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# Argentina-Qatar: Political and Economic Relations and the Bet on Building Long-lasting Ties.

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## **Argentina-Qatar: Political and Economic Relations and the Bet on Building Long-lasting Ties.<sup>1</sup>**

**Mariela Cuadro and Ornela Fabani**

### *Introduction*

Relations between regions and countries pertaining to the so-called Global South have been mostly focused on trade and investments. Occasionally, the global and local contexts allow these relations to enlarge and cause political issues to rise. In general, social and cultural histories are sidestepped causing a disconnect in shared experiences and constituting otherness.

Argentina-Qatar's relation is not an exception. Mainly focused on trade and investments, it has been enhanced during the "booming relations" between Latin America and the Middle East when a timid political agenda emerged. Regarding cultural and social issues, despite some faint initiatives, both spaces remained estranged.

In this *Gulf Insight*, we will make a review of Argentina-Qatar's relations with the aim of contributing to show case this estrangement and to celebrate the opportunities that are offered by Qatar hosting the FIFA World Cup.

### *The reencounter between South American and Arab Countries.*

The first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been a particularly prosperous time for relations between Latin America and the Middle East, leading Marta Tawil to characterize it as

one of the "booming relations" (2016). Perhaps the most important and symptomatic event of this period has been the establishment of the South America–Arab Countries Summit in 2005 (ASPA, for its acronym in Spanish and Portuguese). Although it had been fundamentally conceived as a political forum, its establishment was accompanied by the increase of the interregional trade by more than [100 percent](#). The Gulf monarchies occupied a privileged role in this dynamic. Particularly, this framework allowed Argentina to improve its relations with the following countries: Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Qatar being part of a list of 15 countries all over the world with which it has enhancing trade. Regarding the social and cultural dimensions, besides the frustrated attempt of the BibliASPA (ASPA's Library), there were not any other initiative.

### *Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's governments and the deepening of Argentina-Qatar relations*

Specifically, regarding Argentina-Qatar relations, the rapprochement between both countries gained momentum during Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's governments (2007-2015). As a conclusive example, in 2010 the Qatari emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani and his prime minister visited Argentina, marking the

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<sup>1</sup> All articles published under "Gulf Insights" series have been discussed internally but they reflect the opinion and views of the authors, and do not reflect the views of the Center, the College of Arts and Sciences or Qatar University, including the terms and terminology used in this publication.

first time a high-ranking Qatari leader officially [arrived at the country](#). Fernández de Kirchner returned the visit in [2011](#) and in 2013, both Argentina and Qatar established [embassies](#) at Doha and Buenos Aires, respectively.

Since 2010 and during all Fernández de Kirchner's governments, Qatar was one of the few Arab countries with which Argentina's trade was in deficit, mainly due to the South American country's import of Liquefied Natural Gas which explained [93.6 percent of it](#). For its part, as only 1 percent of Qatar's land is arable, Argentina, with its fertile soil, looks like a desirable place to invest. As of 2011, Argentina has enacted Law 26,737 ("Land Law") regulating the possession of Argentinean rural land by foreigners and postulating that up to 15 percent of it can be in foreign hands. One of the modes Qatari investments have adopted in Argentinean territory during this period was the purchase of shares of already established companies linked to agriculture and with investments in the South American country (Cuadro, 2016).

Argentina's rapprochement to Qatar and its neighbors -Saudi Arabia, UAE and Kuwait-was part of an international insertion strategy that led the government to get politically closer to Global South countries. This way, it looked for deepening South-South relations, both to strengthen its international presence and to increase trade. Despite this strategy, the government did not quit Argentina's traditional Western identity, thus maintaining and reproducing the idea of the Oriental otherness. This explains that this relation revolved around economic issues, based on the

assumed complementary character of both economies.

