



The Eurasia Center – Middle East Program

Qatar's Pivotal Role in the Middle East

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The skyline of Qatar's capital, Doha, in the morning (photo credit: Wikimedia)

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The skyline of Qatar's capital, Doha, in the morning (photo credit: Wikimedia Commons).

In the aftermath of the most recent conflict between Israel and Hamas, the militant organization currently ruling over the Gaza Strip in Palestine, millions of dollars of aid began to pour into Gaza to help in the rebuilding process. Multiple countries, including the United States, promised to aid in recovery and in tackling concurrent food, water, and electricity shortages. But none promised more money than the tiny country of Qatar, which pledged a staggering \$500 million in humanitarian aid and reconstruction funds.¹

Qatar may be a small and unassuming country, but it has grand plans for Middle East hegemony. In the past few years, Qatar has been embroiled in controversy, with the state being the subject of a multi-state diplomatic and trade boycott by nearby countries, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Beginning in 2017, the boycott only ended in January of 2021 after tense negotiations with the Saudi-led blockade coalition, Qatar, and mediator countries of Kuwait and the United States.

It may seem strange that countries like the UAE and Qatar would engage in such diplomatic spats, considering how much commonality the two Arab monarchies share. But the rift between Qatar and its neighbors reveals much about the churning of change in the Middle East, particularly in the aftermath of the Arab Spring and as the region is embroiled in a cold war between pro and anti-Iran

¹ Al Jazeera. "Qatar pledges \$500m for Gaza reconstruction." May 26, 2021.
<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/26/qatar-pledges-500-million-to-gaza-reconstruction>.

coalitions. Qatar has found itself at the intersection of Middle East's shifting alliances, with mercurial relations with the Saudi-led bloc, their Iranian rivals, and the third party of Turkey as it navigates its own foreign policy and engages in a strengthening of its worldwide soft power.

In order to understand the present and future of the Middle East, it is critical to understand the history of Qatar, the circumstances of its recent crises, and where the country is heading.

Background:



Map of Qatar (photo credit: Infoplease).

The State of Qatar is a nation of 4,471 mi² (11,581 km²) located on the Qatar Peninsula, holding only a single land border with Saudi Arabia and a coastline along the Persian Gulf. The country contains more than 2.7 million people, but like other fellow Gulf states such as the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, the vast majority of Qatar's inhabitants are expatriates, with only about 300,000 being native Qatari citizens. The largest expatriate groups include Indians, Nepalis, Bangladeshis, Filipinos, and Egyptians, with the country containing more Indians than actual Qataris.

In many ways, Qatar is almost indistinguishable from the UAE or Bahrain, from its brutal desert heat to its glitzy and modern capital of Doha. The state's history is similar to the rest of the Gulf monarchies, with the territory having been a British protectorate until full independence in 1971, and with absolute power being concentrated in the hands of a single family, the Al Thani dynasty; the current Emir, Tamim bin Hamad al Thani, came to power in 2013 after the death of his father. Qatar has also become fabulously wealthy off of petroleum reserves, and the state is the 15th largest producer of oil in the world despite being the 138th largest by population. Furthermore, Qatar is a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), a political economic union which includes Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Oman.

But where Qatar differs from its Gulf counterparts is in its political orientation: since the beginnings of the Arab Spring in 2011, the Al Thanis have supported revolutionary and civil society movements across the Middle East, in opposition to oppressive dictatorships and in an idealist bid to create a freer Arab World (though Qatar also supports autocratic groups such as Hamas). In particular, Qatar has helped fund numerous Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood, which seeks to rule the state according to religious law. When the Muslim Brotherhood member Mohamed Morsi won Egypt's first fully free presidential election in 2012, Qatar became a steadfast supporter of his, providing over \$7 billion of loans and aid to the new government.²

This Islamist orientation has put Qatar at direct odds with many of its neighbors. For instance, the UAE sees Islamism as a threat to stability in the region and to their own monarchical power, and it, along with Saudi Arabia and four other countries, have officially classified the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization. Both during and after the Arab Spring, the UAE, spearheaded by Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan, has generally sided with counter-revolutionary, anti-Islamist forces in the region: the UAE fully supported the 2013 Egyptian coup against Morsi, and has since become a key ally to the military government.³ Qatar, on the other hand, strongly condemned the coup, setting up a clear fault line between the two Gulf monarchies.

