

# The Gulf Crisis: The U.S. Factor

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**ABSTRACT** *The election of the U.S. President Donald Trump played a key role in reigniting the Gulf crisis. The blockading quartet (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt) took advantage of the election of a more sympathetic U.S. president to resume the 2013-2014 diplomatic crisis with Qatar, trying to get Doha to agree to their demands. However, divisions within the Trump Administration hindered the quartet efforts to get a much-weakened Qatar to comply. The Defense and State Departments helped balance out the president's more negative attitude towards Qatar in order to prevent any negative fallout of the U.S. interests in the region.*

## Introduction

**O**n June 5, 2017, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt announced that they had decided to sever their diplomatic ties with Qatar. The four countries also imposed a full blockade on Qatar, covering its (single) land border with Saudi Arabia as well as the country's air and seaports. This extended to transit travel across the region, with all planes travelling to and from Qatar prevented from landing in Saudi, Emirati, Bahraini or Egyptian airports. Qatari diplomats were given 48 hours to leave the blockading countries while other Qatari nationals were allowed two weeks.

Unlike his senior advisers, who favored a more balanced approach to prevent any negative fallout of the U.S. interests, President Trump lent support to the blockading countries particularly in the early stages of the crisis. He has since changed his position gradually to become more in harmony with the position of the foreign policy establishment. This paper examines the U.S. position on the Gulf crisis and the evolution of President Trump's policy on the blockade of Qatar. It argues that the inconsistency in U.S. policy towards the Gulf crisis has contributed to complicating the issue and made it even more difficult to find a quick solution to the problem.

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U.S. President Donald Trump and Saudi Arabia's King Salman bin Abdulaziz (C-R) pose for a picture with the leaders of the GCC in Riyadh on May 21, 2017.  
MANDEL NGAN / AFP / Getty Images

## Roots of the Crisis

Since the ascendance of Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa al-Thani, former Emir and father of the current ruler, to power in 1995, Qatar's regional role has fundamentally changed. Its dynamic and flexible foreign policy approach allowed Doha to balance relations with major powers in the region and across the globe. Qatar established a robust relationship with the United States –hosting the largest U.S. military bases outside U.S. territories at al-Udiad, in the south of the country– while simultaneously nurturing strong ties with some of the U.S.'s traditional foes; including Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas. The *Al Jazeera* broadcasting network was also established, addressing some of the most pressing, often ignored, topics in the Arab Middle East. It screened Arab intellectuals and political activists from a wide array of political trends.

These changes, brought about by Qatar, became a source of irritation for its neighbors –Saudi Arabia and the UAE in particular– providing for periodic crises between the two Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries.

When the Arab revolutions broke out in early 2011, conservative Arab governments blamed *Al Jazeera* coverage for fanning the revolutions, which engulfed the region from Tunisia to Yemen. Peaceful protests by young Arabs won admiration worldwide, leading western governments, especially the U.S., to consider abandoning its traditional allies, such as Hosni Mubarak of Egypt. While most Arab governments were on the back foot, waiting to react to events on the ground, Doha and the *Al Jazeera* network were in their prime, playing a vibrant role across the region. A reversal of fortunes was quick in the making, however.<sup>1</sup>

A watershed moment for both the Arab Spring and for Qatar's foreign policy came in the summer of 2013. At that point, revolutionary momentum began to fade. Islamists in power could not manage the transition to democracy in Egypt, while the army could not resist the temptation to seize power. Qatar's position became untenable when the junta, supported by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, took over in Cairo, reversing the gains of the January 25, 2011 revolution and reinstating autocratic rule. The June 30, 2013 coup, which removed Egypt's first democratically elected president, exposed the rift between these two Gulf countries and Bahrain, with Qatar. The governments of these three countries withdrew their ambassadors from Doha by the beginning of 2014, marking the crescendo of a crisis, which lasted for nine months. They demanded Qatar expel figures from the Muslim Brotherhood, shut down *Al Jazeera* Live Egypt and change its position on the military regime in Cairo.

The lack of sympathy from the Obama Administration prevented Saudi Arabia and the UAE from taking further action against Qatar during the 2014 crisis. Qatar also opted for reconciliation at that time, seeking to facilitate a smooth transfer of power from Sheikh Hamad to his son Sheikh Tamim. Hence it accepted some of its neighbors' demands, and signed the Riyadh Agreement in November 2014. The three GCC countries returned their ambassadors to Doha thereafter and the leaders of Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain attended

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the annual GCC summit in Doha in December 2014.

