



**INSTITUTE OF
STRATEGIC STUDIES**

web: www.issi.org.pk
phone: +92-920-4423, 24
fax: +92-920-4658

Issue Brief

Qatar-Gulf Rift: Going Beyond a War of Words

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Written by: Arhama Siddiq, Research Fellow

Edited by: Najam Rafique

Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates broke off relations with Qatar on June 5, 2017 in what is being seen as the worst diplomatic crisis to hit the Gulf Arab states in decades. The move has further deepened fissures among Gulf Arab nations.



In an indication of Qatar's growing isolation, Yemen's internationally backed government has also joined the move to break relations, as did the Maldives, Mauritius, Mauritania and the government based in eastern Libya. Jordan has also stated that it would downgrade its diplomatic representation with Qatar. After the May 5 development, only Kuwait and Oman have relations with Qatar.

The three Gulf countries and Egypt accused Qatar of supporting terrorism and upsetting the regional order. The countries said they would halt all land, air and sea traffic with Qatar, expel its diplomats and order Qatari citizens to leave the Gulf states within fourteen days. Saudi Arabia also shut its land border with Qatar, effectively cutting off the latter from the rest of the Arabian Peninsula. Saudi Arabia and Jordan have also revoked the license of *Al Jazeera* media network. Simultaneously, Riyadh broadcasted that Qatari troops would be pulled from the ongoing war in Yemen. UAE warned that any sympathizers with Qatar would be jailed.

Economic disturbances surfaced immediately as Abu Dhabi's state-owned Etihad Airways, Dubai-based Emirates and Flydubai said they would suspend all flights to and from Doha despite warning by the International Air Transport Association (IATA) of major travel disruptions. Oil prices have also jumped after the accusations. The price of Brent Crude - seen as the benchmark - rose by 1.2 per cent on the news to \$50.55, while US Crude was up by a similar amount - 1.22 per cent to \$48.24.¹

¹ <http://www.express.co.uk/finance/city/813069/Oil-prices-Qatar-Saudi-Arabia-Egypt-Bahrain-UAE-Brent-Crude>

This disturbance comes two weeks after Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt blocked several Qatari media houses over comments supposedly made by Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim Al Hamad Al Thani. The official *Qatar News Agency* had aired a report citing the Emir of Qatar making favorable comments about Iran while criticizing President Trump's hard line policy towards Tehran. "There is no wisdom in harboring hostility towards Iran"², Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani was reported to have said. Qatar denied the allegations, saying that the news agency had been hacked, and that the report quoting the Emir was "fake news"³. In fact, according to FBI investigations in late May, Russian hackers planted the false news story which led to the entire crisis.⁴

However, some of Qatar's neighbors did not buy this explanation.

Saudi Arabia said it took the decision to slash diplomatic ties because of Qatar's "embrace of various terrorist and sectarian groups aimed at destabilizing the region",⁵ including the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Qaeda, ISIS and groups supported by Iran in the Kingdom's restive eastern province of Qatif. Egypt's foreign ministry accused Qatar of taking an "antagonist approach" towards the country and said "all attempts to stop it from supporting terrorist groups failed."⁶ It gave the Qatari ambassador 48 hours to leave Egypt, and ordered its own envoy in Qatar to return to Cairo within the same time frame. The tiny island nation of Bahrain blamed Qatar's "media incitement, support for armed terrorist activities and funding linked to Iranian groups to carry out sabotage and spreading chaos in Bahrain."⁷

Qatar has rejected the assertions, calling them "unjustified and baseless."⁸ Many western sources have accused Qatar of funding extremists like al-Qaeda's branch in Syria,⁹ and of being a key financial patron of the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip and harboring exiled Hamas official Khaled Mashaal since 2012.¹⁰

² <http://money.cnn.com/2017/05/25/media/qatar-fake-news-iran-al-jazeera/index.html>

³ Ibid.

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/07/qatar-fbi-says-russian-hackers-planted-fake-news-story-that-led-to-crisis-report>

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/05/saudi-arabia-and-bahrain-break-diplomatic-ties-with-qatar-over-terrorism>

⁶ <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-06-05/gulf-rift-deepens-as-nations-cut-diplomatic-ties-to-qatar/8589988>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ <http://www.allenbwest.com/allen/just-mideast-nations-launch-massive-action-terror-liberal-media-silent>

⁹ <http://nypost.com/2017/04/20/time-for-the-us-to-stop-qatars-support-for-terror/>

¹⁰ Ibid.

Saudi Arabia and Iran are at loggerheads over a number of regional issues, including Iran's nuclear program and what Saudis see as Tehran's growing influence in the Kingdom's sphere of dominance - especially in Syria, Lebanon and neighboring Yemen.

That said, Qatar's relationship with Iran is complicated. Primarily because it shares the largest gas field in the world - South Pars - with Iran. It is because of this partnership that the tiny state has become the world's leading exporter of liquefied natural gas.



Reaction from other countries was mixed.