*Mauricio Macri's government and the strengthening of links with Qatar.*

Mauricio Macri's government (2015-2019) changed Argentina's Foreign Policy through a shift in the way of conceiving the world. The new government abandoned the focus on the Global South and reinforced Argentina's "Western" identity. This had an impact on the country's international insertion strategy and entailed radical changes with respect to the previous government. However, continuities also can be pointed out, especially in relation to the Gulf monarchies. Regarding Qatar, we may highlight that the emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, visited Argentina twice, in [2016](#) and [2018](#). For his part, President Macri visited Doha in September [2016](#).

The most remarkable feature of this relation during Macri's government was the prominence of personal links in its making. This was evident in the controversial establishment of a [joint investment fund](#) between the Qatar Investment Authority (QIA) and the Sustainability Guarantees Fund (FGS, by its Spanish acronym) of the National Administration of the Social Security (ANSES, by its Spanish acronym) and the Argentinean body in charge of pensions and retirements. The Memorandum of Understanding through which the fund was established was reported as being a result of influence-trafficking by people outside the Argentinean state. Its secretive character only contributed to make it

more of a suspect<sup>2</sup>. This bond was also fundamental in allowing Al-Thani to [buy 28,000 ha of land](#) in the province of Río Negro, becoming one of the main landowners of Argentina. The purchase generated controversy because it exceeded the limit allowed by the aforementioned “Land Law” even after its flexibilization by decree.

The good relation between both heads of state was also manifest in the case of Boca Juniors, the Argentinean football team that propelled Macri to politics and that at the time was presided by one of his lobbyists, Daniel Angelici. This relationship enabled the signing of Qatar Airways as [Boca’s sponsor in May 2018](#). In the same vein, some voices have pointed out that the appointment of Macri as Head Chief of the FIFA Foundation, after he was not reelected as President of Argentina, was signed in Qatar during the final match of the Clubs World Cup in December 2019 when Macri, Al-Thani, and the FIFA’s President, Gianni Infantino, coincided.

Macri’s relation with Al-Thani also played an important role regarding foreign investments within a field of extreme importance to the government: energy. Indeed, [Qatar Petroleum](#) arrived at *Vaca Muerta* field as one of the main investors during this period. The signing of this agreement is noteworthy as it represented the first investment of Qatar Petroleum in Argentina, its first significant international investment in unconventional oil and gas resources, as well as the landing of the first oil company in the Middle East in the Neuquén field.

*Latest developments: Alberto Fernández’s government and the opportunity to building long-lasting ties*

Alberto Fernández was elected in 2019 with Cristina Fernández de Kirchner as his running mate (2019-2023). His presidency has been conditioned by the COVID-19 pandemic, the huge debt that Macri’s government took with the IMF before leaving *Casa Rosada*, and the undeniable rise of China as a global power. Trying to make a balance between the United States and China, his steps have been erratic. Regarding the Middle East, Fernández visited Israel in his first foreign trip as President in the context of the commemoration of the 75th anniversary of Auschwitz’ liberation. Most analysts saw this as a goodwill gesture to the US, based on the Argentinean tradition of defending human rights. With respect to Qatar, Argentina received COVID-19 linked [assistance from Doha](#) which provided masks and non-perishable food, among other supplies. Furthermore, [Qatar Airlines collaborated with the repatriation of Argentinean citizens stranded in Asia](#).

Despite his unpredictable behavior in regards to his Foreign Policy’s decisions, it can be deduced from numerous interviews that Fernández’ interaction with the world is tight: putting aside Latin America, he only interacts with Europe and North America and obscures the rest of the world (with the unavoidable exception of China). With this, Argentina participates in its traditional elite idea that the Latin country pertains to the West. This way, it reveals an identity

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<sup>2</sup> For a more on this topic, see Cuadro and Frenkel, 2022.

politics that continues to participate in the othering of that part of the world, which is -as Argentina- the product of colonial practices.

Argentinean people are passionate about football, the reader has only to google images demonstrating the farewell of Diego Maradona to corroborate this assertion. Football can be the way forward for Argentina's collaboration with other countries. For the upcoming FIFA World Cup 2022 taking place in Qatar, Argentina has requested more tickets. Sports diplomacy can be a tool forward for Argentina to enhance and expand its relationship with the Global community.

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