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Qatar's Maverick Streak Leaves It Friendless in the Gulf

KRISTIAN COATES ULRICHSEN

The decision on June 5, 2017, by three Gulf states, joined by Egypt, to sever diplomatic ties with Qatar and impose economic and trade sanctions on their small neighbor caught many observers of regional and international politics by surprise. Relations between Qatar and its three partners in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)—Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Bahrain—were thought to have improved in the wake of a previous diplomatic dispute in 2014. Qatar's September 2015 deployment of 1,000 troops as part of a Gulf-led military operation in Yemen appeared to have sealed its return to the regional fold after years of mutual mistrust.

Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani participated in a May 2017 Riyadh summit at which US President Donald Trump called on Arab leaders to join forces against violent extremism. To the possible surprise of the neophyte president, the "Antiterror Quartet" that formed two weeks later was united against a fellow Sunni Arab state rather than Iran.

To understand the intense political and media campaign against Qatar that has unfolded this year, which has resulted in the outcast being placed under an indefinite diplomatic and economic embargo, it is necessary to examine the changing trajectory of Qatari statecraft over a period of at least 25 years. Decisions made in the early 1990s set the direction of policy making in Doha during the 18-year rule of Emir Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani after he seized power from his father in a June 1995 palace coup. Many of the decisions made by Sheikh Hamad, both as heir apparent and later as emir, were rational policy responses to the political and economic challenges of the time. But they set Qatar on a collision course with Saudi Arabia and the UAE on matters of regional geopolitics.

UNSTABLE TRIANGLE

Regional relationships among the eight nations of the Gulf—the six states that formed the GCC in 1981 (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE) plus Iraq and Iran—have long been defined by an asymmetry of size and power. Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Iraq have all viewed themselves as potential regional hegemons at various times over the past half-century. They have coexisted in an unstable triangular balance of power in which alignments have shifted over time. Moreover, as their passage to statehood was followed by the growth of centralizing governments in Riyadh, Tehran, and Baghdad, an imbalance of power between these three large powers and the five smaller coastal states on the Arabian Peninsula developed as well.

Power imbalances in the Gulf were given bite and urgency by repeated episodes in which all three larger states exhibited expansionist designs on at least one of their smaller neighbors. Iraq presented an existential threat to Kuwait long before Saddam Hussein turned it into reality with the invasion of August 1990. Kuwait lost two-thirds of its (desert) territory in 1922 when the British-organized trilateral Uqair Protocol settled the boundaries of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq. Four decades later, Iraq's military leader, Abd al-Karim Qassim, massed troops on the southern border as soon as Kuwait became an independent state in June 1961. His action necessitated the return of British troops to the erstwhile protectorate within six days of their departure. Further border skirmishes in the

KRISTIAN COATES ULRICHSEN *is a Middle East fellow at Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy. He is the author of, among other books,* Qatar and the Arab Spring *(Oxford University Press, 2014).*

1970s demonstrated the persistence of the Iraqi threat to Kuwait, though their limited extent may have lulled Kuwaiti (and international) observers into a sense of complacency regarding Saddam's intentions.

For Bahrain and the UAE, it was Iran rather than Iraq that represented the primary threat to their internal and external security. Iran under the shah claimed Bahrain as its "lost" fourteenth province, just as Iraqi leaders from Qassim to Saddam claimed Kuwait as Iraq's nineteenth governorate. In 1970, the year before Britain withdrew from all its remaining positions east of Suez and ended its protected-state relations with Bahrain, Qatar, and the Trucial States (which became the UAE), the issue of Iran's territorial claim over Bahrain was settled by a United Nations fact-finding mission led by the Italian diplomat Vittorio Winspeare Guicciardi. It found that Bahrainis—Sunni and Shia alike—overwhelmingly favored the option of becoming an independent Arab state rather than a province of Iran.

A year later, in November 1971, on the day before Britain's final withdrawal from the Gulf and the formal creation of the UAE, Iranian forces seized three islands in the Strait of Hormuz from the emirates of Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah. This show of force sent a clear message to the small, newly independent Gulf states (including Qatar) that their survival could not be taken for granted now that their longtime external security guarantor was departing.