The election of President Donald Trump in 2016 encouraged Riyadh and Abu Dhabi to resume the conflict and bring it to a decisive conclusion. The Trump Administration seems to have created the right environment for an alliance between the crown prince of Abu Dhabi and the crown prince of Saudi Arabia to complete some unfinished business with Qatar. This came into focus with the Arab-Islamic-American summit in Riyadh, which brought the U.S. President together with more than 50 leaders from around the Arab and the Islamic world to discuss issues of interest, particularly the combat of terrorism.

In fact, Donald Trump's ascension to the White House, and his subsequent visit to Riyadh provided the catalyst that sparked the 2017 Gulf crisis. President Trump himself acknowledged the connection between his visit to Saudi Arabia and the

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Gulf crisis. To quote from the President's *Twitter* feed: "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... [continued] extremism, and all reference was pointing to Qatar. Perhaps this will be the beginning of the end to the horror of terrorism!"<sup>2</sup>

Clearly, the blockading quartet relied on President Trump's support to pressure Qatar into backing down and accept their conditions to resolve the crisis. On June 23, 2017, they issued a list of 13 demands, calling upon Doha to comply with them in exchange for lifting the blockade. The ultimatum included the closure of *Al Jazeera* and a number of other media outlets sponsored by Qatar, such as *Al Araby* television network and *The New Arab* newspaper. The blockading countries also demanded that Qatar reduce the level of its diplomatic relations with Iran and shut down a Turkish military base. The ultimatum

demanding Qatar to hand over dissidents from each of the countries concerned and share information about the opposition figures. Qatar was also asked to pay out an unspecified amount in "damages" to the countries concerned "in compensation for the harm which Qatar's foreign policy had caused them over the years."<sup>3</sup> The reference here was mainly to the events of the Arab Spring, wherein Saudi Arabia and UAE paid billions of dollars to bail out the military regime in Egypt and prevent the collapse of the state institutions following the military coup.

### **U.S. Reaction: Divided They Stand**

From day one, the position of the Trump Administration on the Gulf crisis was inconsistent and contradictory. President Trump championed the demands of the anti-Qatar alliance.<sup>4</sup> He even appeared to take credit for the move to isolate Qatar, suggesting that it was inspired by his insistence to Gulf rulers during the Riyadh summit that more needs to be done to combat and restrict financing "terrorism." In this regard, Trump considered the Palestinian resistance movement (Hamas) a terrorist organization just like ISIS and al-Qaeda and hence he considered Qatar's support for the besieged Palestinians in Gaza as an act of financing terrorism<sup>5</sup>.

Trump's remarks and his position on the Gulf crisis contradicted those of his then Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, and Secretary of Defense, Jim Mattis. Merely hours following the

imposition of the blockade on Qatar, Tillerson and Mattis urged the various parties of the conflict to remain calm and find a peaceful solution to the crisis.<sup>6</sup> Lt. Col. Damien Pickart, a U.S. Air Force spokesperson for the U.S. Central Command –headquarter in Qatar– went a step further by praising Qatar’s contribution to the U.S. war efforts against ISIS. “The United States and the [anti-ISIS U.S.-led] coalition are grateful to the Qataris for their long-standing support of our presence and their enduring commitment to regional security,” Pickart said.<sup>7</sup> Trump’s accusations that Qatar was funding extremism were also contradicted by the U.S. Ambassador to Qatar, Dana Shell Smith, who stated that Qatar had made “real progress” in curbing financial support for terrorism.<sup>8</sup> Former White House spokesman Sean Spicer also tried to limit the diplomatic damage caused by Trump’s tirades. “The United States wants to defuse and resolve this crisis immediately within the principles put forward by the president with regard to the elimination of the financing of terrorism,” Spicer said on the day Trump pointed a finger at Qatar over *Twitter*. Furthermore, Spicer asserted that Trump had enjoyed “very productive” talks with the Emir of Qatar during his visit to Riyadh in May.<sup>9</sup>

