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Nabil Abdo Ahmed Hassan

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The Qatari Initiative for Interfaith Dialogue: The Context of Origin and Development

Nabil Abdo Ahmed Hassan

Journalist and Researcher at Qatar News Agency

Email: Nabil.almoriri1@gmail.com

Abstract

Qatar has played a vital role in the advocating human rights and ensuring diversity of religions and identities. The general objective of this research is to introduce the State of Qatar's initiative for interfaith dialogue as the first Arab initiative after the events of 9/11. The importance of the study is its attempt to present a new addition to the field of knowledge and open the door to study the Arab initiatives for interfaith dialogue, and the circumstances of their emergence. Due to the nature of this study, which focuses on describing and analysing reality to show the contexts of the Qatari initiative, it is based on the descriptive analytical approach, which is used to study the current conditions of the phenomena in terms of their characteristics, forms, relationships, and factors influencing them. The research reached several conclusions, the most prominent of which is that the State of Qatar was the first to launch a religious dialogue in the Arab Gulf region under the auspices of the official authorities.

Keywords: Interfaith Dialogue, Qatar, Religion

Introduction

Dialogue is a well-established approach in the Islamic religion, and an original principle that has been necessary for this religion since its early beginnings. It was present and included in all stages of Dawah, at times of weakness and at times of strength, and in peace and in war, but it was largely collapsing from the Islamic scene during the years of intellectual and civilizational decline. As a result, the West, particularly Western Church, started the initiative since the last half of the twentieth century so that the reaction in our Islamic world would be a state of cautious acceptance because of some reasons that relate to the apprehension of the West after the colonial era and the role of the Church that supported the colonial campaigns against Muslim countries.

With the advent of the twenty-first century, and specifically after the attack of 11 September 2001 on the United States, the Arab and Islamic world witnessed a major shift, as many religious dialogue initiatives were advocated throughout it. The first of these initiatives was the "Qatar initiative for dialogue" which was launched in 2003, and was followed by other Arab and Islamic initiatives in an unprecedented dialogue race.

The Qatari initiative for dialogue at its inception was not just a passing step, but rather had its consequences in a greatly changed local context, in addition to the international

circumstances that were generated after the attacks of 11 September 2001, and the challenge that Muslims faced in light of the global war on terrorism that targeted Muslims in particular.

In this research, we will shed light on this Qatari initiative, identify the local and international contexts in which this initiative was conceived, and study its causes, objectives, circumstances, consequences, and the development it witnessed in the subsequent years.

Literature Review

The researcher examined eight studies directly related to the Qatari initiative for interfaith dialogue, especially with regard to the Doha conferences for interfaith dialogue held under its umbrella. This research presents the most prominent of these studies as follows:

The study of Al-Mulla (2010), which dealt with the Qatari initiative for Interfaith dialogue by explaining the Qatari experience in the Islamic-Christian dialogue, with a focus on the first two seminars held in 2003 and 2004. They brought together only the Islamic and Christian sides. The study, which followed the analytical descriptive approach, concluded that the State of Qatar was the first to launch a religious dialogue in the Arab Gulf region under the auspices of the official authorities.

Al-Hammadi's study (2017) sheds light on the efforts of the Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue by studying some of the conferences organized by the center (from the sixth to the twelfth), through the content analysis approach. It aims at tracking the development of dialogue in the hypotheses of the participants in terms of concept, objectives, and implications, without examining the contexts and circumstances of this initiative.

Ghanem's study (2011) focused on the development of the Doha Conferences for Interfaith Dialogue, by analysing six conferences between 2003-2008 in terms of their topics, outputs, and Jewish participation in them.

Mustafa (2011) study titled "Experiences In international conferences and forums. the problem of the relationship between the religious and the political in dialogues". It focused on the problem of the politicization of those conferences. The sixth Doha Conference on Interfaith Dialogue presented a model to study them, along with models from other international forums.

Fahi (2018) discussed the State of Qatar's initiative for interfaith dialogue in the context of his article, in which he studied the phenomenon of the multiple initiatives launched by the Gulf states to promote tolerance, moderation, and interfaith dialogue, especially after the events of 11 September 2001. He concluded that the phenomenon of spreading dialogue and tolerance initiatives comes in a political context that is consistent with the Western discourse to spread what was called "moderate Islam". He presented Qatar's experience of dialogue from the perspective of this small country's reliance on religious diplomacy in the context of its interaction with the international community, indicating that this approach became more evident after the events of 11 September 2001.

The study of Fahey and Bock (2019) briefly monitored Qatar's initiative for interfaith dialogue in the context of a comparative analysis of three experiences: London, Delhi, and Doha, and focused on examining the development of the interfaith dialogue movement. Among the most prominent results of the Doha conferences was; their nature is limited to the Abrahamic religions, the political motives behind them, their focus on the religious aspects, the prohibition of talking about differences, the predominance of self-discussion, and the theoretical rooting of principles without delving into abnormal religious practices and the resulting behaviors that do not serve humanity.

The study of Hassan and Haroon (2022) dealt with Qatar's initiative in a research on the attitudes of Muslims and Christians towards the Palestinian issue in the Doha conferences for interfaith dialogue. The study focused on the position on the Palestinian issue in these conferences without addressing the contexts of the Qatari initiative and the circumstances of its origin and development.

It is clear that all previous studies did not address the contexts and circumstances of the initiative of the State of Qatar, and only focused on various issues within the framework of the conferences of that initiative.

