

The Muslim Brotherhood Faultline in Saudi-Qatari Relations: Domestic Divisions and Regional Rivalry

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ABSTRACT *The commentary argues the Saudi-Qatari tensions lie in conflicting perspectives about the role of political Islam within the fabric of both states and their actions regionally. Fundamentally, the rivalry stems from contrasting relations between political and religious elites in each country which has taken on increasing political importance in tensions between Riyadh and Doha. Central to much of this are questions about the role played by the Muslim Brotherhood (and its various affiliates). More relatedly, the Saudi-Qatari rifts emerge out of competing understandings of authority and legitimacy, and with it, concern at the contestation of these claims.*

Keywords: Saudi-Qatari Relations, Muslim Brotherhood, Political Islam, Wahhabism, *Al Jazeera*

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Introduction

The dispute pitting Qatar against three of its Gulf neighbors led by Saudi Arabia is predominantly viewed as a consequence of Doha's regional action, notably engaging with Iran, military ties with Turkey, and supporting Islamist groups across the region. In this interjection, we argue that the Saudi-Qatari tensions emerge out of competing understandings of authority and legitimacy, and with it, concern at the contestation of these claims. In other words, friction between Doha and Riyadh lies in conflicting perspectives held by Qatar and Saudi Arabia about the role of political Islam within the fabric of both states and their actions regionally. Fundamentally, the rivalry stems from contrasting relations between political and religious elites in each country which has taken on an increasing 'political' importance in tensions between Riyadh and Doha. Central to much of this are questions about the role played by the Muslim Brotherhood (and its various affiliates).

Both Qatar and Saudi Arabia adopt the Wahhabi strand of Islam, which is part of the strict Hanbali school of Islamic jurisprudence. Nevertheless, the Saudi state has built the ideology as part of the rule-making process through which al-Saud rulers maintained domestic order through unifying territory and tribes. This order is partly imposed as the Wahhabi scholars evolved into an institutional shape-controlled and financed under the patronage of the political leader-

ship. The alliance with Wahhabism has served Saudi Arabia's domestic politics of survival and legitimacy as well as its expansionist foreign policies and desire for hegemony in the Arabian Peninsula. On the opposite side, Wahhabism presented Qatar with challenges and dilemmas related to both domestic politics and foreign policies as we explain below. More significantly, the comparison shows how political questions concerning the salience of religion within states –and the impact of such issues on claims to sovereignty¹– are a point of ongoing friction, resulting in the withdrawal of ambassadors in 2002, 2014, and 2017 and the ensuing blockade. The 2017 blockade showed this element of religionization of the conflict. Saudi Arabia along with Bahrain, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates announced they would cut their diplomatic ties with Qatar, citing Doha's support for various terrorist and sectarian groups aimed at destabilizing the region including the Muslim Brotherhood and ISIS, and al-Qaeda.² The years that followed were shaped by much hostility, with repeated calls to expel Islamists from Qatar and undermining their influence communicated across Qatar-owned media outlets such as *Al Jazeera*.

Saudi Perceptions: The Brotherhood as Liability

Saudi Arabia frames its rivalry with Qatar as a consequence of interference in its domestic affairs.³ In 2014, it withdrew its ambassador from Qatar on claims that Doha failed to

agree on a unified policy to “ensure non-interference, directly or indirectly, in the internal affairs of any member state”⁴ when it did not sign up to a common security pact at a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) foreign ministers meeting in Riyadh. In the 2017 crisis, the 13 demands after the Saudi-led embargo includes an explicit stipulation to end this interference.⁵ The claims were made on the basis of the actions of the Muslim Brotherhood, to whom Qatar is seen as a patron, across the region, along with *Al Jazeera’s* coverage of regional events.

