



## Gulf Crisis Continues, Threatening Mideast Peace and U.S. Interests

Doug Bandow

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Oil-rich Saudi Arabia wants to rule the Persian Gulf and the United Arab Emirates wants to rule Riyadh, indirectly, at least. Both states desire to impose their will on neighboring Qatar, whose independent foreign policy irritates entitled elites not used to criticism let alone opposition. But so far the two nations' efforts have done little more than strengthen Qatar's independence and expose their own hypocrisy. Washington should continue to mediate, while making clear that the fault mostly lies with the aggressive and repressive Saudi-Emirati axis.

In June Abu Dhabi and Riyadh imposed a quasi-blockade on the small sheikdom of Qatar and demanded that it accept the status of vassal. They were joined by two countries which previously sold their sovereignty: Egypt, whose unpopular al-Sisi dictatorship was on both the Saudi and Emirati payrolls, and Bahrain, whose Sunni monarch crushed democracy protests by the Shia majority with the help of Saudi troops. (The Maldives and one of Libya's contending "governments" also joined in, while Kuwait and Oman remained neutral.) UAE and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia presented 13 "non-negotiable" demands, which included accepting foreign oversight of Doha's policies.

In the Middle East, an artifact of geography, the existence of vast pools of oil and natural gas, enriched otherwise unimportant nations ruled by small, sheltered families. "There are no clean hands here," observed one unidentified State Department official. In dispute is support for terrorism, status of human rights, and relations with Iran.

The KSA and UAE royals long have been frustrated with Qatar. Not over supporting terrorism, however. After all, 15 of the 19 9/11 hijackers were Saudis and two were Emiratis. Moreover, both countries earned a dubious reputation in Washington as a source of money for al-Qaeda and other groups targeting the U.S.

Indeed, State Department officials complained in a long cable dated December 30, 2009: "it has been an ongoing challenge to persuade Saudi officials to treat terrorist financing emanating from Saudi Arabia as a strategic priority." This matters because "donors in Saudi Arabia constitute the most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide." The Kingdom "remains a critical financial support base for al-Qaeda, the Taliban, LeT [Lashkar-e-Tayyiba], and other terrorist groups, including Hamas."

State went on to observe that Emirati citizens "have provided financial support to a variety of terrorist groups." Moreover, "UAE's role as a growing global financial center, coupled with weak regulatory oversight, makes it vulnerable to abuse by terrorist financiers and facilitation networks." The recent hacking of UAE ambassador to America Yousef al-Otaiba's emails led to

circulation of an online report compiling evidence of his government's support for the Haqqani Network in Afghanistan, Islamist radicals in Libya, and similar violent groups elsewhere. Three years ago former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton advocated bringing "pressure on the governments of Qatar and Saudi Arabia, which are providing clandestine financial and logistical support for ISIL and other radical Sunni groups in the region." Last year Donald Trump complained that the Saudis were "the world's biggest funders of terrorism." Recently Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Bob Corker observed that "The amount of support for terrorism by Saudi Arabia dwarfs what Qatar is doing."

Washington officials say the KSA has improved: "Interaction and cooperation with the Saudis has gotten better," one unnamed administration staffer told the *Financial Times*. But not because Riyadh has reformed. Last year the Treasury Department complained that the KSA and UAE supported two Yemeni backers of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. In May the *Washington Post* reported that the Kingdom blocked a Trump administration proposal to sanction the Saudi chapter of the Islamic State. Progress occurred only due to Washington's persistence: "Because the U.S. government has made terror financing a high priority and relentlessly raised this over and over with all these countries, we have put substantial financial pressure on al-Qaeda," said the *FT* source.

Of course, Qatar (along with Kuwait, which avoided the Saudi-Emirati attack) has been rightly criticized for its failings. In late July State acknowledged Doha's improvements in limiting terrorist funding, but warned that "terrorist financiers within the country are still able to exploit Qatar's informal financial system." Doha recently signed a new memorandum of understanding with Washington on terrorist funding, which hopefully will lead to a more effective response. However, unlike Riyadh, Doha does not spend up to \$4 billion annually spreading fundamentalist Wahhabism, which prepares people for terrorist appeals by degrading those, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, who do not accept fundamentalist Sunni teachings. Saudi Arabia may lead the global hypocrisy parade: the royals affect public piety by ostentatiously subsidizing intolerance while living lavishly in private behind high walls. Without the slightest hint of shame last month the monarchy announced creation of the Department of Public Prosecution to target social media hate speech.

