

The National Interest: The Rift between Qatar and the GCC Could Threaten Trump's Foreign Policy

The United States should not pick sides in the conflict, but instead bring the parties to the negotiating table.

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Shortly after President Donald Trump delivered his historic address to the U.S.-Arab-Islamic Summit in Riyadh, a new Middle East crisis erupted. The growing rift between Qatar and its Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) partners has not only unleashed a crisis of potentially far-reaching geopolitical implications but also threatens Trump's principal foreign policy success.

The GCC crisis erupted on May 24, when the official Qatar News Agency (QNA) was hacked and quoted Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani in a fake statement saying that Iran is an "Islamic power" and that Qatar enjoys "good" relations with Israel. The statement also quoted the emir calling Hamas "the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people," as well as saying that Qatar had "strong relations" with Iran and the United States.

Unnamed U.S. officials have since attributed the hack to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a charge that was swiftly denied by Abu Dhabi. Qatari officials, however, allege that the virus which infested the QNA website had been planted on April 20, 2017 and that the hacked statement of Tamim was set to be released on May 11, 2017, ten days before Trump was scheduled to deliver his Riyadh address.

Doha has also requested assistance from the FBI and its British counterpart to take part in its investigation and provided evidence of the alleged Emirati orchestrated hack at a news conference on July 20. It is to be followed up by legal action against Abu Dhabi and Riyadh, who Qatar considers a co-conspirator. It is unclear when Doha will present its legal case to the international community.

On June 5, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt severed diplomatic ties with Qatar over allegations that it is supporting terrorism and embraces Iran and its regional agenda. The block also imposed an economic embargo of Qatar—which includes cutting off all food supplies and access to medicine—by closing off land and maritime borders.

All Qatari citizens have since been expelled from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE and their citizens living in Qatar were provided a fourteen day deadline to leave. Egypt, however, has not placed any travel restrictions on its citizens residing in Qatar, expelled Qataris living in Egypt or imposed an economic embargo on Doha. Saudi Arabia and its regional partners have nonetheless closed down all air routes to and from Doha from their respective countries. Qatar, however, has not expelled any citizens from Saudi Arabia and its regional allies.

Tweets About Qatar Trigger Fear Of Miscalculation

On June 6, Trump weighed in on the dispute by posting the following message on Twitter:

"During my recent trip to the Middle East I stated that there can no longer be funding of Radical Ideology. Leaders pointed to Qatar—look!"

He swiftly followed up by another two tweets later that morning, which gave little ambiguity of his stance vis-à-vis Qatar:

“So good to see the Saudi Arabia visit with the King and 50 countries already paying off. They said they would take a hard line on funding extremism, and all reference was pointing to Qatar. Perhaps this will be the beginning of the end to the horror of terrorism!”

Three days later, on June 9, after Secretary of State Rex Tillerson called upon Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain to ease their blockade of Qatar, Trump contradicted his top diplomat by announcing hours later during a press conference at the White House that “the nation of Qatar, unfortunately, has historically been a funder of terrorism.”

Whatever intention Trump had vis-à-vis the GCC dispute, his tweets followed up by the June 9 press conference had a clear destabilizing impact. The reaction was perceived as Trump supporting the Saudis as well as a “green light” for a Saudi military invasion in order to depose Tamim and settle Riyadh’s long-standing grievances with Doha once and for all.

Moreover, the ultimatum—which required Doha to sever ties with Tehran—was widely perceived by Qatari officials as a trap. If Qatar did turn to Iran for diplomatic protection, Saudi Arabia would likely press the United States for further diplomatic pressure on Doha.

As part of an effort to shore up international support for Doha and to prevent Tehran from taking advantage of the crisis, Qatari Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani visited all Western powers, including Russia and Turkey, but not Iran. Qatar also believes that Iran is the only beneficiary of the GCC crisis.

Qatar, however, did receive Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for Arab and African Affairs Hossein Jaber Ansari on June 18 in Doha. During the two-month long crisis, Qatar has received the foreign ministers of Germany, United Kingdom, France and the United States. On July 23–24, Recep Tayyip Erdogan became the first major international leader to visit Riyadh and Doha as part of an effort to defuse the crisis.

Doha’s interpretation of Trump’s Qatar tweets rests on the assumption that his messaging was based on allegations brought to him by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and not from his intelligence agencies.

