

The RCLF Minute, Issue 2

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Understanding What Led to the Gulf Crisis

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Purpose: *This brief provides an overview of the dynamics that have resulted in the ongoing conflict between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, and Bahrain, in hopes of clarifying what triggered the abrupt dispute.*

The Arab countries of the Gulf are currently facing a dispute with one of their own. On June 5, 2017, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, and Bahrain (the Quartet) announced that they would be severing ties with Qatar and that Qatar was also being expelled from the Saudi-led coalition leading the war on Yemen. The Maldives and Yemen soon announced that they were also severing ties with Qatar. Oman and Kuwait, the other two members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have maintained their ties to Qatar and Kuwait has offered to mediate the dispute. In addition to severing diplomatic ties, the Quartet closed their respective airspace to Qatari aircraft and Saudi Arabia closed Qatar's only land border. Qatar is highly dependent on its imports that it receives by land and sea in order to meet the basic needs of its population. As a result of the blockade, Qatar has strengthened its relationship with Iran and Turkey, both of whom have been providing Qatar with food supplies.

The severing of ties with Qatar has resulted in the Gulf Crisis which has revealed the multi-dimensional chaos of conflict and coercion that afflicts much of the Middle East. The outcome of the Gulf Crisis will have far-reaching consequences for the United States, given that Qatar is the location of the al-Udeid Air Base, the forward headquarters of USCENTCOM. This current crisis can be viewed as a continuation of the 2014 GCC crisis when Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE withdrew their ambassadors from fellow GCC member Qatar. At the time, the three countries accused Qatar of interfering in their domestic affairs and that Qatar was also supporting Islamist groups who they perceive to be a threat to stability and security. The 2014 crisis was resolved through mediation efforts by Kuwait's Emir Sheikh Sabah Al Ahmad.

As a small nation, located between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Qatar has historically been a minor player in international affairs. That changed significantly in the early 2000s, when aggressive investments in the country's natural gas coupled with global high oil prices transformed Qatar into a high-profile international player, reflective of the country's newfound wealth. The newfound wealth positioned Qatar as the world's richest nation based on a per capita income of \$127,480¹ by 2016. Qatar has used their wealth to develop a foreign policy independent of the regional consensus, as lead by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Part of this was largely achieved through soft-power initiatives such as investing in Al Jazeera and by taking on the role of an effective international mediator for controversial groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, and the Taliban.

¹ "GDP Per Capita, PPP (current International \$) | Data." World Bank Open Data | Data. Last modified 2016. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.PP.CD>.

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The strength of Qatar's soft power approach became clear during the 2011 Arab Spring when Qatar's political activism aligned itself with Islamist opposition movements in countries such as Egypt and Tunisia. This position was completely at odds with the foreign policy objectives of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates who favored secular regimes and who were weary of revolutionary change in the Middle East. From the perspective of the Saudis and Emiratis, Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood was the most problematic because the Muslim Brotherhood offered a Salafi style of political Islam that directly clashed with the monarchical governing style of Saudi Arabia.

Both the UAE and Saudi Arabia perceive the Muslim Brotherhood as a threat to their stability because both nations are faced with Islamist ideologies which challenge the legitimacy of the respective monarchies. By 2014, both nations designated the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization and urged the United States and European allies to follow suit, though they have not. This is the seed from which to understand the allegations of Qatar's support for terrorism that arose in June 2017. This is emblematic to their dissatisfaction of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey, who prior to the attempted coup in 2016, was widely praised in the Muslim world for his democratic and yet Islamic form of governing. Thus, Qatar's support of the Arab Spring was perceived as an attempt to undermine Saudi Arabia's legitimacy as the leader of the Muslim world.

The Iran Nuclear Deal, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, was signed in 2015 and it added another layer to the already complicated relationship between Qatar and its Arab neighbors. Saudi Arabia has had an adversarial relationship with Iran since 1979, with the unfolding of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. By successfully overthrowing the Shah, Ayatollah Khomeini became the Supreme Leader of Iran and was applauded by large segments of the Muslim world for defeating a pro-Western authoritarian monarchy. Saudi Arabia perceived Iran's Islamic Revolution as a threat to regional stability and as a threat to its role as not only a regional leader but a leader of the Muslim World. Saudi Arabia continues to find Iran's level of influence in places such as Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Bahrain to be unacceptable. Both countries have been struggling to assert themselves as leaders of the Muslim world, though support can generally be found to be split along Sunni-Shi'a lines. Saudi Arabia's hostile relationship with Iran complicates its relationship with Qatar, who generally has a positive relationship with Iran, whom it shares a major gas field with.