Unfortunately, the monarchy's hate speech is not harmless. In a recent report Tom Wilson of the London-based Henry Jackson Society argued that "a growing body of evidence has emerged that points to the considerable impact that foreign funding has had on advancing Islamist extremism in Britain and other Western countries." Saudi money has radicalized Muslims in Bosnia, Kosovo, Pakistan, and elsewhere. Norwegian terrorism analyst Thomas Hegghammer concluded "If there was going to be an Islamic reformation in the 20th century, the Saudis probably prevented it."

What the KSA and UAE really mean when criticizing Doha's alleged support for "terrorism" is hosting groups critical of the Saudi and Emirati royals. For instance, the Muslim Brotherhood is the largest organization of political Islam. The U.S. has reason to be wary of the group, but members are well integrated socially in a number of nations, such as Kuwait and Turkey, and have ended up in governments in Egypt, Tunisia, and elsewhere. The presidency of Mohamed Morsi ended badly, but was responsible for a fraction of the crimes committed by General turned

President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who sought support from Abu Dhabi and Riyadh while staging a coup and brutally crushing all opposition.

The latter two also criticized Qatar for hosting such groups as Hamas and the Taliban. However, keeping an open line of communication with such organizations is useful, and hacked emails from Ambassador al-Otaiba reveal that Abu Dhabi was angry when it lost out to Qatar as the location of the Taliban embassy. From America's standpoint, it is better that such groups locate in Doha, where they can be monitored and moderated than in, say, Tehran.

Indeed, Washington never asked Qatar to expel its guests. To the contrary, former general and CIA director David Petraeus observed in July: "Our partners should remember that Qatar—at our request—welcomed delegations from the Taliban and Hamas." Courtney Freer, with Gulf State Analytics, contended that hosting political refugees has historical precedent and reflects "a desire to expand influence regionally and internationally" rather than any "ideological affinity." Perhaps most irritating to the Saudi and Emirati rulers is the existence of Al Jazeera, which criticizes them. After all, they are used to dictating to state-controlled media in the KSA and UAE. Both governments have criminalized any expression of sympathy for Qatar on social media; Saudi journalists say they receive specific talking points and orders to attack Doha. Any media outside of royal control rankles.

As part of the PR wars Riyadh and Abu Dhabi criticized Doha's record on human rights and religious liberty. No one would mistake Qatar's hereditary monarchy as a Western-style democracy. In its latest human rights report the State Department noted that Qatar holds no elections for national office and does not protect civil liberties. The Muslim nation also restricts religious liberty.

Yet oppression is much broader and deeper in the UAE and Saudi Arabia. (Human rights also suffer badly in Bahrain and Egypt, but they are bit players in the ongoing drama.)

In the Emirates, noted State: "the three most significant human rights problems were the inability of citizens to choose their government in free and fair periodic elections; limitations on civil liberties (including the freedoms of speech, press, assembly, and association); and arrests without charge, incommunicado detentions, lengthy pretrial detentions, and mistreatment during detention."

As if that wasn't enough, the Department went on to report: "Other reported human rights problems included a lack of government transparency; police and prison guard brutality; government interference with privacy rights, including arrests and detentions for internet postings or commentary; and a lack of judicial independence. The law directly prohibits blasphemy and proselytizing by non-Muslims, and indirectly prohibits conversion from Islam by referring to Sharia law on matters of religious doctrine. Domestic abuse and violence against women remained problems." The International Centre for Justice and Human Rights reported that human rights supporters face problems such as "criminalizing, harassment against them and their families, restriction of freedom of movement, work ban and abusive work dismissal," as well as enforced disappearance.

With an exquisite, even sublime, sense of irony, the KSA created and funded the “National Society of Human Rights.” NSHR recently issued a press release, promoted at great expense by the Podesta Group, complaining about Doha’s mistreatment of a Qatari citizen returning from the Hajj. The group’s concern for Doha’s alleged misbehavior is, of course, touching. But one wonders when the “Society” will get around to commenting on the case of blogger Raif Badawi, who in 2014 was sentenced to ten years in prison and a thousand lashes. His lawyer subsequently was hit with a 15 year sentence.