The clearest example of the inconsistency in the U.S. position on the Gulf crisis emerged on June 9, 2017 when then Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, in a brief speech at the State Department, stressed the need for all parties to seek a resolution to their disputes

through negotiations. He also called on Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt to ease the blockade imposed on Qatar during the month of Ramadan. He expressed concerns about the humanitarian cost of the conflict and its negative impact on the war on ISIS.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, within an hour, at a joint press conference with the Romanian President, Trump reiterated his position on the crisis. He insisted that isolating Qatar was a victory for his approach aiming at stopping all forms of support for those he described as “extremists,” claiming that Qatar was “a major source of support for extremism” and that success in putting pressure on it would mark the beginning of the end for “terrorism.”<sup>11</sup>

## Inconsistency in Action Too

The lack of a clear and coherent foreign policy doctrine has led to these divisions and contradictory policy statements. Although inconsistency was a pervasive feature of the Trump’s White House in dealing with a range of international affairs including the North Korea crisis, the Iranian nuclear issue and the Syrian conflict; yet, it was most evident in the Gulf crisis.

Disagreements between the White House and the State Department on interpreting the Gulf crisis developed into different policy decisions. According to a report published in *The Washington Post*, the White House, and Trump in particular, was irritated by the State Department’s stalling of

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large arms-purchases by Gulf countries that the President had agreed to during the Riyadh summit in May, including a multi-billion dollar arms deal promised to Saudi Arabia. The Secretary of State “has also been slow-walking the deals as part of his quest for leverage as he tries to mediate the Arab family feud,” while the White House argues that this strategy is ineffective.<sup>12</sup>

The Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Bob Corker (a Republican from Tennessee) supported Tillerson’s approach. He suggested that Saudi Arabia and the UAE were being disingenuous in their allegations of Qatar financing terrorism, and instead demanded that all of the Gulf States do more to curb the financing of extremists.<sup>13</sup> One tangible result of Corker’s exasperation has been the promise by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to block any future arms sales to all of the members of the GCC, including the three who are blockading Qatar, until they find a diplomatic resolution to their differences.<sup>14</sup>

During a visit to Doha in July 2017, Tillerson offered an implicit endorsement of the Qatari position. “I think Qatar has been quite clear in its demands, and I think those have been quite reasonable.”<sup>15</sup> When Tillerson signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Qatar that covers steps to restrict the financing of terrorism, he pointed out that no other Arab or Muslim nation –including members of the anti-Qatar quartet– had signed such a deal with the United States.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, the U.S. State Department expressed dissatisfaction with the maximalist demands of the anti-Qatar quartet. State Department spokesperson, Heather Nauert, stated clearly that the U.S. was unimpressed by the lack of any detailed and verifiable allegations presented against Qatar. “At this point, we are left with one simple question: Were the actions really about their concerns regarding Qatar’s alleged support for terrorism? Or were they about the long-simmering grievances between the GCC countries?,” Nauert said.<sup>17</sup>

On June 15, 2017, Secretary of Defense, Jim Mattis, and his Qatari counterpart signed a \$12 billion contract to sell thirty-six F-15 jets. These jets were part of a larger \$21 billion plan to sell seventy-two planes of the same type to Qatar and originally agreed with the Obama Administration. That the Pentagon allowed the deal to go ahead, however, is an indication of deep differences within the U.S. government on the Gulf crisis.<sup>18</sup> Speaking before the House Foreign Relations



Trump's son-in-law and his senior advisor, Jared Kushner and Ivanka Trump arrive at the Global Center for Combating Extremist Ideology shortly before its inauguration in Riyadh on May 21, 2017.

MANDEL NGAN / AFP / Getty Images

Committee, then Secretary of State, Tillerson, downplayed rumors of a rift between the State Department and the White House on the Gulf crisis. While insisting that there was harmony between himself and President Trump, Tillerson did acknowledge that there were “differences” in how the president “chooses to articulate elements” of their supposedly unified policy.<sup>19</sup>

By the time he was heading back from the Gulf in July 2017, however, Tillerson appeared to be speaking more frankly about his disagreements with the White House on the Gulf crisis. He contrasted his experience as CEO of what he described to be a “highly structured” organization such as Exxon-Mobil, with working within the U.S. administration. The latter, said Tillerson, was “not a highly disciplined organization,” but rather, “decision making is fragmented, and

sometimes people don’t want to take decisions, coordination is difficult through the interagency [system].”<sup>20</sup>

