



# A Guide for Those Perplexed About the Qatar Crisis

By the CAP Middle East team     June 21, 2017

On June 6, a bloc of mostly Arab- and Muslim-majority countries led by Saudi Arabia announced a set of punitive measures against the Persian Gulf emirate of Qatar. These measures include severing all diplomatic ties; closure of airspace,\* territorial waters, and land borders; the expulsion of Qatari citizens from within the bloc countries' borders; and a ban on their respective citizens' travel to Qatar.<sup>1</sup> Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, and Bahrain accuse Qatar of interfering in their domestic affairs; supporting terrorist and extremist groups; and using its media network "to fan internal strife."<sup>2</sup> Qatar has categorically rejected the accusations and considers these measures an attempt to violate its sovereignty.<sup>3</sup> No official list of public demands has been issued. Several countries, most notably Kuwait and Oman, are mediating between the two sides. This chain of events has resulted in the worst crisis to hit the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) since its inception.<sup>4</sup>

This issue brief outlines the ongoing developments surrounding Qatar and how it affects American interests in the Middle East.

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## Why did the Saudis and their partners take action now?

It's hard to say. Tensions between Qatar and other members of the GCC date back to 1995, when the son of Qatar's emir replaced his father in a palace coup. Some GCC countries attempted to restore the father to power in a failed countercoup the following year. Until the region-wide political revolts of 2011, however, Qatar and the rest of the GCC were largely able to paper over their differences.<sup>5</sup>

Following the revolts, tensions and mutual recrimination have been brewing between Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain on the one hand and Qatar on the other. These tensions came to a head after the 2013 coup that brought Egypt's current president, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, to power. While Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Kuwait all backed the new regime led by former Defense Minister el-Sisi, the Qatari-backed satellite news network Al Jazeera provided a media outlet for the deposed Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>6</sup>

In 2014, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain withdrew their ambassadors from Qatar, largely in protest of its policy position on Egypt. Kuwaiti mediation reinstated the ambassadors after an eight-month period.<sup>7</sup> The resolution was predicated on an agreement signed in the Saudi capital of Riyadh, which reportedly committed Qatar to a set of steps, including “noninterference in each other’s affairs, cooperation on regional issues, and declining to support extremist groups.”<sup>8</sup>

The Saudi-led coalition’s decision to break ties with and isolate Qatar came on the heels of U.S. President Donald Trump’s visit to Saudi Arabia in late May. Shortly after Trump’s visit, an incendiary speech allegedly given by the emir of Qatar—Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani—that attacked Saudi policy and defended Qatar’s relations with Islamist groups appeared on official Qatari news sites and social media accounts. Saudi Arabia and its partners used this incident as justification for the start of their blockade of Qatar. For its part, Qatar claims that the story was the result of a hack. The results of an FBI investigation are not yet public, but they reportedly corroborate Qatar’s claim.<sup>9</sup>

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## What does this crisis have to do with the United States?

The U.S. military relies on facilities in Qatar to project power across the Middle East. U.S. Central Command—which runs American and coalition military operations in the region—bases both its forward headquarters and its regional air operations control center at al Udeid, an air base near Doha.<sup>10</sup> Al Udeid houses more than 11,000 American military personnel, and American bombers, tankers, and surveillance aircraft fly combat missions over Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan from the base.<sup>11</sup>

More broadly, American security policy in the Middle East relies in no small part on good relations with all members of the GCC. U.S. Air Force F-22 stealth fighters and F-15E strike aircraft, for instance, fly combat missions out of al-Dhafa air base in the UAE; the U.S. Navy maintains a major naval installation in Bahrain; and tens of thousands of U.S. Army soldiers remain deployed in Kuwait.<sup>12</sup> Making matters worse, the current crisis severely undercuts long-standing American efforts to encourage the GCC to work more closely together on security issues, such as missile defense.

In addition, in recent years, Qatar has emerged as a major buyer of weapons from the United States. Most recently, the United States approved a \$21.1 billion sale of F-15 fighters to Qatar in November 2016.<sup>13</sup> Last week, U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis met with the Qatari defense minister to finalize the first tranche of this sale to the tune of \$12 billion.<sup>14</sup> Qatar has also recently purchased Apache attack helicopters, rocket artillery systems, and Patriot missiles from the United States.<sup>15</sup> All in all, Qatar has spent over \$30 billion on American weapons since former President Barack Obama first took office in 2009.<sup>16</sup>

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## Is there anything else to know about Qatar?