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In Qatar's case, it was neither Iran nor Iraq but Saudi Arabia that had expansionist designs on the small peninsula that jutted out of its Eastern Province. In the 1930s, King Abdulaziz bin Abdulrahman Al Saud, the founder of the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, included the Qatari peninsula in the tribal territories that he suggested owed allegiance to him (rather than to the Al Thanis in Doha). Much more recently, and directly relevant to Qatar's post-1995 course, Saudi and Qatari forces were involved in two boundary skirmishes on their land border in 1992 and 1993. These skirmishes caused great consternation in Doha and likely encouraged the heir apparent, Sheikh Hamad, in his quest to develop a set of more autonomous regional policies that would enable Qatar to emerge from the Saudi shadow if not escape it altogether.

GAS-FUELED STRATEGY

For Sheikh Hamad, who had begun to take responsibility for much day-to-day decision making in Doha from 1989 onward, the Saudi skirmishes reinforced the central lesson of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait: the smaller Gulf states could partially offset their geostrategic vulnerability by using their vast energy resources to form trade linkages that would give their international partners a direct stake in their survival. The utility of such ties was illustrated in August 1990, when the United States assembled a 34-country coalition that demanded Iraq's withdraw from Kuwait and liberated the country through the use of military force.

Whereas Kuwait had oil in abundance to tie it into international trading networks, Qatar possessed vast undersea reserves of natural gas in the North Field, which overlaps the maritime boundary with Iran (where it is called the South Pars Field). The existence of these reserves had been known since the early 1970s, but it was not until the late 1980s that Qatar began to take steps to exploit the resource, using technological expertise and financing from Japan and Mobil Corp.

As heir apparent, Sheikh Hamad appointed a coterie of like-minded, ambitious young cabinet ministers, notably Foreign Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani (known as HBJ). They were equally anxious to accelerate Qatar's economic development and strategically utilize the resulting windfall. Qatar exported its first cargo of liquefied natural gas (LNG) in 1995, the year Sheikh Hamad became emir. Production expanded so rapidly that Qatar overtook Indonesia in 2006 to become the world's largest LNG exporter. The gas bonanza made this small emirate, with a population of just 2.6 million, the world's richest country by gross domestic product per capita.

Long-term gas contracts have created durable ties that bind Qatar to a range of industrialized and emerging economies in Europe and across the Asia-Pacific region. Many countries, including China, Japan, and South Korea, would experience immediate disruption to their energy mix should LNG imports from Qatar be interrupted or halted.

The forging of energy security linkages provided Qatar with a degree of strategic depth, ensuring that a range of external partners effectively became stakeholders in its continuing stability. Any attempt—by Saudi Arabia or any other state—to

swallow up Qatar would neither go unnoticed nor gain international acquiescence, given all that is now at stake.

After running a budget deficit for every year but one in the 1980s and 1990s, Qatar enjoyed surpluses after 2001 as both the volume and the price of its energy exports began to soar. This success provided Emir Hamad and HBJ with the resources that underpinned Qatar's emergence as a regional and even international actor in the 2000s. The decisions they made on how to utilize this revenue stream caused friction with many of Qatar's neighbors.

Friction points

An early indication that Qatar under "the two Hamads" was prepared to go its own way was the launch of Al Jazeera in 1996. The satellite television network was established by decree in February 1996 after a year of preparation (which straddled Emir Hamad's June 1995 assumption of power). It began with 6 hours of programing each day before expanding to 24 hours in 1999. Al Jazeera reportedly was given a one-time grant of $137 million by the emir as seed money, and is said to have continued to receive state funding. Even the pretense of a separation of interest has evaporated since 2011, when a member of the ruling family replaced the Palestinian journalist Wadah Khanfar as director-general of the Al Jazeera Media Network.

Al Jazeera rapidly gained a mass audience across the Arab and Islamic world. Its no-holds-barred coverage of events contrasted sharply with the placid state-owned news outlets elsewhere in the region (even while it appeared reluctant to cover domestic developments within Qatar itself). Programs such as *as-Sharia wa'l-Hayat* (Religion and Life) provided a region-wide platform to the Egyptian cleric and Muslim Brotherhood associate Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who had taken up residency in Qatar in 1962 after fleeing a crackdown on the Brotherhood in Egypt under the rule of Gamal Abdel Nasser.

The prominent platform given to Qaradawi and other dissidents caused great friction with many Arab governments and embroiled Qatar in numerous diplomatic disputes in the 1990s and 2000s. Typical of these was a Saudi decision in 2002 to withdraw its ambassador from Doha in response to Al Jazeera's giving airtime to Saudi political dissidents critical of the royal family. It took nearly five years for the Saudis to restore full diplomatic representation.