The Society also might address the 14 Shia Saudis sentenced to death for simply protesting against the royals, which was treated as a terrorism-related crime. Perhaps the NSHR could issue a press release. Moreover, the group might address the monarchy’s kidnapping of three dissident Saudi princes, Sultan bin Turki bin Abdulaziz, Turki bin Bandar, and Saud bin Saif al-Nasr, detailed by the BBC last month. Bin Abdulaziz was released for medical treatment after his first abduction, only to be grabbed again in 2016. None have been heard from and are presumed in prison.

State also had much to say about human rights in the Kingdom, none of it good: “The most important human rights problems reported included citizens’ lack of the ability and legal means to choose their government; restrictions on universal rights, such as freedom of expression, including on the internet, and the freedoms of assembly, association, movement, and religion; and pervasive gender discrimination and lack of equal rights that affected most aspects of women’s lives.”

But the government’s abuses don’t stop there. Added State: “Other human rights problems reported included: a lack of judicial independence and transparency that manifested itself in denial of due process and arbitrary arrest and detention; a lack of equal rights for children and noncitizen workers; abuses of detainees; overcrowding in prisons and detention centers; investigating, detaining, prosecuting, and sentencing lawyers, human rights activists, and antigovernment reformists; holding political prisoners; arbitrary interference with privacy, home, and correspondence; and a lack of equal rights for children and noncitizen workers.”

As for religion, the UAE restricts non-Muslim faiths, though it admittedly behaves little different from many other repressive Muslim nations. In contrast, the KSA is a totalitarian state. There are no churches, synagogues, temples, or other houses of worship. Even Shia Muslims, in the minority, are treated badly. The U.S. government routinely cites Saudi Arabia as a Country of Particular Concern.

Finally, the Saudi-Emirati jihad targeted Qatar’s relationship with Iran. Since Doha and Tehran share a natural gas field, a civil relationship is a must. Ironically, the UAE recognizes this reality. A former Qatari deputy prime minister, Abdullah bin Hamad al-Attiyah, pointed out that UAE’s trade with Iran was far greater than that of Qatar. The latter agreed to cut commerce with Tehran if Abu Dhabi and Riyadh did so as well, but the UAE refused. Moreover, in August Saudi Arabia moved to improve its strained relations with Iran, agreeing to exchange diplomatic visits.

Nor has isolation proved to be a useful tactic against Iran. To the contrary, there is much greater hope for liberal and democratic transformation in Iran than Saudi Arabia. Tehran remembers a

liberal past, holds elections, tolerates some opposition media, and hosts a growing youth population that looks West.

On foreign policy Riyadh's policies are more dangerous—invading Yemen, promoting radical Islamists in Syria, sustaining tyranny in Bahrain, funding dictatorship in Egypt, and attempting to turn Qatar into a puppet state. The Saudi royals are so fearful of Iran because the latter offers a cause, though flawed, in which people can believe. Who but a well-compensated Saudi prince supports a system in which well-compensated princes are entitled to mulct the rest of the population?

Ironically, the Emirati-Saudi campaign has greatly benefited Tehran. Iran looks quite reasonable, compared to the pampered royals demanding their neighbor's obeisance. Qatar has turned to Tehran for help supplying the foodstuffs no longer available through Saudi Arabia. Indeed, Doha recently restored diplomatic relations with and returned its ambassador to Iran. (Qatar also has tightened ties with Turkey, helping to limit Saudi and Emirati dominance of the Gulf.)

Although Saudi Arabia and UAE moved in tandem, they appear to be uncomfortable partners. Ambassador al-Otaiba expressed his government's desire to manipulate Saudi Arabia through the relationship of the two kingdoms' crown princes. He even claimed creation of a secular state was a shared objective of the two monarchies. The Saudi response was less than favorable. Moreover, in Yemen the two governments have prodigiously killed civilians and impeded international relief efforts, creating a humanitarian crisis. (Despite authoring the present catastrophe, Riyadh is seeking PR credit for providing financial aid to its victims.) But otherwise their strategies vary, with Riyadh fostering the growth of radical Islamists while UAE recently battling al-Qaeda. Yet two years ago Abu Dhabi purchased weapons from North Korea for distribution in Yemen, a major no-no for Washington.

