

## The Muslim Brotherhood Is the Root of the Qatar Crisis

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The Saudi-led bloc has made thirteen demands of Doha, but they're mostly about resolving one issue -- and time is almost up.

Monday marks the end of the 10 days that Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt gave Qatar to comply with [13 far-reaching demands](#). For starters, Qatar is being told to cut off relations with Iran, shutter Al Jazeera, and stop granting Qatari citizenship to other countries' exiled oppositionists. Despite high-level American and Kuwaiti mediation efforts, a deal appears unlikely. Qatar considers the demands an assault on its sovereignty and has refused to buckle to pressure. The other four countries, which declared an economic and diplomatic embargo on Doha on June 5, have repeatedly insisted that their demands are non-negotiable, and have promised further escalation if the deadline passes without an agreement.

On the surface, the policy disagreements at the center of this rift aren't new. The anti-Qatar bloc has long viewed Doha as too chummy with Iran, too provocative in its backing of Al Jazeera and similar media outlets, and too supportive of Islamist movements. What's new is the zero-sum stakes that the anti-Qatar bloc perceives in the current standoff. Saudi Arabia and the UAE particularly view Qatar's support for Muslim Brotherhood affiliates as lethally threatening to their own regimes, and therefore see Qatar's behavior as not merely objectionable, but utterly intolerable.

In fact, while the countries' 13 demands of Qatar include a range of issues, the overwhelming majority are relevant to their ongoing concerns about Qatar's relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood, and reflect these countries' desire to nip what they view as an existential threat in the bud.

In a sense, the Gulf monarchies have worried about their long-term stability ever since late 2010, when a series of popular uprisings started upending autocratic regimes across the Middle East and North Africa. While the activists at the forefront of those uprisings demanded political reform and economic equality, the so-called Arab Spring rapidly descended into a series of bitter power struggles. In the deadliest of cases, civil wars erupted in Syria and Libya, as regimes responded brutally to protests, fomenting conflicts in which hundreds of thousands have been killed and millions have been displaced. But even in less violent instances, the regimes quickly faced zero-sum stakes: Deposed Tunisian dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali fled into exile, while his Egyptian counterpart Hosni Mubarak was tried and jailed. These events, and Washington's embrace of the various protest movements, unnerved the Gulf monarchies -- including Qatar to some extent. While Al Jazeera covered the January 2011 uprising in Egypt very aggressively, it joined its Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) partners in opposing the subsequent uprising in Bahrain, and it participated in the March 2011 Saudi-led military intervention to support the Bahraini monarchy as it quashed the protests.

But as Muslim Brotherhood organizations rose politically in the aftermath of these uprisings, Qatar charted a separate course and strongly backed these groups. Doha's decision partly reflected its ideological inclinations: The emir was famously close with Egyptian-born cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the de facto Brotherhood spiritual guide who had lived in Qatar since 1961, and Al Jazeera had long provided a platform for Qaradawi and other Brotherhood figures to promote the group's theocratic ideology. But it also reflected Doha's strategic considerations: With Brotherhood affiliates winning elections in Egypt and Tunisia, the Brotherhood appeared to be the political wave of the future. And the Brotherhood presented no internal risk to the Qatari regime, because Doha had [dissolved the domestic Brotherhood chapter in 1999](#).

Saudi Arabia and the UAE, however, saw the Muslim Brotherhood's emergence as severely threatening. After all, the Brotherhood seeks to establish a "[global Islamic state](#)" under its own control, which implies toppling those Muslim governments that are not Brotherhood-ruled in the long run. And both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi feared that the Brotherhood's success in Egypt, Tunisia, and beyond would energize underground Brotherhood groups within their respective countries. Indeed, the Emirati government had been working to dissolve the local Brotherhood branch, known as al-Islah, since 1994, and it viewed al-Islah's traditional influence within the state's educational institutions as particularly worrisome.