Qatar and the UAE's relationship has been strained since 1995, when Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani overthrew his father, Emir Khalif al Thani in a bloodless coup d'état in order to become Emir of Qatar. The UAE granted asylum to Khalifa Al Thani in Abu Dhabi which resulted in Qatar accusing the UAE, along with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain of supporting Khalifa Al Thani in plotting against the new Emir. UAE also reacted strongly to Qatar's support of President Morsi when now President Sisi lead a coup d'état in Egypt in 2013. This is because the Emirati government has been working to dissolve al-Islah, an Emirati branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, since

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1994.² Qatar also continues to host a number of Muslim Brotherhood members in Doha, at the displeasure of its Arab neighbors.

Despite Qatar's support of the Arab Spring in Egypt and Tunisia, Qatar supported Saudi-led military efforts to quell the revolution in Bahrain. Qatar and Bahrain have a long history of land conflict. Qatar and Bahrain have disputed over the Hawar Islands, the town of Zubara, the Janan Islands, and several reefs that are necessary to establish maritime boundaries since the mid-20th century. In 1986, both countries were prepared to have a military confrontation over this territory dispute, but Saudi Arabia was able to mediate the dispute. In 1991, Qatar referred the dispute over to the United Nations International Court of Justice where it was awarded Zubara and the Janan Islands and one of the reefs. Bahrain was awarded Hawar Islands and the other reef. Qatar has also disputed its border with Saudi Arabia. The current Saudi-Qatar border was established in 1965 with the *Agreement on the Delimitation of the Offshore and Land Boundaries Between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Qatar*.³

In December 2016, Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud arrived in Doha to help strengthen relations between Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Unfortunately, there was a setback in May 23, 2017 when the Qatar News Agency reported that Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad al-Thani during a military graduation ceremony, "criticized renewed tensions with Tehran, expressed understanding for Hezbollah and Hamas, and suggested U.S. President Donald Trump might not last long in power."⁴ Qatar denounced the statements as false and has received assistance from the FBI to investigate what Qatar alleges was a hacking into the Qatar News Agency. Just a day before the four countries announced that they were severing ties with Qatar, news reports emerged of hacked emails of Yousef al-Otaiba, the UAE ambassador to the United States. The emails "revealed ties between Otaiba and a pro-Israel think-tank in Washington, along with efforts to undermine the image of Qatar-and, to some extent, Kuwait-internationally, internationally, including Emirati requests to move the US forward Central Command operations from the airbase in Qatar's al-Udeid to the UAE."⁵ Despite the severing of diplomatic ties, Qatar retains its position as a global leader in liquefied natural gas production and Qatari natural gas

² Trager, Eric. "The Muslim Brotherhood Is the Root of the Qatar Crisis." The Atlantic. Last modified April 26, 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/07/muslim-brotherhood-qatar/532380/>.

³ "Agreement on the Delimitation of the Offshore and Land Boundaries between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Qatar." Welcome to the United Nations. Last modified 1965. <http://www.un.org/depts/los/LEGISLATIONANDTREATIES/PDFFILES/TREATIES/SAU-QAT1965OB.PDF>.

⁴ "Gulf Rift Reopens As Qatar Decries Hacked Comments by Emir." Reuters. Last modified May 25, 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-qatar-cyber/gulf-rift-reopens-as-qatar-decries-hacked-comments-by-emir-idUSKBN18K02Z>.

⁵ Jazeera, Al. "Timeline of Qatar-GCC Disputes from 1991 to 2017." Breaking News, World News & Video from Al Jazeera. Last modified June 9, 2017. <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/06/timeline-qatar-gcc-disputes-170605110356982.html>.

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continues to flow to the UAE and Oman through the Dolphin Energy's pipeline based in Abu Dhabi.

In June 22, 2017, Kuwait presented Qatar with a list of 13 demands from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE, and Egypt that would need to be met in order to end the crisis, giving Qatar 10 days to respond.⁶ Qatar responds by refusing to submit to the demands, referring to the list as an infringement on its sovereignty. Qatar has also indicated that it would not engage in talks on resolving the standoff until the blockade and sanctions were lifted; however, on July 3, 2017 Qatar does hand the Emir of Kuwait its response but does not release the information publicly. After receiving pressure from the United States, on July 18, 2017 the four nations said they didn't require that Qatar submit itself to the 13 demands but rather the following broad principles, 1. Commit to combatting terrorism and extremism, 2. Deny financing and safe havens to terrorist groups, 3. Stop incitement of hatred and violence, and 4. Refrain from interfering in the internal affairs of other countries. To date the conflict has not yet reached any resolution and remains largely at a stalemate, though Saudi Arabia and the UAE are engaging in an aggressive cyber campaign against Qatar.

⁶ "Arab States Issue 13 Demands to End Qatar-Gulf Crisis." Breaking News, World News & Video from Al Jazeera. Last modified June 23, 2017. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/06/arab-states-issue-list-demands-qatar-crisis-170623022133024.html>.