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Arab States Give China a Pass on Uyghur Crackdown

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Brief Analysis

Leaders in the Middle East have calculated that defending the Muslim minority is not worth the risk of losing Chinese economic, political, and military assistance.

On August 21, Qatar informed the UN Human Rights Council that it was withdrawing from a multilateral letter it had signed in support of China's actions against the Muslim Uyghur minority in the restive Xinjiang province. Although it is unclear what exactly spurred this reversal, the decision is hardly a sign that Doha is preparing to call Beijing out publicly or scale down its bilateral ties. Ali al-Mansouri, Qatar's permanent representative to the UN, explained the move in innocuous terms: "We wish to maintain a neutral stance, and we offer our mediation and facilitation services." That careful wording is unsurprising given that Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani has met with Chinese president Xi Jinping twice in the past six months and agreed to enhance strategic cooperation with Beijing.

More important, Qatar's stance highlights a wider trend: when given the opportunity to address the issue alongside their fellow UN members, every Arab government in the Gulf region and beyond has chosen to either ignore or voice support for China's human rights violations against Muslim Uyghurs, two million of whom live in Xinjiang alone. How to explain the fact that so many Muslim-majority states are essentially giving China a pass on well-documented abuses against their co-religionists?

COMPETING UN LETTERS

In July, two coalitions signed opposing letters to the UN Human Rights Council regarding the Uyghur issue: [one criticizing China's policies in Xinjiang](#), and the [other backing them](#). The first camp, consisting of twenty-two countries, called on Beijing to stop its campaign of mass detentions, surveillance, and restrictions against Uyghurs and other minorities in the province.

The second camp, with thirty-seven countries, submitted a letter that read at times like a Chinese propaganda statement. After saluting Beijing's "remarkable achievements in the field of human rights," the letter argued that the Xinjiang crackdown was intended to combat terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism—three problems that "have seriously infringed upon human rights" in the province, including "the right to life, health, and development." The letter singled out some of China's specific "counterterrorism and deradicalization measures" for praise, such as "setting up vocational education and training centers."

The geographical divergence between the two camps is striking. The first camp consisted mainly of European states, while the second was dominated by African and Middle Eastern states, among them Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, and the United Arab Emirates.

WHY THE ARAB SILENCE?

As in other parts of the world, Arab governments craft their foreign policies based on their own individual sociopolitical circumstances and a wide array of often-competing goals. Yet their universal willingness to back or ignore China's treatment of the Uyghurs seems to stem from several shared concerns.

Solidarity on non-interference. Before Qatar's withdrawal, all six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council signed the pro-China letter, notwithstanding their bitter differences on so many other issues. One way to explain this is that all of these states have more or less authoritarian governments and do not like foreign mingling in their affairs. In their view, intervening in China's internal affairs would leave them open to similar interference. For instance, Saudi Arabia does not want to invite any more international pressure than it already faces regarding the Jamal Khashoggi case. As for signatories outside the GCC, Egypt is leery of international calls to improve conditions for its thousands of political prisoners, so criticizing China's mass detentions [is not an option](#).

Fear of political Islam. This concern intensified among many Arab governments after 2011, when uprisings across the region and the empowerment of political Islamists coincided with a spike in jihadist terrorism that destabilized several states. Since then, Arab leaders have become even more uncomfortable with conflicts built on religious ideology, and most of them associate political Islam with terrorism. As such, their domestic efforts to combat terrorism have made them sympathetic toward Beijing's claim that the Uyghur crackdown is a counterterrorism campaign. This is why a country like Egypt is willing to let Chinese authorities interrogate Uyghurs in Cairo, and to praise Beijing for detaining hundreds of thousands of them in Xinjiang.

Fear of separatist movements. Historically, the Uyghur region of Xinjiang has been of strategic importance to China because it served as a bridge to Central Asia and the Middle East. Yet the area's diverse ethnicities and cultures have made it very difficult for Beijing to govern and stabilize. After 2011, China began to worry that the unrest sweeping the Arab world could have ripple effects in Muslim areas of northwest Xinjiang, encouraging the province's existing separatist movements to push harder for independence. Today, Beijing claims that the Uyghur controversy is a Western-propagated conspiracy aimed at hindering China's progress by creating ethnic minority divisions within its borders— similar to the situation in many Arab states, where governments tend to view Kurdish and other minority movements as Western-fueled attempts to sow internal strife and separatism. Arab and Chinese leaders alike are firm believers in suppressing any such movements within their borders.

Desire for economic development. China's ongoing Belt and Road Initiative seeks to link Asia and Europe with an ambitious slate of land and maritime infrastructure projects, many of them in the Middle East. So far, Beijing has

reached BRI cooperation agreements with eighteen Arab countries, and Chinese companies have signed \$35.6 billion in contracts there, \$1.2 billion of it directed toward local energy and manufacturing sectors. Meanwhile, China's trade with Arab countries reached \$244.3 billion last year, and the government is currently preparing for two investment meetings early next month: the fourth China-Arab States Expo and the third China-Arab Economic Summit. Such ties give Arab states another potent reason to avoid criticizing China, as Beijing is wont to remind them. On August 21, for example—the same day Qatar withdrew from the UN letter—the newly appointed Chinese ambassador to Doha praised the relationship between the two countries and noted that “Qatar is China's second-largest source of LNG import.”

Belief that China is too big to challenge. Arab countries have many political and military ties with China as well, and in their view, defending the Uyghurs is not worth risking them. China has so much global influence and is clearly not afraid to assert it, so Arab states rightly fear that questioning events in Xinjiang could spur Beijing to take any number of punitive actions against them.

WHAT CAN WASHINGTON DO?

The United States withdrew from the Human Rights Council last year, so there was little it could do about the competing UN letters. Yet Washington can still do much to shape the international conversation on the Uyghur issue. Putting a Uyghur American in charge of the China portfolio on the National Security Council was a promising bilateral step, but officials should also invest more effort and funds to counter the Chinese narrative internationally.

This includes increasing Arab and Muslim awareness of what is happening in Xinjiang—and locally, to Uyghur activists in countries like Egypt. In general, the Arab world tends to be uninterested in China's internal affairs. This is a problem in of itself, since it has fostered widespread public ignorance of developments that would otherwise be quite relevant to them. To fill this void, Alhurra television and other U.S. government media directed at the Arab world could raise awareness of Muslim Uyghurs and dispel Chinese government claims that the unrest is entirely caused by terrorists. Increased understanding among the masses could in turn make it more difficult for Arab governments to kowtow before the more troubling aspects of Beijing's foreign policy.

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