The Politics Of Al-Udeid Air Base

In an interview with the Christian Broadcast Network aired on July 12, Trump said, “We are going to have a good relationship with Qatar and not going to have a problem with the military base... If we ever had to leave, we’d have 10 countries willing to build us another one. And they’ll pay for it. The days of us paying for things are largely over.”

However, as David Des Roches of National Defense University points out, “Al-Udeid is the largest overseas air base used by the United States and has two active runways capable of handling every aircraft in the U.S. inventory, together with robust fueling and ammunition storage facilities. In addition, the base also houses the forward headquarters of U.S. Special Operations Central Command (SOCCENT) and U.S. Air Forces Central Command (AFCENT) with their advanced command and control infrastructures. This complex has been built up considerably over 14 years, with much of the funding provided by Qatar.”

Since the establishment of the Al-Udeid Air Base in 2002, the U.S. government estimates that construction and maintenance costs totals \$10 billion. Out of the \$10 billion, Qatar has spent \$9 billion. It is also widely understood that the U.S. Air Base was relocated to Qatar after Saudi Arabia ordered the U.S. to leave the Prince Sultan Air Base, which the United States had maintained since the Gulf War of 1991.

In addition to having paid the overwhelming majority of costs pertaining to Al-Udeid, the Qatari government has also given Washington an unfettered ability to operate and has apparently not denied a single U.S. operational request for the base since its inception.

Contributing to Doha's mounting challenges in Washington was a conference hosted by the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies (FDD) in Washington on May 23 whose primary focus was to advocate for the U.S. withdrawal from the Al-Udeid Air Base.

This, along with an op-ed published by the UAE ambassador to Washington in the Wall Street Journal on June 12—three days after Trump's public rebuke of Qatar—called for relocating the Al Udeid Air Base to the UAE.

Between Doha's growing regional isolation and what Qatari officials believe is an orchestrated international campaign of smear, especially in Washington, triggered by a barrage of critical op-eds about its foreign policy and persistent allegations of Qatari support for terrorism in leading U.S. media outlets, coupled with the mixed messages from Trump and his top diplomat left the Qatari leadership at a state of panic: the leadership feared Qatar's security environment could begin to resemble that of Kuwait prior to Saddam Hussein's invasion.

Due to the fear of a Saudi miscalculation of U.S. policy intentions, just as Saddam Hussein had in 1990, coupled with what the Qatari leadership perceived as "the Iran trap," the emir chose to ignore Tehran and instead dispatched Minister of State for Defense Khalid bin Mohammad al Attiyah to Washington. There, he signed a deal to buy as many as seventy-two F-15 fighters jets valued at as much as \$21 billion.

Despite Trump's public criticism of Qatar, the symbolism of the arms agreement signed by al- Attiyah and James Mattis underscored that the U.S.-Qatar strategic alliance remained intact despite problems. Mattis announced during the agreement signing, "I believe that (Qatar's) Prince Thani inherited a difficult, very tough situation, and he's trying to turn the society in the right direction." While the agreement had been years in the making, its high-profile signing ceremony was expedited to send a clear message to the GCC of U.S. support for Qatar's sovereignty and value as a key U.S. strategic ally.

Following al-Attiyah's visit, he departed for Ankara on June 30 to meet the army chief of staff, his Turkish counterpart and Recep Tayyip Erdogan to secure Turkish diplomatic and military support. Earlier in June, Turkey's parliament ratified two deals on deploying troops to Qatar and training its army. While Qatar initially touted that 3,000 Turkish troops would be dispatched to the Gulf country, no more than 180 will eventually be sent. Washington remains Doha's undisputed security guarantor as Turkish troops play a largely symbolic role, since Qatar also considers Turkey to be a critical ally against Iran.

In light of the persistent diplomatic onslaught against Qatar, Doha now considers Saudi Arabia and the UAE in particular to be hostile entities. Within the context of Qatar's irreversible relationship with Saudi

Arabia, even if a solution to the GCC crisis ultimately is brokered, Doha has made a strategic decision to utilize its F-15 acquisition primarily for homeland security as opposed to continuing to develop and strengthen its expeditionary forces.

Qatar's National Service Authority will similarly focus its new national service program on strengthening its security forces as part of a strategic effort to boost homeland defense.

The national service program will also partner with the Qatar Foundation's Education City, which covers fourteen square kilometers and houses educational facilities from school age to research level and branch campuses of some of the world's premier universities.