The U.S. government's position is difficult to discern. Prior to visiting Riyadh President Donald Trump criticized the Saudi royals for being defense dependents and funding terrorism. However, they appeared to capture their guest—perhaps due to the power of the orb with which he posed or the emotion of the sword dance in which he performed. He apparently gave his approval to the Saudi-Emirati campaign and tweeted his endorsement afterwards.

However, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis clearly if indirectly took Qatar's side. The former criticized Riyadh and Abu Dhabi and pressed them to specify their demands, which led to the impossible list of 13. He pronounced Qatar's positions "very reasonable." Secretary Mattis emphasized Doha's role as a military ally and host of al-Udeid Air Base. There were no words of sympathy for Qatar's accusers. Moreover, U.S. intelligence believes that Abu Dhabi hacked the Qatari government's website, creating fake quotes from Qatar's emir which helped trigger the latest dispute. Ally as cyber-criminal does not go over well with this administration.

All of which has strengthened Doha's position and left the Gulfdom in no mood for surrender. At the same time, Saudi Arabia and the UAE faced humiliation. While Abu Dhabi denounced the "colonial" practices of Iran and Turkey in Syria, the Emiratis and Saudis were pushing precisely the same approach in the Gulf.

They ostentatiously but unsuccessfully sought support from smaller states, such as Somalia. Abu Dhabi's ambassador to Russia, Omar Saif Ghobash, talked about turning the issue into one of "us or them," but it now looks like "them" is winning. Having made a baker's dozen outrageous, non-negotiable demands, the KSA and UAE cannot back down without a massive loss of face. However, given Washington's position, escalation, and especially military action—once rumored to be in preparation—are out of the question. (The presence of Turkish troops presents another roadblock to Emirati and Saudi aggression.)

Last month the Saudi royals hosted a minor Qatari sheikh from the losing side of the al-Thani family's internal battles, perhaps hoping to use him in an effort at regime change. However, Qataris appear to have united around the current emir, Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani. Abu Dhabi and Riyadh are spending prodigiously on think tanks, most notably the Middle East Institute, and PR agents, such as the Podesta Group, but blackening Qatar's image has not redeemed their reputations. The UAE and KSA found it difficult to build international support for turning their neighbor into a virtual colony, suppressing criticism of their own dictatorial practices, and censoring a major global media organization.

Earlier this month Qatar's emir spoke with Saudi Arabia's crown prince. But after reports of their conversation surfaced, the latter accused the former of distorting their talk and cut off contact. Which puts the instigators of the stand-off back to square one. The virtual blockade is costly to both sides. Qatar undoubtedly suffers more economically than its antagonists, but is in better financial position than Saudi Arabia, which has suffered significantly from lower oil prices. The Saudi crown prince recently staged a humiliating domestic retreat, rolling back some of his economic reforms imposed just a year ago.

Politically the accusers are the clear losers. They unintentionally focused attention on their poor human rights records and shameless hypocrisy, while Riyadh's prime antagonist, Iran, gained ground. The U.S. hasn't formally taken sides, but officials evidently blame the countries which started the fight.

At this stage, most governments see no quick resolution to the Gulf confrontation. For instance, Secretary Tillerson observed that the "ultimate resolution may take quite a while." Almost certainly Riyadh and Abu Dhabi will have to back down, but neither regime is ready for the resulting humiliation.

In a perfect world Washington wouldn't be concerned about a squabble among contending sets of sanctimonious elites half a world away. But the U.S. has made itself the guarantor of Gulf security. The administration can't ignore the ongoing fight, especially with the extraordinarily reckless Saudi crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, acting like the proverbial bull in a china shop. A Gulf dominated by Saudi Arabia, pursuing Wahhabi imperialism, and the UAE, busy establishing military bases in Puntland, Somaliland, and Yemen, would be no less dangerous than one dominated by Tehran.

President Trump should assert positive leadership in Middle Eastern affairs and confront Riyadh's outsized negative role. American officials should indicate that they expect the Saudis and Emiratis to clean up the mess they have created. And the sooner the better.

*Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, specializing in foreign policy and civil liberties.*