

# U.S. Options in the Qatar Crisis

by [Lori Plotkin Boghardt \(/experts/lori-plotkin-boghardt\)](/experts/lori-plotkin-boghardt), [Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](/experts/simon-henderson),  
[Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt), [Katherine Bauer \(/experts/katherine-bauer\)](/experts/katherine-bauer)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



### [Lori Plotkin Boghardt \(/experts/lori-plotkin-boghardt\)](/experts/lori-plotkin-boghardt)

Lori Plotkin Boghardt was a senior fellow in Gulf politics at The Washington Institute from 2013-2018.

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### [Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](/experts/simon-henderson)

Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy at The Washington Institute, specializing in energy matters and the conservative Arab states of the Persian Gulf.

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### [Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt)

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute.

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### [Katherine Bauer \(/experts/katherine-bauer\)](/experts/katherine-bauer)

Katherine Bauer is the Blumenstein-Katz Family fellow at The Washington Institute and a former official at the U.S. Treasury Department.

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Brief Analysis

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**To prevent escalation and preserve American interests in the Gulf, Washington should consider various steps on the diplomatic, military, energy, and counterterrorism fronts.**

## **B**ASIC GUIDELINES FOR NAVIGATING THE CRISIS | By Lori Plotkin Boghardt

As the diplomatic rift between Qatar and its Gulf neighbors widens, the principal challenge in determining Washington's best approach lies in Doha's complicated role as a U.S. security partner. Qatar is a critical strategic ally

for the United States, particularly as the host of al-Udeid Air Base, an important facility in the fight against the Islamic State (see below for in-depth analysis of the basing issue). Yet it also supports dangerous forces in the Middle East that threaten U.S. and allied interests. As a result, the current climate holds both opportunities **and risks** (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/will-qatars-diplomatic-exile-spark-the-next-great-war>) for Washington.

In deciding how to address the crisis, U.S. officials should follow four general guidelines:

- *Ask Abu Dhabi for a full briefing and regular updates on Emirati and Saudi intentions.* The fact that top U.S. regional partners took drastic action against another close partner without consulting Washington is worrisome. Senior administration officials should seek a complete understanding of what the UAE and Saudi Arabia seek to achieve in the crisis, how they intend to achieve it, and the endgame they envision for Qatar. The UAE may be the most effective channel for such information given its special relationship with Washington, though the Saudis should be engaged as well. These consultations should focus on areas of shared interest, areas of difference, and preparations for various possible outcomes. The degree to which the Saudis are willing to discuss these matters in detail will be a good test of bilateral relations following President Trump's recent visit to Riyadh.
- *Concentrate U.S. diplomatic efforts on restricting Qatari support for dangerous regional actors.* Some of Doha's policies have been major concerns in Washington for years, so the administration should use the current crisis as an opportunity for more active engagement on them. This means talking with Doha, Abu Dhabi, and Riyadh about specific steps Qatar can take to cut off or rein in support for radical actors. Topics that should be addressed in these conversations include political and financial backing as well as safe havens and communication platforms (e.g., Al Jazeera). Washington could reward Qatar for improvements on these issues with supplemental security guarantees and, if desired, public recognition.
- *Recognize that some things won't change, and that's okay.* Qatar's desire to maintain working relations with Iran is essentially nonnegotiable, in large part because the two countries share the world's largest natural gas field. Similar to Kuwait and Oman, Qatar's relationship with Iran has advantages for American security interests.
- *Keep in mind that the best outcome is a more moderate Qatar, not an unstable Qatar.* Actions that rapidly destabilize Qatar or make it feel compelled to join forces with Iran are not in America's security interests. Tehran would welcome the latter outcome and is working toward it.

#### **WHAT TO DO ABOUT AL-UDEID AIR BASE | By Simon Henderson**

Currently, the giant al-Udeid Air Base is a crucial part of America's ability to project military force in the region. Heavily used during the Iraq and Afghan campaigns, it is now a command center for operations against the Islamic State. It has a long runway capable of handling the heaviest bombers as well as a hardened Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC).

In use since 2003, al-Udeid replaced a Saudi air base and CAOC that Riyadh would not allow to be hardened against enemy attack. Additionally, U.S. aircraft at that facility had to fly through Kuwaiti airspace on their way to Iraqi targets so that the Saudis could implausibly argue they were not involved. Al-Dhafra Air Base in the UAE has also hosted a range of U.S. tanker and reconnaissance aircraft, but is not as well equipped as al-Udeid. Air bases in Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman have hosted U.S. aircraft as well but similarly lack a CAOC.

