

Qatar Doesn't Need a Blockade, It Needs an Audit

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Articles & Testimony

Doha is overdue in aggressively targeting terror financiers, but addressing the latest batch of regional al-Qaeda designations could go a long way toward easing Gulf tensions.

One grievance underpinning the ongoing diplomatic conflict between Qatar and its fellow Gulf Arab countries is Doha's close ties to a variety of extremist elements spanning the spectrum from the Taliban to Iran to the Muslim Brotherhood. But Qatar's most disturbing relationship of all is with al Qaeda. It is past time for it to come to an end.

Al Qaeda in Syria enjoys a (misplaced) air of legitimacy in Qatar as a group fighting both the Bashar al-Assad regime and the Islamic State. Many of the group's major donors give to the cause because they see al Qaeda in Syria as the "moderate extremists" in the multi-sided conflict. Al Qaeda in Syria is often [viewed \(http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/07/28/the-nusra-front-is-dead-and-stronger-than-ever-before/\)](http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/07/28/the-nusra-front-is-dead-and-stronger-than-ever-before/) in this light either because people agree with the ideology, they see it as more moderate than the alternatives, or simply because they are willing to put ideological issues aside and support the side that offers a real possibility of ending Assad's murderous regime, seeing their contributions as something other than explicitly financing al Qaeda.

That perception was always misplaced, but must now be aggressively challenged. Al Qaeda's [present strength \(http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/15/al-qaeda-is-swallowing-the-syrian-opposition\)](http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/15/al-qaeda-is-swallowing-the-syrian-opposition/) in Syria has given the group new opportunities, both operationally and financially, and it remains a threat to the West. A July 2016 UN

Security Council [report \(http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2016/629\)](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2016/629) claimed that al Qaeda in Syria "remains one of the most effective branches of Al-Qaida worldwide." Many of the group's top terrorist operatives have relocated to Syria from South Asia. Closing off the group's current sources of revenue and resources is thus critically important.

Donors and fundraisers based in the Persian Gulf have long supported al Qaeda's central organization, as well as its affiliates in Iraq and more recently Syria. But while most such affiliates have diversified their methods of fundraising, away from reliance on individual donors and exploitation of charitable flows to mask their transactions, al Qaeda in Syria is the major exception. According to the [Security Council \(http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2017_35.pdf\)](http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2017_35.pdf), as of January 2017 the group has continued to derive its income "mainly from external donations," along with criminal sources of funding such as kidnapping for ransom, extortion, and war spoils.

The group's budget could be as much as 10 million dollars annually, with [several million dollars \(https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2308.aspx\)](https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2308.aspx) a year coming from private donors in the Gulf, facilitated by false online fronts. Hajjaj al-Ajmi, a Kuwaiti who was sanctioned by the United Nations in 2014, [used Twitter to solicit donations \(https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/sanctions/1267/qa_sanctions_list/summaries/individual/hajjaj-bin-fahd-al-ajmi\)](https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/sanctions/1267/qa_sanctions_list/summaries/individual/hajjaj-bin-fahd-al-ajmi) for al Qaeda in Syria. And others such as Qatari national Saad bin Saad al-Kaabi have [posted solicitations \(http://www.cnn.com/videos/us/2014/06/18/erin-dnt-qatar-terror-fundraiser.cnn\)](http://www.cnn.com/videos/us/2014/06/18/erin-dnt-qatar-terror-fundraiser.cnn) on Facebook and WhatsApp accounts for "arming, feeding, and treating" fighters in Syria. This includes openly crowdsourcing donations for al Qaeda and other jihadi groups in Syria.

It's for this reason that back in March 2014, then-Treasury Department Under Secretary David Cohen [singled out \(https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2308.aspx\)](https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2308.aspx) Qatar as an especially "permissive jurisdiction" for terrorist financing. The problem was not limited to support for Hamas, Cohen stressed, but to Qatari support for extremist groups operating in Syria. "To say the least," he concluded, "this threatens to aggravate an already volatile situation in a particularly dangerous and unwelcome manner."

Indeed, it has. According to a *Financial Times* [report \(https://www.ft.com/content/dd033082-49e9-11e7-a3f4-c742b9791d43?mhq5j=e2\)](https://www.ft.com/content/dd033082-49e9-11e7-a3f4-c742b9791d43?mhq5j=e2), Qatar secured the release of members of the Qatari royal family kidnapped in Iraq by paying several hundred million dollars in ransom money, including to groups tied to al Qaeda. If true, then even if these sums of money prove to be grossly exaggerated, they amount to payment from Qatar's state coffers to al Qaeda.

Qatar has taken some [limited action \(https://qa.usembassy.gov/prglaser10262016/\)](https://qa.usembassy.gov/prglaser10262016/) against individual terrorist financiers: freezing assets, imposing travel bans, shutting down accounts, [shutting down \(https://www.mofa.gov.qa/en/all-mofa-news/details/2015/12/01/he-qatar%27s-ambassador-to-france-qatar%27s-battle-against-financing-terrorism-is-long-standing\)](https://www.mofa.gov.qa/en/all-mofa-news/details/2015/12/01/he-qatar%27s-ambassador-to-france-qatar%27s-battle-against-financing-terrorism-is-long-standing) the Madad Ahl al-Sham charity tied to al Qaeda in Syria, and pursuing several prosecutions. But in all these instances, the country only acted in response to considerable U.S. pressure and was remarkably reluctant to publicly take credit for successes.