Even President Trump conceded that while “Rex is doing a terrific job” that there was a “little bit of a difference, only in terms of tone.”<sup>21</sup> Yet, what was considered as minor differences of “tone” between the different wings of the executive branch appeared to the rest of the world to signal a chaotic style of conducting foreign policy that has in fact deepened the Gulf crisis. It was in this vein that the German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel accused the governments leading the blockade on Qatar of “Trumpization” of their foreign policy, in reference to the brash grandstanding that deepened the crisis.<sup>22</sup>

While there has been a latter-day shift in the White House approach, poli-

cymaking remains subject to Trump's temperamental and irrational changes of direction. One particular case highlights how much more significant the differences between the president and other members of the executive branch are than Tillerson cared to admit to the House Foreign Relations Committee. In a written answer formulated by the National Security Council, a body answers directly to Trump, together with the State Department, both said: "We encourage countries to minimize rhetoric and exercise restraint to allow for productive, diplomatic discussions," an apparent hint that the Saudi-led quartet should back down from its demands issued to Qatar in late June.<sup>23</sup>

For a while, Trump appeared to be falling into line behind this attempt to bring a sense of discipline and uniformity to the U.S. executive branch position on the Gulf crisis. On July 5, the eve of the G20 summit in Hamburg, Trump made a phone call to Egyptian leader Sisi who himself was due to host a meeting of the foreign ministers of the countries leading the blockade on Qatar. Trump enjoined the parties gathered in Cairo to "engage constructively" and end the crisis without further escalation.<sup>24</sup> For a while, it seemed that all branches in the U.S. executive were in unison regarding this unprecedented crisis between the GCC countries and in particular that Washington was not supportive of the ultimatum handed down to Qatar.

Within a week, however, statements by the U.S. President served to confuse

the situation further. While Trump downplayed the possibility of moving the U.S. command base located in Qatar's Khor al-Udiad, he also stated that, "If we ever had to leave, we would have 10 countries willing to build us another one, believe me, and they will pay for it." This was in sharp contrast to statements by Defense Secretary Mattis who had earlier categorically rejected the prospect of moving the base from Qatar.<sup>25</sup> At that time, it was understood that the UAE was lobbying to move the U.S. base out of Qatar and offered to host it instead.

Inconsistency in the Trump Administration's policy on the Gulf crisis increased with the intervention of the President's son-in-law and senior foreign policy advisor, Jared Kushner, in the Gulf crisis. When Kushner was sent to the Gulf in September 2017, Tillerson called each of those countries' foreign ministers to ensure that "Kushner had not sent conflicting messages about the U.S. policy."<sup>26</sup>

The misalignment within the U.S. executive branch on the Gulf crisis was the purported existence of a "parallel foreign policy" which some have suggested was formulated in the "family quarters" of the White House. Particularly important was the role of Jared Kushner and his outsized role in contributing to policy. Kushner holds a particular gripe against Qatar following Qatari investors' unwillingness to help support a real estate deal that his family was attempting.<sup>27</sup> Aides close to Tillerson have also speculated that Kushner was the channel through which paragraphs drafted by

the United Arab Emirates' Ambassador to Washington, Yousef al-Otaiba, found their way to Trump's July 9 address in which he was seen to be at odds with his Secretary of State.<sup>28</sup>

Trump's former chief adviser, Steve Bannon, also played a role in hardening the position of the President and hence creating this inconsistency in the U.S. foreign policy.<sup>29</sup> Bannon believed that the United States was engaged in an existential war against "radical Islam."<sup>30</sup> This justifies the escalation with Qatar on the basis that Qatar supports some Islamic currents, even if classified as "moderate," such as the Muslim Brotherhood.

This has clearly irked many in the U.S. establishment, with former CIA Director David Petraeus taking the unusual step of reminding Trump that it was a request from the United States, which drove Qatar to host both Hamas and representatives of the Taliban.<sup>31</sup>

### **Implication for the U.S. Interests**

Since the early days of the Cold War, security and stability of the Gulf region has been a key U.S. interest. The role the GCC plays in the international energy markets makes it of vital importance for the U.S. Over the past seven decades, the U.S. has developed strong bonds with the GCC on organizational as well as at individual state levels.