Research Problem

The State of Qatar has not known, in its history, any initiatives of dialogue between religions, for many reasons, some of which are related to the nature of a religiously homogeneous society, and the lack of justification for such kind of dialogue. The State of Qatar also belongs to the conservative "Gulf region" geography, which also did not witness any religious dialogues because of a huge intellectual arsenal that warns against religious dialogues unless they are of a rhetorical, advocacy, or dialectical nature with the aim of victory for Islam and spreading its call to the worlds. However, this small country surprised the region and the world by launching this initiative without prior warning, which calls for studying the circumstances and contexts that dictated this unprecedented step.

Research Objectives

1. Introducing the State of Qatar's initiative for interfaith dialogue as the first Arab initiative after the events of 9/11.
2. Studying the internal and external circumstances and contexts that contributed to the launch of this initiative.
3. Stating the most prominent aspects of the initiative's development over the past two decades and the steps taken to enhance it.

Research Questions

1. What is the nature of the State of Qatar's initiative for Interfaith dialogue between religions?
2. What are the internal and external circumstances and contexts that contributed to the emergence of this initiative?
3. What are the most prominent aspects of development witnessed by this initiative and the most important initiatives taken to enhance it?

Research Importance

The importance of the study is its attempt to present a new addition to the field of knowledge and open the door to study the Arab initiatives for interfaith dialogue, and the circumstances of their emergence. This encourages the launch of field studies and surveys to evaluate them, study their outputs, and indicate the extent of their success or failure in achieving the goals related to achieving coexistence and understanding among followers of religions. This contributes to correcting its course and enhancing its effectiveness.

Methodology

Due to the nature of this study, which focuses on describing and analysing reality to show the contexts of the Qatari initiative, it is based on the descriptive analytical approach,

which is used to study the current conditions of the phenomena in terms of their characteristics, forms, relationships, and factors influencing them (Elayan, 2001. P. 47). This approach does not stop at merely collecting, classifying, and tabulating data, but is concerned with analysing it and interpreting its results in order to reach generalizations about the phenomenon under study (Al-Hamoudi, 2019). The researcher used this approach to describe and analyse Qatar's initiative for Interfaith dialogue based on the circumstances of that stage, what was written about it, and the host country's speeches regarding it and the events that accompanied it.

Study Plan: The study includes three sections and a conclusion, as follows:

The first topic: the nature of the Qatari initiative for interfaith dialogue

The Qatari initiative for interfaith dialogue is represented in conferences and meetings that bring together people from different religions. They were launched historically in 2003. It also aims at bringing together a number of leaders of the three monotheistic religions, from different countries of the world, along with researchers and those interested in religious affairs from various countries, as well as experts in the specialized topics that are usually discussed within the framework of these conferences and are related to issues of coexistence, tolerance, and cooperation, such as human rights issues, media, and some issues related to the economy and the development of societies and others.

The conferences held within the framework of this initiative began under the umbrella of the Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry is still largely concerned with it, although there is a "Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue" that organizes and supervises conferences, meetings and dialogue activities, as will become clear later.

Dr. Ibrahim Al-Nuaimi, President of the Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue, (personal interview, 2022) describes these conferences as purely scientific. In each session of the conference, a specific topic is discussed, and researchers and those interested are invited to write their research on it. A scientific committee affiliated with the center undertakes the process of evaluating these research and selecting the appropriate ones to present them during the conference.

These conferences usually deal with general topics, issues, and problems of concern to people of religions and humanity in general and try as far as possible to distance themselves from political and doctrinal issues. The goal, according to those in charge of it, is to meet, get acquainted with, and create a kind of cooperation regarding the issues under discussion, in addition to the exchange of knowledge about the positions of the three religions in order for the followers of each religion to know the values, principles and knowledge of the followers of the other religion on these issues (Al-Nuaimi, personal interview, 2022).

However, it cannot be asserted that this trend is dominant, especially with regard to political issues that cannot be separated from other issues because the political and the religious are intertwined. In addition, the emergence of the initiative and the circumstances that surrounded this emergence at the local and international levels make distancing it from political issues specifically difficult to a large extent.

The second topic: the contexts of the emergence of the Qatari initiative for interfaith dialogue (Qatari preparedness towards effective diplomacy)

The launch of the initiative took place in April 2003, which witnessed the first Islamic-Christian dialogue meeting in the history of the State of Qatar, and that was about a year and a half after the attacks of 9/11. It was able to withstand in a fierce atmosphere of challenges

at all levels, and even witnessed an important development in some of its aspects, as we will see in this research.

Several factors allied together to stimulate the political will to make an important political and cultural breakthrough in a region where religious dialogues had not been at the core of its programs and directions, but rather in an environment dominated by a religious vision that opposes dialogue to a large extent, as evidenced by a lot of strict religious literature regarding religious dialogue with the other. The religious cultural heritage does not mean the Qur'anic and prophetic texts, but rather the attempts to omit some of these texts and direct them towards warning against religious openness to, or dialogue with the other, except in a limited context related to communication, advocacy, and debate to clarify the truth, as I indicated previously. These factors and conditions can be read in the following two axes:

- *The local context*

Before talking about the Qatari internal context, it is important to highlight the overall developments that the country experienced during the nineties of the twentieth century, which are important developments witnessed by this small country overlooking the Arabian Gulf, with an area of about 11,521 square kilometres, and whose population does not exceed 2.6 million people, according to 2019 statistics, the vast majority of whom are expatriates (Government Communications Office, 2019). As this period in particular witnessed the beginning of the rise of the State of Qatar on the stage of international politics, especially after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, and the emergence of new variables in Arab-Arab relations. It prompted this small country to adopt a new realistic policy, one of the results of which was the signing of a joint defense agreement with the United States. In 1992, the State of Qatar became one of Washington's largest allies in the region, and that was the first agreement of this kind since the country's independence from the British occupation in 1971 (Qablan, 2021. Pp. 50-52).

