

The Gulf Crisis Is a Messaging Nightmare—With No Success in Sight

by [Hassan Mneimneh \(/experts/hassan-mneimneh\)](#)

Jun 21, 2019

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/azmt-alkhlyj-rsalt-kabwsyt-bla-njah-fy-alafq\)](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Hassan Mneimneh \(/experts/hassan-mneimneh\)](#)

Hassan Mneimneh is a contributing editor with Fikra Forum and a principal at Middle East Alternatives in Washington.



Brief Analysis

Nearly two years have lapsed since what was supposed to be a political blitzkrieg against Qatar metastasized into economic and geo-strategic trench warfare. Through effective counter-measures—and despite considerable financial drain—Qatar has seemingly been able to withstand the harsh diplomatic and logistic constraints imposed by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in conjunction with Bahrain and Egypt. Though incurring substantive extra expenditures due to the blockade, Qatar credibly claims that it will be able to maintain the new status quo of boycott and siege “forever.”

By opting for a reactive and ostensibly understated posture, Qatar has lured the Saudi-UAE alliance to numerous overstatements and missteps during the past two years. Today, Qatar conveys a message of steadfastness and confidence, while the opposing party seems mired in unconvincing polemics to deflect from its apparent aggressive stance.

Qatar’s narrative can be shown to be at odds with the facts, and the clumsily articulated grievances against Qatar do have meaningful substance. Yet the ongoing efficacy of Qatar’s messaging underlines the reality that the current approach towards Qatar has proven to be ineffective. At its heart, the conflict remains a counter-productive plan to tackle a legitimate concern. And though Qatar’s responses to Saudi and Emirati actions may have proven the latter’s accusations on the former’s proclivity to engage in policies detrimental to its Gulf and Western partners, there is little consolation in this vindication. The conflict between Gulf states is in fact strengthening the hand of malignant and malevolent state and non-state actors in the region.

Qatar is able to maintain its position due to a potent messaging structure designed to appeal to outside observers. Through the calm and reasonable demeanor of its statesmen, a consistent reconciliatory tone, and a near total avoidance in its official statements of inflammatory polemics—amplified through a generously funded and well-honed media infrastructure with both overt and covert branches—Qatar has succeeded in dominating the narrative of the Gulf crisis.

In the Qatari narrative, the country is a clear ‘victim’ as a small state that values national sovereignty, international norms, and freedom of the press. Images of Saudi Arabia and the UAE as strong ‘aggressors’ are boosted by grandiose rhetoric from Riyadh from the early stages of the crisis that smacked of bravado, deprecating a diminutive

Qatar and pledging a swift victory against it. Though this early rhetoric failed to reflect the conflict's more complex reality, it provided ample opportunity for the Doha media machine to lament the despotism, anachronism, and bullying of Qatar's detractors.

This speaks to a fundamental error committed by the Saudi-UAE alliance: mis-framing the rationale for hostile action, and over-shooting in its application. According to the maximalist list of demands issued a few days after the onset of its sudden and harsh ostracism, Qatar was in essence denounced for its "support for terrorism" and for allowing its broadcast media to host dissident voices critical of the Saudi, Emirati, Egyptian, and other regional governments.

In response to these allegations, the measures taken by Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, and their allies were extreme. The boycott of Qatar was intended to be total. It allegedly forced families of mixed nationality to separate, expelled and recalled students without deference to the academic calendar, and suspended all trade and communications until demands on Qatar for a de facto surrender were met.

The allegations for Qatari support for terrorism are credible if the threshold for this claim includes engaging terrorist organizations to secure the release of hostages or other humanitarian interests on a topical basis, or seeking to lure and subvert less virulent local groups into arrangements that prevent their assimilation into hard international terrorist networks. However, such a definition would certainly also expose Saudi Arabia, and probably even the UAE, for having previously resorted to similar maneuvers in Syria, Libya, and Yemen.

In fact, the allegations driving the boycott were motivated by Qatar's embrace of the Muslim Brotherhood and its derivative organizations, which Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, and Cairo have assessed as indistinguishable from hard terrorism. The fact that the designation of the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization is a controversial point of view in many Western capitals, including Washington, may explain the other Arab states' reluctance to openly focus on the Qatar-MB nexus. In fact, anti-Qatar discourse, while rarely emerging above reductionist statements, seemed custom-crafted to suit Western capitals. In turn, the narrative seemed to have involved little effort to endow it with the credibility to insure local and regional popular support.

Thus, in lieu of a substantive case delineating the anti-Qatar faction, the Gulf public was subjected to a cultural campaign of boastful poetry, songs, and broadcast programs appealing to tribal sensitivities and country rivalries. These efforts to bolster popular support for the boycott had questionable traction and came with worrisome potential consequences.

Also concerning was that these steps obfuscated a more intricate case against Qatar, built on the Qatari embrace of the Muslim Brotherhood, a MB stranglehold on some facets of Qatari international media networks, and actual aggressive actions taken by Qatar prior to the open hostilities between Gulf states.