U.S.-Qatari relations stretch back to the early 1970s when the British with-

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drew from the Gulf region. They have evolved since then but particularly after the 1991 Gulf War when the two countries signed a military cooperation agreement. Bilateral relations developed further in 2002 with the relocation of the U.S. military headquarters in the region to the al-Udiad Airbase from the Prince Sultan Airbase in Saudi Arabia. The al-Udiad Airbase, located 40 kilometers southwest of Doha, is the largest U.S. military base in the Middle East, hosting about 11,000 U.S. troops. It is home to the U.S. Combined Air and Space Operations Center (CAOC), which oversees U.S. military air power in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq and 18 other countries around the region. The base boasts the longest runway in the Gulf, with a length of 12,500 feet and accommodates 120 fighter jets. Qatar invested \$1 billion in constructing the base during the 1990s, reinforcing the U.S.-Qatari military ties. It also houses an advanced air force headquarters for the U.S. Central Command, and other U.S. air units.<sup>32</sup>

The U.S. Defense Department fears that all of the U.S. military privileges

in Qatar may be jeopardized if the diplomatic escalation continues between Qatar and its Gulf neighbors. Rival powers, particularly Russia and Iran, will also stand to benefit if the U.S. takes sides in the crisis.<sup>33</sup> Qatar has already started developing ties with Moscow and has shown interest in buying the Russian-made S400 anti-aircraft defense system. The Gulf crisis also risks undermining the two pillars of the U.S. Middle East strategy: containing Iran and defeating ISIS. If Qatar's Gulf neighbors continue to isolate it, it may seek to strengthen ties with Iran. Regarding the war on ISIS, Pentagon officials are concerned that the boycott of Qatar and the travel ban will hinder the movements of U.S. military personnel in the region.<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, any further escalation in the crisis could put America's allies in the region on a collision course, especially after the ratification of the Turkish-Qatar joint military agreement.<sup>35</sup> The blockade of Qatar may also have economic implications for U.S. companies operating in the Gulf. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain may pressure U.S. companies to withdraw from Qatar or face consequences.<sup>36</sup>

Furthermore, the U.S. has an intrinsic interest in keeping indirect contacts with groups it considers terrorist, such as Hamas and Taliban, via Qatar. "There's got to be a place for us to meet the Taliban. The Hamas (folks) have to have a place to go where they can be simultaneously isolated and talked to," said one U.S. official.<sup>37</sup> In fact, the Taliban opened an office in

Doha in 2013 at the request of the United States.<sup>38</sup>

## Trump's About-Turn

On July 5, 2017, a four-way meeting between the foreign ministers of the countries leading the blockade on Qatar –Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt– failed to take expanded punitive measures against Doha. The meeting was held in Cairo following the expiration of a 10-day interlude granted to Qatar to comply with the quartet's list of 13 demands, and a subsequent 48-hour period of grace requested by Kuwait, which was mediating between the parties of the Gulf crisis. In fact, it was President Trump who this time foiled the attempt to bog Qatar down. In a phone call with Egypt's President Sisi, Trump urged the Arab countries involved in the Gulf crisis to "negotiate constructively to resolve the dispute."<sup>39</sup> Following the call, the foreign ministers of the blockading quartet issued a statement declaring their adherence to international law.

U.S. diplomatic efforts to find a solution to the Gulf crisis gained momentum afterwards when President Trump met the Emir of Kuwait, Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah, in Washington, D.C. on September 7, 2017. Two weeks later he met the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad al-Thani, who was in New York for the United Nations General Assembly 72<sup>nd</sup> session. Trump's direct involvement in resolving the Gulf crisis was an important development.

It marked a break with the White House's previous stance, in which the U.S. president encouraged the blockade of Qatar.

In his remarks in the run-up to the meeting with Sheikh Tamim, the U.S. President displayed a clear change of tone. He began by praising the Emir of Qatar, emphasizing the "strong" and "historic" relationship between his country and Qatar. Trump delved into the Gulf crisis directly, stating, "We're trying to solve a problem in the Middle East, and I think we'll get it solved. I have a very strong feeling that it will be solved pretty quickly." He went even further by stressing that U.S.-Qatari relations were not confined to the Gulf crisis, but included "trade and many other things." He also stated that, "We've had a tremendous relationship for the last short period of time, especially since our meeting in Saudi Arabia, which I think was an epic and very important – really a very historic meeting. And now we want to make the most of it by getting things settled."<sup>40</sup>

Sheikh Tamim underlined the importance of the Memorandum of Understanding on counter-terrorism which Qatar had signed with the U.S. the previous summer. The Emir told Trump: "As you said, Mr. President, we have a problem with our neighbors, and your [involvement would be of great use]. And I'm sure that, with your intervention, hopefully we can find a solution to this problem."<sup>41</sup> Trump stressed that he would personally make an effort to bring the parties to the negotiating table.

