

The Qatar Standoff and US Interests

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KRISTIAN COATES ULRICHSEN, AUG 11 2017

The rupturing of diplomatic relations with Qatar and imposition of economic measures against Doha on June 5, 2017 by Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.) has brought to a head a long-running dispute about Qatar's distinctive approach to regional affairs. Tensions between Qatar and its neighbors go back a long way, and predate considerably the Arab Spring in 2011 and Qatar's subsequent high-profile support for Islamist transitions in North Africa and Syria. A previous withdrawal of the Saudi, Emirati, and Bahraini Ambassadors from Qatar in 2014 lasted nine months, but the current standoff is more serious and threatens the very fabric of the Gulf Cooperation Council (G.C.C.). Both sides in the dispute – Qatar and the so-called 'Anti-Terror Quartet' (A.T.Q.) have, moreover, sought to mobilize political support in Washington, DC and other Western capitals for their cause; this places the Gulf's international partners in a delicate position given the dense web of strategic and commercial ties that have, for years, formed a cornerstone of their approach to regional affairs.

Ties with all Sides

U.S. interests in the Gulf are longstanding and multifaceted. Their modern roots lie in the U.S. security arrangements with Saudi Arabia and maintenance of a naval detachment in Bahrain (US Middle East Force), which date to the 1940s, as well as the Carter Doctrine of January 1980, which stated that the US would use military force, if necessary, to protect its national interests in the Gulf. Successive Presidential administrations under George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton in the 1990s designed a 'Dual Containment' policy that excluded Iraq and Iran from regional security structures and deepened bilateral security relations with GCC states (Buzan & Waeber, 2003, p. 201). This was achieved through a pre-existing access to facilities agreement with Oman and the many security agreements with Saudi Arabia, along with defense cooperation agreements with Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the U.A.E. (with the first two also accorded Major Non-NATO Ally status by the George W. Bush administration in 2002 and 2004). G.C.C. states developed into major logistical and command-and-control hubs for the US Fifth Fleet in Bahrain in 1995, and the forward headquarters of US Central Command (CENTCOM) in Qatar in 2002. Substantial stocks of military equipment were prepositioned at airbases and ports in the UAE, and Kuwait became the administrative and logistical lifeline for multinational forces in Iraq after 2003 (Gause III, 2009, p. 127).

The Barack Obama administration made concerted efforts to engage and coordinate with the G.C.C. as a bloc, particularly on security and defense issues of common interest. In March 2012, a G.C.C.-U.S. Strategic Cooperation Forum was launched and, at its September 2013 meeting, a U.S.-G.C.C. Security Committee was formed to address counter-terrorism and border security in the Gulf. In December 2013, President Obama issued a presidential determination that made it possible, for the first time, for the U.S. to sell arms to the G.C.C. as a bloc (Gulf States Newsletter, 2014, p. 10). Two heads of state Summits were held at Camp David in May 2015 and in Riyadh in April 2016, although policymakers on both sides expressed frustration at the lack of tangible follow-up from each meeting. U.S. and G.C.C. officials also worked together in the coalition against the Islamic State and on the logistical aspects of the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen, although ties were strained by the Iran nuclear deal, U.S. policy on Syria, and responses to the Arab Spring.

Winning hearts and minds

Rather than any single explanation or trigger point, a convergence of factors appears to have shifted the geopolitical

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landscape in the Persian Gulf in the six months since the new U.S. government took office. The Trump administration signaled its intent to follow a set of regional policies – toward Iran and Islamist groups – that appeared to align far more closely to those of Abu Dhabi and Riyadh than Doha. Both Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed and Saudi Arabia's then Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman were high-profile visitors to Washington in the run-up to President Trump's Riyadh Summit with Arab and Islamic leaders on 20-21 May. Strong bonds reportedly formed between President Trump's advisor and son-in-law Jared Kushner and Mohammed bin Salman in Saudi Arabia and Yusuf al-Otaiba, the influential U.A.E. Ambassador in Washington, D.C.

Whereas the Obama administration sought to work collectively with the G.C.C., Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E. quickly emerged as the two spearheads for the regional projection of U.S. policies in the Gulf, based on a set of hawkish defense and security interests. Key principals within the Trump administration, such as Secretary of Defense James Mattis and CIA Director Mike Pompeo, held views on Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood that aligned with those in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. Just a week into the Trump presidency, U.S. forces conducted a joint raid with U.A.E. Special Forces against Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula targets in Yemen, which is believed to have yielded the intelligence that led to the imposition of the 'laptop ban' on flights from Middle Eastern airports to the United States.

