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# Lessons and Legacies of the Blockade of Qatar

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**ABSTRACT** *The diplomatic and economic blockade of Qatar launched on June 5, 2017 has gravely weakened the Gulf Cooperation Council and raised questions in the United States about the reliability of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates as reliable political and security partners. This has important implications for socio-political stability and regional security in the Gulf against a backdrop of a generational transition of leadership and a far more assertive and unpredictable thrust of policymaking coming out of regional capitals.*

**N**ow into its ninth month, the diplomatic and economic blockade of Qatar launched on June 5, 2017 has gravely weakened the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and raised questions in the United States about the reliability of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as reliable political and security partners. In addition, the ongoing crisis has brought to a head long-simmering tension within the Gulf region that predates the Arab Spring, but which acquired a potent new force after 2011. The result has been a widening of the cracks in the regional political and security architecture as policy responses in the three protagonists' capitals –Doha,

Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi– have diverged sharply. This has important implications for socio-political stability and regional security in the Gulf against a backdrop of a generational transition of leadership and a far more assertive and unpredictable thrust of policymaking coming out of regional capitals.

The crisis with Qatar began in stages in May and June 2017. On May 23, the *Qatar News Agency* was hacked and a 'fake news' story that attributed inflammatory quotes supposedly made by Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani was placed on the site and immediately picked up by media in Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Over

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## The rising crescendo of anger in neighboring capitals mirrored an earlier iteration of the Gulf spat in 2014 when Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain withdrew their ambassadors from Doha in March and accused Qatar of being a threat to regional security and stability

the following twelve days, the Emir's 'remarks' –which U.S. investigators agreed were fabricated– became the basis for a media onslaught by outlets in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi that portrayed Qatar as a destabilizing regional actor and accused Doha of supporting terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and Hamas. Given the strict control of media in both Saudi Arabia and the UAE it was inconceivable that such an outpouring of anti-Qatar rhetoric could have happened without some form of state sanction at the highest levels, and in July 2017 *The Washington Post* reported that U.S. investigators suspected that the hack of the *Qatar News Agency* had, in fact, been orchestrated by the UAE with the use of Russia-based hackers.

The rising crescendo of anger in neighboring capitals mirrored an earlier iteration of the Gulf spat in 2014 when Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain withdrew their ambassadors from Doha in March and accused

Qatar of being a threat to regional security and stability. The 2014 dispute lasted for eight months and was resolved by an agreement signed in Riyadh in November (known as the 'Riyadh Agreement') that paved the way for the return of the three ambassadors, shortly before the GCC annual summit that took place in Doha (of all places) in December. Qatar made concessions during the eight-month dispute that acknowledged that at least some of the claims made against Doha had some substance. These included the expulsion of several Emirati dissidents who had settled in Qatar after they fled a security crackdown on Islamists in the UAE in 2012, as well as the relocation of seven senior members of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood who likewise had moved to Doha to escape persecution at home.

On June 5, 2017, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain again withdrew their ambassadors from Doha and were joined this time by Egypt and, at least initially, by the internationally-recognized Yemeni government in exile in Riyadh led by ousted President Abd Rabbo Mansur Hadi. On this occasion, however, Qatar's detractors (who soon labeled themselves the 'Anti-Terror Quartet') went much further than in 2014 and added an economic and trade blockade to the diplomatic embargo of Qatar. The 'Quartet' closed their airspace to Qatar and shut Qatar's only land border with Saudi Arabia to try and stifle the Qatari economy and force Doha to the negotiating table. In addition, the 'Quartet' gave their citizens two weeks

to leave Qatar, and forced Qatari residents within their borders to depart, in an act that tore at the cross-border family and tribal ties that are such a prominent feature of the social fabric in the Gulf.