U.S. aircraft carriers traditionally provide "four-and-a-half acres of U.S. sovereign territory" independent of foreign restrictions, but the Navy is currently focused on coping with the threat from North Korea. Even when operating in the Gulf, any carrier-based aircraft tasked with hitting targets in Iraq or Syria depend on in-flight refueling provided by tankers at shore bases such as al-Udeid and al-Dhafra.

In short, while the U.S. military could probably afford to give up al-Udeid if absolutely necessary, this is not a good

option in the immediate term and would mean going without a CAOC until a new one could be established. Instead, Washington should strive to increase the number of available facilities in the region and improve its command-and-control arrangements with partner governments. It should also pursue the possibility of returning to Saudi Arabia, and perhaps reducing restrictions at al-Udeid and elsewhere (e.g., less notice for aircraft and personnel movements; easier permissions for military strikes).

### **THE ENERGY ANGLE | By Simon Henderson**

Although Qatar is only sparsely populated, it holds significant regional leverage because of its massive natural gas resources. It has the third-largest reserves in the world (after Iran and Russia), and its position as the leading supplier of liquefied natural gas (LNG) is challenged only by Australia. Doha has gas customers stretching from Britain to Japan; it is also a member of OPEC despite producing relatively little oil.

Most of Qatar's gas can be found in the offshore North Field, which lies under the waters of the Persian Gulf and is contiguous with Iran's less-developed South Pars field. Doha lacks a substantial military, so its offshore facilities and massive Ras Laffan LNG plant are largely unprotected. In other words, Qatar is relying on Iranian goodwill and U.S. military support to keep its biggest source of wealth secure.

Despite the current crisis, no plans have been announced to shut the Dolphin pipeline, which transports Qatari gas to the UAE and Oman. There is some industry speculation that the Emirati port of Fujairah, a major bunkering hub, will be closed to Qatari-flagged vessels, but this would only be a commercial inconvenience.

The U.S. position on Qatar's gas rights should echo America's longstanding commitment to ensure the free passage of oil supplies internationally. In addition, Washington should try to improve energy relations within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). For instance, Saudi Arabia has long blocked the Dolphin pipeline's extension to Kuwait, forcing the latter to import LNG by tanker from as far away as Trinidad and Tobago.

### **QATAR'S MIXED COUNTERTERRORISM RECORD | By Matthew Levitt and Katherine Bauer**

The GCC states have a variety of complaints about Doha, but chief among them is continued Qatari support for Islamist extremist groups in the region, including funds for al-Qaeda and similar actors. Although Washington singled out Qatar as a "permissive jurisdiction for terrorist financing" in 2014, U.S. officials have more recently showered Doha with modest praise. Speaking last month after a meeting between Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and his Qatari counterpart, a U.S. spokesperson indicated that the two had reviewed "Qatar's continuing efforts to stop the financing of terrorist groups, including prosecuting suspected financiers, freezing assets, and introducing stringent controls to its banking system." More recently, the U.S. ambassador to Qatar, Dana Shell Smith, retweeted statements from 2016 noting Qatar's "real progress" on this front.

Qatar has indeed taken action against individual terrorist financiers, though it has been unwilling to make this information public. It has also pursued systemic solutions over the past few years, such as establishing a National Antiterrorism Committee empowered to designate such financiers independently of the United Nations. And it has adopted legislation to better regulate charities that operate or send funds overseas. To date, however, it has refused to publicly acknowledge whether any actions have been taken under these authorities. The little that is known comes from U.S. government reports.

For example, according to the State Department, Qatar has frozen funds and enacted travel bans against UN-designated financiers per its obligations as a member state, and prosecuted individuals involved in terror financing. In its 2014 *Country Reports on Terrorism*, the department credited Qatar for two notable moves: shutting down an online campaign suspected of raising funds for violent extremist elements in Syria, and deporting a Jordanian terrorist financier residing in Doha.

Yet these are largely one-off actions taken in response to significant U.S. pressure. Qatar has still not made the strategic decision to publicly tackle terror financing as a matter of policy, and some of its known actions have proven to be half-measures (e.g., prosecuting certain U.S.- and UN-designated terrorist financiers but not imprisoning them). Doha's reluctance to take credit for the few positive steps it has taken shows a lack of seriousness in making Qatar an inhospitable environment for such financiers. This mindset also reflects Doha's broader policy of supporting groups such as Hamas, the Taliban, and al-Qaeda in Syria.

*Lori Plotkin Boghardt is the Barbara Kay Family Fellow at The Washington Institute and a former CIA analyst. Simon Henderson is the Institute's Baker Fellow and director of its Gulf and Energy Policy Program. Matthew Levitt is the Institute's Fromer-Wexler Fellow, director of its Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, and a former official with the Treasury Department and FBI. Katherine Bauer is a Blumenstein-Katz Family Fellow at the Institute and a former Treasury official.* ❖

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