

The Gulf Crisis: A Tragic Act of Self-Immolation

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Brief Analysis

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Does Qatar fund terrorism? Certainly. It is an argument based on an accusation that is applicable to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Iran, Turkey, Russia, and the United States. As long as there is no agreed-upon definition of terrorism, any and all governments that provide support to non-governmental entities outside of their borders can be accused of aiding and abetting terrorism. Still, not all accusations are of equal weight, and the case against Qatar is not trivial. There is a substantive disagreement between Qatar on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia and the UAE on the other on three aspects of terrorism: definition, management, and the engagement of Iran.

There is no agreement in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) on the criteria to define terrorism. Qatar's threshold for applying the terrorism label to Islamist movements is more lenient than that of Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Qatar has effectively accepted the distinction between political Islamism and radical Islamism.— The former is a version of the ideology proclaiming an acceptance of democratic principles while advocating for a socio-political order in which religion is paramount; the latter rejects the political order, locally and globally, and seeks its replacement with a militant, even predatory regime in the name of religion. A case can be made for the distinct consideration of the two versions, but a case can also be made for the symbiosis between them. Some accuse political Islamism of serving as a mere staging ground for radicalism. The UAE has consistently been skeptical of any differentiation within Islamism, and while Saudi Arabian policy had displayed considerable ambivalence in the past, it has gradually embraced the UAE stance.

With the Arab Spring, these differences were no longer merely theoretical or marginal. In many Arab Spring theaters, Qatar deemed the local Muslim Brotherhood affiliate as a more viable option and a credible alternative capable of syphoning away radical constituencies. Accordingly, Qatar provided it with considerable support. Wary of the local and regional destabilization that could result from Muslim Brotherhood populism, the UAE and Saudi Arabia offered funds and materials to more conservative groups that accept the political quietism at the core of Saudi Salafism. They simultaneously strove to restore a more reasoned version of the challenged autocratic order. The combined efforts of these three Gulf rivals degraded the Arab Spring debate into one between theocrats and autocrats, at the exclusion of the democrats.

In addition to disagreeing on definition, Qatar distinguished itself from its GCC partners in adopting a more “liberal”

approach to manage terrorist groups. Whether in order to seek local concessions or to resolve hostage situations, Qatar entered into financial settlements with abject terrorist groups. A charitable assessment may see in such actions a tool to achieve results, create dependencies, and potentially fracture terrorist networks. A less charitable assessment may deem it a clear act of funding terrorism. Qatar earned immediate praise upon successful negotiations yielding some relief from warfare in Syria and the release of hostages held by terrorists. The net impact of these actions, however, further enabled terrorism. Saudi Arabia and the UAE declare the outcome intentional and aimed at regional disruption, not merely incidental.

Qatar also applied a “liberal” approach to its relationship with Iran and Iranian proxies in Lebanon, Yemen, and allegedly Bahrain. While Saudi Arabia leverages its leadership and patronage position in many Muslim-majority countries to demand alliance against Iran, it has accorded flexibility to GCC partners — Kuwait, Oman, and even the UAE — for proximity and trade considerations. Qatar sought to assert a more sovereign approach in its interactions with Tehran. In light of the distrust that has accumulated between Riyadh and Doha, Saudi Arabia has demanded that Doha comply with their anti-Iranian stance. The argument in Saudi media is that Qatar, a “statelet” of 300,000, ought not be challenging the collective will.

The rationale behind Qatar’s policy is difficult to document; however, it is possible to outline it. Qatar’s separate course dates back to the palace coup of 1996. Hamad, the new Emir, combined a new version of soft Arab nationalism with an Islamic tint, which focuses on culture and economy. Much of the modernization efforts of Hamad sought to place Qatar at the center of the putative Arab-Islamic Renaissance, although the fluid characterization of his project attracted contradictory tendencies. Hence, Qatar lightly pursued normalization with Israel, but also displayed anti-Israel posturing; it sought a strategic partnership with the United States, while also expanding ties with Iran. There exists much speculation about a disproportionate influence on the Muslim Brotherhood, and about the Rasputin-like role of former Israeli MK Azmi Bisharah. Neither can be dismissed, but both ought to be qualified. Hamad maintained a hands-on engagement, as he sought to elevate Qatar into a global economic mini-super-power, and a definitive regional agent of influence. The Arab Spring seemed at first to vindicate Qatar’s assessment, but it was an illusion: Qatar’s expectation that the Brotherhood would be the vehicle of transformation was proven thoroughly false. Qatar has since been forced to preserve its acquired footholds while countering efforts by its neighbors to scale it back to a Bahrain-like status.