In the Spring of 2017, a slickly-produced feature-length documentary called "The Black Hands" was disseminated over the internet. It bore all the marks and production quality standards of the Qatari media machine, and it blamed UAE leadership for a series of consecutive actions that subverted the "Arab Spring." The documentary claimed that UAE efforts were part of a counter-revolutionary drive serving neo-imperial and Israeli interests.

This documentary existed in a broader media environment where Qatari-sponsored media afforded space for Gulf dissidents to make both subtle and explicit conspiracy-oriented accusations. The subsequent concern in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi over the spread of the documentary ought not to be reduced to a mere autocratic revulsion to free speech. It should be understood instead as a legitimate questioning of a sophisticated, subversive media operation, which continues to thrive through an effectively selective focus.

The discussion of the documentary was overtaken by the cascading events of the Saudi-UAE action against Qatar. Yet it foreshadowed the Qatari response to the boycott in its official and global media, which initially appeared with

mere allusions and incrementally developed vocal expressions in line with the insinuations of the documentary.

Over a year later, the strength of the Qatari media machine was demonstrated by its exploitation of the murderous blunder committed by Saudi Arabia in the assassination of journalist and public intellectual Jamal Khashoggi. The murder resulted in the derailing of the country's image crafting efforts abroad to present Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman as a visionary reformist.

More significantly, the failure of the boycott to deliver its intended result in the anticipated time frame has enabled Qatar to strengthen its ties with both Turkey and Iran. This has come at the detriment of a cohesive Gulf stance against Tehran's ambitions and in favor of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's proclivity to steer his country away from its Western alignment. The Qatari media sphere portrays Qatar's actions, which Saudi and Emirati-sponsored press characterize as revealing of its true traitorous nature, as efforts towards moderation against "extremist" leaderships in the region that is in turn supported by "extremist" leadership in Washington and Tel Aviv.

This messaging rivalry has effectively decimated reporting of substance in Gulf media; disparaging arcane reports dominate news coverage while heated partisan polemics replaces strategic orientations. While meaningful news initiatives such as the American Alhurra, France 24, and Germany's DW Arabic have stepped in to fill the gap that this rivalry created, both Russia and Iran have also embarked on momentous media efforts to take advantage of Arab readership looking for new media sources. These sources supply narratives that complement and supplement Qatari media messaging.

Aside from the conflict's corrosive effect on Gulf media, Qatari and Saudi-Emirati funds alike are being locked into competing patterns of depletion. Governments on both sides are investing in venues and locales in deeply consequential and sometimes lethal circumstances, such as in Libya, Yemen, and possibly Sudan. Other efforts, while not actively fatal, are disruptive to economies and policies of other regions, in African countries in particular, while still other efforts attempt to draw in outside media and policy outlets towards serving each of the dueling sides.

During this crisis, the United States has not lived up to the leadership position it commands in the Gulf. By omission and commission, it has enabled a side conflict to degenerate into a fraternal global war, which has as a side-effect the attrition of U.S. interests as well as the potential for peace and security in the Gulf and beyond. It is time for the United States to exercise its leadership; it is time to end the Gulf civil war.

Ending the conflict will not be easy. Indeed, from an immediate U.S. perspective, the Gulf dispute has translated into a financial windfall. In spite of Qatari media's caricature of the United States, both sides have issued massive arms orders to American companies and have made considerable investment promises. Each side sought to win the endorsement of the White house for its position or prevent statements in support of its rival. While the prevalent view in Washington is that these efforts to woo the United States are serendipitous, the Arab press is characterizing these overtures as revealing the predatory nature and direct responsibility of the United States in "creating" the Gulf dispute. This is added ammunition in a resurgent anti-Americanism in the Arab world that is building upon the successive positions of the U.S. administration, and that is being thoroughly exploited by Iranian and Russian media operations. Thus, working to put an end to the crisis is, in the long term, only in Washington's interests.

The Saudi-UAE-led boycott of Qatar has not achieved its goals. The current status of the stalemate allows for relationship and alliance patterns to continue to evolve in a way that is detrimental to both Gulf and U.S. interests. Only a forceful, proactive stance from the White House that lays out a realistic endgame for the crisis is capable of insuring the real interests of all involved and avoiding a further degeneration into fratricidal threats. Thus, Washington must address the legitimate concerns of the anti-Qatar coalition short of their demand for a total surrender. And the United States should work towards a plan to restore national Qatari governance over its global

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

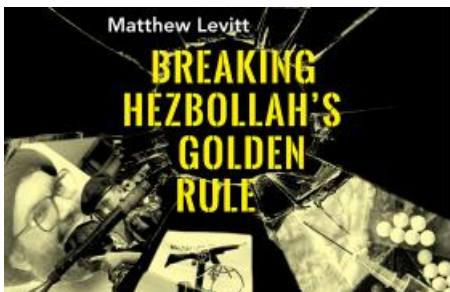
[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)

