political transformation.

The enhancement of Tunisia's bilateral relations with Qatar faced criticism from specific sectors of Tunisia's domestic political opposition. Tunisian leftists, pan-Arabists, and forces loyal to the former regime accused Qatar of using its charitable networks and media outlets to advance Islamist agendas (Newlines Institute 2022). These tensions became evident during a controversy in April 2013, when President Moncef Marzouki praised Qatar for its role in helping to recover assets previously held by the Trabelsi family (relatives of Ben Ali's wife) in Lebanon, while also warning Tunisian citizens against insulting Qatar. In response, a social media campaign emerged that openly denounced Qatar's growing influence in Tunisia (Mahjar-Barducci 2013). Criticism of Qatari investment in Tunisia often focused on concerns about the lack of transparency in Doha's financial engagements and the risks of increased foreign control over strategic sectors of the national economy. Public anxiety that Qatar was "buying" influence in Tunisia intensified after the reports of new financial arrangements. Notably, in May 2013, Prime Minister Ali Laarayedh announced that Qatar would extend a \$1 billion loan on what he described as "easy terms", which aimed at dispelling growing fears that the country was entering into exploitative or politically conditional financial agreements (Barnett 2013, 6). However, public distrust was already high, and this was not just about money. It reflected broader anxieties about national independence, especially with an Islamist-led government, which Qatar sponsored.

The "Troika" coalition struggled to alleviate widespread public concerns that Ennahda, under the leadership of Rachid Ghannouchi, sought to erode Tunisia's secularist foundations. Increasing criticism from secular factions, who accused Ennahda of failing to prevent the proliferation of radical Islamist elements in the post-revolutionary period, ultimately destabilized the "Troika" (Lang et al. 2014, 7). Ennahda did not manage to tackle Tunisia's most urgent challenge, which is the economic crisis. As a result, people began to feel disenchanted with the socio-economic shortcomings. In 2012–2013, extremist Salafist groups such as Ansar al-Sharia emerged, whose attacks posed a security threat to the country (Ansar al-Sharia took advantage of the openness of the Tunisian government that was led by the Islamists after the revolution to strengthen their organizational structures and support their network of associations). When Ennahda was in power, it allowed Ansar al-Sharia to carry out propaganda activities and hold political demonstrations, despite not having obtained the necessary legal permission to do so. It was allowed to operate under the "tolerated but not officially recognized" (*Toléré non reconnu*) regime. This allowed the group to vastly increase the number of its supporters from several hundred at the end of 2011 to several thousand at the beginning of 2012 (Allani 2015, 93). As a result, the government was accused of weak control and

tolerance of extremism, and the secular opposition began to intensify its repression. In 2013, the assassinations of two prominent secular politicians, Choukri Belaid and Mohamed Brahman, caused great public outrage. Ennahda was accused of failing to curb extremists (The Guardian 2013). This could have led to civil war, as happened in Libya. Unlike Tunisia, Qatar's involvement in Libya was more direct and security-oriented, reflecting different strategic priorities across the Maghreb. To avoid further crises, the "National Dialogue Quartet" was formed, consisting of the civil society organizations, such as "The General Union of Tunisian Labour", "The Tunisian Confederation of Just Industrialists and Artisans", "The Tunisian League for Human Rights" and "The National Council of Tunisian Lawyers". The quartet played a crucial role in establishing a political process when the country was on the brink of civil war (BBC News 2015). The "Troika" collapsed under the weight of political polarization and public disillusionment. "The Quartet" initiated a national dialogue in which both Ennahda and the secular opposition participated, where they discussed a transition plan for power, a mechanism for forming an interim government, the conditions for holding elections, and the continuation of the constitutional process. Ennahda agreed in 2014 to a transition from power through national dialogue, which paved the way for the 2014 electoral victory of the secularist party "Nidaa Tounes". In 2014, Ennahda earned second place in the parliamentary elections. Widely celebrated as peaceful and relatively transparent, the 2014 parliamentary and presidential elections have ushered in a new era (Lang et al. 2014, 7).

Even after Ennahda stepped down from leading the government, Qatari donors continued to stay engaged with Tunisia. Since 2015, the Qatar Investment Authority has actively invested across multiple sectors in Tunisia. In 2015, the Qatari charity "Education Above All" implemented two projects: "Jendouba Works!" and "My Education... My Hope". Besides those projects, the Qatari company "Silatech" provided substantial financial and technical support to start-ups and microfinance companies in Tunisia. Qatar demonstrated its commitment by participating in a 2016 international investment conference focused on Tunisia, where it pledged \$1.25 billion to support the country's struggling economy over five years (Fadli 2018).

Conclusion

Between 2011 and 2016, Qatar's involvement in Tunisia, particularly through its support for the Ennahda movement, reflected a broader strategy of deploying soft power to expand its regional influence in the Maghreb as a middle power. Doha's post-Arab Spring foreign policy aimed to reshape regional alignments by backing political actors aligned with its ideological and strategic priorities. While its assistance contributed to Tunisia's post-revolutionary stabilization, it also intensified rivalries with Saudi Arabia and the UAE and fueled domestic suspicion of foreign interference. At the same time, Ennahda's political success cannot be explained solely through Qatari support. Domestic factors, including public dissatisfaction with the

Ben Ali regime, the organizational strength of Ennahda, and the weakness of secular opposition parties, also played an important role. Overall, the Tunisian case demonstrates both the opportunities and challenges of Qatar's post-Arab Spring foreign policy. Although Doha succeeded in expanding its influence in Tunisia, its close relationship with political Islam remained a subject of debate both within Tunisia and across the wider region. These regional tensions and disagreements over Qatar's support for Islamist movements later contributed to the broader Gulf crisis of 2017, when Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt imposed a diplomatic and economic blockade on Qatar, accusing Doha of interfering in regional affairs and supporting political Islamist actors.

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