The Qatari policy created a robust case against itself. Its support of accommodationist Islamists may have inflated their self-assessed influence and contributed to the derailing of the Arab Spring. Qatari engagement of terrorist organization has not resulted in any meaningful dismantling of terrorist networks; the opposite is true. And Qatari channels to Tehran weaken the sought-after containment of Iran.

None of these arguments, however, justify the assault on institutions and assumed values that have been committed by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and sundry clients against Qatar in the current escalation. The U.S.-Arab Islamic summit in Riyadh last month was a considerable gain for the Saudi camp, providing an effective tool to prod Qatar in the desired direction. Statements attributed to the Emir of Qatar suggested that he was dissenting from some of the Riyadh’s decisions. Whether they are true or not, Saudi Arabia and its camp had certainly not exhausted the available options for redress before engaging in their GCC bullying that demands unconditional surrender from Doha’s leadership while inflicting damage on society, the rights of citizens, shared structures, and regional reputation. The GCC seemed to have evolved into a twenty-first-century haven of prosperity, progress, and order. Suddenly, the cloak of reason and modernity is shed and replaced by aggressive feuding and posturing worthy of pre-Islamic Arabia, or at least of the Nasser-Qaddhafi-Saddam legacy.

The stance currently taken by the Saudi camp is a departure from the deliberate, incremental, and quiet approach usually associated with Saudi leadership. It is unlikely to achieve meaningful results, or at least not the ones

intended. Both Iran and the Islamic State are cheering the developments. Tehran has already extended a hand to Doha. The anti-Qatar coalition issued their own list of terrorists and terrorist organizations, demanding that Qatar dissociate itself from those listed. Further lists, issued by governments supporting the action against Qatar, were also circulated. Some names on these lists are recognized terrorists and terrorist outfits; whether Qatar has provided them with any support is contested. Some other names have explicit links to Qatar, but labeling them terrorists is rather controversial. Were standards applied in forming the lists applied across the board, many individuals and organizations benefitting from the support of Riyadh and Abu Dhabi would have to be included. In short, the coalition is seeking a level of purity from Qatar that it does not apply to itself. Radical Islamists are elated about the feud in their enemy's camp, and are proactively highlighting the precarious and capricious nature of the Gulf's political order in their recruitment campaigns.

Qatar's idealism of yesteryear has not materialized. Instead it has provided Iran with relief against actions intended to curtail its project of regional hegemony, exaggerated the role of the Muslim Brotherhood, and even offered radical Islamists and jihadists a lifeline. It is thus important to seek a measured reversal of these policies; one that does not obliterate the positive achievements of Qatar, and one that is not premised on Qatar's submission and surrender. Most importantly, though, the review of Qatar's policies should not offer autocracy the license to strengthen its grip on Arab societies. The narrative embraced by Qatar almost two decades ago may have been naïve, but the alternative should not be a return to the oppressive authoritarianism of three decades prior. While the United States under the new administration focuses on the immediate, it is crucial to recognize the reality of the underlying regional pressures that Qatar sought to manage.

Neither the region nor the world can afford the collapse of one of the rare success stories in the Arab world, which is the cooperation and integration achieved by the Gulf States. For its own immediate and strategic interests, the U.S. administration should refrain from conflicting and inflammatory positions, seek to contain and diffuse this unnecessary escalation, and usher in a reasonable alignment in policy and approaches in the region. Permanent damage has already been inflicted, but the opportunity to rescue what is left still exists – in all probability, however, not for too long. ❖

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