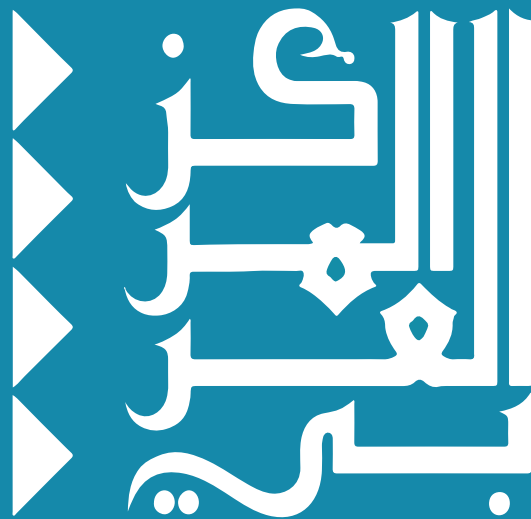


Why Qatar? Explaining Contentious Issues

Imad K. Harb

June 6, 2017



Arab Center Washington DC
المركز العربي واشنطن دي سي

Three of the countries comprising the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)—Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates— have just severed diplomatic relations with the State of Qatar, a partner in the council. Such a drastic measure followed tense relations over the last couple of weeks that took the form of a media campaign mostly fought against Doha after the fabrication of statements attributed to its ruler, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, in which he purportedly affirmed “unacceptable” positions regarding Iran, Palestinian Hamas, Lebanese Hezbollah, terrorism and responsibility for it, and Qatari-American relations.

The disinformation campaign and the latest severance of diplomatic relations are serious developments in the life of the council and represent indications of deeper troubles within the entente. More importantly, these developments threaten the Gulf countries’ unity at a time of great turmoil and uncertainty in the Middle East and increased Iranian influence and activism in the region. Indeed, the best option at this time is for all members of the GCC to step back from causing further damage to their alliance, evaluate what binds them politically, economically, socially, and culturally, and pursue negotiations and compromises that help them face their common challenges.

Major Contentious Issues

Over the last two decades, Qatar has steered a somewhat independent course in foreign policy

from other members of the council. This is not different from the Sultanate of Oman’s autonomous approach to regional politics, but Qatar’s has different circumstances. Still, any deviations from accepted GCC policies have unfortunately caused some tension between it and other members, specifically the three that took the latest drastic action.

The Muslim Brotherhood

The first issue that has strained relations between Qatar and Saudi Arabia and the UAE is one linked to its relations with the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and to its hosting of some of the organization’s figures in Doha for decades. Their presence in the country, however, should not be strange to other GCC states. In the 1950s and 1960s, Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf sheikdoms hosted thousands of MB members escaping persecution, mainly by the nationalist regime of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser but also by the other secular regimes in Syria and Iraq. While there, these exiled MB supporters were instrumental in establishing the Gulf states’ educational systems and influenced their social development. Today, while Saudi Arabia and the UAE have designated the MB as a terrorist organization, Kuwait and Bahrain still allow their Brotherhood branches to operate legally, raise funds, and participate in the political process. Indeed, about half of Kuwait’s 24 opposition members of parliament are either Islamists or Salafists, and these parties have three representatives in Bahrain’s lower house. This context makes criticism of Qatar illogical and

suggests that there are other reasons that prompted the severing of relations.

Most important among these reasons is the fact that the best organized and influential group to exploit the changes brought about by the “Arab Spring” was the Muslim Brotherhood. In Egypt, arguably the most consequential Arab state where the developments of 2011 succeeded in changing the regime and toppling President Hosni Mubarak, only the MB was able to organize itself and succeed in assuming power, on both the parliamentary and presidential levels. Qatar perceived this outcome as a democratic translation of the will of the Egyptian people. At the same time, President Mohamed Morsi’s ascent to power was worrisome to other Gulf rulers and political elites who were not quite convinced that they could deal with the new Egypt and feared that the organization could steer Arab politics in a direction anathema to Gulf interests.

That anti-Qatar Gulf states could not cope with the idea of a governing Muslim Brotherhood cannot be helped, given political and elite preferences. But it could be argued that the critics should have been more circumspect in conflating the MB and the extremist Islamist organizations that arose since the 1970s. By not differentiating between the two, they reinforced the views of rightist and neoconservative politicians and commentators in the United States who remain consumed with fighting what they call “Islamic terrorism.” Indeed, one might be tempted to excuse the Americans involved in attacking Qatar since they really do

not understand the differences between Islam and Islamism and, in reality, confuse the two—as was apparent in President Donald Trump’s address to Muslim leaders in Saudi Arabia.

By the same token, it is hard to excuse GCC countries that criticize Qatar for its MB position because they should know better. The mainstream Muslim Brotherhood is the moderate heir of the original organization established by Hassan al-Banna in 1928. Although it has experienced many changes and had a number of leaders, it is historically not guilty of being responsible for spawning violent Islamist organizations whose ideological underpinning was the thinking and writings of Sayyid Qutb. Qutb was an Egyptian Islamist activist who opposed the nationalist secularism of the Nasser regime and, instead, preached the establishment of an Islamic state governed by the laws of Sharia. In the end, he was imprisoned and hanged by Egyptian security forces in 1966. Organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates, however, should not be blamed for creating al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State. Nonetheless, in the service of political ends, some GCC rulers, politicians, and publics at large link the two Islamic orientations and unfairly blame Qatar for “helping the extremists.”

