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ASSESSMENT REPORT

The World Reacts to the Gulf Crisis: International Consensus and US Contradictions

Policy Analysis Unit | June 2017

International Reactions to the Gulf Crisis

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Introduction

On the Morning of June 5 2017, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain announced that they would cut all diplomatic and consular ties and cut off all land, sea and air travel with Qatar. Additionally they agreed to close their territory, airspace and territorial waters to Qatari use; to prohibit Qatari citizens from traveling to their countries; and to give Qatari residents and visitors currently inside those countries a two week grace period to depart.

This unprecedented move for intra-Gulf relations also aimed at convincing as many countries in the region and beyond as possible to take sides. The alliance did succeed in pushing small and marginal states to join them in its isolation of Qatar to force it into submission. Yet for the most part, major regional and international powers, with the exception of a conflicting US standpoint, adopted a more responsible narrative on the crisis, calling for a resolution through dialogue— with the caveat of the ambiguity of the US official position.

The US Position: Contradictions Cause Further Complications

America's initial reaction to the crisis came from US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson who, alongside Defense Secretary James Mattis, was in Sydney meeting with his Australian counterpart. Tillerson called for the peaceful resolution of the crisis. Yet the US position was later cloaked in ambiguity when President Trump published a tweet the next day (6 June) which seemed to parrot the demands of the regional anti-Qatar alliance¹. Trump even appeared to take credit for the moves to isolate Qatar, suggesting that it was inspired by his insistence to Gulf rulers during the Riyadh Summit (only days before the crisis began) that more be done to combat "terrorism" and terrorist financing. Trump's position also seemed to paint the Palestinian

¹ "Trump Takes Credit for Saudi Move against Qatar, a U.S. Military Partner" New York Times, 6/6/2017. Last Accessed 15/6/2017: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/06/world/middleeast/trump-qatar-saudi-arabia.html? r=0>

resistance movement Hamas with the same brush as ISIL or Al Qaeda². The situation became no clearer when the Pentagon distanced itself from Trump's statements and praised Qatar's efforts to combat the financing of terrorism. Indeed, Trump himself described Qatar as a strategic partner in the fight against terrorism during his visit to Riyadh.

It looked like the conflict in the Trump administration ended when the State Department suggested that it was mandated with ending the Gulf crisis. Yet less than an hour after a statement by Secretary Tillerson calling for the blockade on Qatar to be eased and a resolution of the crisis through dialogue, the President again accused Qatar of financing terrorism "at a high level," and described Saudi-led steps against Qatar as "difficult but necessary³." In this sense, Trump seemed to undermine the position of his foreign minister and his credibility in resolving the crisis.

Trump's remarks highlighted a deep division in his administration between the realist trend represented by the State Department and the Pentagon, keen to preserve the unity of the international coalition in the war on Daesh, of which Qatar is an essential part; and the populist current that sees all things Islamic as terrorist and all contributions to Islamic charitable institutions as terror financing. Yet even these populists are prepared to sell out, willing to brush aside concerns about Saudi financing of terror in return for commercial deals.

It could also be argued that Trump wants to exploit the Gulf crisis and even try to inflame it in order to distract attention from the investigations into the Russian intervention in the 2016 US presidential election. These investigations started to look more serious following testimony by former FBI Director James Comey in which he accused Trump of lying about the reasons behind his dismissal. Comey argued that the president dismissed him because of his insistence on further investigations into Russian election interference and the Russian ties of Trump aides⁴.

² "President Trump's Speech to the Arab Islamic American Summit." Ibid.

³ "Trump Seems to Undercut Tillerson's Remarks on Qatar" Washington Post, 9/6/2017. Last Accessed 15/6/2017: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/arab-countries-place-dozens-on-new-qatar-terror-list-deepening-dispute/2017/06/09/fd727fab-e750-4fdd-ac23-26256e8e0493_story.html?utm_term=.cef99978bce9

⁴ "Former FBI chief Comey says he was fired to stop Russia inquiry, and accuses Trump of 'lies, plain and simple'" LA Times, 8/6/2017. Last Accessed 15/6/2017: <http://www.latimes.com/politics/la-na-pol-comey-hearing-20170608-story.html>

While the other branches of the Executive, such as the State Department and the Pentagon, are working to end this conflict, the statements by Trump merely serve to provide the blockade with cover. These machinations come at a time when there is a lot of progress in bilateral relations between Doha and Washington, particularly covering issues such as terror financing. It is plausible that the two prevailing currents within the US Administration will play the role of bad cop and good cop in order to put pressure on Qatar to buckle to the demands of the alliance arrayed against it. In other words, Qatar will have to turn the tide in Washington at this critical juncture if it wants to prevail.