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On the eve of the meeting between Trump and the Emir of Kuwait earlier that month, in written remarks, Trump called on the GCC countries and Egypt to focus on the commitments of the Riyadh Arab-Islamic-American summit, "to continue our joint efforts to drive out and defeat terrorists." He emphasized, "Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt are all essential U.S. partners in this effort," adding that "We will be most successful with a united GCC."<sup>42</sup>

Trump went as far as to announce his readiness to get directly involved in the Gulf crisis, expressing his confidence that a solution could be found quickly. He said, "If I can help mediate between Qatar and, in particular, the UAE and Saudi Arabia, I would be willing to do so. And I think you'd have a deal worked out very quickly."<sup>43</sup>

Trump's initial anti-Qatar slant in the Gulf crisis began to evolve due to the pressure by then Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, Secretary of Defense, Jim Mattis, and then National Security

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rity Advisor, H. M. McMaster. They have all tried to provide Trump with a more comprehensive picture of the complex situation in the Gulf, balancing out the information presented to Trump by other White House advisers.

Tensions on the Korean Peninsula and the possible outbreak of a crisis with Iran over the 2015 nuclear agreement had also contributed to the evolution of Trump's new position. The President appeared more inclined towards exerting pressure on all the parties of the Gulf crisis to come to a negotiated settlement.<sup>44</sup> Trump attempted to organize a telephone call on September 8, 2017 between the Emir of Qatar and the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman. During the conversation, the two leaders agreed to find a diplomatic solution to the crisis. Saudi Arabia hesitated however and suspended talks that same day, seemingly blaming Qatar out of frustration and a desire not to appear to have buckled.<sup>45</sup>

Furthermore, it was suggested that Trump had personally intervened to curb a Saudi-Emirati plan to act militarily against Qatar. According to these reports, Trump indicated that any military action would strengthen Iran's position in the Middle East. While Trump downplayed the importance of these reports during his meeting with Qatar's Emir in September 2017, statements by the Emir of Kuwait, who took credit for the avoidance of military action, suggested that plans for military action against Qatar were in fact well underway on the eve of the crisis.<sup>46</sup>

### **The Shift towards Amity**

The change in Trump's attitude towards the Gulf crisis to become more consistent with that of the foreign policy establishment and the intelligence community paved the way for the establishment of a U.S.-Qatari Strategic Dialogue. The meeting, which was held in Washington on January 2018, was the first of its kind between the two countries, and, according to a MoU, it inaugurated an annual strategic dialogue forum between the two countries.<sup>47</sup> According to a joint statement issued at the end of the U.S.-Qatar Strategic Dialogue, the U.S. expressed "its readiness to work jointly with Qatar to deter and confront any external threat to Qatar's territorial integrity in consistence with the United Nations Charter."<sup>48</sup> By this, the U.S. administration committed itself to guaranteeing Qatar security, a sea change in the position of the Trump Administration on Qatar.<sup>49</sup> By



the end of the strategic dialogue, the two countries agreed to enhance cooperation in four main areas:

*Political Cooperation:* Both countries expressed their desire to enhance the scope of their bilateral relations. They stressed the need to find an immediate solution to the Gulf crisis that respects the sovereignty of Qatar and preserves the unity of the GCC.

