



مركز الجزيرة للدراسات
ALJAZEERA CENTRE FOR STUDIES

Report

How has Qatar Fended Amidst a Sociopolitical and Economic Blockade by its Neighbours?

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6 August 2017



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Despite the attempts of the anti-Qatar coalition, immediate solidarity with Qatari leadership has prevented chaos and polarisation in Qatar [AlJazeera]

Introduction

On 5 June 2017 Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain imposed land, air, sea blockade on the State of Qatar and started a coalition against it. Also, Jordan relegated its diplomatic relationship with Qatar. The blockade on Qatar has had limited impact on the economy. It has, however, affected the movement of people, goods and animals. Family relations between the Saudis and Qataris date back centuries, long before colonisation and the creation of nation states. The blockade has already forced people across the borders to take difficult positions in support of their respective governments. Insults have been traded, creating an almost irreparable damage between the peoples. There has also been a high level of xenophobic incidences, which was not very common between peoples who often referred to each other as “brothers” and “sisters”. Furthermore, previously lax borders that had enabled animals to move freely to graze have been heavily affected by the blockade. At least 12,000 Qatari-owned camels and sheep have been ordered out of Saudi Arabia as both sides in the Gulf diplomatic crisis refuse to back down(1). The inclusion of animals in the blockade is an act that animal rights activists regard as cruelty to animals. The desert is extremely harsh during summer in the Gulf, and temperatures soar to as high as 50 degrees Celsius. The movement and transfer of large numbers of animals require proper logistical preparation. Failure to have appropriate mechanisms in place may result in the mass death of animals. Hundreds of camels have already died of starvation and thirst after being driven out of Saudi Arabia(2).

The new political reality is most likely to push for new alliances between countries in the region. The Omanis, Kuwaitis, and Qataris will certainly form a strong political bloc irrespective of whether the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) survives. What this political

debacle has done most importantly is normalise the Islamic Republic of Iran. Iran's involvement in Syria has had a bad impact on its reputation in the region especially with the Sunni majority. Iran took political advantage of the situation. It was among the first countries to offer assistance to ease the blockade. Furthermore, it has offered its ports and airspace to Qatar to facilitate the movement of both people and goods during this period. The Qatari government has made it very clear that it has learned from this blockade. It has been an awakening for the country, which has vowed to look for alternative markets and improve its relations with newly discovered suppliers. Iran will most likely gain some mileage out of this debacle especially among the youth of Qatar. The continuing political fumbling by Sunni superpowers and their complicity in the blockade will further increase the limelight on Iran. The sad news for Saudi Arabia, the custodian of Sunni Islam, is that currently the public opinion at least in Qatar is tilting against them. There is an increased political dissent against Sunni-led countries in Qatar because of the blockade. In addition, there is a sizeable Shia population within the countries bordering the Gulf. Therefore, any further shift in public opinion against Saudi Arabia might have serious long-term implications.

The build-up to the blockade

It was clear from the beginning that this blockade was a premature kneejerk reaction. First, it took days for the blockading nations to come up with the list of demands that were eventually rejected by Qatar. The United States showed exasperation in the early days of the blockade when the anti-Qatari forces failed to present the list. It also insisted the demands should be "actionable and reasonable". Eventually, the demands were presented to Qatar through Kuwait's emir, Sheikh Sabah Al Ahmad Al Jaber Al Sabah, who is the chief negotiator in the current crisis. Qatar has rejected the demands and insisted that it will not compromise on its sovereignty.

Before analysing Qatar's reaction, it is important to revisit the background to this impasse. There were two significant triggers. On 24 May 2017, the world woke up to a post on the website of Qatar National Agency (QNA) attributing certain statements to the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani. According to the post, the Emir defended his country's support for the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran, and criticised the anti-Iran policy of GCC states, saying that "it is impossible to disregard the regional and Islamic prominence of Iran, and unwise to escalate [the conflict] with it".⁽³⁾ QNA refuted the statements and claimed that its website was hacked. Notwithstanding, most news networks – especially those sponsored by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates – ran with the story, creating public anxiety. Days after the fake news on QNA were published, a report by The Intercept published a report with leaked emails attributed to Yousef al-Otaiba, UAE's ambassador to the United States. The leaks show a close relationship between Al-Otaiba and a pro-Israel

neoconservative think-tank, the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. This was the straw that broke the camel's back.(4)

How has Qatar reacted to the blockade?

Social media platforms were abuzz with commentary. Platforms in the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia in particular were dominated by the news of blockade. These countries have subsequently reacted harshly to dissent and the United Arab Emirates enacted a law punishing any citizen who demonstrates support for Qatar on social media. The United Arab Emirates' Federal Public Prosecution reminded its citizens that according to the Federal Penal Code and the Federal Law Decree on Combating Information Technology Crimes, anyone who threaten the interests, national unity and stability of the United Arab Emirates will face a jail term from three to 15 years and a fine not less than AED 500,000 (USD 136,000).(5)

In the meantime, Qatar has issued a number of statements guaranteeing the rights of all its residents. It has also issued a statement in the middle of the holy month of Ramadan imploring its residents not to retaliate with harmful language against hostility on social media. The country has also guaranteed its clients - including those from the anti-Qatar countries - that it will honour its contracts notwithstanding the ongoing crisis. Furthermore, Qatar has engaged in a diplomatic overdrive. Its Foreign Affairs Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani has visited a number of countries and made several speeches to governments, civil societies and the media. The top diplomats from many countries have reciprocated by visiting Qatar as well. They have all called for the easing of blockade and the immediate start of a dialogue.

