



مركز الجزيرة للدراسات
ALJAZEERA CENTRE FOR STUDIES

Policy Brief

The Gulf:

An unprecedented crisis and major repercussions

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It can be understood from the US stance that Gulf leaders, perhaps Bin Zayed and Bin Salman, did in fact incite against Qatar during Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia, but there was no in-depth discussion between the two sides [Reuters]

Introduction

On 5 June 2017, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt, in marked succession, cut diplomatic relations with Qatar. Within a matter of hours, it became clear that this was not simply a move to sever ties, but a plan for a full embargo, an unprecedented step at a time of peace between these nations. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain blocked flights to Qatar, closed land and sea borders, and ordered Qatari citizens out of their countries while calling on their own nationals to leave Qatar. The same day, Maldives, Mauritius (though it later denied the news), the Libyan Tobruk-based government (which is not recognised internationally), and the Yemeni government based in Riyadh followed suit and cut ties with Qatar, unable to resist Saudi pressure.

The next day, Jordan downgraded diplomatic relations with Qatar and revoked the licence of Al Jazeera's bureau in Amman, while Mauritania severed diplomatic relations with Qatar. Mauritius, in an official statement, denied it had cut ties, raising questions of whether some party took the initiative on behalf of the Mauritian government.

The actions taken at dawn on 5 June were the culmination of an unprecedented, anti-Qatar media blitz initiated by Emirati, Saudi, Bahraini and Egyptian media on the evening of 23 May. The campaign intensified until it assumed official imprimatur with the decision to cut ties and blockade Qatar.

What, then, is happening to relations between countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)? After Gulf leaders came together in a scene of friendship, cooperation and solidarity during US President Donald Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia, why are relations between three GCC states and Qatar deteriorating so rapidly and in such unprecedented fashion? Was there an immediate cause that spurred Saudi Arabia and its partners to

take this stance, or were these actions planned in advance? Is this simply a fleeting crisis in relations between GCC states, or could the break persist?

From media campaign to severed ties

Late in the evening on 23 May, Arabs and Gulf citizens were surprised by breaking news on the websites of al-Arabiya and Sky News Arabic reporting statements by the Emir of Qatar praising Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas, and discussing tensions between Qatar and the Trump administration. The Emir had held a friendly meeting with the American president two days earlier in Riyadh, and for years Qatar had pursued an anti-Iranian policy in Yemen and Syria. Within a few hours, it became apparent that the website of the Qatar News Agency (QNA) had been hacked and that statements ascribed to Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad had no basis in fact. Qatar denied the statements and said that QNA officials had lost control of the agency's website after the hack. Nevertheless, al-Arabiya and Sky News Arabic continued to carry the original news item and did not report the denial of the Qatari authorities.

Meanwhile, the media campaign against Qatar and its emir continued. The reports first published by al-Arabiya and Sky News Arabic were quickly picked up by all Emirati and Saudi media outlets, including government and quasi-government newspapers and television channels. That evening, the Twitter account of the Qatari foreign minister was also hacked, and the hackers posted that Qatar had decided to sever ties with Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt. None of the media outlets that participated in the anti-Qatar campaign published the official Qatari statement denying statements attributed to the emir or the subsequent statements ascribed to the country's foreign minister. As the offensive against Qatar continued, it appeared that the media blitz was orchestrated in advance and those running it were waiting for the QNA hack to set the plan in motion.

The campaign did not flag for the next ten days; in fact, it intensified, sinking to levels never before seen in Gulf relations and the traditions of the peoples in the region. Both Saudi and Emirati official media intimated that the campaign was given the green light at the highest levels of government in the two countries.

On 4 June, a group of hackers announced they had hacked the email account of Yousef Al Otaiba, the UAE's ambassador in Washington, known for his closeness to the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed bin Zayed, the strongman of the UAE. Within hours, the hackers began leaking some of the ambassador's own emails and mails sent to him by former US officials, prominent think tankers, and even Obama administration officials. The leaked emails revealed the ambassador's extensive efforts in Washington to link Qatar—and even Turkey, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia—to terrorism and his attempt to present the UAE as the moderate, most trustworthy nation in the Gulf and the Middle East, in cooperation largely with officials and researchers known for their strong ties to

Israel. The emails also exposed Emirati efforts to support Mohammed bin Salman, the Saudi crown prince, and promote him in US circles as a reliable ally.