On Doha's growing fear of its neighbors, it is widely understood that if the United States withdraws from either Al-Udeid or from its second military facility in that country, Camp As Sayliyah, Qatar would invite Russia to establish a military presence in the country.

Hamas and Israel

Critics of Qatar's foreign policy frequently point out that Hamas, the Taliban and Muslim Brotherhood representatives, along with well-known extremists such as Egyptian hate preacher Yusuf al-Qaradawi, all continue to enjoy sanctuary in Doha. What is less understood is that Condoleezza Rice requested Doha's assistance to host Hamas following its 2006 election victory in Gaza in order to help facilitate the peace processes between Hamas, the Palestinian Authority and Israel.

Prior to the Gaza election of 2006, Qatari officials repeatedly warned Washington against holding the election as Hamas would be the likely winner.

Over the ensuing decade, Washington has not once requested the expulsion of Hamas from Qatar as the United States apparently prefers the group to be located in Doha as opposed to in Tehran, where it has no influence.

All Hamas officials residing in Doha are under constant surveillance and considered a liability to Qatar, given the potential international scrutiny if an incident occurred.

While American diplomats in Qatar have never interacted with Hamas, Qatari officials have passed on U.S. messages to the group.

The Obama administration similarly requested in 2012 that Doha host representatives from Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, which had become a major political force in Egypt during the initial phases of the post Arab Spring environment.

With allegations surfacing in Washington that Doha is supporting terrorism by hosting the Taliban and Hamas, David Petraeus came to Qatar's defense on July 3 when he told the French newspaper *Journal du Dimanche*, "Our partners should remember that Qatar—at our request—welcomed delegations from the Taliban and Hamas, and that Qatar is now home to our military headquarters for our operations throughout the Middle East."

In addition to hosting Hamas officials in Doha, Qatar remains the only GCC country to maintain formal diplomatic ties with Israel. Since the Israel-Hamas war of 2014, Qatar has been responsible for financing and coordinating the reconstruction of the Gaza strip with the United Nations and Israel. Because of the

enforced blockade of Gaza, all goods into the enclave have to go through Israel's Erez Crossing once it has been supervised by Israeli authorities. The coordination of the Gaza reconstruction is overseen by Qatar's ambassador to Gaza, Mohammed al-Emadi, and Israel's Major General Yoav Mordechai, the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT).

During the 2014 Gaza war, John Kerry relied heavily on both Qatar and Turkey as he sought to draw on their respective relationships with Hamas to put pressure on the group to end the conflict. As part of that effort, Kerry called his Qatari counterpart seventy-five times; they met in Paris, along with then Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, to help negotiate an end to the conflict. While these efforts were ultimately unsuccessful, Egypt once again mediated a truce between Israel and Hamas, the third of its kind since 2009.

Qatar's support for Gaza reconstruction is recognized by Israeli government as paramount to prevent a new conflict between Hamas and Israel from erupting, and Israeli officials have even requested additional Qatari involvement to help finance education and build an industrial park in Gaza.

Qatar and the Taliban

Doha maintains that it is hosting the Taliban at the request of the U.S. government as part of its open-door policy to facilitate talks between Washington, the Taliban and the government of Afghanistan. While peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban collapsed shortly after the Taliban's office opened in 2013, and numerous efforts to revitalize the Afghan peace process have since collapsed, an estimated 100 Taliban officials and their relatives continue to live comfortably in Doha at Qatari state expense, according to the New York Times. In a separate New York Times article, it was report that the UAE and Qatar competed to host the Taliban office.

In 2014, Qatar facilitated the high-profile prisoner exchange of U.S. Army soldier Robert Bergdahl, who was held captive by the Taliban-aligned Haqqani network in Afghanistan and Pakistan, in exchange for five Taliban fighters held at Guantanamo Bay. The negotiations between Qatar and the Taliban were facilitated by German intelligence services at the request of the U.S. government.

Under the U.S.-Qatar agreement pertaining to the prisoners' exchange, Doha's obligation was to host the five former Guantanamo Bay detainees for one year. However, following an Afghan government request, which was supported by Washington, Qatar was asked to retain the five former Guantanamo Bay detainees indefinitely as they were considered too dangerous for the prospect of returning to the battlefield.