The Kingdom’s relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood is complex. Saudi Arabia had earlier enjoyed cordial relations with the Brotherhood during which time the ruling family gave shelter to thousands of the group’s members facing jail and repression in Egypt, Syria, and elsewhere, in the 1950s. However, relations deteriorated as the group’s promotion of political activism, including support for elections, was seen by Riyadh as a direct threat to its dynastic system of rule.⁶ This activism challenges the very terms of the close alliance between the al-Saud ruling family and the clerics of the Wahhabi school of Islam, an ideology based on no contestation of the political authority and full obedience to the ruler. The alliance has long given the Saudi regime a lynchpin for legitimacy and even its very existence. Al Saud unified territory and tribes and also founded the state itself on the basis of agreement between Mohamed ibn Abdel-Wahab

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and Mohamed Ibn al-Saud in the 18th century. The former found a ‘sword’ to implement his radical views and the latter found a ‘religious banner’ in order to unite the hitherto fragmented or hostile Arab tribes under his command within the bounds of a specific piece of land symbolically named ‘Saudi Arabia.’ The fusion of the al-Saud family with the Wahhabi *ulama*, drawing upon the historic relationship between the two groups, also provided the new Saudi state with a degree of legitimacy not found in their tribal lineage.⁷ In the 1990s, the Brotherhood began contesting the agreement and the stability in rule based on a form of power-sharing between al-Saud and religious scholars.⁸

For example, the Brotherhood or groups affiliated with it directly criticized the kingdom’s rulers for allowing U.S. military forces on Saudi soil during and after the 1990 Gulf War.⁹ This criticism challenges the Wahhabi men of religion’s loyal support to the monarchy and their counsel-

With its populist, bottom-up Sunni Islam, including that of the Brotherhood seeking power through electoral means, the Brotherhood challenges Saudi Arabia's top-down political Islam

ing that it is the duty of good Muslims to obey their rulers' on the basis of citing puritanical interpretations of Islam that build such meanings.¹⁰ The rulers felt their authority further dwindled as the Brotherhood's influence expanded into key ideological state apparatuses such as schools. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman said that in an interview in 2018 that the Brotherhood 'invaded' Saudi school curricula and set himself the mission of having these elements 'eradicated fully.'¹¹ The kingdom also expelled many members of the Brotherhood as part of curtailing their influence.

Saudi demands to close *Al Jazeera* –one of the 13 demands presented to Doha– reflect these perceptions of the Brotherhood as a threat. The channel provided a platform and accommodation for several Brotherhood exiles. The closer relation is surmised by one journalist as: "It is in those suites and hotel lobbies that the future of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and, more broadly, the strategy and ideology of political Islam in the country may well be charted."¹²

The perception is drawn on combining both *Al Jazeera* and the Muslim Brotherhood as a threat to Saudi sovereignty. This is evident in the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings as the channel has not hidden its sympathy to anti-regime protests spreading across the region as of 2011 and even "actively promoted regime change across the Arab world."¹³

The combination of threats is best exemplified by Egyptian Brotherhood ideologue Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi. Based in Doha, al-Qaradawi is an Egyptian-born Qatari citizen who has long been one of the most influential religious authorities in Sunni Islam and was also known for his weekly program on *Al Jazeera* that was viewed by tens of millions. Qaradawi has criticized Saudi Arabia and its allies as being 'against Islam.' During the Arab Uprisings, he expressed a sense of inevitability about the Islamists' rising power as "now that the tyrants have been removed... nothing prevents Islamists from taking their rightful place in the heart of society."¹⁴ This irked the Saudi regime, reinforcing accusations that *Al Jazeera* and the Brotherhood interfere in other states' affairs, while also acting to destabilize the Saudi Kingdom's security and 'incite people' against their rulers.¹⁵

Qatari Perceptions: The Brotherhood as Leverage

In contrast to Saudi Arabia, the Muslim Brotherhood occupy a prominent position in Qatar, where refuge was

provided for members of the *Ikhwan* as a means of counterbalancing the influence of Wahhabism. The domestic relations between al-Saud and Wahhabism and the way the latter is used as part of the kingdom's 'expansive'¹⁶ foreign policy presented the rulers of Qatar with a sovereignty dilemma related to both the 'domestic' level of maintaining order and controlling events as well as the external 'Westphalian' order of independence and non-interference.¹⁷ On one hand, Wahhabism served a domestic purpose of shaping opinion and legitimacy among a conservative tribal population but at the same time, it also presented the challenge that the Saudi state could gain power and influence internal politics especially through religious scholars connected with their Wahhabi counterparts across the border.¹⁸ The Brotherhood came as a solution to this Qatari dilemma.