Strategic Hedging

Since the 1990s, Qatar has followed the principle of “strategic hedging” in its foreign policy, seeking good relations with many countries in order to exercise an independence

not often possible for small states. In addition to being an active member of the GCC, it has befriended the United States and hosts al-Udeid Air Base; it has good relations with Turkey; it is not too harsh on Iran, although it criticizes the latter's overreach; and it has found a role for itself in Arab politics such as in Yemen, Libya, Syria, Sudan, and Tunisia. In Lebanon, Qatar brokered a political peace between Lebanese factions in 2008. Over the last two decades, it has generally sought to distribute its eggs among many baskets; otherwise, it fears it would be obliged to toe the line drawn by larger and more powerful members of the GCC like Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

In the present confluence of developments and events, Qatar is asked to stake an anti-Iranian claim that the country does not consider to be in its best interest. Its leadership sees that escalating the situation with Iran—which Qatar understands to be involved in many Arab affairs—will only exacerbate the sectarian divide in the Middle East and may result in unforeseen and unfortunate outcomes everyone will regret. It also understands that the revival of neoconservative circles in the United States, which are exploiting the disarray of the Trump Administration, may inevitably lead to a confrontation with Iran. For this reason, the Qatari leadership sees that it needs to assert its independence in its foreign policy—not specifically to oppose collective Gulf action but to avoid the malfeasance of American circles that have no qualms about plunging others in bloody morasses. It also goes without saying that Qatar, or any other state for that matter,

should not simply have to abide by the diktat of other states that may have different preferences and interests.

The Hamas Factor

It is hard to see how the presence of the leadership of the Palestinian Hamas organization represents a clear and present danger for the GCC. While it is not broadly loved by some Arab governments, Hamas is only seen as a terrorist organization by Egypt, which considers it part of the Muslim Brotherhood. Last month, Hamas dissociated itself from the MB and took an important step toward normalization with the general Arab and international position on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict when it modified its charter and accepted the establishment of a Palestinian state on the June 4, 1967 borders. In essence, it joined the Palestinian Authority in fully accepting the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002 that was, and remains, the position of the Arab League. That initiative was proposed by Saudi Arabia and has been affirmed by every Arab summit meeting since.

It is also hard to think that the problem with Hamas is one that should concern the GCC states to the magnitude shown by Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. One can understand their worry about Iranian-supported Hezbollah, which they already named a terrorist organization because of its activities in Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon, and their concern regarding Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah's attacks on the Gulf

countries as enemies of his “axis of resistance.” But Hamas has not shown any animosity toward the Gulf countries and, in fact, has distanced itself from any Iranian assistance after the Islamic Republic’s support for the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Asad. Further, aside from hosting the Hamas leadership after its exile from Damascus, Qatar does not help the organization militarily; on the contrary, it provides humanitarian assistance to the people of the Gaza Strip, where Hamas rules.

It is clear that bashing Hamas and Qatar serves the interests of opponents of both GCC collective action and Palestinians’ national right to an independent state. These are the actors who are currently orchestrating the American angle of the attacks on Qatar. It is folly to believe that critics of Qatar have the interests of Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE at heart. Only last year, they and many others were cheering when both houses of the American Congress voted to override President Barack Obama’s veto of the Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act (JASTA) that specifically targeted Saudi Arabia. A decade ago, American politicians and opinion shapers forced the cancellation of an agreement with Dubai Ports World (owned by the Emirate of Dubai in the UAE) to manage six major American ports because it supposedly compromised American security.

Moreover, while attacking Hamas is a safe tactic in the American capital and may gain traction considering the dominance of the pro-Israel lobby, those involved do not spare the

Palestinian Authority or its president, Mahmoud Abbas. The view in the United States is that the PA is not doing enough to “fight incitement against Israel” and Abbas is seen as an ineffectual leader who cannot deliver what Israel wants of order and stability in the Palestinian territories. Indeed, Hamas in this case is incidental to an ingrained orientation toward the Palestinian cause, no matter where the organization could find a safe place.

Conclusion

This confluence of many factors was an important foundation on which an attack on Qatar rested. The timing was opportune after President Trump visited Saudi Arabia and met with many leaders of the Muslim world. Some analysts have even suggested that the administration may have had something to do with the flare-up. President Trump’s own tweets on June 6, 2017, accused Qatar of having a role in “funding of Radical Ideology.” But the statements by the Defense Department and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and tweets by the American ambassador in Doha Dana Shell Smith extolling the relationship with Qatar point to a different conclusion. In addition, on June 7 CNN reported that “US investigators believe Russian hackers breached Qatar’s state news agency and planted a fake news report” that was the opening salvo in the current crisis.

The timing may serve to distract from the investigations into the Trump Administration’s relations with Russia prior to the election. On the American side, those involved in the attacks

on Qatar are Trump loyalists (such as the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, whose leadership belongs to the neoconservative camp) who are looking to create conditions to exacerbate tensions with Iran. Unfortunately, these individuals and organizations can always rely on the absence of conflict management and resolution mechanisms in the institutions of the GCC to try to sow the seeds of conflict among members of the alliance.

In the end, however, verbally assaulting Qatar and later severing diplomatic relations with this GCC member are no cure for any purported tensions with Doha. What should concern all members of the GCC today is working together not only to simply iron out differences but to provide an agenda for successful collective action at all levels and in all fields in the service of the security, progress, and prosperity of the people of the Arabian Gulf—and Arabs everywhere.

For more analysis visit arabcenterdc.org