Just like Hamas, the Taliban officials remain under constant Qatari surveillance. But unlike Hamas, U.S. diplomats in Qatar have interacted with the Taliban officials residing in Doha.

Combating Terror Financing

In 2017, the Qatari government sentenced twenty-five ISIS sympathizers, of whom the vast majority are Qatari citizens, to life in prison (twenty-five year terms). No additional details have been provided.

Four Qatari citizens, all Al Qaeda sympathizers, have also faced prosecution. Two were convicted and the remaining two acquitted. During the lengthy trial of the four men, U.S. diplomats were present for the entire proceedings.

Ibrahim Issa al-Bakr, who is accused of terror financing on behalf of Al Qaeda and the Taliban, was convicted in abstention and is believed to be either living in Syria or dead.

Abd al-Latif Bin Abdullah Salih Muhammad al-Kawari, who is accused of terror financing on behalf of Al Qaeda, is appealing his conviction.

The two others, Abd Al-Rahman Al-Nuaimi, who was accused of terror financing on behalf of ISIS, and Sa'd bin Sa'd Muhammad Shariyan Al Ka'bi, who was accused of terror financing on behalf of Al Qaeda as well as the as for the Al-Nusra Front, were both acquitted because of lack of evidence. The apparent reasons for their respective acquittals were tied to the Qatari intelligence services inability to present the necessary evidence to a court without compromising its intelligence gathering capabilities.

However, under the recent U.S.-Qatar antiterrorism MoU, it seeks to, among other issues, strengthen capacity building for Qatari prosecutors and judges to help train them on terrorism related cases.

A fifth Qatari Al Qaeda sympathizer, Khalifa Muhammad Turki al-Subaiy, who is accused of terror financing on behalf of Al Qaeda, is facing trial and Qatar has requested U.S. assistance.

Uncertainty in Washington over what conditions the five Qatari Al Qaeda sympathizers, all of whom remain on both the U.S. and UN terrorism lists, are held have contributed to a U.S. narrative that Qatar has not taken adequate steps against terror financiers.

From a Qatari perspective, however, details about the conviction of the twenty-five ISIS fighters—a landmark case in the small country of 300,000 citizens—along with the prosecution of the five Al Qaeda members have been shared with Washington through diplomatic channels.

Qatar's cultural reluctance to take more public action against citizens pertaining to terror financing has hurt its international standing, especially in Washington. Qatar's foreign policy has become a lightning rod for a host of issues, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

It can be argued that Qatar finds itself at the crosshairs of changing U.S. policy, from the Obama administration's outreach to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood to embracing regional Islamist movements and hosting the Taliban at its request. Doha has been unable to adapt to the Trump administration's wholesale rejection of its predecessor's regional agenda. This has in turn provided the Saudi-led quartet with an opportunity to use terror financing allegations to take on Doha over its long-standing grievances in foreign policy.

This, a widely held misperception that Hamas and Taliban officials operate out of Doha, and allegations that the Qatari government has not done enough to crack down on terror financing has confused the American public at large and impacted the public debate in particular.

Given these dynamics, Tillerson arguably sought to remove allegations once and for all that Qatar has failed to crack down on terror financing by signing a U.S.-Qatari Memorandum of Understanding on fighting terror financing. During the MoU signing, Qatar's Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani declared, "Qatar is the first country to sign a memorandum of agreement with the US." For his part, Tillerson "praised Qatar for signing the deal, and for committing to the effort 'to track down and disable terror financing.'"

In a subsequent visit to Washington Qatar's special envoy on counterterrorism underscored that the U.S.-Qatar MoU will enhance the level of cooperation on prosecutions, increase intelligence sharing, provide for more technical cooperation and capacity-building with respect to prosecutions and includes mechanisms for making progress reports to the relevant sanctioning committees. During his recent visit, Al-Qahtani also presented the administration a fact sheet of concrete steps taken by his government to crack down on terror financing. No details pertaining to the MoU or the Qatari fact sheet have been released to the public.

Just as Mattis' F-15 agreement with Qatar had been years in the making, so too had the antiterror financing MoU. Tillerson arguably chose to expedite it in order to send the message that Doha is meeting its international obligations to crack down on terror financing.

Prior to the signing of the MoU, however, Qatar has enacted robust legislation to close loopholes on terror financing and is reforming its judiciary by training judges on how to tackle terrorism related issues.