If Al Jazeera was one flashpoint in Qatar's relations with other Arab states—including Egypt before the 2011 uprising that ousted President Hosni Mubarak—Qaradawi's presence in Qatar highlighted another. More by accident than by design, Doha had become home to dozens of political exiles from across the Arab and Islamic world by 2011. As David Roberts, a scholar of Qatari foreign policy at King's College London, has noted, while there does not appear to have been any overarching plan at work, Sheikh Jassim Mohammed Al Thani, the mid-nineteenth-century ruler seen today as Qatar's founding father, referred to his country as the "Kaaba of the dispossessed" (*Kaaba li'l Madiyoum*). This practice of providing a haven for exiles continued through the twentieth century to the present day.

Qaradawi and other Egyptian Muslim Brothers became formative influences on Qatari educational and judicial development in the 1960s and 1970s. More recent arrivals in the 1990s and 2000s included Hamas leader Khalid Mishal, Islamist opponents of Muammar el-Qaddafi's rule in Libya, and Azmi Bishara, a former Israeli-Arab member of the Knesset who reportedly played an important role in shaping Emir Hamad's response to the Arab Spring in 2011. Qatar also hosted an office of the Afghan Taliban, at the request of the United States, in an unsuccessful effort in 2013 to facilitate peace talks with Afghan government representatives.

Peacemaking ambitions

Indeed, another hallmark of Qatari regional policy before the Arab Spring was a growing interest in providing diplomatic mediation. Emir Hamad inserted a commitment to the peaceful resolution of international disputes into Article 7 of the new Qatari constitution that he pushed through in 2003. He and HBJ placed mediation at the core of their foreign policy objectives. Doing so offered a chance to make a statement of autonomy as well as intent to wield influence both regionally and internationally.

In quick succession, Qatar held the rotating chairs of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (2000–3), the GCC (2002), and the G77 plus China at the UN (2004). This debut in regional and inter-regional politics culminated in Qatar's election to a rotating seat on the UN Security Council in 2006–7. Qatar drew international attention as the only Security Council member to abstain on Resolution 1696, which expressed concern over

Iran's nuclear program and demanded that Tehran stop the enrichment of uranium.

After an unsuccessful attempt to reconcile the Palestinian factions Fatah and Hamas in October 2006, Emir Hamad and HBJ won regional plaudits in May 2008 when they brokered the Doha Agreement to end a protracted power-sharing dispute in Lebanon. Qatar also mediated in conflicts in Sudan and Yemen at around the same time, but without achieving a similar breakthrough.

These experiences, while uneven, gained Qatar a reputation as a "nonstop mediator," as a *New York Times* headline put it in 2008, and contributed to its growing international profile. However, Qatar's attempt to mediate in the conflict between the Yemeni government of President Ali Abdullah Saleh and Houthi rebels was resisted by Saudi officials as an unwelcome intrusion into a country that traditionally had been in the Saudi sphere of influence. Qatar also drew a degree of criticism from more seasoned practitioners of diplomatic mediation who pointed out that the Qatari approach appeared to be resolutely top-down, cutting out grassroots organizations, and prioritizing "Band-Aid" outcomes that did not address the roots of conflict.

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Welcoming the Spring

All the above-mentioned issues—Al Jazeera, the hosting of political exiles, and deeper engagement in regional politics—shaped Qatar's assertive response to the Arab Spring in 2011. A final factor was a coincidence of timing: the uprisings began in Tunisia in December 2010, just over two weeks after Qatar was awarded the hosting rights for the 2022 World Cup. Qatar's achievement in navigating the murky politics of FIFA, the global governing body of soccer, to outmaneuver Australia and the United States and capture arguably the biggest sporting event of all crowned its emergence on the international stage. Flush with a success of this magnitude—notwithstanding subsequent allegations that it may have been attained with the help of underhanded payments—Qatar entered the Arab Spring with its national self-confidence at a zenith and a feeling that anything might be possible if enough resources were made available.

