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The Qatar Crisis on the Mediterranean's Shores

by [Ben Fishman](#)

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Brief Analysis

Secretary Tillerson should bear in mind that his diplomatic efforts over Qatar's role in the Middle East will have significant implications for the balance of power in Libya, not just the Gulf.

Although the debate over the origins of the Qatar crisis often focuses on longstanding Gulf tensions related to Egypt, Al Jazeera, Iran, and domestic politics, the situation in Libya exemplifies how the dispute has been active for years, essentially becoming a proxy war that the United Arab Emirates and Doha have waged on foreign soil. Several actors bear responsibility for Libya's current instability, including the United States, its NATO allies, and key domestic players. Yet the contest for influence there between Qatar and the UAE (alongside Egypt) has augmented the violence and dimmed the prospects for unity.

As Secretary of State Rex Tillerson undertakes his effort to resolve the Qatar crisis -- his first major mediation initiative -- he has an opportunity to substantially decrease the outside interference that has exacerbated Libya's political paralysis. By pressing Qatar and the four boycotting Arab states (Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE) to endorse the UN-backed political process in Libya, Tillerson could make a significant contribution to the country's stability just as a new UN envoy takes the helm.

JOINT SUPPORT FOR LIBYA'S REVOLUTION

Initially, the UAE and Qatar led Arab support for Libya's rebels politically, financially, and militarily. At a time when Egypt was consumed with internal unrest and Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah sought to avoid the appearance of

seeking revenge for the Qadhafi regime's 2003 assassination attempt against him, Abu Dhabi and Doha spearheaded the Arab League's endorsement of a no-fly zone over Libya. The accompanying statement, coupled with a similar pronouncement from the Gulf Cooperation Council, influenced President Obama's decision to intervene in Libya, since he had previously insisted on regional support before taking military action in another Muslim-majority country. Qatar and the UAE then hosted ministerial summits of the Libya Contact Group, the primary avenue for international support to the opposition. Both countries also offered diplomatic recognition to the rebels early in the fighting and hosted representatives from the official opposition body, the National Transitional Council (NTC).

In material terms, Abu Dhabi and Doha provided an economic lifeline to the opposition and the city of Benghazi. The Qataris hosted the Temporary Financial Mechanism in Doha, through which they, the UAE, and other foreign donors could contribute humanitarian assistance for the NTC. The Qataris in particular proved crucial in supplying Benghazi with fuel and purchasing the limited oil exports produced in eastern Libya during the revolution.

Militarily, the two Gulf countries conducted their first-ever combat missions as part of NATO's Operation Unified Protector in Libya. More significantly, they provided weapons and special operations support to the rebels -- efforts that had to be conducted in secrecy because they violated the UN Security Council's February 2011 arms embargo. These illicit supply lines were later reactivated during Libya's 2014-2015 civil war.

POLITICAL AND MILITARY DIVERGENCE

As the initial revolution proceeded, however, Abu Dhabi and Doha began to support different factions. The UAE grew close to NTC prime minister Mahmoud Jibril, who managed the opposition's international relations. Under Jibril's direction, Aref Nayed became the Libyan ambassador to the UAE and maintained a stabilization planning cell there until the two men fell out in the latter stages of the revolution. Although Jibril had only limited contact with rebel fighters, he helped direct Emirati military assistance to defected military officers in the east and to militias in Zintan south of Tripoli.

In contrast, Qatar gravitated to Libya's broader Islamist stream, including through personal connections. Sheikha Moza, the wife of then-emir Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, grew up in Benghazi and reportedly influenced her husband to invest in the rebels. And Ali Salabi, a Doha-based Libyan cleric close to inflammatory Al Jazeera commentator Yusuf Qaradawi, had deep ties to Libyan Islamists, including former members of the al-Qaeda-linked Libyan Islamic Fighting Group. Salabi had worked with Muammar Qadhafi's son Saif al-Islam on an amnesty program for former LIFG members, including veterans of the Afghan jihad (e.g., Abdul Hakim Belhaj and Abdul Wahab al-Qayed, brother of former al-Qaeda deputy Abu Yahya al-Libi). Salabi's own brother, Ismail, became a prominent brigade commander in Benghazi.

Tensions between Libya's militias and defected officers escalated when rebel military chief Abdul Fattah Younes was assassinated under mysterious circumstances in July 2011. He had overseen the special forces responsible for the arrest and torture of many Islamists, so the assassination was widely viewed as revenge. Accordingly, whether they realized it at the time or not, Qatar and the UAE were stepping into a longstanding Libyan blood feud that only got worse after 2011.