Despite the UAE's massive financial resources which the UAE has made available for this campaign, most major media outlets are skeptical about the Saudi-Emirati narrative and, in any case, tend to distrust Trump. Trump is much less popular in the rest of the world than he is among the leaders of the countries blockading Qatar. By siding with the regional alliance against Qatar, he has unwittingly raised about the true intentions of the blockade.

The European Positions: A Balance of Interests

Berlin's position on this crisis has been patently clear from the beginning. German Foreign Minister Gabriel Sigmar called for the lifting of the blockade on Qatar, which he described as detrimental to efforts to combat terrorism. The German position on the crisis came in part as a reaction to President Trump's policies in the Gulf region and the direction of the European Union. Germany is seeking to build a more assertive foreign policy for itself through using Europe. This is increasingly pressing with the impending departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union and the recent election of Emmanuel Macron to the Elysee Palace on a foreign policy platform which promised "a strong France and a united Europe". Germany's attitude was made abundantly clear in remarks which Sigmar gave to the newspaper *Handelsblatt* on the Gulf crisis, where he warned of the "Trumpification" of relations between the Gulf States. If escalation in this region fraught with risks continued, he warned, the consequences would not be in anyone's interest⁵.

⁵ See the statement of German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel on the conflict in the Arabian Peninsula, German Media Center, German Foreign Ministry, 7/6/2017 Last Accessed 15/6/2017 <https://goo.gl/RCIXgc> . Also "Germany warns Gulf crisis

France also lent its voices to demands for a negotiated resolution to the Gulf crisis, and President Macron expressed his country's support for all initiatives in support of a truce. A statement issued by the French presidency expressed Paris' intention to undertake efforts to consult with friendly countries to find a solution to the crisis in order to maintain stability in the region⁶.

Both France and Germany have resisted efforts by Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubeir to win them over to the blockade. Berlin was particularly adamant about not jumping on the anti-Qatar bandwagon, and in fact was the first capital to host Qatari Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed Bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani in his round of shuttle diplomacy. Affirming Qatar's important role in the international coalition against ISIL, the German government was clear that any weakening of Qatar would constrain global efforts against terror.

The Russian position at the beginning of the crisis was cautious. Dmitry Piskov, a spokesman for President Putin, said that Moscow "cannot interfere in the internal affairs of other states – in this case, the states of the Persian Gulf. Russia undoubtedly values relations with the Persian Gulf region as a whole and separately with the countries of the Gulf," But the Russian position soon developed, when Moscow returned two days later to offer food supplies to Qatar in the midst of the blockade. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, speaking whilst taking part in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit, called for a negotiated resolution to the Qatar crisis, "through a mutually respectful dialogue" stating that his country would act with the "consent and the interest of the parties involved"⁷.

Lavrov reiterated this position at a press conference he held with his Qatari counterpart, where he said "We cannot be happy in a situation when the relations between our partners are worsening," adding that, "We are in favor of resolving any disagreements through ... dialogue."⁸ This Russian position shows that Moscow has not been dragged into supporting the Saudi and Emirati positions against Qatar. This is despite the close relationship Abu Dhabi has established with Moscow, strengthened by the role of the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi in establishing a back channel between the Kremlin and the Trump Administration.

exacerbates Middle East 'powder keg' DW, 7/6/2017. Last Accessed 15/6/2017 <http://www.dw.com/en/germany-warns-gulf-crisis-exacerbates-middle-east-powder-keg/a-39153930>

⁶ - Crise dans le Golfe: le président français Emmanuel Macron appelle à "l'unité" et à "l'apaisement", Les Nouvelles Calédoniennes, 07/06/2017: <https://goo.gl/Kqu1Sb>

⁷"Russia's Lavrov calls for talks to ease Qatar stand-off" Reuters, 10/6/2017. Last Accessed 15/6/2017: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-gulf-qatar-russia-idUSKBN1910ES>