U.S. President Donald Trump joined the fray on June 6, 2017, when he unexpectedly sent a series of tweets that expressed his full support for the move against Qatar and sought to take credit for the blockade by tying it to conversations he had apparently had with Saudi and Emirati leaders at the Arab-Islamic-American summit in Riyadh on May 21-22, 2017 –just a day before the hack of the *Qatar News Agency*. President Trump’s comments blindsided U.S. officials at the Department of State and the Department of Defense as they had not been cleared beforehand, and reportedly angered then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Secretary of Defense James Mattis, who were both visiting Sydney and scrambled to contain the fallout from the sudden ‘ditching’ of one of the closest U.S. political and security partners in the region and host to the forward headquarters of U.S. Central Command, the ‘nerve center’ for the projection of American military power in the region. In Qatar, the President’s tweets were seen to give a ‘green light’ for whatever follow-up –including military action– the ‘Quartet’ may have been planning, and Qatar went on a state of high alert and defense readiness in response.

Nearly three weeks after the start of the blockade, the ‘Quartet’ issued

a list of thirteen demands on Qatar and gave Doha ten days to meet them. These included demands to downgrade Qatar’s diplomatic ties with Iran and close the Turkish military base in Qatar and halt military cooperation with Turkey, sever all ‘ties’ with terrorist organizations and hand over wanted ‘fugitives’ to the ‘Quartet,’ shut *Al Jazeera* and other news organizations funded by Qatar, pay compensation and reparations ‘for loss of life and other financial losses caused by Qatar’s policies over the years, and align Qatari policies with those of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf and Arab states. Some of the demands were so sweeping that they would effectively have turned Qatar into a vassal state stripped of any meaningful sovereignty by intrusive and lengthy monitoring mechanisms to ensure compliance. The list was widely derided as a document to force capitulation –on the lines of the 1914 ultimatum sent by Austria-Hungary to Serbia in the run-up to the outbreak of World War One– rather than the basis for negotiation and dialogue between Qatar and its detractors.

Qatar did not respond to the list of demands and the ten-day deadline came and went without further sanction. Although the ‘Quartet’ may have hoped that President Trump’s June 6 tweet signaled a turning-point in U.S. policy toward the blockade – and had in fact spent months wooing the White House and the President’s influential son-in-law and chief advisor, Jared Kushner– they miscalculated the degree to which the in-



Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan, Adel Jubeir, Sameh Shoukry, and Khalid bin Ahmed al-Khalifa, Foreign Ministers of the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Bahrain respectively, gather to discuss the Qatar crisis in Egypt on July 5, 2017.  
Stringer / AA Photo

stitutions at the heart of American government would push back against the President. Officials in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi appear to have believed that once the President had taken a decision the rest of the U.S. government would do the same without any institutional resistance. Having determined that the decidedly apolitical Trump Administration was more akin to a Gulf-style Royal Court than ever before (and probably ever after), Saudi and Emirati leaders latched on to the personalized nature of policymaking in the new White House that seemed—at least in its chaotic early months—at odds with the institutional mechanics of traditional governance. However, they underestimated the institutional resilience of U.S. policymaking, which, in this case, was augmented by the presence in office of Secretaries of State and

Defense with first-hand experience of the value of the Qatari partnership to the U.S.

Hitherto-unprecedented gaps developed in the U.S. approach to the Qatar standoff as President Trump's unconventional policy style clashed openly with the traditional instruments of American policymaking in ways that complicated and undermined attempts to resolve the crisis. Over the summer of 2017, then Secretary Tillerson was blindsided on several occasions by comments made by President Trump that undercut his attempts to calm the situation and find the parameters of a mediated solution. In the absence of U.S. willingness, at least at the outset, to urge the 'Quartet' to the negotiating table, Kuwait took the early lead in seeking to dial down tension and pre-

vent the crisis from spiraling out of control. The Emir of Kuwait, Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah, at 88 not only the elder statesman of the Gulf but also a former Foreign Minister of forty years' standing, engaged in a frenetic round of shuttle diplomacy in the first week of the standoff in June. Although his diplomatic overtures did not resolve the standoff, Emir Sabah may have played a pivotal role in ensuring that the initial blockade of Qatar was not followed by military action; at a White House press conference alongside President Trump in September 2017, Emir Sabah indicated that military action had in fact been forestalled and implied that it had been on the table at one point.

