

The First U.S.-Qatar Strategic Dialogue

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Jan 29, 2018

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Brief Analysis

This week's meetings indicate a substantial U.S. effort may be under way to end the Arab diplomatic rift over Qatar.

On January 30, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Defense Secretary Jim Mattis will jointly host a U.S.-Qatar Strategic Dialogue in Washington. In an auspicious sign of how seriously the Trump administration is taking this first-ever bilateral conference, Tillerson has also been confirmed as a speaker at the Chamber of Commerce reception for the Qatari delegation the evening beforehand.

Washington's high-level commitment to the event is at least partly rooted in the fact that U.S. efforts to counter Iran's destabilizing activities in the Gulf have been derailed since last May by the sudden eruption of open tension within the Gulf Cooperation Council. At the time, an apparent hacking attack on the Qatar News Agency disseminated fake statements sympathetic to Iran, leading to a diplomatic break between Qatar and an alliance made up of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt. The alliance then produced a list of thirteen grievances against Doha, including its alleged support for terrorists.

The U.S. position on the rift was initially dominated by President Trump's tweet indicating sympathy for the Saudi/Emirati stance: "During my recent trip to the Middle East I stated that there can no longer be funding of Radical Ideology. Leaders pointed to Qatar—look!" But it soon emerged that other members of the administration took a more neutral view, leaking the news that the hacking attack on Qatar had been orchestrated by the UAE. Washington and Doha signed a counterterrorism agreement soon thereafter, but efforts to convince the parties to resolve the crisis have apparently been stymied by the reluctance of the UAE's de facto leader, Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed al-Nahyan of Abu Dhabi.

Over the past two months, tensions between Qatar and the UAE **have reignited**

(<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-uae-qatar-rivalry-is-escalating>) with claims and

counter-claims of military overflights and a fuss about a map at the new Louvre Abu Dhabi museum that failed to show the Qatar Peninsula. In what seems like a carefully orchestrated climb-down, the UAE air force announced on January 23 that it was avoiding escalation with Doha, while Qatari foreign minister Muhammad bin Abdulrahman al-Thani offered similar sentiments two days later. And on January 29, the Louvre Abu Dhabi announced that its cartographical omission of Qatar was due to "a failure in the commissioning process."

At the same time, President Trump has been signaling a public shift in U.S. policy on the dispute. Two weeks ago, he thanked Qatar's Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani by telephone for his efforts "to counter terrorism and extremism in all forms." Then, during his January 26 address at the World Economic Forum in Davos, the president appeared to emphasize the importance of a united Gulf front by prefacing his comments on the Middle East with a telling declaration: "We continue to call on partners to confront Iran's support for terrorists." The State Department announced the U.S.-Qatar Strategic Dialogue later that same day.

This week's delegation from Doha is scheduled to include two deputy prime ministers (who also serve as foreign and defense minister), along with the minister of energy and industry, the minister of economy and commerce, and the minister of finance. The State Department tweeted that the dialogue will "discuss areas of cooperation between our countries, including trade and investment, defense, security and law enforcement, counterterrorism and aviation." Yet while Washington remains grateful to Qatar for hosting al-Udeid Air Base and 10,000 American military personnel, it also has residual issues with Doha, particularly regarding terrorism—this likely explains why the State Department's counterterrorism bureau fired off a pre-summit tweet noting that the "US-Qatar Strategic Dialogue to include counterterrorism themes."

Former officials say that the significance of strategic dialogues can vary widely depending on the level of representation and scope of participation on the U.S. side. The joint Tillerson/Mattis bill augurs well for productive sessions, though full judgment cannot be made until after the dialogue ends.

Simon Henderson is the Baker Fellow and director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program at The Washington Institute. ❖

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