

President Trump Failed his Gulf Test

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President Donald Trump's lack of discipline, knowledge, and experience and his ill-advised declarations and tweets appear to have convinced some in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)—erroneously—that the United States has indeed sided in the entente with one faction over another. Despite his half-hearted corrective move to invite GCC leaders to a reconciliation conference in the White House and the neutral statements by the Departments of State and Defense, he continued to insinuate that Qatar is culpable for supporting terrorism. Indeed, a report citing administration officials explained that the ongoing GCC crisis has in fact begun after President Trump demanded that Arab allies, especially Qatar, “end their support for Islamic [sic] extremism.”

President Trump seems to have waded into a dispute that undoubtedly will have an enduring impact on intra-GCC relations and the broader US-GCC relationship. It would not be an exaggeration to state that the negative impact he has wrought on the crisis is likely to remain a sore reminder of an irrational approach to foreign policy, one that is also apparent in other areas of the American strategic landscape. While different in circumstances and participants, the president's dealing with the GCC crisis conjures images of his disastrous visit last month to NATO headquarters and the G-7 meeting. While in Europe, he refused to commit to Article 5 of the NATO charter about common defense and announced his unilateral withdrawal from the landmark Paris Climate Accord.

As the Arabian Gulf reels from uncertainty and from Riyadh's and Abu Dhabi's inability to retreat from accusing Qatar of myriad sins and misdemeanors, cooler heads, firmer hands, and more experienced officials at the Defense and State Departments have stepped in to fill the breach the president helped open. At present, what is required from the United States is nothing short of a full-fledged commitment by the White House to cease adding fuel to the GCC fire and to emphasize the importance of GCC unity for the future of the Gulf and of the American relationship with all its peoples and leaders. American friendship with and commitment to the GCC has always been and should remain to the collective body of the GCC and not to one or some of its constituent parts.

Discord Between the President and His Men

Instead of coming out with a unified position representing the American government as a whole regarding the unfortunate, and unneeded, developments between members of the GCC, President Trump threw all caution to the wind and tweeted a number of statements castigating Qatar for purportedly supporting extremism. Qatar was funding extremist ideology, he asserted, and those present at the Islamic summit in Riyadh supposedly attested to that. He even took credit for the blockade that Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates imposed on the Qatari peninsula.

This came after he said—following a meeting with Qatar's ruler Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani—that the United States and Qatar have

been “friends for a long time” and that Qatar discussed the possibility of purchasing “lots of beautiful military equipment.” When it became apparent that he had caused serious damage, he invited Sheikh Tamim to the White House, only to be soundly rebuffed since the emir has been busy dealing with the imposed blockade on his country.

The president’s clueless and dangerous behavior was the opposite of that exhibited by more seasoned and knowledgeable officials in the Departments of Defense and State. Defense praised Qatar’s “enduring commitment to regional security,” according to spokesman Jeff Davis, who also expressed appreciation for Qatar’s hosting “our very important base at al-Udeid.” While less effusive, the new spokeswoman for the Department of State, Heather Nauert, spoke of Qatar’s continuing “efforts to stop financing of terror groups, including prosecuting suspected financiers, freezing assets, [and] introducing stringent controls on its banking system.”

In his capacity as the United States’ chief diplomat, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson sounded a conciliatory tone urging Gulf states to work on bridging their differences. His long career in the energy sector undoubtedly showed him the folly of jeopardizing relations with the world’s premier natural gas exporter. Moreover, as her country’s representative in Doha, Ambassador Dana Shell Smith decided to resign from her position, ostensibly to retire. She had previously expressed reservations about political developments in Washington,

and her dissatisfaction with the president’s statements may have given her more reason to leave the foreign service.

As the representatives of long-standing practical relations with the GCC, and as the institutional repositories of such, it is arguably the case that Defense and State are the best equipped to speak for the American position on the current row in the Gulf. It thus was a positive development that Secretary of Defense James Mattis finally signed the deal with Qatari Minister of State for Defense Affairs Khalid Al Attiya, to supply Qatar with 72 F-15 fighter jets, valued at \$12 billion. While signing the deal points to the strategic importance Secretary Mattis gives to Qatar, the economic side of the affair cannot be ignored—specifically that related to employing Americans, an essential priority for the president himself. Incidentally, two American Navy vessels docked in Doha on the same day for joint maritime maneuvers with the Qatari Navy.

It is also arguably true that the president personally may have burned his bridges with Qatar, notwithstanding the many excuses he may have listed for showing a tough hand. Just as European leaders, most especially German Chancellor Angela Merkel, showed disappointment and dismay in how President Trump dealt with their affairs, it is not likely that Qatar’s leaders— after this snub from a supposedly friendly American president— will put all their eggs in his basket. It would indeed be better for them to keep their functional relationship going with the institutions that

matter, despite Trump's ability as the constitutional president to subvert what is and remains an essential relationship in the Arabian Gulf.

Impact on the American Military Posture in and around the Gulf

The Arabian Gulf has been an important node in US military planning since at least the 1970s. Washington has built enduring military and security relationships with every country of the GCC, supplied hundreds of billions of dollars in military equipment and training to all of them, and integrated them in a strategic network encompassing Asia, Africa, and Europe. The Gulf is also home to tens of thousands of American soldiers stationed up and down its western coast and a base for a varied array of air, land, sea, logistical, and cyber equipment and operations. In fact, it would be difficult to differentiate between the levels of importance of such assets as al-Udeid Air Base in Qatar, Camp Arifjan in Kuwait, the 5th Fleet naval base in Bahrain, Dhafra Air Base in Abu Dhabi, UAE, Thumrait Air Base in Oman, or the secret Saudi Arabian bases for American drones fighting al-Qaeda in Yemen.

