

# Stupendous Hubris... and Its Damage

Imad K. Harb

July 18, 2017



Arab Center Washington DC  
المركز العربي واشنطن دي سي

The *Washington Post's* revelation that the United Arab Emirates was behind the hacking of the Qatar News Agency (QNA) to spread false quotes from Qatar's ruler Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani is nothing short of stunning. According to the story, American intelligence agencies became aware that members of the UAE government had indeed discussed the conspiracy and its implementation one day before it took place, although it is still "unclear whether the UAE carried out the hacks itself or contracted to have them done." Those attacks set in motion an apparently orchestrated chain of events in which Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Egypt became immediate and active participants, and have since developed into a strategic crisis for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) when the four countries severed their diplomatic relations with Doha and imposed a land, sea, and air blockade on the Qatari peninsula.

In a statement, UAE Ambassador to the United States Yousef al-Otaiba immediately denied any knowledge of his government of the hacks and instead repeated the by-now known accusations of Qatar's malfeasance. "What is true," his statement read, "is Qatar's behavior. Funding, supporting, and enabling extremists from the Taliban to Hamas and Qadafi. Inciting violence, encouraging radicalization, and undermining the stability of its neighbors." Other grievances from the beginning of the crisis included colluding with Iran, which the emir allegedly called an "Islamic power" towards which "there is no wisdom in harboring hostility." Demands from Doha in late June also included scaling

back military relations with Turkey and closing a Turkish base on Qatari soil.

What was damning in the *Post* report was that the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the Federal Bureau of Investigations refused to comment on the story; in other words, that it was not untrue. It should be known that the FBI was called in by Qatar when the first hacks occurred and the agency helped in findings Qatar has not yet revealed publicly, although Qatar's Attorney General Ali bin Ftais al-Marri revealed in June that "Qatar has evidence that certain iPhones originating from countries laying siege to Qatar were used in the hack."

### **Potential Dangerous Damages**

At different levels, this revelation stands the entire affair on a new footing, now that tangible information has been made public and confirms the Qatari government's original denials of the first fake statements on QNA and Qatari television. It also confirms different aspects of what was found in the leaked emails of Ambassador Otaiba in early June. But what is indeed stupendous about the revelation is the fact that the hacks were done as if they would never be discovered and without consideration of their detrimental impacts on the GCC states individually and collectively. What may at least partly justify this level of abandon is the conspirators' wrong assumption that the pressure on Qatar will quickly 'bring it around'

to seeing things differently and the whole affair would just end.

First, the UAE's involvement in the hacking--which does not deny the possibility of collusion from other anti-Qatar countries--puts the supposed shining example of modernity in the Gulf and its future role under unwanted and unwarranted scrutiny. In fact, the credibility of the UAE government is at risk since the influential Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Sheikh Mohammad bin Zayed Al Nahyan remains one of the leading figures in the anti-Qatar campaign. UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdallah bin Zayed Al Nahyan and Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash have also been at the heart of the anti-Qatar diplomatic campaign. The UAE (and Bahrain) even criminalized showing any sympathy to Qatar. It thus must be awkward for foreign dignitaries trying to help mediate the crisis (the latest of whom was French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian visiting Abu Dhabi) to read what was revealed in the *Post* story about the UAE's role in the crisis.

The UAE hopes to be amongst the region's and the world's movers and shakers in diplomacy, military affairs, and the environmental realm (it hosts the International Renewable Energy Agency, IRENA). It hosts American, French, and South Korean bases and plays an important role in international finance and investment. It has signed the Individual Partnership and Cooperation Program with NATO to be a "partner in projecting international security and stability." The list of hopes and ambitions includes much more. It is thus essential for the

UAE to maintain a reputation for transparent honesty and the hack did not help. It is one thing to try to influence the behavior of a neighboring state--indeed a fellow member of the GCC--but quite another to hack that state's official media organs to compromise its reputation, peace, and stability.

Second, now that the hacks have been revealed, it is obvious that Saudi Arabia will be accused of collusion. This may not be too far off the mark since within minutes of the publication of the fake statements by Qatar's Emir, Saudi Arabian television stations and individuals were summoned into action against Doha and its leadership. No Qatari denials were brooked or even considered. The Saudi Arabian government machinery also kicked into action and Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir--long a victim of virulent attacks himself while ambassador in Washington--led the diplomatic battle ostracizing Qatar and leading to severing diplomatic relations. With the UAE and Bahrain, Saudi Arabia expelled Qatari diplomats and citizens and even closed Qatar's only land border through which 40 percent of food stuffs and necessities cross, forcing Doha to rely on supplies from Oman, Turkey and Iran.

The damage to Saudi Arabia's reputation and standing in the Islamic world is likely to be worse than that to the Emirates. If the kingdom has colluded with the conspiracy, it is not likely to emerge unscathed. Neither will King Salman bin Abdel-Aziz be spared since the entire fiasco occurred under his watch. Crown Prince

Mohammad bin Salman, who has benefited from the crisis to shorten the distance between him and the throne, may be most vulnerable if accountability becomes an important factor within the Al Saud family or if the United States gets its act together. On the other hand, not colluding is not an exoneration of the Saudi Arabian leadership since Riyadh sees its alliance with the UAE against Doha as sacrosanct. What is required, thus, is a clear statement from King Salman and evidence that the kingdom had no role to play in the conspiracy and that he is ready to again sponsor a wise retreat from the edge of the abyss towards which the crisis has pushed the GCC.