After the mid-1990s, the country witnessed profound internal transformations since its former Emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, took over the reins of power, succeeding his father, specifically in June 1995. He adopted an independent political comprehensive reform approach, especially in the fields of diplomacy and foreign policy, which enabled the people of his country to play an active role at the regional and international levels (Abdullah, 2014).

The transformations led by the former Emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, since his accession to power, were characterized by comprehensiveness and gradualism to push this small, still traditional society, towards modernity, although in the end they were aimed at searching for a foothold in the arena of international politics. The beginning of this change was in the development of educational and health systems. He led an important shift in the educational field that made Qatar today occupy the first place in the Arab world, and the fourth in the world in the quality of education. He also developed a modern health system that competes with the finest health systems in the world, with a remarkable cultural openness and an unprecedented media excellence in the Arab world, which was embodied in the abolition of the information Ministry, and the launch of the Al-Jazeera satellite channel, which was considered an unusual transformation in the Gulf region and in the entire Arab World (Abdullah, 2014. Pp. 18-21).

These transformations, which coincided with unprecedented economic growth, thanks to gas discoveries, led to the emergence of the State of Qatar as one of the most prominent influencing elements in the region and the world, starting from the first decade of the twenty-first century. It subsequently led many interventions and mediations to resolve many crises

in the region, such as the Lebanese crisis in 2008, the Sudanese Darfur crisis in 2011, the reconciliation between the Palestinian Fatah and Hamas movements in 2012, and the negotiations between the United States and the Afghan Taliban movement in 2021, among others, due to its strong and effective diplomatic weight and enthusiastic leadership to make Qatar a prominent figure in the equation at the regional and international levels (Jergon, 2016. Pp 4-6).

It is clear from this presence on the international stage that the State of Qatar has paved an independent way in its domestic and foreign policy, especially after 9/11, and attempted to deviate from the traditional approach followed by the small Gulf states since the establishment of the Gulf Cooperation Council in 1981, which includes six countries (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, and the Sultanate of Oman). Perhaps Doha understood the relative recession that characterized US-Saudi relations after those events. One of its consequences was the strengthening of the diplomatic and strategic position of some Gulf countries, and there was nothing to prevent Qatar from seizing this opportunity (Abdullah, 2014. P 23).

In light of these facts, it can be said that the State of Qatar's launch of the Islamic-Christian dialogue initiative in 2003 falls within the framework of this new strategy and its orientation towards an effective foreign policy and active diplomacy in various directions. Here, Al-Nuaimi (personal interview, 2022) agrees with this interpretation, which takes into account the political dimension. However, he confirms that the events that followed 9/11 were the strongest motives for the State of Qatar to host the first symposium for dialogue between Islamic and Christian in 2003, followed by other countries in the region, to promote the discourse of tolerance and coexistence amid the escalation of violence and extremism, especially after the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. This is also adopted by the researcher in the field of religions, Muhammad Habash, and Bishop William Hanna Shomali (personal interview, 2022).

It should be noted that, in conjunction with the launch of this Qatari initiative in 2003, Qatar witnessed an important event that has implications in the field of transformation and the contemporary political path. That is, on April 29 of that year, Qatari voters voted on the permanent constitution draft of the state of Qatar, which included articles upholding the protection of freedom of opinion and the press (Articles 47 and 48), and ensuring freedom of worship for all (Article 50), in an important shift towards political and religious openness in this region that had been dominated by hard-line Salafist thought to a large extent.

The referendum on the constitution coincided with another Qatari trend, which included a new indication of the policy of openness, represented in the announcement by former US Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld to transfer the US base from Saudi Arabia to Qatar, in conjunction with the US war on Iraq that began on March 19, 2003, as one of the repercussions of the 9/11 events (Abdullah, 2014. P 28). This indicates that the Christian-Islamic interfaith dialogue initiative had its strong political justifications at that particular time.

Qatar took another unprecedented step in 2003 within the framework of the policy of openness to the world's religions and cultures, by allowing, for the first time, the construction of churches (Al-Jazeera Net, 2003). The first church was inaugurated in 2008 for the Catholic community, followed by other churches for the rest of the Christian sects. They are now included in the Complex of Religions, located 25 kilometers from the capital city of Doha. Qatar implemented this step with great caution to guarantee the religious rights of others

while protecting the religious identity of the country (Fahi, 2018. P 21). These steps encouraged other countries in the region to build churches and open up to other religions.

It is also not possible to overlook the development dimension of this religious openness within the framework of the State of Qatar hosting hundreds of thousands of workers, especially from Asian countries, to contribute to the economic and development activities taking place in the country, which requires this state to guarantee their religious rights, especially in light of the international pressures escalated as the country hosted international events and activities that put it in the spotlight (22, Fahy, 2018, pp. 14).

Its hosting of interfaith dialogue conferences also came within the framework of its relentless endeavours to be a centre for international events and activities influencing global politics. In 2001, Doha launched this by hosting one of the most important international conferences, the World Trade Organization conference, which gained a multiplied value because it was held for the first time in an Arab capital, and it came a few weeks after the 9/11 attack, as well as during the American attack on Afghanistan in October of the same year (Abdullah, 2014. P. 158).

The State of Qatar's initiative for interfaith dialogue in 2003 was not the only one in the pattern of Qatari conferences on civilized dialogue with the West at that time. Rather, the State of Qatar launched, in 2002, an initiative for dialogue between America and the Islamic world, under the name "Doha Conference on American Relations with the Arab and Islamic Worlds", which turned into an annual forum under the name of the "America and the Islamic World Forum." It started in 2004, when the forum witnessed in that year a high official presence, led by US President Bill Clinton, and a group of senior thinkers, opinion leaders and experts in the fields of Economics, politics, media and society, from the American and Islamic sides. The Islamic presence included Islamic societies in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East (Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2005).

