



## **POLICY BRIEFS**

# **Blockade of Qatar: Expectations and repercussions**

*AlJazeera Centre for Studies*



The 'Berlin Wall' has not broken the will of the Qataris [Reuters]

### **Introduction**

One month into the campaign against Qatar, it is clear that the 'Berlin Wall' has not broken the will of the Qataris, for several reasons: Qatar's unexpected resilience and steadfastness thwarted expectations in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi of a rapid Qatari surrender; the blockading states rushed to escalate the situation without accurately calculating risks; and the two states leading the siege were overconfident in the US and western position and their own influence in the region. All of this has spelled failure for the campaign and prevented the Gulf blockade states from achieving their objectives.

Did the embargoing states miscalculate? Why? Could the crisis escalate further? Do the states enforcing the blockade have more cards to play?

### **Recklessness and overconfidence**

There are growing signs that those who initiated the campaign against Qatar did not expect the crisis in Gulf relations to last long, anticipating that Qatar would soon capitulate under Saudi and Emirati pressure. It is striking that the media campaign against Qatar was led by Saudi and Emirati media from 23 May to 5 June 2017, absent any official stance by the two states, as if those behind the campaign did not believe they were in need of direct, official intervention. Even after the crisis entered its second phase, the decision to escalate appeared to be hurriedly taken after the media campaign failed to achieve its goals. The escalation involved several callous measures affecting the

lives and livelihoods of thousands of Gulf citizens, with sweeping repercussions throughout the Gulf region.

It is also clear that Saudi Arabia and the UAE did not reach out in advance to build a coalition of nations to bolster their position and were shocked by the refusal by several Arab and regional states to support the embargo of Qatar. When the blockade states released a list of ostensibly 'terrorist' figures and organisations allegedly linked to Qatar, the list appeared to be hastily compiled and came less as an indictment of Qatar than the incompetence of its drafters. For example, the list included some internationally recognised charitable organisations, an advisor close to the Yemeni president (who presumably stands with the blockade countries), an Egyptian detained in an Egyptian prison who had never entered Qatar, and a commander of a Qatari force on the southern Saudi border who had stood, with his troops, in defence of Saudi Arabia and its security for months. Moreover, four weeks after the crisis erupted, Saudi and Emirati spokespersons now admit that no official list had yet been prepared detailing their grievances against Qatar or the demands they expect Doha to consider. As a result, the US State Department described the boycotters' claims against Qatar as 'alleged'.

Indeed, Saudi Arabia and the UAE made the decision to attack Qatar weeks ago, at least since the hacking of the Qatar News Agency on 23 May 2017, which was used as a pretext for the media campaign against Qatar. That the hack was part of the plan was proven both by an investigation of the US Federal Bureau of Investigation, which confirmed the hack, and a statement from Qatari Attorney General Ali bin Fetais al-Marri that evidence showed one of the blockade states had engineered the hack.

### **Failure with the GCC**

Unsurprisingly, as soon as the Saudi-Emirati campaign against Qatar started, Bahrain joined their ranks, announcing on 5 June 2017 that it, too, had put an embargo in place. Despite former tensions, Qatar and Bahrain have enjoyed generally friendly relations. Nevertheless, since the popular Shi'a movement against the royal family in Bahrain gained momentum in 2011, the island country has become a virtual Saudi protectorate. Further, Bahrain had already stood next to Saudi Arabia in the past without adequate consideration of the pros and cons of doing so, as seen in 2014 when the ambassadors were recalled.

Kuwait, which in late May 2017 quickly, though unsuccessfully, sought a resolution to the crisis, and Oman, which supported the Kuwaiti move, are obviously concerned about

the actions of Saudi Arabia and the UAE. With both states preserving a measure of independence from Saudi foreign policy, they surmise that an attempt to bring Qatar to heel could be the beginning, not the end, of Saudi designs for hegemony over the entire Gulf region and policy.

Clearly, however, the boycott of Qatar and the attempt to play tribes spanning Qatar and other Gulf states against one another has not been met with popular support in Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain.