Third, the UAE action may have been the final nail in the coffin of the GCC as an alliance of like-minded and interested states. In fact, a hack as described by the *Post* approaches being an act of war against a sovereign country to force it to alter its behavior and cause harm to its cohesion, people, and leadership. No alliance member interested in its own and its partners' wellbeing executes such an act in the service of collective interests. Before the breaking of the story, there might have been some hope that a foreign (non-GCC) power might have undertaken the hack. But now, the dye has been cast and the UAE (and potential others) will be accused in the court of Arab and world opinion of subverting the stability of a sister country and an alliance partner. The GCC will for a long time be hard put to return to the modicum of coordination and cooperation it had had before the crisis.

Moreover, if the GCC as an institution and a body of common interests was harmed by these developments, and it was, the corollary is that Iran reaped the eventual benefit. Suddenly, the Islamic Republic found itself playing the role of benefactor, thanks in part to the Saudi-Emirati-Bahraini-Egyptian blockade of Qatar. Iran was suddenly handed the opportunity of appearing to be protecting an Arab Gulf country from its Arab Gulf sisters. Similarly, after Qatar was asked to sever its military relations with Turkey and close the latter's base on its soil, Turkish troops became an essential element in Qatar's defense, in direct opposition to the anti-Qatar entente and detrimental to GCC common defense strategy.

### **The Already Damaged American Policy**

Finally, an important yet not merely potential damage that the UAE hacking will incur is that to the credibility of American policy and diplomacy in the Gulf. From the early going, President Donald Trump sided with the anti-Qatar camp and tweeted his pleasure that Qatar was being castigated for its behavior. His intervention threatened to put the United States on the side of some members of the GCC against others, a policy not imagined by any other president or administration. It is actually possible that the original conspiracy to falsely blame Qatar may have benefited from a mistaken belief by some Gulf leaders that if President Trump supports the move against Doha then it is likely that the whole scheme would succeed.

But the positive attitude that the secretaries of Defense, James Mattis, and State, Rex Tillerson, exhibited toward Qatar helped put the brakes on the American plunge into the ill-advised arrangement. Early in the crisis, the Department of Defense expressed its satisfaction with Qatar's behavior. Secretary Mattis actually signed a \$12 billion Qatari deal to acquire American F-15 fighters after Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Egypt, and others severed their diplomatic relations with Qatar. After a period of hesitation, Secretary Tillerson joined Mattis in calling for a negotiated settlement and a return to Gulf unity. He pledged to help Kuwait's mediation efforts and eventually signed a memorandum of understanding on combatting terrorist financing with his Qatari counterpart, Sheikh Mohammad bin Abdel-Rahman Al Thani; an agreement that others in the Gulf have refused to sign. Perhaps both secretaries were privy to the information revealed by the *Post*, informed the president of it, but got rebuffed because he wanted the Saudi Arabian-Emirati accusations to stick. Only time will tell.

For now, however, American diplomacy seems to have suffered from the episode. Neither has President Trump distanced himself completely from the original accusations nor have his chief lieutenants been able to resolve the unneeded crisis. He will arguably never again be believed by the Qataris if he were to declare a change of mind or call for a face-saving compromise. In the binary, us-versus-them, atmosphere dominating the Saudi-Emirati coalition, his secretaries have committed the sin of neutrality

and rationally looked at GCC and American interests. They thus cannot be trusted as allies against Doha. In the process, the United States becomes least effective with both sides of the equation.

### **Possible Next Steps?**

The revelations about the UAE's hacking have indeed presented the Gulf, the Arab world, and the world at large with a different understanding of the development of, and potential end for, the GCC crisis. They are as much a refutation of the original accusations that set three GCC members and Egypt against purported Qatari malevolent behavior as they are an exoneration of the Qatari leadership's insistence on charting their own independent foreign policy within the confines of GCC interests.

As the UAE leadership continues to deny its culpability, it may be time for the Qatari government and American intelligence agencies to release whatever information they have gathered since the original hacking took place last May 24. Verification of what appeared in the *Post* story is the first step towards an admission of responsibility.

A clear and unequivocal statement by the Saudi Arabian government on the hacking story is essential. As of this writing, Riyadh has not issued a response to the hacking report, a very strange shortcoming given its deep involvement in the crisis. Its al-Arabiyya television station, for example--one that was at

the forefront of covering the accusations against Qatar--has not even carried the story or the UAE denial of its role in the hacking. It is therefore the duty of King Salman bin Abdel-Aziz to direct his government to issue a statement to that effect; otherwise, his kingdom will be accused of collusion as well.

Finally, it behooves the United States government to clearly make its united position known: that the United States continues to believe in the importance of GCC unity that will only be served by a complete admission of guilt where required. The Department of State would do well to lead the American effort since Secretary Tillerson has been involved in the diplomatic approaches to the crisis.

---

**For more analysis visit [arabcenterdc.org](http://arabcenterdc.org)**