

The Assault On Qatar Was Another Big Saudi Failure

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The small Persian Gulf kingdom of Qatar put itself on display last weekend with its annual Doha Forum. The event's broad theme was governance in a changing world.

However valuable the conference discussion, another important purpose of the gathering was to showcase the land of just 2.8 million, of whom little more than 300,000 are citizens. I was hosted by the government and treated well, if not quite like visiting royalty.

The emirate has spent more than two years under diplomatic, economic, and cultural assault by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. However, Qatar has survived and even prospered. Today it looks and feels normal. Even those without oil wealth feel secure. A driver, a Syrian refugee, told me that he and his family were no longer suffering from any impact of the blockade.

In June 2017, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, along with their financial and military dependents, most notably Bahrain, Egypt, and Jordan, broke off diplomatic relations with Qatar, expelled Qatari citizens, banned all commerce and travel, denied access to airspace and territorial waters, and punished their own citizens who sympathized with Doha. In what has been called the Second Arab Cold War (in 2014, the Saudis and Emiratis briefly cut diplomatic ties), the coalition issued a baker's dozen demands. Their acceptance would have turned Qatar into a puppet state, effectively governed by the Saudis and Emiratis.

Riyadh and Abu Dhabi hypocritically accused Qatar of funding terrorists, a practice they, as well as other Gulf States, had long tolerated, to Washington's frustration. The more serious complaint appeared to be over Doha's relative foreign policy contrariness, refusing to follow Saudi Arabia's lead and backing different radical Islamist factions in regional political and military struggles. (For instance, Saudi Arabia's taste runs to fundamentalist Wahhabists, who preach hatred against everyone other than extremist Sunnis, while Qatar prefers the Muslim Brotherhood, which promotes political activism.)

Doha also maintains civil relations with Iran, with which it shares a natural gas field. Even worse, Qatar's state-backed Al Jazeera has publicized the crimes of other Gulfdoms, such as the murder and dismemberment of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi agree that criticism is a bad thing, which is why they insisted that the emirate shut down its news service.

Whatever one thinks of the Saudi/Emirati charges, for the Qatari ruling family, compliance—the equivalent of surrender—was not an option. Said Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani, the Saudi group was “demanding that we have to surrender our sovereignty,” which was something that Doha would “never do.”

Qatar suggested negotiation, which was summarily rejected. That left the country isolated and endangered. There was even a threat of invasion by Saudi Arabia.

However, Doha played its weak hand well. It turned to Kuwait, a friendly Gulfdom independent of Riyadh, to act as mediator. Oman, another small Gulf state with a more balanced foreign policy, encouraged reconciliation and handled Qatar-bound maritime traffic. Doha upgraded relations with Iran, which opened its airspace—Qatar Airways now boasts that it has even more destinations than before—and became an important source of food imports. The Qataris even invited in the Turkish military to forestall any invasion.

Doha also highlighted the role of America’s Al Udeid air base, winning support from the U.S. Defense and State Departments despite President Donald Trump’s initial tweets backing the Saudis. At the Doha Forum, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin defended Qatar’s role in combatting terrorism financing. He urged America’s allies to heal their breach.

The gathering highlighted bilateral ties that have become key to Qatar’s success. The U.S. sent a large delegation, including Mnuchin; Ivanka Trump, the president’s daughter and adviser; and Zalmay Khalilzad, currently negotiating with the Taliban. Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif addressed the participants.

Turkey’s defense minister and foreign minister, along with a presidential adviser, spoke. The heavy Turkish representation may have been an indirect response to whispers that Doha might negotiate away Ankara’s military presence. Last weekend, Qatar’s Foreign Minister al-Thani rejected such fears: “Any country that opened up for us and helped us during our crisis, we will remain grateful for them...and we will never turn our back to them.”

The assault on Qatar is one of Riyadh’s most important failures. Rather like the invasion of Yemen, what was supposed to be a quick and simple victory has instead highlighted Saudi impotence and reinforced the crown prince’s reputation for recklessness. He appears locked in another struggle that he doesn’t know how to resolve. When confronted with the failure of his anti-Qatar campaign, MbS downplayed the effort, saying it was only of minor importance. Rather than acknowledge a mistake, Riyadh suggested that it might dig a 37-mile canal to act as a moat along the border with Qatar, essentially turning it into an island.

