

Saudi Arabia Ups Pressure on Qatar

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

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[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.



Brief Analysis

The visit of a top-level Saudi delegation to Doha hints at exasperation with Qatari policies.

According to the official Saudi Press Agency, the visit by Saudi foreign minister Prince Saud al-Faisal, intelligence chief Prince Khaled bin Bandar, and interior minister Prince Muhammad bin Nayef was "brief" and "fraternal." But given the recent strains in Saudi-Qatari relations, such a group suggests that Qatar was read the riot act.

Few details were revealed of the meeting and luncheon with the Qatari ruler, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani. The talks were said to have covered bilateral relations, the "joint march" of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) -- which also includes Kuwait, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Oman -- and "a number of issues of mutual concern, particularly the latest developments in the regional and international arenas."

The Saudi list of problems with Qatar is long, predating Sheikh Tamim's succession last year of his father, Sheikh Hamad, who has taken on the title "Father Emir" and seems to act as his son's closest advisor. Riyadh had disapproved of Hamad's sidelining of his own father in 1995 and sponsored a coup plot attempting to reverse the change. For many years, an apparent key editorial purpose of Qatar's Aljazeera satellite television service was to annoy Riyadh.

The latest sore appears to be Tamim's support for Muslim Brotherhood elements in the member states of the GCC, which have notionally pledged noninterference in one another's internal affairs. But Saudi Arabia is also concerned about Qatari support for Libyan Islamists and Hamas in Gaza. Overall, the issues distract the GCC from trying to form a common front against Iranian adventurism.

Mediation between King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia and Sheikh Tamim, orchestrated last November by Kuwait, was declared a failure in March when the kingdom, along with the UAE and Bahrain, announced a diplomatic boycott. Their ambassadors have yet to return to Doha. Last month, Sheikh Tamim visited King Abdullah in Jeddah, but no

reconciliation appears to have occurred between them.

For Washington, the scale of the differences between the Gulf neighbors could affect the U.S. military's ability to operate in the Persian Gulf region, where responsibilities for action against the extremists of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) -- recently renamed the Islamic State (IS) when the group declared a caliphate in parts of Iraq and Syria -- have been added to protecting the sea lanes and deterring Iranian subversion. The United States also needs to consider what its response would be if relations between Riyadh and Doha led to outright hostility. The blandness of the official announcements relating to the visit almost certainly obscures straight talk at the least and possibly even outright threats.

Simon Henderson is the Baker Fellow and director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program at The Washington Institute. ♦

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