Uniquely among countries in the Middle East and North Africa, Qatar's rulers had nothing to fear from the powerful demands for political and economic inclusion that swept across the region in 2011. With per capita GDP for Qatari nationals exceeding $300,000, there was virtually no appetite for rocking the boat or questioning the status quo. Qatar also lacked a relatively marginalized hinterland—such as Ras al-Khaimah, a backwater to the cosmopolitan cities of Abu Dhabi and Dubai in the UAE—where higher levels of economic inequality might translate into political unrest or support for Islamist alternatives. Foreign workers constitute up to 85 percent of the population of Qatar; while many complain of economic exploitation, they do not represent a political challenge to the status quo. The Qatari ruling elite thus viewed the Arab Spring as an opportunity rather than a challenge, and a chance to brand Qatar as something different even as their counterparts in Bahrain, 20 miles off Qatar's northwestern shoreline, forcibly suppressed political demonstrations.

Within the seven months from March to October 2011, Qatar played a key role in the campaign that ended Qaddafi's 42-year rule in Libya. Holding the rotating leadership of the Arab League, Qatar rallied Arab support for UN Resolution 1973 in March 2011, which authorized a NATO-led no-fly zone over Libya. Qatar participated in the subsequent air campaign and provided material and logistical support for Libyan opposition forces throughout the conflict. It also deployed special forces and sent a flow of weapons to selected (mainly Islamist) militias on the ground. The apparent success of the Libyan intervention added to Qatari leaders' confidence and likely contributed to their enthusiasm to do something similar in Syria. Emir Hamad became the first Arab leader to call for a military intervention to end the Assad regime's brutal response to the uprising.

Each of the factors that shaped Qatari foreign policy before 2011 came together during and immediately after the Arab Spring. Al Jazeera dominated regional and international coverage of the uprisings with its nonstop reporting of events—and, on its Arabic channel, with an editorial slant its critics called increasingly partisan. An Egyptian affiliate, Al Jazeera Mubasher Misr, became a flashpoint. Qatar's critics labeled the channel little more than a mouthpiece for the Muslim Brotherhood. They successfully demanded its closure as a price for ending the 2014 installment of the simmering diplomatic dispute between Qatar and its neighbors.

Many of the exiles based in Doha returned to their home countries after the uprisings with Qatari financial and logistical support, fueling accusations that Qatar was inserting itself into the domestic affairs of other states in the region. Qatar's activist response to regional upheaval also spurred the UAE and Saudi Arabia into developing more assertive policies of their own. Emirati support for "secular" militias in Libya was countered by Qatar's sponsorship of Islamist groups, laying the foundation for the subsequent conflict that tore apart post-Qaddafi Libya. In Syria, Saudi assistance to different groups of rebels—both Salafi and secular—complicated and undermined attempts to form a unified opposition front in the critical early period of the civil war. In May 2013, an investigation by the *Financial Times* estimated that Qatar had provided up to $3 billion in support for Syrian rebel groups during the first two years of the conflict, much of which proved difficult to trace.

In 2013, the speed with which Saudi Arabia and the UAE moved to replace Qatar as the boldest actors in regional politics spoke volumes. Within the space of eight days in June and July, Emir Hamad handed over power to his 33-year-old son, Sheikh Tamim, and General Abdel Fattah El-Sisi toppled the Muslim Brotherhood presidency of Mohamed Morsi in Cairo. While there is no evidence to suggest a link between the two events, Emir Tamim nevertheless faced an immediate foreign policy crisis that signaled the unraveling of the big bet made by his father and HBJ (who also stepped down as foreign minister and prime minister that month).

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Ever since, Tamim's time as emir has been taken up by addressing the fallout from Qatar's Arab Spring actions and choices, struggling to convince a skeptical regional audience that his government has made a clean break with the policies of the past. Although Tamim has systematically removed members of the old guard in successive government reshuffles since 2013, officials in Abu Dhabi, especially, remain certain that "the Father Emir" and HBJ are still pulling the strings behind the scenes in Doha.

Part of the reason that Saudi and Emirati leaders felt unable to give Tamim the benefit of the doubt lay in the discovery that Egyptian members of the Muslim Brotherhood who escaped Sisi's crackdown in 2013 had found sanctuary in Doha and started to convene to discuss the next steps for the organization. Although such gatherings are likely to have occurred without explicit sanction from, or even the knowledge of, the Qatari government, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia summoned Tamim to a showdown meeting in Riyadh in November 2013.

At the meeting, the emir of Kuwait, Sabah al-Ahmad Al Sabah, attempted to mediate between the Saudi and Qatari rulers, as he has also done in the latest round of their dispute this year. Emir Tamim nevertheless was made to sign a document stipulating that Qatar would stop interfering in the affairs of its neighbors. He was given three months to comply.