Still, there are glimmerings of hope. Mnuchin’s comments demonstrated that the president’s extended genuflection to the Saudi royals has not affected his administration’s approach to Qatar. Those who make and administer policy identify with Doha and desire compromise. Washington has criticized the extreme Saudi and Emirati demands.

Moreover, Gulf Cooperation Council discussions after the September attack on Riyadh’s oil facilities included Qatar. Rice University’s Kristian Coates Ulrichsen suggested that this “dialogue opened a space for diplomacy, whereas the maximalist and take-it-or-leave-it nature of the 13 demands in 2017 had represented an ultimatum rather than a basis for negotiation.”

Saudi Arabia invited Qatar's emir to attend last week's GCC meeting. Although there was no talk about the issues dividing GCC members, the emir's presence suggests that the Kingdom has abandoned its earlier hopes of expelling Qatar from the GCC. Moreover, the *Wall Street Journal* reports that Doha had made a settlement offer, which included abandoning the Muslim Brotherhood. Foreign Minister al-Thani later stated that no concessions that "affect our sovereignty and interfere with our domestic or foreign policy" would be offered. Riyadh had apparently backed away from several of its most outlandish conditions.

As yet nothing has come from such efforts. Nevertheless, a couple weeks ago, Foreign Minister al-Thani spoke of the contacts: "We hope that these talks will lead to a process where we can see an end for this crisis." The Saudi foreign minister also acknowledged discussions but said the content was best left in private.

Another promising sign: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE sent football (soccer) teams to the Arabian Gulf Cup in Qatar. Two years ago, the contest was moved to Kuwait, since the foregoing three refused to travel to Qatar. The Saudi ambassador to Kuwait, Sultan bin Sa'ad al-Saud, observed that "sport might repair what politics has ruined."

The UAE may be the more important barrier, pressing Riyadh not to make concessions. Ulrichsen observed: "The leadership in Abu Dhabi remains resolutely opposed to any normalization of ties and easing of the blockade." Last week, the UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash tweeted that "the onus lies with the one that caused the crisis, to reconsider erroneous policies that led to its isolation." He said Doha's conversations with Riyadh are "a repeat at attempts to split the ranks and evade commitments."

Even so, MbS may decide that continuing confrontation benefits Iran. Riyadh seems to be slowly moving toward the same conclusion regarding the war on Yemen, which has proved to be catastrophic for all concerned. Gulf unity would obviously be the best policy in facing Iran.

Should Doha demand more than a return to the status quo? Madawi al-Rasheed, a visiting professor at the London School of Economics, warned against accepting the Saudis' "new conditions of servitude." She explained, "For reconciliation with Qatar to succeed, Saudi Arabia needs a new approach to foreign policy. It should realize that neither its current diplomacy nor its military aggression against other countries, for example Yemen, will crown it the king of Arab affairs. It cannot lead the Arab world by conspiracy, petrodollars or military strikes."

Foreign Minister al-Thani emphasized, "We believe we are still at a very early stage, and what happened in the last two and a half years was a lot and there is, I think, a need for some time to rebuild trust again." Still, the governments are talking. He observed: "We have broken the stalemate of non-communication to starting a communication with the Saudis."

Washington should encourage the Gulf states to work through their problems. However, actions speak louder than words. The administration's most important contribution to a negotiated settlement might have been its refusal to attack Iran for apparently targeting Saudi oil facilities. The Saudi royals decided that if they cannot count on the U.S. military to act as their bodyguards, then Riyadh has greater reason to settle ongoing disputes.

If the Kingdom truly wants peace and stability, it should abandon its reckless campaign for regional hegemony. That obviously means ending the costly military intervention in Yemen. Also necessary is stopping the failed political offensive against Qatar. Today, Washington's

supposed friends, most importantly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have become greater threats than Iran to regional peace and stability.

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