Like other GCC states, Qatar is a major energy exporter. But unlike Saudi Arabia and the rest of the GCC, Qatar mainly exports natural gas rather than oil. Indeed, Qatar has the third-largest proven reserves of natural gas in the world—872 trillion cubic feet—after Russia and Iran. Energy exports accounted for nearly half of Qatar’s government revenue in 2014, and only Russia exported more natural gas than Qatar in that same year.<sup>17</sup> This energy wealth combines with a small population—the 2010 Qatari census showed a population of just over 243,000 nationals<sup>18</sup>—to give Qatar the financial means to fund Al Jazeera and bankroll other initiatives intended to enhance Doha’s influence around the world.

Furthermore, Saudi-led coalition’s complaints about Qatar’s lax attitude toward terrorist financing are not without merit. In 2014, Qatar was considered “the region’s biggest source of private donations to radical groups in Syria and Iraq.”<sup>19</sup> Since then, U.S. officials acknowledge that Qatar has taken important steps to prevent terrorism financing—it prosecuted five individuals on American terror finance lists in 2015 and 2016<sup>20</sup>—but they also assess that entities and individuals within Qatar continue to provide financial support to “regional Al Qa’ida affiliates.”<sup>21</sup> Last April, Qatar allegedly paid as much as \$1 billion in ransom to both Iran and an al Qaeda affiliate in Syria to secure the release of a Qatari royal family hunting party that had been kidnapped in Iraq. This payment reportedly helped precipitate the Saudi-led blockade.<sup>22</sup>

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## What has the American response been so far?

Confusing. After the Saudis and their partners announced their actions against Qatar, President Trump issued a series of tweets taking credit for the moves—even after Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Secretary Mattis made statements attempting to calm the situation.<sup>23</sup> Secretary Tillerson made another statement on June 9, calling for “consensus and understanding” to resolve the crisis.<sup>24</sup> Less than an hour later, President Trump called the Saudi-led moves “hard but necessary” during a Rose Garden press conference.<sup>25</sup> Trump’s statements have reportedly undercut Secretary Tillerson’s efforts to organize a summit in Washington with the Saudi, Emirati, and Qatari foreign ministers to help defuse the crisis.<sup>26</sup>

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## So what happens next?

With the mixed messages coming from the Trump administration, that’s unclear at best. Trump’s embrace of Saudi Arabia during his trip there<sup>27</sup> may have led Riyadh to believe it had a green light to take whatever action it wanted in the region. Trump’s

public statements have undermined the attempts of Secretary Mattis and, especially, Secretary Tillerson to resolve the crisis, giving the impression that the president has all but taken Saudi Arabia's side in this dispute.

That's dangerous when it comes to what happens next. Knowing that whatever approach Secretary Tillerson pursues can be overridden by a tweet from the president, Saudi Arabia and its partners may choose to escalate their dispute with Qatar. If they do not, then the crisis may muddle along until Qatar acquiesces to Saudi demands or until a new normal settles in—one that would almost certainly harm American interests. Indeed, Emirati Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash recently stated that the blockade of Qatar could continue for “years” if the Saudi-led bloc's demands go unmet.<sup>28</sup> Something to watch for in the days and weeks ahead is whether Secretary Tillerson can successfully convene his proposed meeting of Gulf foreign ministers and achieve a diplomatic resolution. If he fails—or if President Trump sabotages him with an early morning tweetstorm—it will probably be up to other governments in the region, such as Kuwait, to try to end the crisis.

This crisis has laid bare the shortcomings of President Trump's handling of foreign policy. His public embrace of Saudi Arabia did nothing to prevent this crisis, and may even have encouraged Riyadh to start it. Worse, Trump's impulsive public statements and tweets have exacerbated rather than defused the crisis, leaving a short-staffed and demoralized U.S. Department of State to clean up the mess. The Qatar crisis gives American citizens and friendly foreign leaders alike good reason to question just how President Trump and his administration will handle a more dangerous crisis in the future.

**\*Correction, June 21, 2017:** This issue brief has been corrected to clarify the airspace affected by the punitive measures issued against Qatar.

