



## BRIEFING PAPER

Number CBP 8030, 30 June 2017

# Qatar crisis

By Ben Smith

### Contents:

1. The row
2. Background
3. Developments
4. Western interests
5. Outlook



# Contents

<b>Summary</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1. The row</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2. Background</b>	<b>6</b>
Generational change	7
<b>3. Developments</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>4. Western interests</b>	<b>11</b>
UK	11
<b>5. Outlook</b>	<b>12</b>

## Summary

A crisis blew up in June 2017 between a group of Arab countries led by Saudi Arabia on one side and Qatar on the other, with its roots in the independent foreign policy pursued by Qatar over recent years. Qatar has traditionally taken a much more positive line towards political Islam than neighbouring monarchies, which tend to see it as a threat to their legitimacy.

Qatar's links to the Muslim Brotherhood go back some time, but became much more significant with the Arab uprisings of 2011, when it looked as if the Islamists might be the force of the future. Saudi Arabia, though, and particularly the United Arab Emirates, were intransigent, associating political Islam with terrorism. They accused Qatar of supporting terrorist groups. In June 2017, after the visit to Saudi Arabia by President Trump, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt imposed a blockade on Qatar, and expelled Qataris from their countries. They demanded an end to support for terrorist groups, the closure of the Qatari broadcaster Al-Jazeera, and for Qatar's foreign policy to fall in line with the other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council.

The US at first indicated support for the moves against Qatar, but later became more cautious; disunity among members of the GCC could bring more disorder to the Middle East.

The UK, which receives a significant proportion of its imported gas from Qatar, supports the mediation efforts by Kuwait.

Some commentators have argued that the row could threaten the future of the GCC, but there are differences in approach between Saudi Arabia and the UAE that may take the heat out of the dispute.

# 1. The row

On 23 May 2017 Qatari News Agency gave details of a speech by Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, in which he apparently offered praise for Hamas and Iran and criticised other GCC governments. Except that he didn't. The Qatari Government hurriedly announced that the official news agency's site had been hacked, but it was too late to stop a sharp reaction from other Gulf Cooperation Council states led by Saudi Arabia. (The hacking claim may be true but the views expressed were close to the known opinions of Qatari leaders).

There was another factor: reports cite the figure of \$1 billion for the ransom the Qatari government paid for the release of family members who were kidnapped while on a hunting trip in Iraq. Some of the [money reportedly found its way](#) to the al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, Tahrir al-Sham (formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra) while most of it went to the Iranian government; the group had been kidnapped by an Iran-backed Shia militia. Why would the money go partly to Iran and partly to sworn enemies of Iran – a Sunni jihadi organisation? A complicated deal involving Shiite hostages held by Sunni groups and the evacuation of towns various besieged towns.

The visit in May 2017 by President Trump to Saudi Arabia could also have been a factor. During the visit, President Trump [made a speech calling for](#) a united front against terrorism and roundly condemning Iran for “fuelling the fires” of sectarianism and terrorism. He also announced sales of \$110 billion worth of US arms to Saudi Arabia.

After the visit there were crackdowns in Bahrain and Egypt on opposition figures, as well as the move against Qatar. Fawaz Gerges of the London School of Economics [said](#):

Donald Trump now accepts the view of Saudi Arabia as a strategic bastion in the Arab and Islamic World. [...] What you are seeing now is that the Saudi-led coalition feels empowered. They are on the offensive. It's a new era. Everyone has to toe the line and join this alliance.

## Measures

Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt broke off diplomatic relations with Qatar. Other states aligned with the Saudis, including Mauritania and the Maldives, and the exiled government of Yemen, followed suit in breaking off diplomatic relations. Jordan and Djibouti downgraded diplomatic ties.

Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain closed borders to Qatari shipping and aircraft and gave Qataris two weeks to get out of their respective countries, while at the same time ordering their own nationals to leave Qatar.

The scale and speed of the Saudi-led reaction suggests that the moves were planned in advance.

Results

The measures resulted in shortages of food and logistical difficulties for those who had to leave the country when transport was shut down.

## 2. Background

Qatar has tried to carve out a distinctive role for itself in foreign policy. Although its population is very small, it has great wealth from the natural gas field in the Persian Gulf that it shares with Iran. In order to use that wealth to gain influence, Qatari leaders have differentiated themselves from their larger neighbours, offering themselves as mediators between various warring factions in the Muslim world, including from Palestine, Afghanistan and Lebanon.