Qatari civil society initiated the Tamim Al Majd (or "Tamim the Glorious") campaign. This is the work of Qatari artist Ahmed al-Maadheed, whose portrait of Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani has gone viral in Qatar, adorning many buildings and vehicles all over the country. This has created an enormous level of solidarity and unity. "Part of the blockade and the political turmoil was to weaken and eventually isolate the Emir and his immediate family. The blockade would have created chaos and a 'saviour' would have emerged to rescue the situation"(6); and that would have been the end of the current leadership. Simply put, part of the strategy was to have a palace coup in Qatar. However, things did not turn out as predicted, and immediate solidarity with the current leadership thwarted those attempts and worked to achieve social cohesion. There was also a petition signed by thousands declaring solidarity with the State of Qatar and indeed the Emir. These efforts made it very difficult for the anti-Qatar forces and those who wanted to see a palace coup and polarise public opinion in the country.

Qatar's foreign minister has argued that the list of demands were not actionable and "meant to fail". US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has engaged in efforts to de-escalate

and has been leading the US efforts that culminated in the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Qatar and the United States on Anti-Terror Funding. This was regarded by most political commentators as “a political ace”, and was undoubtedly the most significant reaction. It also demonstrated Qatar’s political maturing and an emboldened foreign minister “who has come out of age”.

On 21 July 2017, the Emir delivered a speech to the nation for the first time since this political debacle ensued. There was a significant take-away from the speech, which many hope will guide Qatar’s foreign policy moving forward. According to the Emir, “any solution to the crisis must be based on two principles: first, the solution should be within the framework of respect for the sovereignty of each State. Secondly, it should not be in a form of orders by one party against another, but rather as mutual undertakings and joint commitments binding to all.”⁽⁷⁾ Moreover, his speech concentrated on the need to diversify the economy and nurture new political and economic relations established during the blockade. The country has indeed been bolstered, and the blockade has achieved the opposite of what it was intended to achieve.

What is left to be seen is how Qatar will react should Saudi Arabia continue the blockade and consequently ban Qataris from performing Hajj (or Islamic pilgrimage). Also, what will happen to the thousands of non-Qatari Muslim residents who wish to fulfil that religious obligation this year? Even Saudi Arabia’s “number one enemy”, Iran, has not had its citizens prevented from performing Hajj. Should the blockade continue to the beginning of Hajj season, it is likely to heighten the current discussion on the internationalisation of the administration of Makkah and Madinah. Certain Muslim organisations have started this discussion, and it is intensely despised by Saudi Arabia. The barring of Qataris from performing Hajj will indeed set a dangerous precedence. If Saudi Arabia does not prevent this from happening, a new movement against it might come along.

Conclusion

The haphazard nature of this political campaign by the anti-Qatar forces demonstrated serious political immaturity and the over-estimation of the power of money in politics and shaping world opinion. It also demonstrated the type of leadership the people of the region are under, which is driven by impunity and the disrespect of basic human rights. How can a coalition of countries engage in such harsh political measures based on media reports? The list of demands to Qatar by anti-Qatar coalition has invited widespread criticism. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has been the most outspoken head of state in condemnation. The demand to close Al Jazeera has also invited widespread condemnation from the media fraternity and human rights organisations. The Economist has been unrelenting:

[A] monarchy, where the government censors everything from political dissent to risqué Rubens paintings, and where a pro-democracy blogger named Raif Badawi has been sentenced to 1,000 lashes and ten years in jail, is trying to shut down the only big, feisty broadcaster in the Arab world, Al Jazeera. This is an extraordinary, extraterritorial assault on free speech. It is as if China had ordered Britain to abolish the BBC.(8)

The blockade has destroyed cross-border cultural cohesion in the Gulf. Consequently, there is certainly going to be a high level of mistrust moving forward. The level of discontent particularly on social media platforms demonstrated a new socio-cultural setup, one dominated by tribalism and xenophobia. Since this debacle started, the anger felt by ordinary citizens in all countries has played out online(9). Qatar is entering an important political phase in its history. The support and solidarity it has received pushed it into a new political terrain. It will now have to rely more on outside political and solidarity than on its own neighbourhood. It should ready itself to ratify certain human rights and political treaties as a member of this new terrain. Adhering to these new conditions might further increase the resentment against it though. The new political reality will bring political scrutiny against it. The political blockade is long from over, and the anti-Qatar coalition will never accept defeat but will use various tactics to save face. Qatar, on the other hand, has insisted that it will never enter into any sort of negotiations while the blockade is still in place.

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