



# **Treading Diverging Paths**

## **Donor proliferation and aid transparency in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates**

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**Ph.D. thesis defence on 7 December, 2017**

### **Abstract**

This dissertation explains the diversity of multilateral paths followed by similar small rentier states in the international realm. Why do some states commit to multilateralism by signing legally binding treaties, participating in institutions and contributing financial resources?

Amongst small state theorists, common wisdom has long held that small states are more likely to act multilaterally because of structural needs to bandwagon with bigger actors within existing frameworks. Liberal scholars reach a similar conclusion by arguing that states are progressively “socialized” within international organizations. On the other hand, political economists indicate that when a rentier state enjoys preferential trading terms thanks to its hydrocarbons exports, it has little incentive to engage multilaterally. “Branding” scholars in particular consider that small rentier states have a preference for costly and visible initiatives and little interest for the nitty-gritty aspects of international cooperation. The predictions outlined by these two research strands are completely antagonistic: while small state theory and liberalism predict more multilateral cooperation, rentier state theory predicts less of it. These opposite views fail however to explain the diversity of approaches to multilateral cooperation of small, resource-rich states like the Gulf emirates of Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – but also Norway, Venezuela or Brunei, for instance.

Against this background, this dissertation endeavours to understand better this discrepancy with a case study approach of two similar oil and gas exporting small states, Qatar and the UAE. These follow significantly different multilateral approaches in the field of foreign aid, a key component of their foreign policy for which they are increasingly important globally. The two city states diverge on two major items of the international community’s aid agenda – donor proliferation and aid transparency. On the one hand, the UAE has in the past decade opened its doors to most Western international organizations of foreign assistance and become an active member of the OECD Development Assistance Committee on sensitive issues such as aid transparency; and made exceptional efforts in the

region and among emerging donors at large, to streamline its aid landscape. On the other hand, Qatar has favoured bilateral frameworks and shut out the United Nations Development Program in Doha. Its attempt to streamline aid, despite reforms initiated fifteen years ago, has not as yet been fruitful.

Building on an alternative domestic approach, this thesis argues that the international behaviour of these states is better understood by looking at the impact of rentier and dynastic dynamics on the development of their aid bureaucracies. The growth of the rentier state creates a fragmented aid landscape in which performance is secondary, and where both reform-prone and reform-averse aid actors coexist. The need to accommodate members of the ruling dynasty and close allies concurs in forming and fossilizing aid fiefdoms. In other words, contrary to a widespread assumption, Gulf autocrats do not form a fully autonomous or cohesive leadership. Thus, even in the small centralized and autocratic state of Qatar, the fragmentation of the aid landscape undermines the leadership's reforms on donor proliferation and aid transparency. Conversely, decentralization of power in the UAE between rentier Abu Dhabi and non-rentier Dubai makes domestically negotiated agreements costlier and "stickier". Decentralization tempers the rentier and dynastic dynamics in Abu Dhabi and enhances reforms on donor proliferation and aid transparency.

If autocratic rulers cannot always act the way they want to, they also do not necessarily want to abide by the rules. Problematically, rentier and dynastic dynamics say little of actors' preferences. To complement the previous findings, I trace the evolution of aid preferences in Qatar and the UAE and underline the overlooked role of foreign advisers. While rentier state scholars assume that "rulers rule", I show that the growth of idle rentier state bureaucracies has given foreign experts more leverage. I identify the extent to which the divergent formation of three generations of aid experts has led Qatar and the UAE onto divergent multilateral pathways. I conclude by showing that there is a two-way relationship between the rise of pro- or anti-multilateralism foreign experts and the rentier state. If rentier dynamics weaken multilateralism by fragmenting autocrats' public policies, they nonetheless help consolidate foreign expertise in the face of inefficient rentier bureaucracies. Conversely, rivalrous foreign experts participate in the further segmentation of the bureaucracy.



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## **Bio**

Martin Lestra is a postdoctoral researcher at the Université Jean Jaurès – Toulouse. With researchers in the dramatic arts, he develops more effective continuing professional development modules for medical practitioners. During his doctoral studies, Martin was a visiting researcher at New York University – Abu Dhabi and at Qatar University. His dissertation explores rentier state cooperation with international organizations, based on a comparative study of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates in the realm of foreign aid.

His research interests include Gulf studies, higher education in the Middle East, migration and foreign expertise ; and increasingly, the intriguing world of medical vocational training.

He is a graduate of the Grenoble Institute of Political Studies, the University of Kent and the College of Europe, where he was awarded the Lavoisier Scholarship by the French Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs. He has authored and co-authored articles in the Oxford Middle East Review, the Middle East Law and Governance Journal, as well as co-authored book chapters in edited volumes (Gerlach Press and University of Pennsylvania Press). At the EUI he co-edited with Luigi Narbone an ebook entitled The Gulf monarchies Beyond the Arab Spring. Changes and challenges (2015).