The Arab uprisings in 2011 made that maverick foreign policy intolerable for the monarchs of larger Gulf states, as long-standing rulers such as Hosni Mubarak in Egypt toppled. The intensifying tensions with Iran also sapped the tolerance of Qatar's neighbours.

### **Muslim Brotherhood**

Underlying the disagreement is the fact that the Qataris did not oppose political Islam, unlike that of fellow member states of the GCC, who worried about the threat to royal legitimacy that political Islam represents. Qatar was supportive of the Muslim Brotherhood Egyptian government of Mohammed Morsi. The Qatari Government also hosted a political office for the Palestinians, and Hamas leaders lived in Doha.

It was particularly after the Arab Uprisings that Qatar's policy came to prominence but links between the MB and Qatar go back about 60 years. Qatar saw the MB as a way to project its influence and compete with Saudi Arabia, and gave Qatari citizenship to Yusuf al-Qadarawi, an Egyptian theologian close to the MB. Qadarawi has been living in Qatar on and off since the 1970s and has been a star preacher on Al-Jazeera.

The coup against the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt, carried out with Saudi backing, and the general failure of the uprisings weakened the Qataris' position.

### **Terrorism**

The Qatari government is variously accused of supporting ISIS and Al-Qaeda, terrorism in the Saudi Eastern Province and in Manama, the Bahraini capital, and the Houthi rebels in Yemen. Qatar and the UAE have supported different militias in Libya which have fought each other. Some have gone as far as to describe the clashes in Libya as a "[proxy war](#)" between the Qataris and the Emiratis that has been one of the factors that has prevented stabilisation in Libya.

The accusation of supporting terrorism is applied liberally in the Middle East; Iran, for example, regularly accuses the US and its allies of supporting terrorist organisations.

Qatar's definition of legitimate organisations may have been broader than that of Saudi Arabia and the UAE; Saudi Arabia has [gradually moved](#) from an equivocal position to one closer to the UAE's: that all Islamist organisations should be treated as terrorist. The US Government

said in 2014 that Qatar was a “[permissive jurisdiction](#)”,<sup>1</sup> along with Kuwait, for terrorist financing but later praised efforts to rein it in.

### **Al-Jazeera**

Qatar funded and developed Al-Jazeera – a news organisation with a relatively objective output, as long as it wasn’t talking about the Qataris. Al-Jazeera has not been shy about including content critical of other Gulf states. It has given a platform to Muslim Brotherhood supporters.

### **2014 crisis**

In 2014, there was an eruption of tension: Gulf neighbours such as UAE complained that Qatar was interfering in their affairs. Qatar had given refuge to several Emirati dissidents, as well as maintaining its ties with the Brotherhood. Qadarawi was giving sermons critical of Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE demonstrated their displeasure by withdrawing their ambassadors, and designated the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organisation.

The cracks revealed by the 2014 dispute were papered over. Qadarawi was stripped of his Qatari citizenship and other Brotherhood figures were expelled. Diplomatic relations were restored.

The fundamental disagreements had not gone away, however, and the Saudis and Emiratis accused the Qataris of going back on some of their commitments.

Qatar has also cultivated ties with Iran. It has supported radical groups opposing the Assad government in Syria. Hillary Clinton’s [leaked emails](#) revealed the official US view that the governments of both Qatar and Saudi Arabia were clandestinely funding ISIS, something that they denied.

On the other hand, Qatar sent troops to help the Saudis and the UAE restore control in Bahrain, even though the country had been supportive to rebel groups elsewhere in the Middle East since 2011.

A Chatham House analyst [described](#) it so:

The contradiction was typical of a country that has operated a scattershot, independent and at times maddeningly inconsistent foreign policy, doing its best to punch above its weight wherever it can.

### **Generational change**

As well as differences on policy, personalities of leaders are always important in the Gulf monarchies. Another factor driving the present crisis is the change at the top in Saudi Arabia. King Salman, who ascended the throne in 2015, quickly promoted his son, Mohammed bin Salman, to be Deputy Crown Prince and Defence Minister, unusual for a 29 year old. Mohammed bin Nayef, the King’s nephew, was Crown Prince.

## 8 Qatar crisis

The change to a younger generation has already affected Saudi policy – many commentators think that the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen would have been less likely under the old guard.

The Qatar crisis has also been driven by Abu Dhabi Crown Prince and deputy supreme commander of the UAE Armed Forces, Sheikh Mohammed Bin Zayed Al-Nahyan. MBS and MBZ, as they are known, have a close relationship.