In March 2014, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE all judged that Qatar had failed to change its behavior sufficiently, and withdrew their ambassadors from Doha in the name of security and stability. The rupture of diplomatic relations was not unknown in Qatar's history—the Saudis had withdrawn their ambassador for several years in the previous decade, while Qatar and Bahrain established full ties only in 1997, fully 26 years after independence. But the coordinated action by three GCC members against a fourth was unprecedented.

While the withdrawal of the diplomats was not accompanied by economic penalties such as those applied this year, Saudi Arabia and the UAE used the 2014 confrontation to designate the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization. Given Qatar's hosting of Brotherhood exiles in Doha and its apparent support for Brotherhood affiliates in post–Arab Spring transition states, this move was a clear signal from Qatar's detractors—particularly Abu Dhabi—that such behavior would no longer be tolerated.

VISCERAL TENSIONS

Led by the hawkish security clique clustered around the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the UAE has adopted a very different position on Islamists than Qatar, taking a hard-line approach toward rolling back their interests across the Middle East. This diametrically opposed stance explains the visceral tensions between the UAE and Qatar, both in 2014 and in 2017.

Emirati anger was also provoked, in part, by the discovery that several Islamists who had escaped a security crackdown in the UAE in 2012 had found sanctuary in Doha. For policy makers in the UAE (and in Saudi Arabia), this appeared to be an indication that Doha was returning to business as usual, providing a haven for exiles and support for Islamist groups, despite Emir Tamim's protestations to the contrary. After an eight-month standoff, punctuated by periods of Kuwaiti mediation and Qatari concessions (which included expelling the Emirati dissidents and relocating the Muslim Brotherhood exiles to Turkey), a meeting in Riyadh in November 2014 produced an agreement that ended the dispute.

The terms of the 2014 Riyadh agreement, and the question of whether Qatar has honored them, have come to the fore in the 2017 iteration of the spat. The Antiterror Quartet, as the four blockading states call themselves, is adamant that Qatar remains a dangerous regional maverick. They have made allegations with varying degrees of credibility, linking Qatar to terrorist organizations and even al-Qaeda's September 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States (in which 18 of the 19 hijackers were from the countries of the Antiterror Quartet).

The timing of the 2017 rupture suggests that officials in Abu Dhabi and Riyadh may have aimed to take advantage of the benign political climate offered by the new Trump administration in the United States, whose views on Islamist extremism align closely with their own. Years of anger at Doha's brash regional policies may have made the opportunity to put Qatar back in its place too tempting to pass up. Moreover, the startling rise to prominence of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Saudi Arabia, after his father became king in January 2015, sealed the emergence of an aggressive new axis linking him with his counterpart in Abu Dhabi. Having put up with Qatar's disruptive behavior for so long, Mohammed bin Salman and Mohammed bin Zayed appear unwilling to do so any longer, even if the initial shock and awe of their diplomatic and economic sanctions failed to produce immediate results.

Six months into the standoff initiated on June 5 by the Antiterror Quartet, the initial flurry of diplomatic and economic sanctions on Qatar has given way to a series of inflammatory informal measures. The shift from formal to informal is most likely a reflection of the quartet's failure to secure the support of the United States or broad sections of the Arab and Islamic world for the isolation of Qatar. While it is too early to say whether this miscalculation will rebound on the dynamic leadership styles of the crown princes of Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi, the personalized and bitterly acrimonious nature of the dispute threatens to inflict long-term damage on the social fabric of Gulf societies. Thirty-six years of moves toward regional cooperation is at risk as the GCC faces its most severe crisis since the bloc came together at great speed in response to external threats in 1981.

The prospect of a generational rift in a hitherto strongly knit web of political and security partnerships in the Gulf is deeply concerning to US and European policy makers. Moreover, the apparent inability of any of the parties to back down means they might continue to support informal policies that veer dangerously close to meddling in their neighbor's domestic affairs. Initial Kuwaiti attempts to mediate have failed to produce results but may at least have prevented the dispute from escalating further. Aside from creating bad blood that will take years to overcome, any additional escalations risk providing openings for new players to insert themselves into regional security affairs in ways that may increase tensions even more and reinforce the divergent trajectories that have led to this point. ■

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