The General Secretariat of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation asked Qatar to stand by its previous agreements signed under the umbrella of the Gulf Cooperation Council, principally those concerning stopping support of terrorist groups along with media provocation.¹¹

On the other hand, Russian President Putin and Turkish President Erdogan have called on all interested countries to engage in dialogue, and said they are ready to help bring the dispute to an end.¹² Erdogan defended Qatar saying he would have been the first head of state to confront Qatar if the accusation against it had been true.¹³ The Turkish parliament has also ratified a legislation which allows its troops to be deployed to a Turkish military base in Qatar.¹⁴ German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel blamed Trump of inciting conflicts in the Middle East and hazarding a new arms race in the region.¹⁵ French President Emmanuel Macron told Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani in a phone conversation that he planned to seek ways to reduce the current tensions between Qatar and its neighbors.¹⁶

¹¹ http://www.oic-oci.org/topic/?t_id=12984&t_ref=5703&lan=en

¹² <https://www.azernews.az/region/114299.html>

¹³ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/06/turkey-tayyip-erdogan-criticises-qatar-sanctions-170606222419516.html>

¹⁴ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/06/turkey-fast-track-troops-deployment-qatar-170607151127104.html>

¹⁵ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/06/german-fm-blasts-trumpification-qatar-gcc-dispute-170607003519065.html>

¹⁶ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/06/qatar-diplomatic-crisis-latest-updates-170605105550769.html>

A senior Iranian official, Hamid Aboutalebi, deputy chief of staff for Iran's President Hassan Rouhani, said that the decision to sever ties with Qatar would not help end the crisis in the Middle East.¹⁷ The head of Iran's parliamentary committee on national security and foreign policy, Alaeddin Boroujerdi blamed Trump's recent visit to the Saudi Arabia for the present situation.¹⁸ Chairman of the union of exporters of agricultural products, Reza Nourani has stated that food shipments sent from Iran can reach Qatar in 12 hours via sea.¹⁹

There were contradictory statements from the US camp. While the US military said it had "no plans to change our posture in Qatar"²⁰ amid the diplomatic crisis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson urged the respective countries to work out their differences, offering US support to do so,²¹ President Trump had other thoughts saying in a series of twitter posts that his trip to the Middle East was "already paying off as regional leaders followed through on their promise to take a hard line on funding militant groups."²² In a phone call to Qatar's emir, he later went on to express Washington's readiness to participate in efforts to solve the Gulf crisis.²³ The US' biggest concentration of military personnel in the Middle East are located at Qatar's Al Udeid Air Base. The base located in the southwest of Doha is home to some 11,000 US soldiers.²⁴ Pentagon declined to comment on President Donald Trump's tweets, and contradictorily, voiced appreciation for Qatar's support of US army presence in the country.²⁵

Meanwhile, the Pakistan government said it has no immediate plans to cut diplomatic ties with Qatar. Foreign office spokesperson Nafees Zakaria, stated that, "At the moment there is nothing on Qatar issue, (we) will issue a statement if some development takes place."²⁶

The situation is a complex one for Qatar. The country might have natural gas and oil, but it does not really produce its own food - Saudi Arabia supplies over 90 per cent of Qatar's food requirements.²⁷ Now that the border has been shut, food prices in Qatar could sky rocket. Another element of alarm is the

¹⁷ <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-qatar-gulf-idUSKBN18W0OR>

¹⁸ <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1110436/middle-east>

¹⁹ <http://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/iran-offers-to-export-food-to-qatar-by-sea-as-residents-rush-to-stock-supplies/story-Z8Fm8xS6SSDncsqUpioyUJ.html>

²⁰ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/06/military-plans-change-posture-qatar-170605174247252.html>

²¹ <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/06/05/middleeast/saudi-bahrain-egypt-uae-qatar-terror/index.html>

²² <https://newsd.in/isolating-qatar-beginning-end-terrorism-donald-trump-gulf-crisis/>

²³ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/06/trump-offers-resolve-gulf-crisis-170607180101012.html>

²⁴ <http://www.egyptindependent.com/qatar-largest-us-military-base/>

²⁵ <https://www.rawstory.com/2017/06/pentagon-contradicts-trump-tweets-and-praises-qatar-for-its-enduring-commitment-to-regional-security/>

²⁶ <http://in.reuters.com/article/gulf-qatar-pakistan-idINL3N1J22BH>

²⁷ <https://www.ft.com/content/dc24473c-499e-11e7-a3f4-c742b9791d43>

impact on Qatar Airways which is one of the biggest airlines in the world. But now that it is no longer allowed to use Saudi, Egyptian, Bahraini or Emirati air space means flights to Africa or even North America would have to take a huge detour. This could mean longer time and higher costs all around. The third element of concern is the shooting up of oil prices - any kind of instability in the Middle East tends to shoot oil prices up which affects costs around the world.

Qatar has major fiscal reserves, maintains the political support of the Turkish government and is a crucial energy partner for countries like Russia and China. Doha can also turn to Iran. The Saudis and Emiratis should realise that isolating Qatar may backfire.

The best and probably the only way forward is through immediate dialogue in order to iron out differences. Coercion is never the solution and since neighbors are bound by geography and cannot be changed, dialogue is absolutely imperative.