On 21 June 2017 Mohammed bin Salman was promoted to Crown Prince. Mohammed bin Nayef was demoted because he was not sufficiently enthusiastic about the blockade on Qatar, [according to analysts](#).



## 3. Developments

Kuwait and Oman both offered themselves for the role of mediators. Oman, particularly, has a record of mediation – the Omanis helped with the secret talks that led to the Iran nuclear deal.

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has called for “calm and thoughtful dialogue”, but Abu Dhabi and Riyadh had tipped Washington off in advance of the move, and Donald Trump’s tweet about the clash suggested he was taking credit for it:

[So good](#) to see the Saudi Arabia visit with the King and 50 countries already paying off. They said they would take a hard line on funding extremism, and all reference was pointing to Qatar. Perhaps this will be the beginning of the end to the horror of terrorism!”

A day later, however, Trump appeared to change course somewhat, phoning the Qatari Emir and offering a meeting at the White House if that would help resolve the problem. On 16 June [reports emerged](#) that the Qataris had signed a \$12 billion deal to buy F15s from the US. The [Qatari defence minister said](#) the deal underlined the:

... longstanding commitment of the state of Qatar in jointly working with our friends and allies in the United States in advancing our military cooperation for closer strategic collaboration in our fight to counter violent extremism and promote peace and stability in our region and beyond.

### Shopping list

The US pressed the Saudis and the Emiratis to set out concrete demands.

On 23 June, the Saudi side [presented its demands](#), through Kuwaiti mediators:

1. **Curb diplomatic ties with Iran** and close its diplomatic missions there. Expel members of Iran’s Revolutionary Guards and cut off any joint military cooperation with Iran. Only trade and commerce with Iran that complies with US and international sanctions will be permitted.
2. **Sever all ties to “terrorist organisations”**, specifically the Muslim Brotherhood, Islamic State, al-Qaida and Lebanon’s Hezbollah. Formally declare those entities as terrorist groups.
3. **Shut down al-Jazeera** and its affiliate stations.
4. **Shut down news outlets that Qatar funds**, directly and indirectly, including Arabi21, Rassd, Al-Araby Al-Jadeed and Middle East Eye.
5. Immediately **terminate the Turkish military presence** in Qatar and end any joint military cooperation with Turkey inside Qatar.
6. **Stop all means of funding for individuals, groups or organisations that have been designated as terrorists** by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, Bahrain, the US and other countries.

7. **Hand over “terrorist figures”** and wanted individuals from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain to their countries of origin. Freeze their assets, and provide any desired information about their residency, movements and finances.
8. **End interference in sovereign countries’ internal affairs.** Stop granting citizenship to wanted nationals from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain. Revoke Qatari citizenship for existing those nationals where such citizenship violates those countries’ laws.
9. **Stop all contacts with the political opposition in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain.** Hand over all files detailing Qatar’s prior contacts with and support for those opposition groups.
10. Pay reparations and **compensation for loss of life and other, financial losses caused by Qatar’s policies** in recent years. The sum will be determined in coordination with Qatar.
11. **Consent to monthly audits for the first year** after agreeing to the demands, then once per quarter during the second year. For the following 10 years, Qatar would be monitored annually for compliance.
12. **Align itself with the other Gulf and Arab countries militarily, politically, socially and economically,** as well as on economic matters, in line with an agreement reached with Saudi Arabia in 2014.
13. **Agree to all the demands within 10 days** of it being submitted to Qatar, or the list becomes invalid.

Iran and Turkey stepped in to help with Qatari food supplies. Qatar receives some 40% of its imports over its only land border, shared with Saudi Arabia. Iran also opened its airspace to Qatari flights, to compensate for the ban on Qatari flights over Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt.

## 4. Western interests

Qatar is host to the biggest US air base in the Middle East – Al-Udeid, which is heavily involved in US and allied air campaign against ISIS in Iraq and Syria. US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and the US Defence Secretary Jim Mattis have both [argued](#) that the West cannot afford a rift between Saudi Arabia and Qatar. It would, apart from anything else, complicate the Trump Administration's [ideas](#) for an 'Arab NATO' to bolster US allies against Iran. The idea was to push back against Iran's alleged meddling in Arab affairs – some in the Administration may think that it could result in more arms sales to the Gulf Sunni countries. The idea was not publicly mentioned during the Trump visit to the region, however, and the Qatar row has underlined how difficult it would be to put into practice.