Along with Kuwait, Turkish policy responses to the crisis were important in preventing any significant escalation. The decision of the Turkish parliament on June 7 –one day after President Trump's inflammatory tweets in support of the 'Quartet'– to ratify an agreement that permitted the deployment of Turkish troops in Qatar and approve another accord on military training cooperation was especially significant as it raised the cost of any military move on Qatar considerably, that the 'Quartet' may have planned, not least because it demonstrated that Qatar was neither isolated nor without allies that would come to its support if needed. It is notable that many in Qatar feel that it was Turkey, far more than the United States, which visibly came to Qatar's assistance during what could have developed into an existential threat to state sovereignty. For a country and

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a people that had invested heavily in building a longstanding partnership with the United States, President Trump's actions in June 2017 caused considerable shock and highlighted the need to diversify political and security relationships to not be overly reliant on any one partnership.

The combination of Turkish action and Kuwaiti shuttle diplomacy ensured that the initial blockade of Qatar was not followed by further direct action. U.S. officials have suggested that there were concerns that military action was on the table in the immediate aftermath of June 5 and that these reports were deemed credible enough to warrant a warning to the Saudi and Emirati leadership not to escalate the issue. Qatar also responded to President Trump's sudden withdrawal of support by redoubling their outreach to other parts of the U.S. government and becoming the first Gulf State to sign a Memorandum of Understanding with the U.S. on terror financing

## Visceral state-led campaigns in the 'Quartet' media have inflicted great damage while in Doha a grassroots sense of nationalism and national identity has surged

in July. Qatari officials additionally increased their public diplomacy efforts in Washington, D.C. and other key capitals in Europe and Asia to counter the intense lobbying of the 'Quartet' states and PR surrogates in favor of harsh measures to keep up the pressure on Doha. By August, it was becoming clear that the crisis was settling into a holding pattern and that indirect tactics were replacing direct action as the pressure tool of choice in the 'Quartet' capitals.

It is the decision to shift to indirect tactics that will inflict the greatest damage on the social fabric of Gulf societies that may take years, if not decades, to overcome. The 'Quartet' meddling in Qatari tribal and ruling family affairs crossed a very significant red line in regional politics and could yet come back to bite the ruling families that countenanced the move, which themselves are vulnerable to familial contestation. First in August and then in September 2017, Saudi and Emirati media sought to portray 'dissident' members of Qatar's ruling family as 'rightful' claimants to power to deny the legitimacy not only of Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani

but of his father and grandfather as well. First Sheikh Abdullah bin Ali al-Thani and then Sheikh Sultan bin Suhaim al-Thani were put forward by the 'Quartet' as key figures whose positions of influence in contemporary Qatar were unfairly denied by historical events that brought Emir Tamim's grandfather, Emir Khalifa bin Hamad al-Thani, to power in 1972 and ensured that succession would pass to Emir Tamim's father, Emir Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, rather than to any of his brothers.

Sheikh Abdullah bin Ali al-Thani was a much-younger half-brother of Sheikh Ahmed bin Ali al-Thani, ruler of Qatar from 1960 until he was deposed by Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad in 1972 (whereupon power in Qatar passed to its present line of Emirs Khalifa-Hamad-Tamim). As the half-brother, son, and grandson of former rulers of Qatar, Sheikh Abdullah had credentials for seniority, but the attempt to portray him as the claimant of a ruling line ousted unfairly in 1972 lacked credibility, not least because Sheikh Abdullah had several surviving older half-brothers who theoretically would have more of a claim to resurrect the line of power. Observers noted instead that the 'selection' of Sheikh Abdullah appeared to rest more on his longtime residency in Saudi Arabia, amid reports that he may have been threatened with a seizure of his assets if he did not cooperate and play along with Saudi attempts to build him into a Qatari notable they could negotiate with (rather than anyone from the Qatari government). Indeed, Sheikh Abdul-

lah suggested that he had faced intolerable pressure that had wanted him to take his own life, in a video ‘confession’ he made, reportedly from the UAE, in January 2018. After claims that he was not free to leave the UAE caused an outcry, Sheikh Abdullah departed first for Kuwait and, after a stay in the hospital, to London.