The forum came as part of the global efforts to address the consequences of the 9/11 terrorist events in the United States of America, on the relations between America and the Islamic world, and also to build bridges of understanding and rapprochement between cultures, countries, and peoples in the face of extremism (Al-Thani, 2017).

The philosophy of the forum was to create bridges of communication not only between the American and Islamic sides, but also between spiritual and diplomatic leaders in each side, and also between counterparts in each faith, to define the scope of the religious and diplomatic levels for cooperation on issues affecting relations between the United States and the Islamic world. This reflects the belief in the possibility of religious and diplomatic cooperation, given the role of religion in motivating individuals and shaping their views (Keswetter and Schein, 2013). This approach is usually lacking in interfaith and political dialogues, especially those that engage in dealing with crises in the Middle East.

The forum continued to be held until 2017, it was held in Washington, and no other forum has been held since then. The two organizers of it, the Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the American Brookings Institution, did not make any statement regarding the cessation of the forum.

One of the indicators of Qatar's success in dialogue initiatives was that it strengthened its international position in this regard by chairing the United Nations Organization for the Alliance of Civilizations, where Qatari Ambassador Nasser Al-Nasr was appointed a High Representative of the Organization for six years between 2013 and 2018 (United Nations, 2003). In December 2011, the capital, Doha, hosted the activities of the Fourth United Nations Forum for the Alliance of Civilizations, and Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser,

wife of the former Emir of Qatar, had an active role in the organization as a member of the high-level group of the “United Nations Program for the Alliance of Civilizations” (official website of Sheikha Moza Bint Nasser, 2020). Qatar has also hosted several religious and cultural meetings and forums over the past two decades, which are not mentioned in this research.

- *The context of growing up at the regional and international levels (the Gulf is at the forefront of the scene after 9/11)*

The regional and international circumstances in the era that followed 9/11 also formed a motive for launching this initiative, as Al-Nuaimi (personal interview, January 11, 2022) indicated that the events of 9/11 and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the suspicious role of Western media that turned those events into an issue of an Islamic-Christian conflict, prompted countries and leaders in the world to ask: Do these successive events reflect a real religious conflict fueled by extremist ideas? Or is it arranged and orchestrated as some would see? Therefore, some countries, such as the State of Qatar, under the leadership of His Highness the former Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, adopted, in the midst of these successive events, practical steps to confront this situation. Doha believed in the need for the Islamic world to move to calm these tensions and find ways for Islamic-Christian dialogue on a larger base.

In fact, the Arab Gulf countries were at the forefront of the scene after the events of 9/11, and they are concerned with the consequences of these events more than others for several considerations, the most important of which is that the perpetrators of the attacks belong to this region (almost 15 of them hold Saudi nationality). There is an idea growing in Western political and intellectual circles that countries of the Cooperation Council for the Arab Gulf States have become a breeding ground for extremism and terrorism, and the presence of US military bases in these countries has opened the appetite of the United States to have a role in confronting terrorism. This carries a moral dimension to legitimize the war on terrorism and find justifications for its Arab and Islamic acceptance. There is an attempt by the Western media to find a link between the Arab Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia, and global terrorism, and link that to the Gulf cultural and educational system that breeds terrorism, as they claim (Kamil, 2003. Pp 291-292).

The American reaction was evidently powerful after the 9/11 events in New York and Washington, where the neoconservatives, who at that time controlled the American politics during the era of President George W. Bush”, waged a war against “terrorism” without differentiating between Jihadist and moderate Islam. The aim was apparently to tailor a new Islam that complies with the American standards, and the most dangerous consequence is to exploit the concept of war against terrorism and to work to change the Arab and Islamic world, even if it is necessary for the process of change to take place by force. This is a realistic translation of the visions of Samuel Huntington in his book “The Clash of Civilizations.” On this basis, a large number of Arab and Islamic countries have been placed in the category of countries that finance terrorism, including the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, whose educational curricula were considered incitement to terrorism, and that these educational curricula, as they claim, stand behind building and shaping the conviction of the Saudi suicide bombers who, allegedly, participated in 9/11 events (Razzaq, 2020. Pp 232-233).

In this context, the West exerted the maximum pressure on the Gulf states in particular to adopt the American perspective as a reform process to contain terrorism, uproot its roots, impose a settlement to the Arab-Israeli conflict, impose a democratic reforms, reconsider the educational and cultural systems as a whole, and even reform the Islamic religion itself

according to the American vision (Walad Abah, 2004. Pp101-103). This was according to a comprehensive strategy towards the region that also included plans to contain the so-called rogue states, and to contain the imbalance in the social and political structure in some friendly countries to the United States, especially in the Gulf region (Abdullah, 2010. Pp 312-315).

In the midst of this situation, another war has grown in the United States and the West in general, one with a cultural and civilizational dimension that is no less fierce, represented in the growth of writings against Islam and its people, and the portrayal of this religion as representing a new challenge to the West, its values, and civilization. These writings were based on the legacy of the Christian perspective of Islam, which was formed during the Crusades. The Orientalists later attempted to make it up with a false scientific image. This image consisted mainly of multiple dimensions, on top of which was the questioning of the prophethood of Muhammad, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, and the consideration of Islam as a pagan religion based on violence and brutality, in addition to being a religion of decadence and sensuality, so that the image became, in a more horrible way, an essential part of the Western strategic and intellectual discourse after 9/11 (Wlad Abah, 2004. Pp 138-142).