Despite the prevalence of the Brotherhood or their sympathizers throughout Qatar's various bureaucracies,¹⁹ the Brotherhood is barely involved in Qatari domestic affairs. Qatar has limited the 'institutional opportunities'²⁰ available for religious scholars of any description to exert influence domestically. This means a distinct contrast from Saudi Arabia, reflecting the ability of al Thani to maintain their domestic authority without the reliance on religious figures for legitimacy. The rulers can thus augment their legitimacy without getting indelibly linked to Wahhabism or giving religious scholars any official place in government. As such, Qatar

managed to resolve its sovereignty dilemma best surmised by Roberts:

To augment the status of *Wahhabism* in Qatar... would have been to intractably instill the necessary deference of Qatar to Saudi Arabia as the custodian of the two holy places and the al-Wahhab legacy. Instead, supporting the *Ikhwan* [Brotherhood] avoided a reliance on Saudi scholars or jurists to design and staff Qatar's systems in a *Wahhabi* image inevitably tilting toward Riyadh²¹.

The second way in which the Muslim Brotherhood is used by Doha is reflected in Qatar's actions regionally, with the *Ikhwan* providing a means for Doha to exert influence across the Middle East. This is made possible as the Brotherhood possesses 'cross-border networks'²² and a high level of organization,²³ and as the Qatari leadership was always in a stronger position in its relations with the Brotherhood enough to set and enforce guidelines as to the group's limitations to a greater degree²⁴ and even described by Roberts as allowing Qatar to fashion itself a place as a key 'spoke in the Brotherhood's wheel.' Part of these limitations came as the two sides developed a mutually beneficial relationship 'so long as the Brotherhood in Qatar were, inevitably, outward facing'²⁵

For example, this hosting of the Brotherhood scholars allowed Qatar to 'augment its regional status with *Ikhwan* ideology being more widespread than Wahhabi thought' while the Brotherhood's transference of its

Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani (R) receives Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan Al-Saud (L), at the Al Bahr Palace in Doha, Qatar on April 26, 2021.

Qatari Emirate Council / AA



ideology at the internal level remains limited and controlled, in contrast with the Saudi case (where the Brotherhood's influence included political activism, radicalizing Saudi youth). The Brotherhood thus served the Qatari rulers' attempts to have an 'independent and self-sufficient role for Qatar through a flexible foreign policy that has reached out to a wide range of political interests in the region.'²⁶

On this regional level, the Brotherhood can also curtail Saudi Arabia's expansionist sovereignty as it presents a type of political Islam challenging the 'top-down' political Islam, propagated by Saudi Arabia via its Salafi religious establishment and men of religion and their puritan interpretations of Islam based on obeying the ruler. With its populist, bottom-up Sunni Islam, including that of the Brotherhood seeking power through electoral means, the Brotherhood challenges Saudi Arabia's top-down political Is-

lam.²⁷ Within this regional game, Qatar turned its dilemma into an advantage as evidenced by punching above its weight across the regional and international arenas in challenge to what some call a 'small state syndrome'²⁸ or others hail as 'smaller states big politics' utility maximization of power. This accords with the Qatari adoption of a form of 'Wahhabism-lite' which is considered more flexible than that in Saudi Arabia.²⁹

Qatar's policy vis-à-vis that of Saudi Arabia evolved within the battle lines drawn throughout the Arab uprisings and their consequences as of 2011. In 2013, the Egyptian army led a coup that overthrew the elected President, Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohammad Morsi, which Saudi head of intelligence, Prince Bandar bin Salman, 'had worked so tirelessly to achieve.'³⁰ Openly showing his support to the new post-Morsi regime, the then Saudi King Abdullah said

he would stand with the new regime in Cairo, directly aiming his words at Qatar, whom he charged with ‘fanning the fire of sedition and promoting terrorism, which they claim to be fighting.’³¹ Maha Azzam, a fellow at Chatham House, summed up the Saudi fears towards the Brotherhood:

What they had was a lethal equation, democracy plus Islamism, albeit under the Muslim Brotherhood. That was a lethal concoction in undermining the kingdom’s own legitimacy in the long run. They know full well they do not want democracy, but to have another group representing Islam was intolerable.³²

Amidst a groundswell of support for the Brotherhood in Saudi Arabia, as evidenced by waves of Tweets and messages of solidarity across social media, Saudi Arabia along with the UAE pledged \$12 billions of aid to Egypt days after the coup, a package whose timing and size make it look as if it was meant to help the Egyptian generals exterminate the Muslim Brotherhood.³³ Against this background, Qatar felt the overthrow of Morsi was a threat to its pursuit of influence or to its long investments cultivated over decades to the point of what some now call a ‘direct and intimate relationship’³⁴ between Doha and the Brotherhood. During Morsi’s presidency in 2012-2013, Qatar provided financial aid in the region of \$7.5 billion. After the coup, opposed by Qatar, Doha assiduously continued to support the Brotherhood. *The Washington Post* reported in November 2013 on a Muslim Brotherhood

Historically, the rise of *Al Jazeera* can thus offset or counterbalance the Saudi threats to Qatar’s sovereignty at a number of levels

leadership in exile ‘starting to take shape here among the shimmering high-rises of Doha.’ Riyadh reacted to these closer ties as a breach of its sovereignty. The Kingdom banned the Brotherhood by classifying it as a ‘terrorist movement.’³⁵ The escalation is justified by claiming that the Brotherhood would ‘sow dissent,’ and ‘calls for disobedience against the state’s rulers.’³⁶ Official statements warned that Saudi citizens and foreign residents in the country would be punished by law if they ‘insult other countries and their leaders or hold any gatherings that can ‘target the security and stability and spread sedition in the society.’³⁷

Al Jazeera, a platform and a medium exemplifying the ties between Qatar and the Brotherhood can thus relate to Doha’s attempts to demonstrate independence from both Saudi Arabia and the perceived constraints of Wahhabism. Indeed, the creation of *Al Jazeera* itself shows the divergence in the domestic politics between the state and religion inside the two countries. As explained by Fromherz, “Unlike Saudi Arabia, where reformists in the ruling family are constrained by their alliance with the Wahhabi *ulama*,

Adopting the same brand of Wahhabism, Qatari leaders feel their domestic authority is based on neutralizing or weakening any potential collusion between Wahhabis inside and Wahhabis outside

the rulers of Qatar have been able to experiment with a plethora of open and challenging educational, media and diplomatic initiatives.³⁸ Presenting itself as ‘one of the region’s more liberal and democratic countries,’ the state makes it within its prerogatives to provide ‘freedom of press and speech as represented by *Al Jazeera*.³⁹ Historically, the rise of *Al Jazeera* can thus offset or counterbalance the Saudi threats to Qatar’s sovereignty at a number of levels. The creation of the channel came as an attempt to ‘cut into the people consuming Saudi media,⁴⁰ which has been expanding since the 1990s to a wider appeal in the Arab region with the full realization that leaders can stabilize their rule, and that of others, if they maintain their ‘death grip on the information their populations were able to consume.⁴¹ The channel challenged the Saudi control of pan-Arab media, long maintained by owning outlets across platforms such as print, radio, and TV and also by the centrality of the Saudi market for most Arab advertisers and which gave the kingdom greater ‘influence’ over media content.⁴² Second, the channel allowed Qatar to play into