As part of an effort to crack down on terror financing, Qatar's parliament passed Law No 15 of 2014 Regulating Charitable Activities (the Charities Law). The Charities Law establishes a strong framework for the regulation and supervision of charities and the law was one of the first of its kind in the region. The Regulatory Authority for Charitable Activities (RACA), established in 2014 by Emiri Decree No 43 of 2014, is responsible for registering charities in Qatar and monitoring their activities. The key provisions of the Charities Law are the following:

- The Charities Law prohibits fundraising unless the charity receives authorization from RACA. No charity is permitted to receive or send funds or donations, etc., whether to or from any person or charity outside Qatar, without obtaining approval from RACA.
- The charities are subject to recordkeeping requirements and charities must provide required reports to RACA for supervision purposes (including access bank accounts, etc.).
- RACA also has the power to dissolve a charitable organization if it breaches the Charities Law.

Moreover, the primary Qatari law addressing AML/CFT is Law No 4 of Year 2010 on Combating Money Laundering and Terrorism Financing (the AML/CFT Law). The AML/CFT Law is supported by other laws and regulations (like the Charities Law, which expands on the requirements for charities) and a number of Emiri decrees.

And in 2007, Qatar established the National Counter Terrorism Financing Committee (NCTC), which was formed in under Council of Ministers Resolution No. (7) of 2007.

- NCTC's membership includes representatives from all authorities that have a role to play in combatting terrorist financing. The membership includes the Qatar Central Bank (QCB) and the following Ministries and authorities: Qatari Armed Forces, State Security Bureau, Internal Security Forces, Ministry of Civil Services Affairs and Housing, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Economy and Commerce, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs, General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers, General Authority for Customs and Ports and Qatar Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

- The NCTC is formed under the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry's representative leads the NCTC. The Prime Minister also serves as the Minister of Interior.
- As part of its mandate, the NCTC has established a mechanism for ensuring listed persons or entities sanctions by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) are identified dealt with in a manner consistent with the UNSC's Resolutions (UNSCRs). In this connection, the NCTC sends lists to all relevant authorities regarding names and entities, subject to sanction who are listed in the UNSCRs relating to terrorism and terrorist financing. The NCTC has established protocols and issued guidance for financial institutions on what the firms need to do in the event of matching a name on the list. The Qatar Financial Centre Regulatory Authority is one of the authorities that receives these lists and guidance from NCTC. On receipt of the same, it broadcast the lists to its regulated firms and publishes the guidance issued by the NCTC.
- In addition to addressing the UNSCRs, Qatar also maintains its own watch list of suspects that it uses to screen passengers on international flights (also noted in the preceding U.S. report, as well vetting procedures and background checks applied to preserve national security, protect against illicit financing, etc.) With respect to the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), Qatar sees OFAC as a good model and is developing to align with that approach.

Towards that end, the Consultative Assembly (Majlis as-Shura) is expected to pass legislation that Qatar will accept the OFAC list.

Conclusions

The ferocity of the GCC crisis has not only become a distraction to the U.S. regional agenda to defeat ISIS and contain Iran, but also appears aimed at forcing Washington to pick sides.

Nevertheless, because the GCC crisis is partially about Qatar's independent foreign policy, differences pertaining to Doha's regional stances should ultimately be resolved by the conflicting parties themselves. The United States should instead focus on bringing the parties to the negotiation table by establishing a framework that all can agree to.

Towards that end, Washington could develop a roadmap that provides face-saving measures for all parties to the crisis. The United States could propose a GCC-wide protocol for dealing with terror financing in cooperation with U.S. and European counterterrorism government agencies. All would agree to monitor, disclose, enforce sanctions against funders. All countries would agree to not harbor persons on the OFAC SDN list. Washington could also negotiate a bilateral counterterror financing MoU with each of the respective GCC countries, similar to the one it recently signed with Doha. Washington should also suggest that each GCC member abide by the international cyber/media standards to protect against true cyber crimes and propaganda.

Sigurd Neubauer is a Nonresident Fellow at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington. Follow him on Twitter @SigiMideast. This analysis draws heavily on interviews with the Qatari leadership who, given the sensitivity of the subject matter, requested that their comments and insights be used on a not-for attribution basis. Names and affiliated organizations of these individuals have therefore been omitted from the text. However, any mistakes made, are entirely the author's own.