



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

Situation Assessment | 3 June 2020

The Blockade on Qatar: Prospects for Continuation or Resolution

Unit for Political Studies

The Blockade on Qatar: Prospects for Continuation or Resolution

Series: [Situation Assessment](#)

3 June 2020

Unit for Political Studies

The Unit for Political Studies is the Center's department dedicated to the study of the region's most pressing current affairs. An integral and vital part of the ACRPS' activities, it offers academically rigorous analysis on issues that are relevant and useful to the public, academics and policy-makers of the Arab region and beyond. The Unit for Political Studies draws on the collaborative efforts of a number of scholars based within and outside the ACRPS. It produces three of the Center's publication series: Assessment Report, Policy Analysis, and Case Analysis reports. .

Copyright © 2020 Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. All Rights Reserved.

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies is an independent research institute and think tank for the study of history and social sciences, with particular emphasis on the applied social sciences.

The Center's paramount concern is the advancement of Arab societies and states, their cooperation with one another and issues concerning the Arab nation in general. To that end, it seeks to examine and diagnose the situation in the Arab world - states and communities- to analyze social, economic and cultural policies and to provide political analysis, from an Arab perspective.

The Center publishes in both Arabic and English in order to make its work accessible to both Arab and non-Arab researchers.

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

Al-Tarfa Street, Wadi Al Banat

Al-Dayaen, Qatar

PO Box 10277, Doha

+974 4035 4111

www.dohainstitute.org

Table of Contents

Beginnings of the Crisis	1
Lessons from the 2014 Crisis	1
The US Factor in the Crisis	2
The Future of the Crisis	4

Despite the passage of three years since the blockade of Qatar, and the deep rift in the structure of the Gulf Cooperation Council, the crisis remains ubiquitous. The mediation efforts made by Kuwait and other international parties, and new ones, have not succeeded in the efforts that Washington pushed in recent weeks to restore the unity of the Council. The crises experienced by the region, such as the outbreak of the Covid-19 epidemic in the GCC states, the collapse of oil prices and the economic hardship faced by most of the Gulf countries due to the low oil prices and the global economic recession did not help in changing the reality imposed by the blockade three years ago in the worst crisis the GCC has witnessed it since its establishment in 1981.

Beginnings of the Crisis

The blockade on Qatar started just two days after a summit that was held in Riyadh on 20 - 21 May 2017, the declared goal of which was to confront terrorism and contain Iran and saw the US President attending alongside representatives of about 50 Arab and Islamic countries. On the night of 24 May, the Qatar News Agency was hacked and made various statements attributed to the Emir of Qatar during the graduation ceremony for students of a military college, which was co-opted as an excuse to launch the crisis. That is, in the absence of a real cause for the crisis, one was fabricated. As a result, an unprecedented media campaign was launched targeting Qatar, culminating in three Gulf states - Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, and Bahrain - alongside Egypt, declaring their decision to cut diplomatic ties with Qatar on 5 June 2017. The measures also included closing the land, sea and air outlets with it, forbidding transit in Qatari territory, airspace and territorial waters, preventing its citizens from traveling to Qatar, giving residents and visitors with Qatari nationality a specific period in which they had to leave, and preventing Qatari citizens from entering. These measures were unprecedented for the Arab Gulf states, or even for their treatment of any other country, including Iran, even in the most severe crises that it witnessed, which suggests that they were intended to cause a state of shock and dismay that would force Qatar to surrender to the demands of the blockading countries.

Lessons from the 2014 Crisis

This was not the first crisis between Qatar and its neighbors, as the same three Gulf countries had previously withdrawn their ambassadors from Doha in February 2014. At that time, the dispute over the position on the military coup in Egypt that toppled elected President Mohamed Morsi on 3 July 2013 represented the core of the 2014 crisis. This is itself was practically an extension of the dispute that erupted over the 25 January revolution in Egypt and the response to the Arab revolutions that spread from Tunisia in late 2010.

The mediation carried out by Kuwait at that time succeeded in containing the crisis and resulted in the first Riyadh agreement and then the Riyadh supplementary agreement after negotiations lasting eight months. The goal, as was evident from the text of the Riyadh Supplementary Agreement on 16



November 2014 at the summit in Riyadh attended by all leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries except Oman, was to change Qatari foreign policy. The ambassadors of Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, and Bahrain were returned to Doha, and the Saudi Crown Prince at that time, Prince Salman bin Abdulaziz, attended the Doha Summit in December 2014, on behalf of King Abdullah, who was unwell in the run up to his death. The summit appeared to represent a great success for Qatari diplomacy and its ability to contain tension and conflict with neighbours, without compromising the independence of its national decisions.