*Defense:* Both parties stressed the vital contribution of their defense partnership to the security and stability of the region. The two parties issued a “Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation,” affirming the two countries’ joint commitment to promoting peace and stability and countering the scourge of terrorism, and the U.S. committed to ensuring Qatar’s security and territorial integrity against any external threat. A \$24.7 billion military sales program,

which saw Qatar purchase the latest U.S. military systems to strengthen its military capacity in various areas in coordination with the United States, was announced. According to Qatari Minister of Defense Khalid al-Attiyah, the “Qatar Vision 2040” for military cooperation with the United States includes expanding the al-Udiad air base, build new housing and facilities and increase capacity at dormitories. The proposed improvements “represent a transition from an expeditionary environment with temporary facilities, to a base with an enduring infrastructure capable of sustaining long-term operations.” In addition, al-Attiyah announced that Qatar is “building new naval ports to accommodate U.S. warships.”<sup>50</sup>

*Counter-terrorism:* The joint statement also noted that the United States and Qatar are committed to strengthening their security partnership and

Then U.S. Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, in contradiction to Trump’s statements, urged Saudi Arabia and its allies to ease the blockade against Qatar, on June 9, 2017.

PAUL J. RICHARDS /  
AFP / Getty Images

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efforts to eradicate terrorism and violent extremism. The two countries reviewed their joint efforts under the MoU on counter-terrorism signed in July 2017 and stressed the need to strengthen those efforts, especially regarding “information sharing, countering the financing of terrorism, aviation security, and capacity building.”

*Trade and Investment:* Both countries reaffirmed their commitment to promoting bilateral trade. Qatar is investing more than \$100 billion in the U.S. economy, including \$10 billion in infrastructure projects. Qatari companies also invest in U.S. financial services, health care and technology markets, while U.S. companies in Qatar are engaged in construction, energy and services industries, as well as Qatar hosting six U.S. universities in Education City.<sup>51</sup>

“The Strategic Dialogue” between Qatar and the U.S. was the last step in

the long journey, which saw the position of President Trump move from siding with the blockading countries against Qatar into reaffirming the strategic alliance with Qatar. For the first time, since the beginning of the Gulf crisis, the United States has officially declared that it will not tolerate military action against Qatar. By this, the White House has confirmed that Qatar is a strong and reliable regional partner, especially with respect to maintaining regional security and stability and combatting terrorism. This constitutes a sea change in President Trump's position on the Gulf crisis.

## Conclusion

The inconsistency in the Trump Administration policy towards the Gulf crisis is one further example of the lack of a coherent foreign policy. Trump's distaste for the ruling establishment, his personal characteristics and ruling style, and the absence of a clear foreign policy doctrine, make inconsistency the hallmark of his administration. The existence of a “parallel foreign policy,” planned and executed in the “family quarters” of the White House, with personal business interests involved, seems to have also played a role in making the U.S. policy on the Gulf crisis inconsistent. Ideological motives of some of the President's top advisors, chief amongst them former White House Chief Strategist, Steve Bannon, were also instrumental in shaping the president's position on the Gulf crisis. The conflict between the ideological

current within the administration and the pragmatic establishment (the State Department, the Pentagon and the intelligence community) and the family quarters represented by the president's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, was the main feature of Trump's first year in office.

Although the President's position towards the Gulf crisis continues to fluctuate, there is ample evidence to suggest that the foreign policy establishment is regaining control. One can assume with a reasonable degree of certainty that the official policy line of the U.S. administration is now focused on resolving the Gulf crisis, or at least preventing it from escalation.

As the Gulf crisis persists, it could undermine the GCC and may lead to its demise. One clearly visible result of the crisis is the emergence of two distinct blocs within the GCC. While the first, led by Saudi Arabia, seeks to bring the smaller Arab Gulf States under its control and dictate their foreign policies, especially towards Iran, the second, which includes Qatar and Oman, wants to retain a degree of independence. Kuwait, meanwhile, is seeking to chart an equivocal path between these two camps. The December 2017 GCC summit in Kuwait served only to highlight the depth and intensity of the divisions that cut through the GCC.

This comes at a time when the U.S. appears to be needing unity amongst its allies to isolate Iran. In addition, disunity amongst the GCC allies threatens the U.S.-led war on terror, a

cornerstone in Washington's Middle East policy. All the GCC countries are members in the U.S.-led international coalitions against ISIS and Qatar hosts the largest U.S. military base in the Middle East. According to the U.S. military, two thirds of the anti-ISIS air campaign is waged from al-Udiad airbase in Qatar. This illustrates how damaging the Gulf crisis could be for the U.S. war efforts against ISIS and the U.S. Middle East interests in general. This was the key factor that made the foreign policy establishment take a more balanced approach towards the crisis, something that President Trump has only lately understood. ■

## Endnotes

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