### **Failure within the Arab world and the region**

Similar to Bahrain, Egypt was expected to stand with the embargo. President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi is indebted to the UAE and Saudi Arabia for the two states' backing of the July 2013 coup, as well as their financial and political support for the post-coup regime. In any case, relations between Cairo and Doha are fraught; Sisi constantly complains of Al Jazeera's coverage of Egyptian affairs and of Qatar hosting opponents of his government. In addition to Egypt, Jordan attempted to appease the embargoing states without fully breaking with Qatar, downgrading diplomatic ties with Qatar and issuing an administrative decree of questionable legality revoking the license of Al Jazeera's bureau in Amman. Among other Arab states, only a handful effectively joined the embargo camp: Mauritania, Djibouti, the Riyadh-based Yemeni government, and the non-internationally recognised Libyan government in Tobruk, which is under the control of Khalifa Haftar and wholly reliant on Emirati assistance.

In contrast, despite Saudi and Emirati pressure, Sudan, which has contributed troops to the Arab coalition in Yemen, refused to take any action against Qatar. Algeria, Tunisia, Lebanon, Palestine and the internationally recognised Libyan government Tripoli took a similar position. Unlike most Arab states, Iraq went beyond declaring neutrality and calling for dialogue among all parties to explicitly reject the blockade and boycott of Qatar. Morocco, which traditionally maintains close ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, surprised its allies in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi by refusing to support the embargo; it even sent a plane full of food assistance to Qatar, in a symbolic show of Arab and human solidarity.

Major neighbouring states in the region – Turkey, Iran and Ethiopia – likewise refused to join the blockade camp, albeit for different reasons and with differing reactions.

Having worked for years to establish close ties with Arab Gulf states and encourage Gulf investments, Ethiopia maintained its conventional posture of refusing to get involved in Arab–Arab disagreements. Iran, in contrast, found the Gulf crisis to be potentially advantageous, one because it revealed Saudi Arabia as the aggressor and the power seeking to dominate its neighbours and two because it put an end to the burst of regional–US solidarity against Iran. It also weakens the position of the camp supporting the Syrian revolution. Iranian officials may dearly hope that Gulf disputes will help Iran create closer ties not only with Qatar, but also with Oman and Kuwait, both of which also fear Saudi dominance. Undoubtedly, the Iranian stance had an impact on the Iraqi government’s approach to the crisis, leading Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi to explicitly condemn the boycott and siege of Qatar.

All parties took a particular interest in Turkey’s position from the early days of the crisis, and not only because it maintains strong ties with both Qatar and Saudi Arabia. In 2014, Qatar and Turkey signed an agreement for the establishment of a Turkish military base in Qatar. In the early stages of the crisis preceding the embargo decisions Ankara clearly attempted to maintain a balanced stance towards each side of the dispute. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan sent the minister of energy and the presidential spokesman to Riyadh and Doha to mediate and contain the crisis, but he was taken aback by Saudi and Emirati decision to impose the blockade, only hours after the Turkish delegation had returned to Ankara to file its report. This angered Erdogan, prompting him and other Turkish officials to declare their outright opposition to Saudi and Emirati measures, and to express their sympathy with Qatar. Turkey immediately decided to provide needed consumer goods to Qatar, the importation of which was seriously affected by the closure of the Saudi–Qatari border.

Mounting Turkish fears that Mohammed bin Salman and Mohammed bin Zayed would take further steps spurred Turkish President Erdogan to ask his government to debate the military cooperation agreement with Qatar in the Turkish parliament on 7 June 2017 and hold a vote the same day. The Turkish military base in Qatar was in fact inaugurated previously and several hundred Turkish soldiers had been deployed, but the infrastructure for 5 000 ground and air troops is not yet ready. As soon as the Turkish parliament approved the deployment of forces in Qatar, several Turkish military technicians were dispatched to work with their Qatari counterparts to complete the necessary installations at the base. On 18 June, Qatar officially announced the arrival of the first of the Turkish forces to be stationed in the country.