regional politics even those including regional powers such as Iran along with Saudi Arabia. U.S. embassy cables released by *WikiLeaks* in 2010 claimed the lack of *Al Jazeera*’s coverage of the civil unrest in Iran after the disputed presidential election in the summer of 2009.⁴³ Third, *Al Jazeera* weakened the whole idea of the ‘state’ in the Arab region by undermining the state’s monopoly over the flow of information. So making ministries of information and their oppressive censorship bodies obsolete, and also by building what Marc Lynch calls a “new Arab public” through heavy coverage of issues, such as those of Palestine, as the main area of the ‘widest consensus’ in this new public.⁴⁴ It is within this vocal, pluralist, and critical public sphere, *Al Jazeera* was able to address grievances of people in the region and challenge the status quo including Saudi influence over Arab media. Even more, voices critical of the Saudi regime made their way into *Al Jazeera* screens in the name of *Al Jazeera*’s claims on pluralism. It is within this context of contentious public politics that we can understand how the channel opened a space of one hour on a weekly basis to al-Qaradawi in his weekly program, *al-Sharia wal Hayat* [The Sharia and Life]. Al-Qaradawi’s appearance on *Al Jazeera* even gained a significant position as a barometer for tension or rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Qatar agreed to expel seven members of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and removed al-Qaradawi’s platforms on Qatar TV and *Al Jazeera* Arabic, and as a consequence ‘the 2014 crisis appeared resolved, and indeed GCC

relations improved considerably over the course of 2015.⁴⁵

Conclusion

The analysis above demonstrates the importance of (geo)politically charged Islamism as the main source of vitriolic differences between Saudi Arabia and Qatar. While Riyadh and Doha differ about the nature of threats they face, it also shows the opportunities they can accrue as part of these understandings. For example, Saudi Arabia framed the Muslim Brotherhood as a challenge to its sovereignty on the grounds of the group's political activism contesting the quietist Wahhabi ideology and its principles of full obedience to political leadership.⁴⁶ In contrast, Qatar bolsters its legitimacy and authority by its closer relationship with the Brotherhood which has helped the Qataris evade Saudi Arabia's interference into its domestic affairs, and also gain leverage to affect the regional order in the Gulf. The Muslim Brotherhood thus stands as a grounded theological and intellectual 'space' allowing both countries to practice their struggles and interactions with each other, and also offers a 'sphere of possibility' to construct their different meanings of entities such as territory, authority, and control.

Elements such as the Brotherhood complicate a solution to the crisis by conflating both external and domestic levels of threats. Saudi rulers see the Brotherhood as a threat to their domestic authority within the territory

of the kingdom given its ideological and physical influence already established over the decades. At the same time, they see Qatar as an external ally of this domestic enemy allegedly seeing to play into its domestic politics through the Brotherhood's 'bottom-up' politically activated version of Islam. It is hard to imagine how Saudi Arabia and Qatar can thus act in concert within this double sense of threat from both a group and a state.

The same applies to Qatar. Adopting the same brand of Wahhabism, Qatari leaders feel their domestic authority is based on neutralizing or weakening any potential collusion between Wahhabis inside and Wahhabis outside in a country where one of the biggest mosques is named after 'Mohamed Ibn Abdel-Wahab.' The separation is deemed necessary as Saudi Arabia also uses its Wahhabism as part of its expansionist policies and desires of hegemony over the regional order.

In order to resolve the crisis, the two states, and their allies, need to engage in a dialogue to (re)align their understandings of (geo)politically charged Islamism as a challenge to regime legitimacy and authority. The contrasting position of the Brotherhood in Saudi and Qatar means that a solution reverberates across borders. At the same time, the fact that these understandings are linked to competing visions on regional order and the role of ideologies such as political Islam also provide reasons to consider solutions at a broader level of discussion, including other countries outside the

Gulf region such as Egypt. Without compromising or mediating understandings, disputes can emerge again, not to be addressed by false platitudes such as 'unity among brothers.' Perhaps one of the key steps to be taken is to talk to each other. Whilst simplistic, dialogue offers an effective tool to build trust, particularly as disagreement and fear have begun to occupy prominent roles in relations between Riyadh and Doha. Rapprochement in January 2021 highlights the symbolic power of such a step, achieved through direct meetings between Saudi and Qatari leaders. Furthermore, the two states can also find a solution to the Brotherhood faultline by re-situating the disagreement along lines of convergence serving their mutual interests, acknowledging differences within the context of broader shared concerns, namely crises in Syria and Yemen or the common goal of regional stability in the Gulf. ■

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