Initially, Brotherhood leader Mohammed Morsi attempted to assuage these fears by visiting Riyadh shortly after he won Egypt's June 2012 presidential elections, and the UAE tried to engage Morsi by inviting him to Abu Dhabi. But Brotherhood leaders' persistent and vocal criticisms of the UAE, particularly regarding [Abu Dhabi's](#)

[prosecution of al-Islah](#) in 2013, exacerbated Saudi and Emirati concerns about the Brotherhood's long-term intentions. So when Egypt's military responded to mass protests by ousting Morsi in July 2013, Saudi Arabia and the UAE believed that they had dodged a bullet, and saw the ensuing struggle against the Brotherhood in existential terms. They therefore generously supported then-Defense Minister Abdel Fatah al-Sisi as he brutally repressed the Brotherhood, seeing their own fates as tied to the Brotherhood's defeat.

Yet despite the lethal threat that its GCC partners saw in the Brotherhood, Qatar continued to chart a pro-Brotherhood course. Following the Egyptian coup, Qatar granted refuge to some Brotherhood leaders who escaped from Egypt, [and Al Jazeera housed them in a five-star Doha hotel](#) and granted them regular airtime for promoting their cause. Al Jazeera also aired the Brotherhood's ongoing anti-coup protests, and in some cases allegedly [paid Muslim Brothers for the footage](#). In response, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain withdrew their ambassadors from Doha in March 2014, accusing it of violating the GCC's principle against interfering in members' domestic affairs. The standoff was resolved quietly two months later, and [Egyptian Brotherhood leaders left Doha later that year](#).

But from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE's standpoint, Qatar [never lived up to the 2014 agreement](#) and continued to serve as the nexus of the Brotherhood's regional networks. After all, Qatar still houses the leadership of Hamas, which has long identified as the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood and is a U.S.-designated terrorist organization. (Hamas recently distanced itself from the international Brotherhood movement, but its leader affirmed that it remains part of the Brotherhood's "[intellectual school](#)" -- and he made this announcement from Doha.) Moreover, Al Jazeera continues to promote Brotherhood voices, and other Qatari-funded outlets and think tanks often employ Brotherhood cadres and allies. (For example, until recently, former Brotherhood youth Islam Lotfy was chairman of the satellite network Al-Araby Al-Jadeed.) And Qaradawi still enjoys a platform.

So it should come as no surprise that anxiety about the Muslim Brotherhood is at the center of the Gulf crisis -- and the list of 13 demands.

The second demand orders Doha to "sever all ties to terrorist organizations, specifically the Muslim Brotherhood," and to declare the Brotherhood a terrorist organization.

The third demand calls for shutting down "Al Jazeera and its affiliate stations," which these countries view as a Brotherhood mouthpiece, and the fourth demand similarly calls for the closure of at least four other outlets that are regarded as staunchly pro-Brotherhood.

The fifth demand calls on Doha to "immediately terminate the Turkish military presence currently in Qatar and end any joint military cooperation with Turkey inside Qatar." This reflects the four countries' concerns regarding Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's vocal sympathy with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's "anti-coup" cause, and the prospect that Turkish influence within Qatar might consolidate Qatari support for Brotherhood organizations.

The sixth demand orders Doha to "stop all means of funding for individuals, groups or organizations that have been designated as terrorists by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, Bahrain, the U.S. and other countries," which includes many Brotherhood affiliates.

The seventh demand asks Qatar to "hand over terrorist figures and wanted individuals from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain to their countries of origin," a list that includes Brotherhood cadres and supporters, including Qaradawi.

The eighth demand calls on Doha to "end interference in sovereign countries' internal affairs," which encompasses Brotherhood affiliates across the region, and the ninth demand effectively repeats this: "Stop all contacts with the political opposition in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain. Hand over all files detailing Qatar's prior contacts with and support for those opposition groups."

What will Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt actually do if Qatar doesn't bend? In an interview with the Guardian, the UAE ambassador to Russia [threatened](#) secondary sanctions against Qatar. But a column in the Saudi-owned Al Arabiya went much further, [warning](#) Doha that its failure to accept the 13 demands "may be like Rabaa Square" -- a reference to Egyptian security forces' August 14, 2013, massacre of Muslim Brotherhood members and allies, in which hundreds were killed.

In other words, this rift is also existential for the Qatari government. But given the country's long history of coups and abdications, there are no good answers for Doha. Refusing to comply with the 13 demands will exacerbate the external threat it faces, but yielding to those demands will show weakness domestically, and could make the emir vulnerable.

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