Although the Turkish–Qatari military cooperation agreement has been in the works since 2014, the parliament’s swift approval of the treaty left a tangible sense of unease in the three Gulf blockade countries, since the timing demonstrated Turkey’s clear partiality to Qatar. The UAE’s ties with Turkey have not been in the best shape for years, but Riyadh’s displeasure with Ankara’s stance could heighten tensions between the two countries. For its part, Ankara seems keen to appear as a neutral party and insists on playing the role of mediator – a message Turkey sought to send with the visit of Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu to Qatar, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia in mid-June. Yet, there are serious doubts that Saudi Arabia and the UAE will agree to Turkish mediation.

## **International failure**

Undoubtedly, in the early days of the crisis, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi were placing their biggest bets on Washington. Even assuming the campaign against Qatar was planned long in advance, it is unlikely that the Saudi and Emirati officials who unleashed it discussed their plans with the US administration during President Donald Trump’s visit to Riyadh. Senior US officials, particularly after the decision to break off ties, said they were surprised by the exacerbation of the crisis and the Saudi and Emirati escalation. Nevertheless, Mohammed bin Zayed and Mohammed bin Salman clearly viewed Trump’s visit as a victory for their policy line and were confident that Trump would support their stance on Qatar. Given the ties between the Saudis and Emiratis, and several of Trump’s close advisors, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi certainly have not lacked for means to convey their viewpoint directly to the US president since the beginning of the crisis on 23 May. This could explain Trump’s early tweets, which, although marked by much ambiguity, nevertheless seemed to support Saudi Arabia and the UAE’s position on the crisis.

But after 7 June 2017, when the US State Department released a statement on the crisis, it became apparent that the US president was not in full agreement with senior figures in his administration and may not be totally aware of the nature of US interests in the Gulf and the complexities of the crisis. In the days following the statement, it seemed as if President Trump was cut out of the loop on the Gulf issue, with the US State Department and the Pentagon assuming management of the crisis. The US position seemed to be that the crisis did not serve US interests, that the embargo of Qatar was unacceptable, that the parties to the crisis should avoid escalating matters and negotiate a resolution, and that the US supported Kuwait’s mediation efforts and was willing to offer assistance to make such efforts succeed. As of mid-June, despite uncertain progress in US mediation efforts, there was no longer any doubt that the blockade countries’ gamble on explicit US support of their position did not pan out.

The 20 June statement from the US State Department, expressing Washington's growing impatience as it waited for the embargoing countries to lay out their grievances, could have been a signal from the US administration that time is not on the blockade countries' side and they should act to quickly resolve the crisis. It was no accident that the statement was released as reports were coming out of Doha, and from the Qatari attorney general, that US investigators had found evidence that the hack of the Qatar News Agency originated in a neighbouring state, most likely the UAE, according to reports.

On 21 June, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson urged the blockade states to seek a resolution of the crisis, saying it should be settled within the confines of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and through Kuwaiti mediation, and that the demands made of Qatar should be reasonable and actionable. He also stressed the importance of GCC unity and cohesion. These conditions narrowed the options of the embargoing states, which had hoped to internationalise their dispute with Qatar, impose international dictates, and disregard the GCC and its rules.

In addition, the blockade states made efforts to win European support, demonstrated by Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir's visits to France and Germany in the early days of the crisis and meetings between ambassadors from the three Gulf blockade countries and foreign ministry officials in several European nations. It was no secret that the embargoing countries thought that framing the crisis as part of the war on terror would persuade most European capitals, but these efforts produced an inadequate result. Like the US administration, no one in Europe wanted to see a new crisis explode in the Middle East that would compound the complicated situation in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. More importantly, most European capitals did not find a sufficient basis for the allegations against Qatar to warrant a break and embargo.

