

To Counter Iran, Trump Must Rebuild a United Gulf

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Mohammed Soliman is a Huffington Fellow at the Georgetown University's Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, where he focuses on US strategy in the Middle East. He appears frequently on television interviews to provide expert commentary on unfolding current events in the Middle East. Soliman has published in several media outlets, including Foreign Affairs, Open Democracy and La Stampa, as well as analysis for the Middle East Institute.



Brief Analysis

As international court hearings [begin \(https://www.reuters.com/article/us-gulf-crisis-qatar-emirates/qatar-takes-uae-to-u-n-human-rights-court-over-boycott-idUSKBN1J713S\)](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-gulf-crisis-qatar-emirates/qatar-takes-uae-to-u-n-human-rights-court-over-boycott-idUSKBN1J713S) over Qatari allegations against the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) actions during the Gulf crisis, it is worth examining the catalysts of this event, along with potential alternatives for settling the dispute. Despite relatively good relations with all sides, the Trump administration has played an ambivalent role in the regional conflict thus far. In order to bring this conflict to a conclusion, Washington must work to contain and resolve the Gulf crisis. Left to fester, this clash will undermine broader U.S. strategic efforts to contain Iran—the United States cannot effectively deal with the Iranian threat without ensuring that Washington has a united ally base in the region.

The conflict between the two camps, while beginning in the days of the Arab Spring in 2011, reached its peak in June 2017, when Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt cut off ties with Qatar in response to what the quartet characterized as support for terrorism and foreign policy goals diverging from the former countries' interests. These four states withdrew their ambassadors from Doha and imposed trade and travel bans, demanding Qatar's compliance with thirteen points outlined by the quartet in order to lift sanctions. Yet Qatar resisted pressures to capitulate and is pushing back against the siege states' isolating practices, now over a year old, through international recourse. From June 27 to June 29, the International Court of Justice will hold public hearings over Qatar's claim that the UAE is responsible for actions affecting the human rights of Qatari residents.

In the meantime, President Donald Trump has played host to two Gulf monarchs who have asked the White House to support their respective—and opposing—sides of the ongoing crisis. In the first visit on March 19, the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman and President Trump agreed to a multibillion dollar arms deal that Trump has heralded as bringing investment and new jobs to the United States, a message that resonates with Trump's electoral base. Replicating the Saudi model in dealing with President Trump, Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani visited the White House the following month and [emphasized \(https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-amir-tamim-bin-hamad-al-thani-state-qatar-bilateral-meeting/\)](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-amir-tamim-bin-hamad-al-thani-state-qatar-bilateral-meeting/) that the economic partnership between Qatar and the United States is worth "more than \$125 billion," and that he plans "to double it in the next coming years." These two visits emphasized the continued sway Washington holds in both camps, as well as the deep economic ties between the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar.

Yet the administration's apparent assessment that the Gulf crisis is an opportunity to benefit U.S. military industries, a reflection of Trump's "America First" policy, is an approach to the situation that prioritizes domestic aims over the White House's foreign policy goals. Washington appears to have neglected the relevance of the Gulf crisis to the broader challenge of Iran, which has only strengthened its position in key regions such as Syria, as the Gulf countries began fighting amongst themselves.

As its relationships with other Arab states deteriorated, Qatar's isolation emboldened Iran to push forward and forge stronger ties with Doha. Several months after the crisis began, Doha restored full diplomatic relations with Tehran to lessen the impact of the Saudi-led embargo. In turn, rapprochement between Doha and Tehran weakened the Gulf Cooperation Council, and although Qatar and Iran do not necessarily subscribe to the same long-term strategic vision, they currently agree on the short-term, tactical benefits of an alliance against the other Gulf states. The Qatari emir's later visit to the United States demonstrates that this shift towards Iran is by no means irreversible, yet it reflects the reality that Qatar needs support from any direction and, as Iranian food imports largely support Qatar at the moment, this need is currently being met by Iran.

Since Iran figures centrally in President Trump's foreign policy strategy, the Gulf crisis is not simply a regional concern but also an issue that directly affects American interests. The Trump administration's previous efforts to mediate the Gulf crisis have been complicated by Trump's early inclination towards Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which limited the efficacy of former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's initial negotiations mission to the region.

However, the United States has recently appeared to increase its recognition of the crisis' severity and the necessity of involving both parties; President Trump has sent his current secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, to the Gulf to express American concerns over the Gulf crisis. Pompeo, in joint statements with Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir, **remarked (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/04/mike-pompeo-saudi-arabia-qatar-blockade-180429054625262.html>)** that "Gulf unity is necessary and we need to achieve it." Trump stressed the same message with Emir Tamim bin Hamad of Qatar during a **phone call (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/readout-president-donald-j-trumps-call-king-salman-saudi-arabia-4/>)** on June 14, mentioning "the importance of Gulf unity to mitigate regional security threats and to ensure the region's economic prosperity." Trump has also employed tough language in his recent phone call with the Saudi King, although the phone call alone did not convince Saudi leadership to end its bitter standoff with Qatar. These steps, while promising, suggest that more must be done.

Aside from diplomacy in the region, the Trump administration should apply greater pressure on Gulf leaders for a Camp David-style summit, where leaders come together—in person—to commit to move towards reconciliation. Trump can leverage Gulf dependence on the United States' role as the major guarantor of regional security to broker this type of meeting between the current rivals.

In order to pave the way for such a summit, the administration must guide a concrete process of de-escalation between the Gulf rivals. In particular, violations of territorial sovereignty—such as the incident between Qatar and UAE this year where the former's fighter jets closely approached the latter's civilian aircraft—must be dealt with. Furthermore, the Saudis must be pressured to stop media warfare; both Saudi and Western media has been circulating **news (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-06-20/saudi-moves-forward-with-plan-to-turn-qatar-into-island>)** about the Kingdom's plans to cut a canal along its borders with Qatar to turn the peninsular state into an island, an act that would turn Qatar's current figurative isolation literal. The continuation of this type of intimidation, which represents an existential threat to Qatar, may deepen the Gulf rivalry beyond repair.

The Trump administration can still redirect Gulf dynamics to face the increasing Iranian threat, but the continuation of the crisis in the region, which is in the process of escalating, will leave the United States and the Gulf significantly hampered in their attempts to halt further Iranian aggression. ❖

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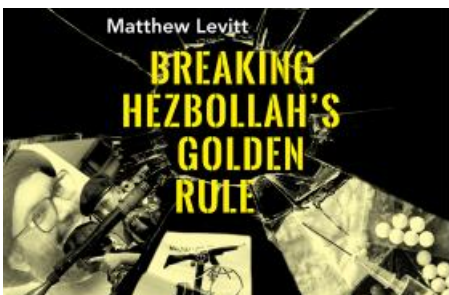
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