Qatar has also gained impressive soft power in both the Middle East and the Western World through its state-funded media network, Al Jazeera (literally meaning "The Island," referring to the Arabian peninsula). Although the network maintains editorial independence, it has been accused by

² Kristian Coates Ulrichsen. "Foreign policy implications of the new emir's succession in Qatar." NOREF. 2013. <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/170552/Foreign%20Policy%20Implications%20of%20the%20New%20Emir%20in%20Qatar.pdf>.

³ Andreas Kreig. "Divided over narratives: The new fault line in the Arab World." Middle East Institute. July 24, 2019. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/divided-over-narratives-new-fault-line-arab-world>.

critics of furthering the Qatari government's agenda and of promoting pro-Islamist views.⁴ Al Jazeera has particularly angered Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf monarchies due to negative coverage of those countries, such as human rights abuses and suppression of protests during the Arab Spring.⁵

Qatar's growing relationship with Iran became yet another key flashpoint between the GCC countries. Over the past few decades, Iran has been slowly expanding its influence in the Middle East through the support of Shia Islamic regimes and militias, putting it at odds with countries from Israel to Saudi Arabia. But although Iran's actions have caused most of the Gulf monarchies to form a united front against it, Qatar remained relatively cordial towards Tehran; Qatar shares the North Dome gas field with Iran, necessitating economic cooperation to keep the energy flowing.⁶ Qatar also hosts the al-Udeid airbase, the largest American base in the Middle East with over 10,000 active troops, and since the base would be a key target in the event of U.S.-Iran conflict, Qatar has been forced to keep a careful balancing act between warm U.S. and warm Iran relations.⁷

Finally, Qatar's close relationship with Turkey, another economic and political rival of Saudi Arabia, became controversial in the Gulf, albeit less so than Qatar's bonhomie with Iran. The Islamist bent of Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan has facilitated ties between the two countries, and in 2015 Turkey announced the planned creation of a Turkish military base in Qatar to host about 5,000 troops, drawing the ire of countries like the UAE which saw such a move as destabilizing to the Gulf region.⁸

Thus, it was a combination of Qatar's Islamist-oriented foreign policy, its close relationships with Iran and Turkey, and the influence of Al Jazeera that finally led Saudi Arabia and its allies to make a move to try and punish the maverick state.

⁴ Jeffrey Goldberg. "Why Does Al Jazeera Love a Hateful Islamic Extremist?". Bloomberg Opinion. July 10, 2013. <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2013-07-10/why-does-al-jazeera-love-a-hateful-islamic-extremist->

⁵ Kelly McEvers. "Bahrain: The Revolution That Wasn't." NPR. January 5, 2012. <https://www.npr.org/2012/01/05/144637499/bahrain-the-revolution-that-wasnt>.

⁶ Brett Sudetic and Giorgio Cafiero. "Iranian-Qatari Relations After Al-Ula." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. February 1, 2021. <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/83771>.

⁷ Sudetic and Cafiero.

⁸ Samuel Ramani. "The Qatar Blockade Is Over, but the Gulf Crisis Lives On." Foreign Policy. January 27, 2021. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/27/qatar-blockade-gcc-divisions-turkey-libya-palestine/>.

The Boycott:



The countries involved with the diplomatic boycott of Qatar (photo credit: DW).

On June 5, 2017, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt severed diplomatic relations with Qatar, expelling its diplomats from their countries and blocking Qatar from using their airspace and sea routes. Additionally, Saudi Arabia closed off Qatar's only land border. Six other countries would sign onto the boycott in later months, creating a full-blown diplomatic crisis in the Middle East.