These bases and others in the region cannot be seen as separate military installations serving American objectives throughout the theater extending from the Middle East to Central and South Asia to Africa, but as integrated nodes of a strategic picture and posture. Naval vessels docking at the Jebel Ali port of call in Dubai, UAE, serve other areas of the Gulf but also go

on patrol for months in the Gulf of Oman, the Arabian Sea, and the vast Indian Ocean in the service of the American global peacekeeping mission on the high seas. But while doing so, they also rely on the existence of other bases along the coast of the Arabian Peninsula as a continuous and interdependent network. Severing the functions of these bases is impossible from a military standpoint and is folly to attempt if the United States wants to continue to both defend its national interests and assure international peace and stability.

Thus, disagreements between GCC states arising out of rivalries, different interpretations of interests, or baseless accusations and recriminations will only impede the execution of the American mission in the Middle East and around the world. It is true that the Trump Administration is struggling to identify how it goes about devising its international strategy – and may therefore not know how to deal effectively with a challenge such as the one presented by the GCC dispute. But it is also true that no one in the American foreign policy structure fathoms ending America's global leadership, President Trump's demagogic "America First" slogan notwithstanding. It follows that it is in the American national interest that the GCC remain a unified body of strong states, that the United States continue to strengthen the entente, and that Washington play a pivotal role in reconciling the differences among its Gulf allies.

Presently, the American military posture in the Middle East is concentrated around the

objective of defeating the so-called Islamic State (IS) in both Iraq and Syria as well as al-Qaeda. Such a battle cannot be achieved without the integrated network of bases in the Gulf where air, sea, and land assets are deployed. Neither can this mission be accomplished if, for instance, the al-Udeid Air Base is moved from Qatar. This is so for the simple reason that dismantling the base and building another elsewhere—UAE Ambassador to Washington Yousef Al Otaiba wants it in his country—will take years and disrupt current operations. Al-Udeid and all other bases also serve as essential rear stations for redeployment, rearmament, supplies, and/or operations.

Moreover, this posture is not separate from the integrated relations that American military thinking and operations has with individual GCC military institutions. Indeed, the United States for over four decades has invested in the organization, training, and arming of the GCC states, in the process creating enduring operational capabilities that have helped some Gulf militaries perform outside of their geographical theater. Examples include Qatar's deployment of troops on the Eritrea-Djibouti border (which was ended recently), the UAE's military role in Afghanistan and elsewhere, and Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen against the Houthi-Saleh alliance to restore legitimate authority in Sanaa. Incidentally, all GCC militaries provide assistance, assets, and personnel to anti-piracy operations from the Bab al-Mandab waterway near Yemen to the Indian Ocean and the expanse of waters in between.

Finally, an essential part of the United States' strategic posture in the Gulf, one that President Trump is keen to preserve, is the stance the administration has so far declared vis-à-vis the Islamic Republic of Iran. From a political perspective and a military standpoint, the United States would be well served for the GCC to appear united, although not necessarily unified. It can be united in its position on rejecting a nuclear-armed Iran, for instance, or on devising ways to limit Tehran's overreach into Arab countries. But it may not be fully unified in requiring every member to carry the mantle of aggressively challenging the mullahs of Tehran, in the process endangering peace and stability in the Gulf. To that end, it indeed was strange for Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates to criticize Qatar for purportedly colluding with Iran while the Sultanate of Oman has for decades had rather cordial relations with the Islamic Republic—not to mention Dubai, which is part of the UAE.

The Required American Role

For these and many other reasons, the Trump Administration would do well to hasten to formulate a unified position that both clarifies where the United States stands on a dispute among what were considered to be very close allies and prevents other would-be interlocutors from exploiting America's absence. Nary a few hours passed after President Trump's tweets castigating Qatar, following the Bahraini-Saudi Arabian-Emirati severance of relations with Doha, that Russian President Vladimir Putin called the Qatari ruler offering diplomatic

mediation. While not taking sides in the dispute but clearly favoring Qatar, Turkey hopes to play a mediatory role as well. Its parliament, however, was quick to pass legislation authorizing the deployment of troops to Qatar, ostensibly as a signal that it will not allow any military action against its Qatari ally. Even French President Emmanuel Macron wants to get in on the action. Other world leaders have also counseled restraint and called for a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

But the required American intervention would be effective and efficient if it combined the following factors. First, it is essential that President Trump refrain from again taking sides in the ongoing dispute. Whatever qualms he might have about Qatar's behavior should be

addressed in private and at the highest level between the American and Qatari leaderships.

Second, the president would also do well to study up on intra-GCC relations, where he would learn two simultaneous lessons: that elite differences in the Gulf are not new, and that the United States has always been a repository of institutional power to help Gulf allies straighten out conflicts they may have between them.

It is also hoped that the Trump White House would entrust the bulk of its relationship with the Gulf states to the departments of Defense and State, which have the institutional longevity, depth, and knowledge necessary for understanding and mediating GCC disputes. This helps GCC unity, protects American interests in the Gulf, and preserves US-GCC relations.

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