FROM REVOLUTION TO CIVIL WAR

During the revolution, Qatari flags flew throughout Benghazi, and residents universally respected Doha for its assistance to the NTC and its vital aid deliveries. Yet this honeymoon was short-lived. By the time the June 2012 parliamentary elections rolled around, Islamist political parties were being tainted with accusations of taking Qatari money, a charge that contributed to their poor showing. Notably, Belhaj's party failed to win any spots in the 200-seat legislature, while Qayed was elected on a slate founded by another former LIFG member. In contrast, Jibril's more outwardly liberal and secular-minded alliance won a plurality, despite the fact that almost all Libyans are

conservative Muslims.

Islamist-oriented legislators soon outmaneuvered Jibril's fragmented coalition, capturing many of the 120 seats allocated to individuals from districts (only 80 seats were allocated to national party lists). Yet the wheels of Islamist frustration with the electoral process were set in motion. By 2014, when Libyans voted for a new legislature, the House of Representatives, the Islamists refused to accept the results. The eastern-based HOR leadership then partnered with Gen. Khalifa Haftar, who had launched Operation Dignity against Islamist "terrorists" a few months prior. This campaign began in Benghazi, where operatives had perpetrated a series of assassinations against current and former security officers. In response, the Islamists launched a counteroffensive through a new militia alliance called Operation Dawn.

Gulf countries soon found themselves in the middle of this civil war, with the UAE and Egypt helping Haftar by bombing Dawn positions in Tripoli while Qatar backed Islamist campaigns in Misratah and elsewhere. To facilitate arms transfers to their local allies, Abu Dhabi and Doha took advantage of allied officials in Libya's transitional government. The Libyan National Army (LNA) and its partners in the east received substantial vehicle deliveries from the UAE, while Qatar channeled support to former LIFG personnel who had secured posts in the Defense and Interior Ministries.

At present, there are limited reports of active Qatari military efforts in Libya. And according to *Jane's* and the UN panel of experts for the Libyan Sanctions Regime, the Emiratis have provided fixed-wing aircraft to the LNA's air force; these planes operate out of al-Khadim Airport in the east, which has been built up over the past year. It is unclear who is flying them, but the Libyans probably do not have the capacity to do so themselves.

On the political front, while the UN negotiated a ceasefire and unity government in late 2015, the resultant Government of National Accord (GNA) has struggled to gain legitimacy inside Libya. Haftar continues to court independent support -- in addition to seeking help from Russia, he has visited de facto UAE ruler Muhammad bin Zayed, most recently this month. According to the official readout of their early July meeting, the prince congratulated Haftar on the liberation of Benghazi, which the general's forces finally claimed this month, three years after launching Operation Dignity. The transcript made no mention of the GNA or the UN.

Meanwhile, the Gulf countries currently boycotting Qatar have designated five Libyans on the list of fifty-nine individuals they have cited as examples of Qatari support for terrorists and extremists: Belhaj; Ali and Ismail Salabi; Mahdi al-Harati, an Islamist brigade commander in Tripoli; and Sadiq al-Gharyani, the extremist Grand Mufti of Libya who recently fled to Turkey after an apparent attempt on his life. Taking a cue from the coalition list, the HOR subsequently designated seventy-five Libyans as terrorists, including members of the Muslim Brotherhood's local political party, alleged financiers, and Islamist militia leaders. Several American citizens appear on the HOR list.

TILLERSON'S MEDIATION

If the ongoing Gulf crisis significantly compromises Qatar's power-projection capabilities, it could tip the balance of power in Libya toward General Haftar, potentially provoking an attack on positions held by Misratah militias or even against Tripoli itself. Such a development would only lead to greater violence and the death of the fragile GNA, just as new UN envoy Ghassan Salame tries to revive unity negotiations.

As part of his mediation efforts, Secretary Tillerson should therefore ask all parties to endorse the UN-led peace process in Libya. Specifically, he should ask Qatar to pledge that it will cut off support to its allies in Libya, and the UAE to guarantee Haftar's restraint while UN negotiations are taking place, allowing the Libyans themselves to determine an appropriate role for the general. If Tillerson ignores Libya in his Gulf talks, the chances of renewed violence will only increase -- a dangerous prospect at a time when Islamic State fighters are likely returning home from Syria and the Pentagon is reportedly preparing to deploy Special Forces to assist with Libya's stabilization.

Ben Fishman, an associate fellow of The Washington Institute, served as director for North Africa on the National Security Council staff from 2011 to 2013. ❖



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