Despite the intensity of the relentless anti-Qatar media campaign, it did not persuade most of the Gulf or Arab public. Popular reactions on social media—the only way to gauge public opinion in these countries – especially in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain and – Oman revealed that most Gulf residents rejected the accusations of the campaign and showed widespread sympathy for Qatar. In response, the UAE announced that public displays of sympathy with Qatar would henceforth be subject to 3–15 years in prison and a fine of 500,000 dirhams.

On 5 June, the media campaign solidified into official political decisions when Gulf states and their partners announced an embargo of Qatar and cut all diplomatic ties.

Of course, this is not the first crisis in relations between Qatar and the three Gulf states. In March 2014, the three states in question withdrew their ambassadors from Qatar following rising frictions due to Qatar's support for the Arab democratic revolutions and its opposition to the military coup in Egypt. That crisis persisted until November of the same year, when relations between Qatar and Saudi Arabia were normalised thanks to Kuwaiti mediation in the last days of King Abdullah's rule. The UAE and Bahrain soon followed suit, and the ambassadors of all three states returned to Doha. Clearly, however, the nature and goal of this crisis is different.

What is sought from Qatar?

The three states' positions on Qatar demonstrate patent contradictions, seen not only in the content of the media campaign, but also in the official declarations justifying the embargo and breaking of ties. For example, Qatar was accused of supporting the Houthis and the Reform Party in Yemen, while the Reform Party is at the forefront of forces fighting the Houthis and Qatari soldiers are standing shoulder to shoulder with Saudi soldiers to defend Saudi Arabia's southern border with Yemen. There is no hard evidence for the allegation that Qatar's contacts with Iran run counter to GCC interests. The rhetoric Qatar uses to describe its relations with Iran, which is aimed at deescalating tensions, is the same as that employed by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Moreover, among GCC countries, the UAE is Iran's biggest trading partner, and all Gulf countries with the exception of Saudi Arabia maintain diplomatic ties with Iran. In fact, Qatar stands with the anti-Iran camp in Syria, Yemen and Iraq. Saudi allegations that Qatar supports terrorist organisations and anti-Saudi groups were vague and unsupported by any evidence.

The most incomprehensible development is how Saudi-Qatari relations, which have been warm and harmonious since King Salman came to the throne, deteriorated to this extent and how they remained so warm if Saudi accusations were well founded. Qatari-Emirati

relations have been poor for some time, but Saudi-Qatari ties are a different story. While relations between Riyadh and Doha have swung between crisis and rapprochement over the last quarter century, there has been no sign of an impending crisis over the last few months.

How, then, should we understand the drivers of the current Gulf crisis?

Qatari policy has run at odds to Emirati policy since the Arab uprisings of 2011. The two states have divergent stances on the Islamist trend in the Arab region, and they stand in opposite camps on various specific issues. The differences between Qatar and the UAE have been manifested most starkly in their respective positions on the military coup in Egypt against the elected president, Mohamed Morsi, and Khalifa Haftar, who refuses to recognise the internationally recognised accord government in Libya and seeks military control of the country, as well as their stances on movements seeking to re-partition Yemen.

Qatari-Saudi disputes are of a different order. Saudi Arabia and Qatar took divergent positions on the Arab revolutions in general, but this did not become contentious because Saudi Arabia did not adopt an overtly oppositional stance on the Arab popular movements in 2011. In Syria, a Saudi-Qatari consensus developed in support of the Syrian revolution and to counter Iranian influence. But Saudi-Qatari ties underwent a severe crisis in 2014 due to their differing stances on the military coup in Egypt in the summer of 2013. While Saudi Arabia has shown little interest in the Libyan situation since the war against the Houthis erupted more than two years ago, Doha and Riyadh seemed more in accord on Yemen than Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, at least on the face of it.

It is therefore difficult to pinpoint a reason or new development that might have sparked the sudden Saudi hostility toward Qatar. The only logical explanation for the shift is that Saudi Arabia, encouraged by the UAE, is seeking total control of Qatari decision making and the country's full capitulation, while also holding out Qatar as a warning to other Gulf states, such as Kuwait and Oman, that maintain a policy independent of Saudi Arabia.

Those in Saudi Arabia and the UAE who made the decision to escalate against Qatar apparently believed that the resolution of the 2014 crisis was not satisfactory or adequate. At the time, King Abdullah had demanded limited concessions from Qatar in terms of its media coverage of Egypt and the expulsion of Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood leaders who had found refuge in Qatar in the wake of the 2013 coup. In contrast, the demand now is Qatar's total submission to Saudi will—which is what Qatar's Foreign Ministry said in a statement on 5 June. The ministry stated that Qatar's national decision-making capacity was on the line and that its autonomy was a point of

contention for the states leading the embargo and cutting ties. Any demands made of Qatar by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, regardless of details, will further this objective.