The policy inexperience of many within President Trump's inner circle may have encouraged Saudi and Emirati officials to believe that an opportunity existed to shape the administration's thinking on critical regional issues, such as Iran and terrorism but also Qatar. It may have been no coincidence that the media campaign against Qatar commenced on 23 May, just two days after President Trump's visit to Riyadh. From the beginning, a key objective of the campaign against Qatar has been to win the battle of hearts and minds in Washington, D.C. and, particularly, within a White House deemed sympathetic to the Saudi and Emirati perspective. Thus, the slew of articles in regional media that associated Qatar with Iran, Al Qaeda, September 11, and contemporary Islamist groups of varying extremity appeared designed to resonate with Trump administration officials and cause maximum impact in the Beltway echo chamber.

If there were hopes in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi that the announcement of diplomatic and economic measures against Qatar would prompt President Trump to take sides, these were initially boosted on 6 June in a series of Tweets that praised the quartet's action and reportedly caused panic in Doha.[i] However, the White House subsequently encountered stiff pushback from the State Department and the Pentagon mindful of the strategic and commercial value of the Qatari-U.S. relationship. Although it had been negotiated during the Obama administration and cleared by the State Department in November 2016, a US\$12 billion agreement to sell F15QA fighter aircraft to Qatar was signed just a week into the crisis. The deal therefore combined practical and symbolic intent, particularly after President Trump described how he had discussed Qatar's 'purchase of lots of beautiful military equipment' during his meeting with Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani at the Riyadh Summit in May.

Implications and Lessons Learned

As the standoff between Qatar and the A.T.Q. enters its third month without any sign of resolution, the least that can be said is that a combination of Kuwaiti and (belated) U.S. mediation prevented the crisis from escalating out of control during the volatile first few weeks. Emir Sabah al-Ahmad Al Sabah of Kuwait – the elder statesman of the Gulf and a veteran of 40 years as his country's Foreign Minister – engaged in a round of shuttle diplomacy in June before Secretary of State Tillerson did the same in July. Their actions led to the whittling down of a list of thirteen conditions and demand for intrusive monitoring and compliance mechanisms issued by the A.T.Q. on June 23 to a set of six general principles, although even the watered-down version was insufficient to kick-start negotiations. Nevertheless, the lack of formal new 'sanctions' on Qatar has been offset by an intensification of the 'war of words' between the A.T.Q. and Qatar as both camps have traded accusations that risk doing considerable reputational damage and inflicting irreparable harm on any prospects of eventual reconciliation within the framework of the GCC.

There are, however, two major policy lessons, one specific to the U.S. and the other more applicable to the era in which 'real' and 'fake' news are becoming ever harder to distinguish and separate. For the U.S. the standoff over Qatar has illustrated how the failure to speak with one voice has sown confusion as gaps have opened between the White House and the departments of government. At times during the past two months, it has seemed as if the U.S.

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has had two policies toward the standoff and U.S. partners have been unsure which one to take at face value. This has implications for U.S. regional credibility, not only among American allies and partners but also adversaries, if the U.S. government is divided and distracted. It also leaves the U.S. vulnerable to the kind of lobbying that attempts to discredit Qatar as a reliable military partner host to critical military facilities at Al-Udeid – the largest overseas air base used by the U.S. – and Camp as-Sayliyah that underpin U.S. force projection in the Gulf and broader region.

The second lesson for policymakers is that the dispute in the Gulf may well be remembered as the first international crisis of the ‘alternative facts’ era. Although the tensions that exploded into the open on 5 June have been brewing for years, the current crisis began with a hack of the Qatar News Agency on 23 May that may – or may not – have been orchestrated by the U.A.E. Regardless of who was behind the hack, the ‘fake news’ of Emir Tamim’s alleged speech was the precursor to the fortnight of breathless articles in regional media that appeared to become increasingly far-fetched, such as a story that members of Iran’s Revolutionary Guards were protecting the Emir’s palace, or an ‘interview’ with a dissident member of the Qatari ruling family that appeared in an English-language newspaper in Abu Dhabi. Qatari-aligned media outlets have hit back in a visceral and acrimonious exchange that has created deep regional wounds that may take years, even decades, to heal. The utter collapse of mutual trust and confidence between Qatar and its three neighbors is a reminder that perceptions do matter in politics and diplomacy, and that these are perhaps more vulnerable to manipulation in the digital age than ever before.

U.S. policymakers would do well to bear in mind that there are no ‘winners’ or ‘losers’ in this dispute, and that the lines between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ are not nearly as visible as the protagonists themselves would like to believe. Actions such as the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between the U.S. and Qatar on terror financing are positive steps toward addressing issues that have created friction in the past, but their utility is lessened if they are seen to be undercut by pronouncements elsewhere. The U.S. has much to lose in any protracted confrontation in the Gulf, particularly if it leaves the G.C.C. gravely weakened and provides openings for other regional states – such as Turkey or even Iran – to make inroads into what has been, for nearly thirty years, the rock-solid pillar of post-Gulf War U.S. defense and security architecture in the region.

References

[i] Based on conversations with both Qatari and US officials over the past two months.

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