The case of Sheikh Sultan bin Suhaim differed from that of Sheikh Abdullah bin Ali in that it was far more construed as a direct challenge to the legitimacy of Qatar’s ruling line of Emirs. Whereas Sheikh Abdullah had been pitched as an al-Thani the Saudis could negotiate with on behalf of Qatar, Sheikh Sultan tried to rally and mobilize support for his alternate ‘candidacy’ among sections of tribes in eastern Saudi Arabia that also contained family branches across the border in Qatar. At one meeting of hundreds of members of the cross-border Qahtan tribe, Sheikh Sultan went as far to say that the Qatari leadership needed to be ‘purged’ and ‘cleansed.’ Once again, analysts identified a historical backdrop to Sheikh Sultan’s appearance at this stage of the crisis, as his father, Sheikh Suhaim bin Hamad al-Thani, was a younger brother of Emir Khalifa who served as Qatar’s foreign minister in the 1970s and aspired to be named the Heir, however, was aggrieved when Emir Khalifa appointed his son, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani (the father of current Emir Tamim) as his successor instead, in 1977. The resulting grudge caused a rift in Sheikh Suhaim’s line that led to an unexplained shooting incident involving several of his

sons (Sheikh Sultan’s brothers and half-brothers) after Sheikh Suhaim’s early death in 1985. Qatari observers noted also that Sheikh Sultan bin Suhaim’s mother was Emirati and that he, like Sheikh Abdullah bin Ali, had been a longtime resident of one of the ‘Quartet’ states prior to his ‘elevation’ as a pretender to power.

Away from the attempted meddling in ruling family dynamics –which the sprawling al-Saud and al-Nahyan families in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi surely do not want to set a precedent for– the Qatar crisis has also inflicted great damage on the social ties that bind the peoples and societies of the Gulf closely together. Tribal connections and patterns of intermarriage have for decades and centuries born no regard for the political boundaries that were imposed in the twentieth century and many Qataris have close family members in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE and vice-versa. Links between Qatar and Dubai were especially close with the two emirates having shared a common currency (the Qatar and Dubai Riyal) in the 1960s as well as a dynastic intermarriage at the highest level of the al-Thani and al-Maktoum families. While family visitations were not explicitly disallowed, and some travel was permitted (via third countries such as Kuwait and Oman), the human blockade of Qatar by the ‘Quartet’ states tightened progressively as time went on and stories of families facing harassment and surveillance over contacts with Qatari members had a further chilling effect on interpersonal relations.

**With decision-making authority in the hands of a young new generation of rulers more willing to take risks and shed the consensual approach of their predecessors, it is hard to see the GCC papering over the cracks any time soon**

Intangible ties of trust and confidence are the ones that are the hardest to recreate and likely will reverberate for a long time to come. Visceral state-led campaigns in the ‘Quartet’ media have inflicted great damage while in Doha a grassroots sense of nationalism and national identity has surged. Revealingly, in light of the above-mentioned ‘Quartet’ efforts to split the ruling al-Thani family and divide them from Qatari society, the new-found nationalism has been fused around Emir Tamim, with stylized images of ‘Tamim al-Majd’ (‘Tamim the Glorious’) appearing everywhere in Qatar. Students of nationalism will analyze the Qatari example as a case-study in years to come as the phenomenon appears to be genuinely a bottom-up phenomenon that incidentally has also unified a ruling family that was, for decades in the twentieth century, historically one of the most fractured in the region. Also significant is that narratives in Qatar increasingly embrace foreign residents as well as Qataris in a ‘we are all in it together’ mentality that is

beginning to break down the barriers between citizens and expatriates that hitherto were largely impenetrable in Gulf societies.