Meanwhile, Qatar's actions often have had mixed or unclear results. For example, although the 2014 State Department country report on terrorism [credited \(https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2014/239407.htm\)](https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2014/239407.htm) Qatar with shutting down Saad al-Kaabi's online fundraising platform, Madad Ahl al-Sham, a subsequent Treasury [sanctions designation \(https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl0143.aspx\)](https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl0143.aspx) noted Kaabi was still actively involved in financing al Qaeda in Syria at least a year later in 2015. Another case involves Abd al-Malik Abd al-Salam (aka Umar al-Qatari), a Jordanian with Qatari residency, who provided "broad support" to al Qaeda in Syria, according to the [Treasury \(https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-](https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-)

[releases/Pages/jl2651.aspx](#)). In 2011 and 2012 he worked with associates in Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Qatar, and Iran to raise and move funds and weapons, and to facilitate fighter travel. According to the State Department's 2014 report, authorities in Doha deported a Jordanian terrorist financier residing in Qatar who had been employed by a Qatari charity that year; it is possible this was Abd al-Malik Abd al-Salam, but that has never been publicly confirmed.

Doha has been particularly sketchy on the issue of the prosecution of terrorism financiers in Qatari courts.

According to the State Department's 2015 terrorism country [report](#)

[\(https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2015/257517.htm\)](https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2015/257517.htm), for example, while individuals and entities in Qatar continued to finance al Qaeda, Doha had "made efforts to prosecute significant terrorist financiers." In fact, five terrorist financiers were prosecuted. The five are [Ibrahim al-Bakr \(https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2651.aspx\)](#), [Saad al-Kaabi, Abd al-Latif al-Kawari \(https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl0143.aspx\)](#), [Abd al-Rahman al-Nuaymi \(https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2249.aspx\)](#), and [Khalifa al-Subaiy \(https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/hp1011.aspx\)](#). Of these, two (Kaabi and Nuaymi) were acquitted in 2016 and three were convicted: Subaiy in 2008, and Bakr and Kawari in 2016. Bakr was convicted in absentia and remains at large somewhere outside Qatar. This was not his first conviction: Bakr was arrested in Qatar in "the early 2000s" and "released from prison after he promised not to conduct terrorist activity in Qatar," according to his 2014 Treasury designation. Subaiy was convicted in absentia in a Bahraini court in January 2008 and arrested two months later in Qatar, where he served a six-month term in prison. Kawari is reportedly serving his sentence under house arrest in Qatar, while Kaabi, Nuaymi, and Subaiy are reportedly under regular surveillance. The nature of that surveillance is a matter of debate, however. In the case of Subaiy, the UN committee on al Qaeda sanctions reported that he [resumed](#)

[\(https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/individual/khalifa-muhammad-turki-al-subaiy\)](https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/individual/khalifa-muhammad-turki-al-subaiy) terrorist financing activities after his release from prison, when he was purportedly under surveillance.

It should therefore not surprise that former senior U.S. Treasury official Daniel Glaser [lamented](#) [\(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OXSMKYr-SFI&feature=youtu.be&t=34m18s\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OXSMKYr-SFI&feature=youtu.be&t=34m18s) in February 2017 that U.S.- and UN-designated terrorist financiers continue to operate "openly and notoriously" both in Qatar and Kuwait. Qatar had not yet made the kind of "fundamental decisions" on combating terror finance that would make the country a hostile environment for terror financiers, Glaser added, concluding that those positive steps Qatar had taken were "painfully slow."

Last week, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Bahrain [collectively designated](#) [\(http://wam.ae/en/details/1395302618259\)](http://wam.ae/en/details/1395302618259) 59 individuals and 12 institutions (including the five prosecuted by Qatar) accused of financing terrorist organizations and receiving support from Qatar. Many of these are entities previously designated by the United States and United Nations for financing al Qaeda, though the list includes others with ties to Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi extremists in Egypt, Libya, and elsewhere. Some of those listed are not Qatar residents, and according to a Qatari official at least six of the people listed are dead.

While likely intended as another shot across the Qatari bow, the list gives Doha an opportunity to help resolve its fight with its Gulf Cooperation Council neighbors, and a face-saving way to do so: It could immediately take action at least against those persons and entities on the list who are already designated by the United States or UN and therefore should already have been targeted by Doha. In particular, Qatar could focus on the many al Qaeda financiers on the list, and take action based on its recent (re)commitment to counter terrorist finance at the Riyadh summit last month. To be sure, Qatar is overdue in aggressively targeting its financing of terrorist groups, in

particular al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate. But belatedly addressing this problem would be far better than not at all.

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