The blockade coalition issued a set of thirteen demands to Qatar, which included the closing of Al Jazeera, the shutting down of Turkey's military base outside of Doha, and cutting off its support for organizations like Hezbollah and the Muslim Brotherhood.⁹ The United States appeared to initially support the boycott, with President Donald Trump endorsing Saudi claims that Qatar had an "extremist ideology in terms of funding" on June 9.¹⁰ However, the U.S. government would later call for dialogue between the Gulf states and mediation through neutral countries such as Kuwait; the Trump administration became concerned that the rift between Arab countries would impede a united regional front against Iran, and interfere with American operations at the al-Udeid base. Israel, which was not involved in the boycott but nonetheless has tense relations with Qatar due to

⁹ Colin Dwyer. "Neighboring Arab Nations Slap Qatar With 13-Point List Of Demands." NPR. June 23, 2017. <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/06/23/534079045/neighboring-arab-nations-slap-qatar-with-13-point-list-of-demands>.

¹⁰ Clark Mindock. "Donald Trump accuses Qatar of funding terrorism 'at very high level.'" The Independent. June 9, 2017. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/trump-qatar-terrorism-funding-saudi-arabia-gulf-accusation-very-high-level-a7782896.html>.

the latter's support of Hamas, also endorsed the blockade, with officials moving to ban Al Jazeera from operating in the country.¹¹

The boycott immediately shocked Qatar's economy, leading to its first negative GDP growth rate of -1.2% in decades. With Qataris ordered to leave the blockading countries within fourteen days, hundreds of mixed-citizenship couples and families faced separation. Now cut off from many of its neighbors, Qatar was forced to improvise, using its vast wealth reserves to open up alternative supply routes in the region. Trade with Turkey increased, and August 24, Qatar announced that it would be restoring full diplomatic relations with Iran, bringing the two countries even closer together; Doha had previously recalled its ambassador from Tehran after militants had attacked the Saudi embassy there in 2016.¹²

With assistance from Iran and Turkey, Qatar gradually became more self-sufficient in food and water production, an impressive achievement considering the desert country's status as one of the most water-stressed countries in the world, and one that traditionally imported 90% of its food supply.¹³ Qatar's domestic food production has increased ten-fold since the beginning of the blockade, and as of 2019, it has now become entirely self-sufficient in dairy production.¹⁴ Within a year of the blockade, Qatar's overall situation appeared to have stabilized, with its economy rebounding with a positive growth rate of 1.2%, and in 2019 Qatar achieved its first budget surplus in three years. Al Jazeera continued to operate and report on stories critical of Qatar's Gulf rivals, such as the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018.¹⁵

As the boycott dragged into its third year and into the coronavirus pandemic, a growing sense began to emerge that the blockade had failed, since the Saudi-led coalition had been unable to force Qatar to accede to any of its thirteen demands: Al Jazeera was still operating, Qatar continued to fund Islamist groups, and its relations with Iran had only deepened. The victory of Joe Biden in the 2020 U.S. presidential election in November was likely the spark to push Saudi Arabia and its Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to finally act to end the crisis, in a bid to improve U.S. relations. By late 2020, all parties began to engage in negotiations to end the protracted crisis, led by the United States and Kuwait. In December of that year, President Trump's son-in-law Jared

¹¹ The Times of Israel. "Netanyahu demands al-Jazeera offices in Israel be shut down." July 27, 2017. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-demands-al-jazeera-offices-in-israel-be-shut-down/>.

¹² Sudetic and Cafiero.

¹³ Laura Wellesley. "How Qatar's Food System Has Adapted to the Blockade." Chatham House. November 14, 2019. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2019/11/how-qatars-food-system-has-adapted-blockade>.

¹⁴ Wellesley.

¹⁵ Al Jazeera. "Timeline of the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi." February 26, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/26/timeline-of-the-murder-of-journalist-jamal-khashoggi>.

Kushner visited both Riyadh and Doha to help finalize a deal, and just as Trump was about to leave office, a breakthrough was reached.¹⁶

Aftermath and Qatar's Future:



The leaders of the GCC countries, including Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad al Thani (second from left), at the Al-Ula summit on January 6 (photo credit: Al Arabiya).

