

Qatar and ISIS Funding: The U.S. Approach

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Alarming ISIS gains in Iraq and Syria present a special opportunity for Washington to work with Qatar on enforcing counter-terrorist financing procedures.

America views its close ally, Qatar, as a terrorist funding trouble spot. Washington has gone so far as to call the small Persian Gulf state a permissive environment for financing terrorist groups.

The United States says it does not have evidence that the government of Qatar is funding the terrorist group now known as the Islamic State (ISIS). But it does believe that private individuals in Qatar are helping to finance this group and others like it. And it thinks the Gulf state is not doing enough to stop this.

To influence Qatar's policies, the United States has employed a carrot-and-stick approach. It heaps praise on its ally for developing new anti-terrorist financing regulations, while privately discouraging and sometimes publicly admonishing its support for terrorist organizations.

Yet the fundamental problem is that America's counterterrorism agenda sometimes conflicts with what Qatar perceives to be its own political interests. Qatar's security strategy has been to provide support to a wide range of regional and international groups in order to bolster its position at home and abroad. This strategy has involved generously supporting Islamist organizations, including militant ones like Hamas and the Taliban. Allowing private local fundraising for Islamist groups abroad forms part of this approach. Closing channels of support to militant Islamists -- i.e., what Washington would like Doha to do -- would be inimical to Qatar's basic approach to its own security.

American and international pressure has been shown to influence the counter-terrorist financing policies of Gulf states. The case of Kuwait is a recent example. Under significant pressure this year, Kuwait has been strengthening its lax anti-terrorist financing rules. There are even indications that at least some of the new rules will be enforced -- a big issue of concern when it comes to Gulf states.

The United States should view its close relationship with Qatar as an avenue through which to influence its ally in a better direction. Alarming ISIS gains in Iraq and Syria present a special opportunity for Washington to work with Qatar to enforce counter-terrorist financing procedures. Qatar might strengthen its resolve to constrict private fundraising channels if it were to perceive a direct threat from ISIS or other terrorist groups that are supported by local donors, or if it were to believe that Qatari jihadists returning home from Iraq and Syria posed a security threat. Signs that ISIS "successes" may be fueling higher levels of private Gulf donations to other Sunni militant groups lend even more importance to the need for adequate counter-terrorist financing measures.

At the same time, financially weakening ISIS demands an approach whose focus is not private Gulf donations. ISIS earns the majority of its income independently -- from oil smuggling, extortion and other crimes in Iraq and Syria. Significantly undermining the group's financial base requires rolling back its access to these local income sources.

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