## Endnotes

- 1 The implementation of the measures varies between members of the bloc, with a hardline position adopted by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Bahrain, and lesser measures imposed by Mauritania, Maldives, Comoros Islands, Yemen, and the Tobruk-based Libyan government. Jordan, Chad, Djibouti, Niger, and Senegal have downgraded ties.
- 2 *Saudi Gazette*, "Why 8 nations severed ties with Qatar," June 6, 2017, available at <http://saudigazette.com.sa/world/mena/7-nations-severed-ties-qatar/>.
- 3 Kenneth Katzman, "Qatar: Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy" (Washington: Congressional Research Service, 2017), p.8, available at <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R44533.pdf>.
- 4 Founded in 1981 as a counterbalance to the revolutionary regime in the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Gulf Cooperation Council is a regional organization made up of the six states of the Arabian Peninsula: Saudi Arabia, Oman, UAE Kuwait, Qatar, and Bahrain.
- 5 Katzman, "Qatar," p. 8.
- 6 Brian Katulis and Peter Juul, "U.S. Middle East Policy at a Time of Regional Fragmentation and Competition" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2014) p. 13–19, available at <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/ArabColdWar.pdf>.
- 7 Katulis and Juul, p. 21; *Reuters*, "Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain end rift with Qatar, return ambassadors," November 16, 2014, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-gulf-summit-ambassadors-idUSKCN0J00Y420141116>.
- 8 Hussein Ibish, "Unfulfilled 2014 Riyadh Agreement Defines Current GCC Rift," *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, June 6, 2017, available at <http://www.agsiw.org/unfulfilled-2014-riyadh-agreement-defines-current-gcc-rift/>.
- 9 Evan Perez and Shimon Prokuecz, "CNN Exclusive: US suspects Russian hackers planted fake news behind Qatar crisis," CNN, June 7, 2017, available at <http://www.cnn.com/2017/06/06/politics/russian-hackers-planted-fake-news-qatar-crisis/index.html>.
- 10 U.S. Air Forces Central Command, "Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC)," February 6, 2011, available at <http://www.afcent.af.mil/About/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/217803/combined-air-operations-center-caoc/>.
- 11 Greg Jaffe and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "For Qataris, a U.S. air base is best defense against Trump attacks," *The Washington Post*, June 6, 2017, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/06/06/for-qataris-a-u-s-air-base-is-best-defense-against-trump-attacks/>; John Vandiver and Chris Church, "Qatar blockade unlikely to affect US troops at al-Udeid base, officials say," *Stars and Stripes*, June 6, 2017, available at <https://www.stripes.com/news/qatar-blockade-unlikely-to-affect-us-troops-at-al-udeid-base-officials-say-1.472147#.WUFNwzPMYRs>.
- 12 Kenneth Katzman, "Kuwait: Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy" (Washington: Congressional Research Service, 2017), p. 9, available at <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RS21513.pdf>.
- 13 Joe Gould, "US-Qatar fighter jet sale worth \$21B in middle of diplomatic crisis," *Defense News*, June 6, 2017, available at <http://www.defensenews.com/articles/us-qatar-fighter-jet-sale-worth-21b-in-middle-of-diplomatic-crisis>.
- 14 Ryan Browne, "Amid diplomatic crisis Pentagon agrees \$12 billion jet deal with Qatar," CNN, June 14, 2017, available at <http://www.cnn.com/2017/06/14/politics/qatar-f35-trump-pentagon/>.
- 15 Katzman, "Qatar," p.15–16.
- 16 Total is sum of \$9 billion in sales from 2009 to 2015 plus the \$21 billion F-15 sale. See, CAP Middle East Team, "Leveraging U.S. Power in the Middle East" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2016), p. 32, available at <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/17125124/MiddleEast-report-print.pdf>.
- 17 Energy Information Administration, "Qatar," October 20, 2015, available at <https://www.eia.gov/beta/international/analysis.cfm?iso=QAT>.
- 18 Gulf Labor Markets and Migration Programme, "GCC: Total population and percentage of nationals and foreign nationals in GCC countries (national statistics, 2010-2016) (with numbers)," April 20, 2016, available at <http://gulfmigration.eu/gcc-total-population-percentage-nationals-foreign-nationals-gcc-countries-national-statistics-2010-2016-numbers/>.
- 19 Robert Mendick, "Terror financiers are living freely in Qatar, US discloses," *The Telegraph*, November 16, 2014, available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/islamic-state/11233407/Terror-financiers-are-living-freely-in-Qatar-US-discloses.html>.
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- 22 Erika Solomon, "The \$1bn hostage deal that enraged Qatar's Gulf rivals," *Financial Times*, June 5, 2017, available at <https://www.ft.com/content/dd033082-49e9-11e7-a3f4-c742b9791d43>.
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- 27 Anne Appelbaum, "Trump's bizarre and un-American visit to Saudi Arabia," *The Washington Post*, May 21, 2017, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2017/05/21/trumps-bizarre-and-un-american-visit-to-saudi-arabia/>; Jennifer Rubin, "Trump's un-American speech in Saudi Arabia," *The Washington Post*, May 21, 2017, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/right-turn/wp/2017/05/21/trumps-un-american-speech-in-saudi-arabia/>; Fareed Zakaria, "How Saudi Arabia played Donald Trump," *The Washington Post*, May 25, 2017, available at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/saudi-arabia-just-played-donald-trump/2017/05/25/d0932702-4184-11e7-8c25-44d09ff5a4a8\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/saudi-arabia-just-played-donald-trump/2017/05/25/d0932702-4184-11e7-8c25-44d09ff5a4a8_story.html).
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