⁸"Russia urges dialogue in Qatar-Gulf dispute" Channel NewsAsia, 11/6/2017. Last Accessed 15/6/2017: <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/world/russia-urges-dialogue-in-qatar-gulf-dispute-8935984>

Regional Attitudes: Opportunities and Risks

Iran seized the initial media attack on Qatar as an opportunity to strengthen its stance against Saudi Arabia as early as May 24, 2017. Iran considers the crisis a result of the summit Riyadh Summit, a meeting which it regarded as intended to plot against Tehran. Recently re-elected president Hassan Rouhani called Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani on May 27, 2017, speaking about the importance of a “dialogue of equals” across the Gulf⁹. With the media-diplomatic attack and the closure of the border with Qatar on June 5, 2017, Tehran expressed its willingness to supply Qatar with food and vegetables to compensate for supplies that would normally have come from Saudi Arabia. On June 11, 2017, Iran sent five planes carrying tons of fruits and vegetables to Qatar¹⁰.

Iran is preparing to reap its rewards from the Gulf crisis, both economically and politically. The Qatari market, which imports \$10 billion worth of food annually, will become an important outlet for the export of food products and other Iranian goods to its close neighbor. This will increase the volume of trade between Iran and Qatar, presently estimated at less than \$300 million. In addition, after years of tension, Iran will seek to "coordinate" with Qatar on a number of conflicting regional issues, in a number of sensitive places like Syria, Yemen and Lebanon, in order to counter Saudi foreign policy.

Turkey, meanwhile, was quick to attempt to play the role of mediator. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, also current president of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, held telephone talks with the Emir of Qatar, the Saudi monarch and the Emir of Kuwait, in which he offered to mediate between the various sides¹¹. The countries leading the blockade on Doha simply paid no heed to Turkish overtures. This led Ankara to beef up its backing to its Qatari ally by accelerating the ratification of previous military agreements between Qatar and Turkey. With legislative

⁹ “Khamenei Expects "Inevitable fall" of Saudi Rulers and Rouhani Calls for Improved Relations”

<http://ara.reuters.com/article/idARAKBN18NOT3?sp=true>

¹⁰ “Iran sends planes stuffed with food to Qatar”, CNN, 11/6/2017, Last Accessed 15/6/2017:

<http://edition.cnn.com/2017/06/11/middleeast/iran-qatar-planes-food/index.htm>

¹¹ “Turkey Offers Assistance to Resolve the Gulf Crisis”, Al Jazeera Net, 6/6/2017, Last Accessed 15/6/2017,

<http://bit.ly/2skgj1k>

approval on June 7, 2017, Turkey will now be able to expedite the establishment of a military base in Qatar¹².

Turkey was quick to supply Qatar with basic Turkish food commodities and products, especially dairy products. Turkey's support for Qatar was an important balancing factor in the crisis, although Erdogan described the decision to establish a military base in Qatar as protection for Gulf security in general, not directed against any Gulf state¹³.

Conclusion

Despite the media campaign and the great diplomatic efforts exerted by the regional alliance to obtain regional and international support for the move to isolate Qatar, they yielded paltry results. Only peripheral countries joined the blockade, some of them clearly coerced into towing the line. Three Arab African countries—Morocco, Sudan and Somalia—which the anti-Qatar coalition took for granted also failed to join the campaign against Doha. Important regional and international players have tended to take more balanced positions and have largely agreed to call on the involved parties to resolve the crisis through dialogue and still others have offered mediation. International steadfastness has been a source of pressure on the blockading countries, which latterly have had to backtrack from some of their more punitive measures, especially those which affect the everyday lives of Gulf citizens directly and which have now become a source of embarrassment. These regional and international positions, even if not conducive to finding a solution to the crisis, are likely to at least constitute a brake on any escalation against Qatar.

¹² "Turkish Parliament approves draft law on the establishment of Turkish military forces in Qatar", Turk Press, June 7, 2017, last Accessed 15/6/2017 <http://www.turkpress.co/node/35366>

¹³ "Foreign Minister of Bahrain: Turkish Base in Qatar to Protect the Gulf Region", Turk Press, 10/6/2017, Last Accessed 15/6/2017, <http://www.turkpress.co/node/35526>