Western business interests connected with Qatar are enormous. Qatari investors are said to own [three times more](#) of London than the queen; the Qatari sovereign wealth fund owns much of the Shard and of Canary Wharf.

Further complications: Turkey has become increasingly close to Qatar. Turkey is building a military base in Qatar, due to be completed in 2018. Turkey has rejected the demand that its new base in Qatar should be closed; President Erdoğan on 25 June described the ultimatum as “against international law” and made clear his support for Qatari resistance against the 13 demands.

### UK

The UK gets almost 30% of its imported gas from Qatar; Qatari ships are at present banned from stopping in UAE, Saudi and Egyptian ports. Analysts have [pointed out](#) that the questions over Qatari supplies come at a time when Brexit and the [closure of the Rough gas storage facility](#) in the North Sea are already combining with the decline in domestic gas production to cause worries about the UK's future security of supply.

The UK supports the efforts at mediation by Kuwait. British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson and Kuwaiti Minister for Cabinet Affairs, Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah, [issued this statement](#) after a meeting on 29 June 2017:

The UK and Kuwait reaffirmed their commitment to cooperate to ensure a de-escalation, with the UK fully supporting Kuwait's mediation efforts. They urged the need for dialogue and for all sides to work together to ensure Gulf unity. They encouraged all sides to strengthen their efforts to fight terrorism and extremism, including work to counter terrorist financing and reduce support for extremist groups, building on progress already made.

## 5. Outlook

Meanwhile, the economic and logistical disruption for Qatar is considerable, at a time when Qatar is due to host the 2022 World Cup. If the Qataris do not back down, [commentators have discussed](#) the possibility of sanctions or even military action. Turkey has come down firmly on the side of the Qataris, as the Turkish Parliament swiftly endorsed two regulations allowing the government to post thousands of Turkish soldiers at a former British base near Doha. The young Qatari Emir may decide that the best course is to back down, however.

The Saudis would probably like to see the back of the Emir and his father and are reported to have tried to oust Tamim bin Hamad before, but the Qatari military is reported to be supportive of the Royal Family.

The closure of Al-Jazeera would be a blow to the vibrant Arab-language press, which has developed in recent years, partly following the example of the Qatari network.

A climb-down on the part of the Qataris might mean stricter controls on money going to armed groups in Syria and elsewhere. It would also mean a narrowing of the space for political differences in the Gulf.

Rex Tillerson said on June 25 that the 13 demands would be "[very difficult](#)" for Qatar to meet and some analysts think that the dramatic dispute could even threaten the future of the Gulf Cooperation Council.

If prolonged hostility between the Qataris and the Saudis drives the Qataris towards Iran and Turkey, that would be the opposite effect to that desired by the Saudi bloc. Turkey has moved closer to Russia and Iran over the Syria conflict; such a crack in the previously pro-Western GCC bloc would further weaken the Western position in the region. The UAE foreign minister [said on 25 June](#): "The alternative is not escalation, the alternative is parting of ways."

There are significant differences, however, between the Saudis, who are more worried about Iran, and the Emiratis, who are more relaxed about Iran but remain vehemently opposed to the Muslim Brotherhood. That may take some of the heat out of the campaign against Qatar. Pressure for a resolution may be mounting in Washington, too: the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee [said on 26 June](#) that the committee would think twice about supporting further arms sales to the Gulf until members had "a better understanding of the path to resolve the current dispute and re-unify the GCC".

### About the Library

The House of Commons Library research service provides MPs and their staff with the impartial briefing and evidence base they need to do their work in scrutinising Government, proposing legislation, and supporting constituents.

As well as providing MPs with a confidential service we publish open briefing papers, which are available on the Parliament website.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in these publicly available research briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.

If you have any comments on our briefings please email [papers@parliament.uk](mailto:papers@parliament.uk). Authors are available to discuss the content of this briefing only with Members and their staff.

If you have any general questions about the work of the House of Commons you can email [hcenquiries@parliament.uk](mailto:hcenquiries@parliament.uk).

### Disclaimer

This information is provided to Members of Parliament in support of their parliamentary duties. It is a general briefing only and should not be relied on as a substitute for specific advice. The House of Commons or the author(s) shall not be liable for any errors or omissions, or for any loss or damage of any kind arising from its use, and may remove, vary or amend any information at any time without prior notice.

The House of Commons accepts no responsibility for any references or links to, or the content of, information maintained by third parties. This information is provided subject to the [conditions of the Open Parliament Licence](#).