In addition, some Western politicians and thinkers have not forgotten to adjust these accusations to be more relevant in our current era. Islam, according to their perspective, is against the values of Western civilization, and against modernity, human rights, freedom, and pluralism, as stated by the former Italian Prime Minister, "Silvio Berlusconi," in his comment on the 9/11 events (The Emirati Statement, 2001). It was preceded by US President George Bush on the day after the 9/11, when he declared that there was a struggle between the forces of good and the forces of evil, claiming that the war on terrorism is a mission entrusted to him by Allah to defend his country and cleanse evil forces (Tevnan, 2003. P. 21).

Among the examples of western intellectual hypotheses after these events is when the conservative right-wing thinker, James Wilson, argued that the problem of Islam is its inability to solve the dilemma of the relationship between it and freedom (Wilson, 2002). The other conservative American thinker Michael Novak also considered that Islamic terrorism is due to dogmatic reasons, and to the nature of Islam itself (Novak, 2004). These hypotheses are not new, and had been repeated even before 9/11 by several Western thinkers, perhaps the most prominent of them is the orientalist Bernard Lewis (Lewis, 1990), and Samuel Huntington (Huntington, 1999. Pp 449-450), the later is the thinker whose idea of the clash of civilizations dominated the scene and seemed like a prophecy, and prompted decision-makers to transform this vision into an international strategy to confront the so-called Islamic threat, as portrayed in the political and intellectual literature.

So, the conflict and tension after 9/11 dominated the scene, specifically between the two sides of the equation, the West and the Islamic world, most prominently the Arab world. Among the most evident consequences of this conflict are the war against Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as the Palestinian uprising "Al-Aqsa Intifada" between 2000 and 2005. The conflict took cultural, religious, and civilizational dimensions. This came at a time when major regional countries retreated as a result of 9/11 events. Some countries searched for a considerable role amid military and cultural wars. The State of Qatar was one of the countries that succeeded in seizing the opportunity to play a vital role in the field of religious dialogue as one of the soft tools or diplomatic paths it pursued in its foreign policy.

- *International interest in dialogue after the events of 9/11*

It should be noted, in this global context, that the attention of the State of Qatar to dialogue between different religions and cultures came at a time when there was

international interest in this type of dialogue. What might be called a global trend has emerged to restore respect for religions and recognize their role in promoting peace between nations and peoples and achieving development, in the context of the international community's efforts to achieve global peace, especially after the growth of fundamentalisms in the world. Nowadays, religious dialogue is described as part of soft power and spiritual diplomacy, as an external variable that some countries exploit in favor of resolving conflict and building what is called global religious peace by focusing on what is common between the monotheistic religions (Jamal al-Din, 2019. Pp 14-15). The interfaith dialogue that led to the so-called spiritual diplomacy is no longer limited to managing conflict, but has become an active force in development to create global religious peace.

The global trend towards activating the role of religions in peace and development at the global level is evident on several occasions. For example, in 2001, the United Nations issued a report entitled "Dialogue Among Civilizations", in which it emphasized the role of interfaith dialogue in consolidating cooperation between countries that differ in their national policies as they prioritize their national interest over any other considerations. This is based on the hypothesis that interfaith dialogue can reduce the cost of managing conflicts and increase the potential positive aspects, because it will include the infrastructure in national societies as an influence on politics, i.e. communication with global public opinion. The outcome will increase if the religious dimension has a role in the emergence of the conflict (Abdul Shafi, 2013).

The International Monetary Fund also issued a report entitled "A Better World for All" in 2000, talking about the Abrahamic common aspects, and it was the basis for religious dialogues sponsored by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Council of Churches. In 2005, the United Nations held the first meeting of religious leaders in the world to discuss global inequality, in which spiritual ideas were linked to secular issues. Another conference of the Group of Eight in July 2005, in which religious leaders participated to achieve peace based on fighting poverty, among other conferences (Jamal Al-Din, 2019. Pp 57-58).

In sum, the birth of the Doha Conferences for Interfaith Dialogue did not come suddenly, but rather came in light of huge global transformations, although the consequences of the events of 9/11 were the ones that ultimately pushed for this path and encouraged the opening of a door for religious dialogue in this region of the world.

The Third Topic: The Stages of Initiative Development

Over the course of its nearly 20-year history, since its founding in 2003, until now in 2023, the Qatari initiative has witnessed a lot of development and faced many challenges, which undoubtedly affected its course. The changes included the parties participating in the dialogue, then the institutionalization and organization, then dialogue and its issues, and finally its sessions, which also witnessed a significant change. This can be detailed by highlighting three stages

➤ *The first phase: bilateral dialogue 2003-2004*

This stage is important to read the context of the initiative, and to clarify the goal of the host country in hosting religious conferences at a time when chaos and hostilities controlled the course of the relationship between East and West. Also, this stage has its own characteristics, whether in the form in which it was launched, or the level of attendance, or the organization and sponsorship by the host country. From the researcher's point of view,

this stage includes the first and second meetings, where the first was in the form of a symposium, namely “Qatar Symposium for Islamic-Christian Dialogue,” and the second was “Qatar Conference for Islamic-Christian Dialogue.”

- *The first meeting: Qatar Symposium on Islamic-Christian Dialogue in April, 2003*

We note from the outset that the Qatar Symposium on Islamic-Christian Dialogue was held from 7-9 April 2003, under the title “Building Bridges”. It took place in coordination and cooperation between the host country and the Anglican Church (Canterbury), and is an extension of a previous symposium held at the official residence of the Archbishop. Canterbury in London (Lambeth Palace), under the same title in 2002. It included open lectures and private sessions by Muslim scholars and Christian clerics from different countries around the world (Anglican Communion, 2003).