Qatar's surrender would have ramifications not for any single pressing issue, but for the overall vision Riyadh (and Abu Dhabi) seemed to have formed for the Gulf region in particular and the Middle East as a whole. It would have an impact on relations with Iran and Turkey, the stance on political Islam and democratisation, and the future of the Palestinian issue and relations with Israel. The consequences would also not be limited to foreign affairs, but would touch Qatari domestic affairs and who leads the major national institutions.

The escalation to force Qatar's capitulation would not have been possible at the present time absent two significant developments. The first is the increasing closeness between the Saudi crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, and the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed bin Zayed, and the former's sense that the latter has a network of influence in the US that successfully improved Saudi Arabia's image with Trump. This, in turn, boosts Bin Salman's position in the kingdom, since he managed to deflect the risks of the JASTA law and persuade Washington to adopt the Saudi agenda. The second development is the moral backing that President Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia lent the camp of Bin Salman and Bin Zayed. Both men saw the visit as a victory for their policy, representing a return of the traditional alliance with the US and Washington's abandonment of any illusions of democratisation in the Middle East.

International dynamics

From the outset, the campaign against Qatar, even after it evolved into a blockade and diplomatic break, was understood to be led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, with those countries that later signed on playing only a marginal role. It was this understanding, in addition to regional and international concern that the crisis would impact Gulf stability that determined the nature of the reactions on the Arab and regional as well as international levels.

Iran did not conceal its attempt to exploit divisions in the Gulf, showing sympathy for Qatar and expressing a willingness to provide any food goods to the Qatari market that could be affected by a closing of the border with Saudi Arabia. Similarly, Israeli officials said that the Gulf crisis offered the opportunity to strengthen Israeli relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE against Qatar, which backs the Hamas government in Gaza. As for Turkey, which maintains close, strategic ties to Qatar and has already begun building a military base in the country, it did not hide its sympathy for the Qatari viewpoint, but it simultaneously made efforts to mediate and contain the crisis. President Erdogan dispatched two envoys to Doha and Riyadh on 3 June, but after they returned to Turkey

to brief the president, Ankara was taken by surprise by the sudden decision to sever ties and embargo Qatar, leading Erdogan to condemn the actions against Qatar.

Most Arab states, even those participating in the alliance against the Houthis, such as Sudan, called for calm and found it difficult to take a stand in support of either side, particularly since Qatar maintains close ties with most Arab states. Both Kuwait and Oman undoubtedly fear that the campaign against Qatar is a prelude to threats to their own political autonomy, but, as is usual among Gulf countries, the two states took action to mediate the conflict and prevent further escalation. Kuwait has more experience and is in a better position given its good ties with both Riyadh and Doha and the Kuwaiti leadership's close familiarity with Gulf disputes after the role it played in resolving the 2014 crisis.

On the international level, Russia and China remained neutral, calling for a negotiated resolution to Gulf disputes. It was striking that Putin stressed Russia's distance from the Saudi camp, saying that a break in ties was not discussed during Bin Salman's visit to Moscow. The Europeans, particularly Germany, were closer to the Qatari position, expressing concerns that the crisis could fuel renewed instability in the Gulf.

The US position, as is typical since Trump entered the White House, seemed more contradictory and confused: officials in the State and Defence Departments were plainly shocked by the rapid development of the crisis and the decision to sever ties with Qatar. Official statements issued by the State Department and the Pentagon affirmed US relations with Qatar and stated that the US had no plans to alter military ties between the two countries. But the day after the decision to cut ties, President Trump said in a tweet that leaders had pointed to Qatar when he spoke in Saudi Arabia of the need to end any support for terrorist groups and that the Qatari boycott was a consequence of his visit to the region.

It can be understood from the US stance that Gulf leaders, perhaps Bin Zayed and Bin Salman, did in fact incite against Qatar during Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia, but there was no in-depth discussion between the two sides, hence the surprise demonstrated by other arms of the US administration. According to media reports, the camp of Bin Salman and Bin Zayed enjoy strong ties with individuals close to President Trump, most significantly the close relationship between Emirati Ambassador Al Otaiba and Jared Kushner, President Trump's son-in-law and advisor. But a prolonged crisis in the Gulf certainly does not serve US political interests—that much is clear from the statements of State Department and Pentagon officials. It was also clear that in the hours following the president's tweet, US state institutions rushed to contain suggestions of bias toward Saudi Arabia and its partners.