A tangible outcome of the Gulf crisis (in addition to the intangible outcomes described above) is therefore, that Qatari measures to respond to the blockade will magnify the policy divergence from what accounts for GCC ‘norms.’ Freed from the need to pay lip service to GCC-wide constraints on matters such as citizen-expatriate relations or the treatment of foreign laborers, officials in Qatar have started to draft policies that break new ground in the Gulf by offering pathways to permanent residence for (selected) expatriates and greater cooperation and coordination with international bodies such as the International Trade Union Confederation –as well as with international human rights organizations. Economically, too, Qatar has reacted to the blockade by rerouting its trade links, creating stronger connections with Turkey, Iran, and Oman, and accelerating efforts to diversify the economy and become more self-sufficient in the production of certain foodstuffs and industrial raw materials.

As of January 2018, the standoff over Qatar looks set to continue into the indefinite future. President Trump has performed a U-turn and replaced his initial support for the blockade of Qatar with a call for dialogue and an end to the crisis. This reflects growing anxiety across the U.S. government that the blockade of Qatar is damaging core U.S. interests in the Middle



Soon after the blockade against Qatar, Turkish and Qatari naval forces conducted a joint military exercise.

MOHAMMED FARAG / AA Photo

East and undermining the Trump Administration's attempt to rally the Sunni Arab world against Iran. The White House readout of a telephone conversation between President Trump and Emir Tamim on January 15, 2018 during which the president praised Qatar's support in countering terrorism was a 180-degree flip from the presidential tweets on the second day of the crisis in June 2017. The conversation signaled to the 'Quartet' capitals that any lingering hopes they had of co-opting President Trump's support for their move on Qatar were dead. It remains to be seen whether and how the Trump Administration may pressure the 'Quartet' to come to the negotiating table, perhaps by scheduling a meeting of Gulf leaders at Camp David. The example of the GCC summit in Kuwait in December 2017, which ended in disarray and acrimony on the first morning of

the planned two-day affair, illustrated the need for an international partner to serve as mediator and umpire to avoid a tit-for-tat fallout should talks fail.

External observers will fear that the GCC is broken both as a practical unit and an aspirational reality. Just as the intangible impact of the anti-Qatar rhetoric will reverberate across the social and political landscape for years to come, the tangible effects of the crisis will be felt in the marginalization of the GCC as a fully-functioning entity. With decision-making authority in the hands of a young new generation of rulers more willing to take risks and shed the consensual approach of their predecessors, it is hard to see the GCC papering over the cracks any time soon. For international stakeholders with political, economic, and security interests

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on both sides of the divide, there is mounting concern that the standoff has gone on for too long and represents an unnecessary distraction from more urgent considerations. These include defeating the residual threat from Islamic State forces in Iraq and Syria, finding a diplomatic solution to the Syrian catastrophe, and preventing a total state collapse in Yemen and Libya.

The prospect of a generational rift in a hitherto rock-solid web of political and security partnerships in the Gulf is deeply concerning to U.S. and European policymakers. Moreover, the apparent inability of any of the parties to back down means they might continue to support informal policies that veer dangerously close to meddling in domestic political and ruling family affairs. Aside from creating bad blood that will take years to overcome, any such moves risk providing

openings for new entrants to insert themselves into regional security dialogues in ways that may increase tensions further and reinforce the divergent trajectories that have led us to this point. Scholars and practitioners alike will need to examine how the rise of nationalist sentiment in individual Gulf States can coexist with the notion of *khaleeji* identity to ensure that the notion of belonging to a collective entity is seen to be worth retaining even as incipient Gulf nationalisms come to the forefront as never before.

The Gulf crisis has dominated Middle East policy during President Trump's first year in office. The trajectory of the crisis highlighted how the policy inexperience of the new White House and their perceived susceptibility to influence triggered a Saudi and Emirati attempt to shape and guide policy in a direction that served their interests but not necessarily those of the United States. Lessons will undoubtedly be absorbed from the standoff regardless of how it ends and especially as the Saudi and Emirati approach to the blockade of Qatar has parallels in their conduct of the war in Yemen, as there does not appear to have been a strong Plan B to fall back on when the 'shock and awe' of Plan A failed to generate a decisive outcome. Above all, the blockade of Qatar has also underscored the need for small states worldwide to diversify their political, economic, defense, and security partnerships as even bilateral relationships thought rock-solid could suddenly become vulnerable to a change of leadership or priority. ■