The literature of the Church of Canterbury indicates that the Doha symposium came within the framework of a series of seminars launched by the Church to study the Bible and the Holy Qur’an, under the title “Building Bridges”. Its beginning was in London in the 2002, then it moved in the following year to Doha as we mentioned above, then to other cities such as Sarajevo, Washington, Singapore and Rome (Anglican Communion, 2008).

Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury and leader of the Anglican Church, confirmed that planning for the Doha Symposium, which coincided with the American war on Iraq, began long before the war (Williams, 2003). This means that Doha planned to host the symposium in the midst of the turmoil that swept the world after the 9/11 events and the US war on Afghanistan in October of the same year.

These information confirm that the Doha initiative for interfaith dialogue was born out of this symposium, which was called the “Qatar Symposium on Islamic-Christian Dialogue”, with cooperation between Doha and the Church of Canterbury. This was before the State of Qatar became independent in organizing and coordinating the Doha conferences, specifically from the third conference.

It seems that the Anglican Church has found an important momentum for its dialogue initiative, as the place, time and care give it an unmissable moral value by holding it in an Arab country, it is even in the Arabian Peninsula where the holy places of Muslims are, and in the Gulf region in particular, which was the focus of attention after 9/11, and at a time when the American-British war destroyed Iraq, a neighbouring Arab Muslim country that is even geographically connected to the Gulf. The symposium received almost unprecedented official sponsorship in all dialogue initiatives coming from the West towards the Arab region. It was inaugurated by the Emir of Qatar at the time, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, in the presence of religious figures who have considerable status in the Islamic world, and sometimes controversial in the West, such as Sheikh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi (Proceedings of the Symposium on Islamic-Christian Dialogue, 2003).

The momentum of this official sponsorship was reflected in the speech of Anglican Church leader Rowan Williams, who thanked the Emir of the State of Qatar for facilitating the symposium, considering hosting it “an exemplary commitment on the part of His Highness to dialogue, a commitment shown by His Highness in a meeting he had with my predecessor, former Archbishop George Leonard Carey, in the Qatari capital, Doha, months before the symposium was held, he continued it strongly and with a distinguished vision. The Emir of Qatar showed enthusiasm for sincere exchange and deep understanding for any meetings of this kind, and we are all very grateful. It is a kind of openness that also makes it possible to do important initiatives towards the Christian community here” (Williams, 2003).

It seems that the idea of that State of Qatar host the symposium was born during the visit of the Archbishop of Canterbury, George Leonard Curry who held office between April 1991 and October 2002, to the State of Qatar in November, 2001 (Elaf Electronic Newspaper, 2001), about 18 months before the aforementioned symposium was held (Anglican Communion, 2003). This is indicated by the speech of Archbishop Rowan Williams, who was assigned in his position in December 2002, which he delivered during the symposium. He indicated that the Emir of Qatar expressed, in that meeting, enthusiasm for cooperation in organizing Islamic-Christian dialogues (Williams, 2003).

The visit of the Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, to Doha was in 2001, at a time when the State of Qatar had shown openness to the issue of building churches on its lands. Perhaps, that visit aimed at holding talks with the Qatari government to establish an Anglican church in the country, for which the foundation stone was laid a few months later during the visit of Archbishop Rowan Williams in April 2003, which coincided with the symposium (Anglican Communion, 2003).

- *The Second Islamic-Christian Meeting: Qatar Conference on Islamic-Christian Dialogue – May 2004*

The second Islamic-Christian meeting took place in Doha in May 2004, in cooperation between the Gulf Center for Studies at Qatar University and the Committee on Religious Relations with Muslims at the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in the Vatican. It was inaugurated by the Qatari Prime Minister at the time on behalf of the former Emir of Qatar, Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani.

This meeting was entitled “Qatar Conference on Islamic-Christian Dialogue”, and witnessed a remarkable presence of Islamic and Christian figures, among them from the Islamic side, Sheikh of Al-Azhar at the time, Sheikh Dr. Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi, and Sheikh Dr. Yusef Al-Qaradawi, and from the Christian side, the curator of the archives of the Catholic Church, Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, President and Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Pierre Luigi Celata, as well as Coptic Orthodox Patriarch, Anba Shenouda III, and other figures interested in the field of dialogue (Qatar Conference on Muslim-Christian Dialogue in 2004, Catholic News Agency, 2004).

The success of the State of Qatar in hosting the first symposium, and the public opinion’s acceptance of it despite the state of Arab and Islamic anger over the war on Iraq prompted Qatar to hold another meeting with a high Islamic and Christian presence, as the number of participants in the conference reached 75 scholars, clerics, thinkers and researchers from both sides (Al-Jazeera Net, 2004), while the attendance of the first symposium did not exceed 30 Muslims and Christians (Anglican Communion, 2003).

The first and second meetings attempted to explore the common values of spirituality by referring to the texts of the Qur’an and the Holy Book. The first meeting was “building bridges” confined to theological issues in part, in the axis of “listening to the Lord and leaning from Him”, then applying those texts on contemporary issues and challenges, such as women’s issues. Another axis discussed “Legacy of the Past and Challenges of the Present”. It also explored the relationship with the other in the “Bible and the Other” axis. The second meeting, titled “Freedom of Religion”, attempted to expand the circle by talking about coexistence between religions, in the “Religions and Peace” axis, and human rights and religions in the “Religious Freedom” axis, in addition to presenting cases of the situation of religious freedom in the world (Malakh, 2010. Pp 99-142).