Spokesmen for both the State Department and White House again affirmed the ties of friendship between the US and Qatar, while US Secretary of Defence James Mattis spoke by phone with his Qatari counterpart, Khalid Al Attiyah, to reaffirm Washington's traditional commitment to relations with Qatar. That same evening, President Trump spoke to King Salman, urging him to preserve the unity of Gulf states and Gulf stability.

Major fallout

Clearly, as Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir said in a press conference in Paris on 6 June, Saudi Arabia and its partners are betting that the blockade will compel Qatar to yield to Saudi and Emirati demands. But Qatar is capable of withstanding these measures: it possesses substantial reserves, numerous options for imports, several sea and air outlets, and major economic partners linked to it through sizeable investments and vital contracts for gas imports, for example. Since the 2014 crisis, the Qatari government has also taken steps to counter a blockade much like the current situation.

At the same time, despite the difference between the withdrawal of ambassadors in 2014 and the current crisis in Gulf relations, it is not impossible for Kuwaiti mediation efforts, backed by Oman and Turkey, to contain the situation, prevent further escalation, and find an exit in the coming weeks or months. Nevertheless, it is certain that Qatari-Saudi relations have undergone a genuine break, perhaps even more severe than the fracture in Qatari-Emirati relations. Riyadh and Doha's view of one another has been scarred by a significant loss of trust. Qatar in particular will not soon forget the media rhetoric used against it or that Saudi Arabia set up a blockade with the intent of starving its population and breaking the fraternal bonds between the peoples of the two countries. It will be difficult to restore Qatari-Saudi relations to the status quo ante, particularly since the latest moves have undermined the few achievements of the GCC since its establishment, such as the free movement of individuals and banking relations.

Bin Salman and Bin Zayed want Qatar's total surrender and full control of Doha's foreign and domestic decision-making power. Even if Qatar agrees to some concessions for the sake of reconciliation and a reduction of Gulf tensions, the Qatari leadership will not cede its ability to act independently, which could endanger the country's security and population's prosperity. Riyadh (and Abu Dhabi) will find it hard to compel Qatar to comply with conditions they themselves are not bound by—for example, by imposing strictures on Qatar's foreign relations while Abu Dhabi freely interferes in Libyan and Yemeni affairs, backs Mohammed Dahlan against the Palestinian Authority, and gives itself the right to contravene Saudi Arabia in issues related to Yemen. How can the UAE allow itself such privileges while denying them to others?

More broadly, the Gulf crisis casts a heavy pall over the future of the GCC, at least in the short and medium term, and raises questions about the capacity of the council to give

expression to a united Gulf will. At issue is not only the severity of the crisis, its antipathy to the region's traditional values, and its contrariety to the strong ties between its peoples; the problem is also that Riyadh (and Abu Dhabi) have demonstrated flagrant disregard for GCC institutions. All of this indicates that the council now means little to its biggest, most significant members. There was no call for an emergency Gulf summit, and the Saudi and Emirati allegations were not brought to any GCC institution for discussion. In fact, the GCC Secretariat learned of the decision of several GCC members to sever ties with another member state and embargo it through the media.

When relations between GCC member states can transform so suddenly from cooperation, concord and alliance to a state of undeclared war, it is not unlikely that many GCC states could consider arrangements outside the council to maintain their security and stability. Even on the popular level, the crisis has led ordinary Gulf citizens to question the possibility of working and investing in other Gulf states, or even marrying citizens from other Gulf countries.

Ultimately, whatever the fate of this crisis, it has put an end to the notion of Saudi leadership of the Gulf and Arab order that began to emerge with the erosion of Egypt's position and the collapse of Iraq and Syria. The problem here is not solely Saudi disputes with other Gulf or Arab states, but also with the Arab and Gulf popular engagement with the Saudi-led media campaign and the nature of the measures taken by Saudi Arabia and its partners against another Arab, Gulf state. During this crisis, Saudi Arabia has acted less like a wise elder who considers other family members' concerns and respects their independence as they respect his than a state aspiring for hegemony and custodianship, inspiring fear and anxiety, not trust and confidence.

The crisis also has ramifications for the image of the US around the world. The US is bound to Qatar by strategic agreements, under which Doha allowed the US to establish the Udeid Air Base and later Centcom. Qatar has honoured this agreement since the early 1990s despite the risk of retaliation from Iran or armed groups that resent US military actions. The world will be watching the US position on Qatar with avid interest to see the true value of its stated commitment to its allies' security.