In his European tour, Qatari Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani was met with clear sympathy and understanding, and Qatar seemingly won the diplomatic battle in Europe. On 19 June, the EU foreign affairs representative explicitly stated that the EU believes it necessary to avoid an escalation in the Gulf and to begin direct negotiations between the parties to the crisis, in order to reach a swift resolution that can preserve the GCC's unity and the stability of its member states.

Russia and China took stances largely in line with Europe, although Russian officials were more proactive in reaching out to the parties to the crisis than their Chinese

counterparts. This is perhaps because Moscow saw a way to turn the crisis to the advantage of Russian policy and its increasing involvement in the Middle East, as it acts to crowd out and weaken the US position in the region.

## **Strategic failure**

Nearly a month into the campaign against Qatar, the Gulf crisis seems to have reached a standstill. The blockade countries' failure to mobilise Gulf and Arab support for their policy, their inability to persuade the Europeans, and their faltering hope for a more muscular US stance on Qatar have all limited their options for further escalation. The Turkish presence and US opposition rule out any military option, and after declaring the diplomatic break and embargo on 5 June, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi no longer hold many cards. In contrast, Qatar has proved resilient and even able to adapt to a longer-term embargo. A statement from the Qatari foreign minister on 19 June that Qatar would not negotiate before the blockade is lifted points to Doha's growing confidence in its position.

### **Thus, three possible trajectories for the future of the Gulf crisis exist:**

**The first**, and most likely, is that Kuwaiti mediation efforts and US pressure succeed in opening a channel for negotiations between Qatar and its Gulf adversaries, one governed by clear parameters that distinguish what could be described as the anxieties of the blockade countries from Qatar's internal affairs, conditions of sovereignty and national autonomy. Success would require the capitals promoting the embargo to recognise the magnitude of their miscalculation and their inability to find other means of pressuring Doha. This scenario is made more likely by optimistic US, Kuwaiti, and Omani statements.

The change in Saudi leadership that came with Mohammed bin Salman's appointment as crown prince, replacing Mohammed bin Nayef, may have removed one of the major purposes of the foreign crisis with Qatar – namely, mobilising Saudis behind their leadership and stoking national fervour – such that foreign disputes eclipse any domestic power struggles. But after Mohammed bin Salman has moved up in the line of succession, priorities are shifting; the focus is now changing from foreign to domestic, to ensure a grip on the levers of state and improve Saudis' standards of living in order to win their approval. This requires reducing tensions abroad, particularly if they sap dwindling Saudi resources and conflict with US demands, as indicated by the US State Department. It is unlikely that Mohammed bin Salman will inaugurate his tenure by obstructing US arrangements in the region and suggesting he is not a reliable ally.

But factors militating against this possibility exist, such as the personal nature of Gulf relations and the fact that the campaign was launched against Qatar without a firm justification. Nevertheless, the cost of holding to these objections is high with little tangible gain.

**The second scenario** is the perpetuation of the status quo. Though less likely than the first scenario, UAE State Minister for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash raised this possibility on 18 June, when he said that Qatar could be isolated 'for years'. This would mean the crisis could continue indefinitely or gradually become the new normal. In other words, the blockade countries, driven by hubris and fleeting interests, could insist on maintaining an embargo of Qatar.

**The third direction** is that of further escalation and additional pressure and inducement to compel new states to join the blockade. This seems the least likely scenario because it would come at a high price for Saudi Arabia itself, as well as for the USA. Saudi Arabia's main arena of influence is the GCC, which today looks like two opposing camps: Qatar, Oman and Kuwait, on one side, and Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE, on the other. The division will not only paralyse the council but will also threaten its very existence, and if Saudi Arabia loses its influence among its neighbours, how can it exercise it in other spheres further afield? As for the USA, as noted, it has repeatedly indicated that the crisis harms its interests and that a resolution is a priority, as demonstrated by the twenty phone calls made by US Secretary of State Tillerson and his cancellation of a planned visit to Mexico in order to dedicate his time to the crisis. It is unlikely that more states will sign on to the embargo knowing that it contravenes US wishes. This makes the blockade's success less likely and puts its supporters on the losing side.