These two meetings discussed how to deal with the sacred texts of the two religions, which call for love, peace, and coexistence among human beings, and their projection on the reality of life. These issues reflect the tense reality after the events of 9/11, after the issue of “religion” surfaced to spark controversy, at the time, about its role in fuelling conflicts or building peace. The Islamic religion was the main accused side in issues of violence and extremism. For this reason, the general orientation of the dialogue in the first and second forums was an attempt to triumph for religions, affirming their sanctity, spiritual and human values, their role in peace, and their rejection of extremism, violence, killing, and destruction, which are attitudes and practices that are sometimes based on wrong readings of texts, or rely on historical religion rather than the religion revealed by Allah in the Holy Books (Malakh, 2010. Pp 149-150).

➤ ***The second stage: trilateral dialogue***

As the researcher explained previously, the Qatari initiative was launched with an Islamic-Christian dialogue, and it took place in a very complex regional and international political circumstance. Its stated goal was to ease the tension that prevailed in Islamic-Christian relations after 9/11 events and the subsequent repercussions, most notably the war launched by the United States on Afghanistan and Iraq.

The first and second conferences brought together representatives of Muslims and Christians, before the former Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, proposed in his speech delivered on his behalf by his brother, Prime Minister Abdullah bin Khalifa Al Thani, to expand the circle of dialogue to include the Jews, justifying this by the doctrinal commonality between the three religions, which is belief in Allah (Al-Thani, 2004). This was actually achieved from the third conference until now. Since then, the conferences have been held in a full Qatari organization, under the title “Doha International Conference for interfaith Dialogue” with mentioning the numerical order of the conferences instead of the “Qatar Symposium on Islamic-Christian Dialogue” (Ghanem, 2011. P 189).

This shift, represented by inviting the Jews to the dialogue table, was the first challenge facing the Qatari initiative, as it caused controversy not only in the Islamic community, but also in Eastern Christianity. Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, head of the World Federation of Muslims, who is one of the prominent figures of Islam, announced his boycott of the Doha conferences because of the Jewish presence. The conference was also boycotted by Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi, Sheikh of Al-Azhar Al-Sharif, Sheikh Ali Gomaa, the Mufti of Egypt, and the Islamic thinker Muhammad Salim Al-Awa, Secretary General of the International Union of Muslim Scholars at the time, along with Christian personalities headed by Anba Shenouda III, Patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox (Ghanim, 2011. P 187; Al Jazeera Net, 2004).

It appears from the attendance of this conference that the boycott was not institutional. That is, it was very personal for the Islamic and Christian figures who refused to attend. The evidence for this is the presence of Islamic personalities such as Dr. Amna Naseer from Al-Azhar University, and Sheikh Dr. Ali Al-Qara Daghi from the International Union of Muslim Scholars, and Rev. Safwat Al-Bayadi, head of the Evangelical Synod of the Nile from Egypt (Ghanem, 2011. P 187).

The Palestinian cause was the determinant of the refusal of these Islamic and Christian personalities to attend the Doha conferences to which the Jews would flock, especially since these conferences were held at the height of the outbreak of the second Palestinian uprising,

the “Al-Aqsa Intifada”, which lasted between 2001 – 2005, an uprising sparked by the Jews’ attack on Al-Aqsa Mosque. Al-Qaradawi expressed this by saying:

“After announcing the expansion of the conference to be an Islamic, Christian, and Jewish dialogue, I decided not to participate in it, so as not to sit with the Jews on one platform as long as they usurp Palestine and the Al-Aqsa Mosque and destroy the mosques, and as long as the issue of Palestine is pending and unresolved” (Qatari Al-Arab Newspaper, 2013).

Based on the previous data, the researcher thinks that this transformation in expanding the circle of dialogue represented an important station and a new stage for the State of Qatar’s initiative for interfaith dialogue. The most important characteristics of this stage are as follows:

- **Tripartite Meeting:** Transforming the Doha meetings from a bilateral dialogue (Islamic and Christian) to a tripartite dialogue that brings together representatives of the three biblical religions (Islam, Christianity, and Judaism).
- **Open Conferences:** from the third conference, the meeting transformed from small, closed symposiums for a group of Muslim and Christian clerics, scholars, and researchers in the field of religions, as in the first and second meetings, to conferences open to the media and invitees from the general public.
- **Global Topics and Issues:** The first and second symposiums were discussions on theological topics or purely religious issues based on religious texts, while the conferences then opened up to global issues and topics of interest to religions and the entire world community.
- **Diverse presence:** In view of the various topics that the Doha conferences began to discuss, they opened the door wide for experts and specialists from various humanitarian disciplines. In addition to religious leaders, there were politicians, media experts, sociologists, opinion leaders, activists in civil society organizations, journalists, students, and others interested in the field of interfaith dialogue.
- **Full country organization:** from the third conference, the organization of the Doha conferences became purely national, undertaken by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Qatar University, after the first meeting was organized in cooperation with the Church of Canterbury, and the second was in cooperation with the Vatican.

Just as the third conference constituted an important stage in the development of the Qatari initiative for interfaith dialogue; it also laid the foundations for a new phase after the participants adopted a proposal put forward by Qatar during the second conference to launch an institution that sponsors dialogue on a permanent basis, with its headquarters in the Qatari capital, Doha (Al Jazeera Net, 2005). After the conference reached this stage, the Emir of Qatar identified three paths for the success of the dialogue to overcome psychological, cultural, and political obstacles; The first is “developing mutual knowledge between the three religions by translating their basic references into Arabic and foreign languages, and proposing the establishment of a joint intellectual institution concerned with this task.” The second is “focusing in the dialogue on social and cultural issues to achieve rapprochement, such as the role of women, and the relationship between religion and modernity.” The third is “examining ways of joint cooperation in order to resolve chronic conflicts whose settlement involves achieving peace and harmony” (Al-Thani, 2005).