In January of 2021, Saudi Arabia announced it would reopen its borders to Qatar and end the country's diplomatic isolation. An agreement with Qatar and the blockade coalition was officially announced at a GCC summit in the Saudi city of Al-Ula on January 5, where the Gulf states signed a statement of "Arab and Islamic solidarity and stability."¹⁷

Activity among the GCC countries has been mostly quiet since then, with the region wrestling with the coronavirus pandemic and with Saudi Arabia busy with disengagement from its prolonged intervention in the Yemen conflict. But the implications of the blockade's ending are enormous, for both Qatar and for the entire Middle East. For instance, some have argued the blockade has helped further regional integration, with a more self-sufficient Qatar having effectively deepened

¹⁶ Vivian Yee and Michael Crowley. "Saudi Arabia Will Reopen Borders With Qatar, Easing a Regional Rift." The New York Times. January 4, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/04/world/middleeast/qatar-saudi-arabia.html>.

¹⁷ Al Jazeera. "Gulf states sign 'solidarity and stability' deal at GCC summit." January 5, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/1/5/gulf-states-sign-solidarity-and-stability-deal-at-gcc-summit>.

economic ties with Iran and Turkey; Turkey is now Qatar's 8th largest trading partner and Iran is its 15th largest, and with Turkey currently undergoing an economic debt crisis, Qatar's wealth has become a critical lifeline to Erdogan's government.¹⁸

But tensions still remain between the GCC countries. Qatar's independent foreign policy will only continue into the future: in Libya, for example, whose warring parties agreed to a ceasefire last year, the UAE and Qatar continue to support opposite sides, one affiliated with Islamists and the other categorically opposed to them.¹⁹ With regards to the eternal Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Qatar continues to be one of the primary backers of Hamas, with the state having reportedly giving over \$1 billion in financial aid to Gaza over the past decade. On the other hand, the UAE, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia have grown progressively closer to the Jewish state due to shared anti-Iran interests. Yet there are silver linings to Qatar's diverse foreign relationships: Qatar's closeness to both Hamas and the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank could give it power to encourage a Palestinian unity government, and its ties with both the U.S. and Iran could prove to be a key factor in mediation if relations between the two nations continue to worsen.²⁰

Ultimately, Qatar has found itself politically and economically strengthened by the crisis, and even its soft power is set to grow in the coming years. In Fall of 2022, Qatar will host the next FIFA World Cup, beginning in November—the tournament was moved from its traditional summer date due to Qatar's intense summer heat, where temperatures can reach highs of 122°F (43°C). Qatar's hosting of FIFA has also attracted controversy, however, due to allegations of abuse and harsh working conditions for South and Southeast Asian expatriate workers who helped construct the soccer stadiums.²¹ The status of such foreign laborers, who are largely responsible for building up the modern skylines that define the Gulf today, has long been a key criticism that human rights activists have levelled at Qatar and other GCC states, such as the UAE.

The FIFA controversy encapsulates the dual reality of Qatar. With its oil wealth, the country is able to punch far above its weight, to embark on idealistic and pragmatic quests for world influence and for change in the Middle East. But the state remains an object of suspicion and enmity, friendly with many countries and groups but not truly close with any one of them. Despite hardship and

¹⁸ Nader Kabbani. "The blockade on Qatar helped strengthen its economy, paving the way for regional integration." Brookings Institute. January 19, 2021. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/01/19/the-blockade-on-qatar-helped-strengthen-its-economy-paving-the-way-to-stronger-regional-integration/>.

¹⁹ Ramani.

²⁰ Shlomo Roiter Jesner. "Qatar Is Using the Palestinians to Assert Its Regional Influence." Foreign Policy. January 26, 2021. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/26/qatar-is-using-the-palestinians-to-assert-its-regional-influence/>.

²¹ Amnesty International. "Qatar World Cup Of Shame." Accessed July 1, 2021. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2016/03/qatar-world-cup-of-shame/>.

challenges from outside, however, Qatar will stay on course, pursuing its goals through whatever methods are necessary and remaining a key focal point in the ever-shifting dynamics of the Arab World.

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