➤ ***The third stage: the institutional organization of the dialogue***

The Qatari initiative witnessed an important development represented in the launch of an institution that supervises the organization of conferences and events related to interfaith

dialogue. This institution was called the “Doha International Centre for Interfaith Dialogue”. The trend towards the institutional organization of this initiative began with the first conference when the former Emir of Qatar suggested a proposal to establish an institution concerned with dialogue based in Doha (Al-Thani, Speech of the Emir of Qatar at the opening of the Qatar Symposium for Islamic-Christian Dialogue, 2003). The proposal was supported by the participants in the third conference, who emphasized the importance of establishing an institution to sponsor dialogue and ensure its sustainability (Al-Jazeera Net, 2005).

In the third conference, the participants in the conference unanimously adopted the establishment of an institution concerned with dialogue, which actually saw the light in the seventh conference held in May 2007, under the title “Doha International Centre for Interfaith Dialogue”, which was officially opened on May 14, 2008. Two years later, an Emiri decision was issued approving the establishment of the centre as an international institution to sponsor dialogue (Qatar Legal Portal, 2010).

The Doha International Centre for Interfaith Dialogue was one of the first centres for dialogue in the Arab world. In fact, it can be said that it was the first centre established in the Arab world after the 9/11 events. It constituted an important step in the development of the Qatari initiative and its continuity until now. The centre’s vision stipulated that “the centre should be a pioneering model in achieving peaceful coexistence among followers of religions, and a global reference in the field of interfaith dialogue” (Doha International Centre for Interfaith Dialogue, 2018). It is clear from this formula that the Center drew its vision according to two tracks that complement each other in its path towards achieving goals and aspirations, namely the practical track: “achieving peaceful coexistence between religions”, and the theoretical track “a global reference in the field of interfaith dialogue”.

As for the center’s message, it is as follows: “The Centre seeks a constructive dialogue among followers of religions to better understand the religious principles and teachings and to serve humanity as a whole, based on mutual respect and recognition of differences amongst individuals and institutions.” Its objectives are

- To be a forum, to promote the culture of peaceful coexistence and tolerance of the other.
- To activate religious values to address the issues and problems that concern humanity.
- To expand the content of the dialogue to include aspects of life interacting with religion.
- To expand the dialogue to include researchers and academics interested in the relationship between religious values and issues of life.
- To be a house of expertise that provides scientific solutions, educational practices and training sessions in the field of dialogue.

The centre also began organizing the Doha conferences starting from the sixth conference, which was held in May 2007, when the launch of the new centre was announced, its board of directors was formed, and a global advisory board of scholars of the three monotheistic religions was also formed to assist in planning and communicating with corresponding institutions around the world (Doha International centre for Interfaith Dialogue, 2018). The researcher in the field of religions, Badran Al-Hassan, confirms that the centre has also added a new value to dialogue in the region by transforming the dialogue activity into an organized institutional work that enjoys scientific and objective permanence and continuity (Al-Hassan, personal interview, 2022).

Since its establishment, Doha International Centre for Interfaith Dialogue has been keen to expand its activities and develop the Qatar Interfaith Dialogue Initiative, which is based

primarily on annual conferences, of which 14 conferences have been held so far, in addition to conferences and seminars outside the State of Qatar, 6 of which were held in the Middle East and Europe. Moreover, there are forums, seminars, and workshops among followers of religions within the State of Qatar, which embraces more than 100 nationalities of different religions, in addition to the issuance of a peer-reviewed research journal, "Religions Magazine", and the organization of various cultural and training activities targeting various segments of society.

The Doha International Award for Interfaith Dialogue was launched by the Center in 2013. It is one of its most important development initiatives since its establishment. It is unique in this field, at the level of the Arab world, and aims to support and encourage the initiatives of individuals and institutions that have a significant and sustainable impact in promoting dialogue and consolidating a culture of peace. The award is supervised by the Award's Committee of Trustees, which is a specialized committee of religious scholars (Muslims, Christians, and Jews), in addition to officials from the Centre. The Committee of Trustees of the Award selects arbitrators from among the best specialists in the issues of the Award from all over the world. The theme of the award corresponds with the title of the annual conference. The award winners are honored during the opening ceremony of the conference (Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue, 2014).

Conclusion

It is clear from the previous information that the Qatari initiative for interfaith dialogue appeared in an exceptional local, regional, and international context. Its data constituted a favorable climate for its emergence of this initiative. From Doha's readiness towards an independent and more effective foreign policy on the international scene at the various diplomatic levels was accompanied by important economic transformations that the country witnessed to a regional atmosphere under which major countries receded or retreated as a result of 9/11 events, in addition to a wide international movement in which visions and trends clashed between a call for launching dialogues between religions, civilizations, and cultures to besiege extremism, violence, action and reaction.

The Qatari initiative began with an Islamic-Christian meeting in 2003, to expand in the third time of the meeting to a tripartite conference in which Jews would participate, with the accompanying controversy over Jewish participation on the background of the Israeli occupation of Palestine. The initiative also witnessed other developments with the establishment of the Doha International Centre for Interfaith Dialogue, and underwent an increase in the momentum of activities between regular internal conferences, and others held abroad from time to time, as well as local seminars, meetings, and round tables that discuss the issues of the religiously and culturally diverse communities residing in the country, in addition to the various publications concerned with interfaith dialogue, its issues, topics, problems, contemporary challenges, and its global award, which added a practical dimension to the activities of the Center.

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