At the time, the Gulf crisis did not take on greater dimensions as a result of the state of anxiety induced by the Obama administration policies that overwhelmed the capitals of the blockading countries. After Obama, in his first term, supported the Arab Spring revolutions to some extent, and his pressure contributed to the removal of Mubarak, in his second term he focused on Iran in the hope of concluding an agreement to curb its nuclear program. Obama's appeasement of Iran, the Gulf's feeling of American abandonment, as well as growing Iranian hegemony, led to a general Gulf sense of weakness. This prompted Saudi Arabia and the UAE specifically to postpone their differences with Qatar, especially in light of the need for Qatar media, financial and military support at the start of the war in Yemen in early 2015. Qatar contributed to supporting the Arab coalition at the time to confront the coup that the Houthis carried out against the government of President Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi, in which they took control of the capital, Sana'a, in September 2014, and began marching towards Aden in January 2015.

However, despite its belief that the dispute with its neighbours was settled, Qatar benefited from the circumstances of the 2014 crisis by learning to enhance its self-reliance, and started building a strategic reserve of foodstuffs, accelerating work on infrastructure projects, especially the new airport and the port, to reduce its dependence on Dubai Ports for exports and imports. Thus, when the 2017 crisis occurred, infrastructure projects were ready to ease the impact of the blockade and its repercussions on the Qatari economy and society, and assisted Qatar in defending the independence of its national decisions and not yielding to the pressure of the blockading countries.

The US Factor in the Crisis

Riyadh and its Gulf allies welcomed the victory of businessman Donald Trump in the US elections and saw the end of the Obama era and the Democrats as an opportunity to return to full cooperation with Washington after the tensions that hit the relationship due to the Arab Spring and the US-Iranian rapprochement. Saudi Arabia therefore decided to overlook Trump's insults and offensive aggrandizing during his election campaign.⁽¹⁾ Saudi was encouraged to pursue this approach by Trump's frank hostility towards the Obama legacy — from the nuclear agreement with Iran and his pledge to overturn it, to his admiration for “strong” leaders, such as Sisi, and his disdain for democracy and human rights.⁽²⁾

1 “In Saudi visit, Trump offers contradictions from campaign,” PBS News Hour, 21/5/2017, accessed on 10/6/2019, at: <https://to.pbs.org/2EVICZLN>.

2 Jonathan Weisman & Julie Hirschfeld Davis, “Republican Lawmakers Vow Fight to Derail Nuclear Deal,” New York Times, 14/7/2015, accessed on 10/6/2019, at: <https://nyti.ms/2KF9saU>.

By this time, it became clear that the 2014 crisis was not completely resolved, but temporarily defused, despite the apparent return of relations between Qatar and its neighbours to normal. Qatar refused to give in to the Saudi-Emirati insistence on dictating its foreign policy, which could, in turn, have transformed into domestic interference.⁽³⁾ This was evidenced by a list of 13 requirements submitted to Qatar following the imposition of the blockade. Trump's political sheltering allowed the blockading countries to put as much pressure as possible on Qatar, including considering military action, as revealed by the Emir of Kuwait, who stated during a visit to Washington in September 2017 to obtain US support for his mediation that his efforts had succeeded in avoiding military action in the Gulf crisis.⁽⁴⁾

Qatar immediately began working to dispel misunderstandings with the White House caused by the receipt of information from one source, intensifying work in Congress, and investing in the dispute that emerged between President Trump and the Foreign and Defense Ministries regarding the Gulf crisis. While Trump supported the positions of the blockading countries at the beginning of the crisis, the US State and Defense departments urged for a resolution through dialogue and offered to help. Parallel to the Kuwaiti mediation, Qatar channelled its efforts into changing President Trump's position as the main source of power on which the blockade countries rely in their attack on Qatar. It began to reinforce the position of the State and Defense Departments and signed a memorandum of understanding with the United States to combat terrorist financing on 12 July 2017 during a diplomatic tour in the Middle East and the Gulf by US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. Earlier, it had successfully concluded an agreement signed at the US Department of Defense headquarters in Washington to purchase 36 F-15s, valued at \$12 billion.⁽⁵⁾

Qatar then shifted its focus to changing Trump's stance on the crisis, and during his participation in the United Nations General Assembly meetings, the Emir of Qatar met with President Trump at the White House in September 2017. The first meeting between the two men was successful, as Trump described his relationship with the prince as a "long friendship."⁽⁶⁾ After that, the meetings between Trump and the Emir were repeated in April 2018 at the White House and in July 2019. In this second meeting, the change in President Trump's position was established, reflected in the joint statement issued after the talks. The two parties affirmed that the close strategic and defense relationship between the two countries had strengthened, and President Trump tweeted that after a wonderful dinner in the Treasury Department on Monday evening with the Emir of the State of Qatar, he had the honour of welcoming the Prince again in the White House for dinner.⁽⁷⁾ The meeting saw the

3 Jorn Vennekens, "Saudi Arabia's Endgame in the Qatar Crisis," *International Perspective*, July 16, 2017, at: <https://goo.gl/dmZSdN>.

4 Remarks by President Trump and Emir Sabah al-Ahmed al-Jaber al-Sabah of Kuwait in Joint Press Conference, White House, September 7, 2017 at: <https://bit.ly/2Fexkkg>

5 Anthony Capaccio and Nick Wadhams, "Qatar Signs \$12 Billion Deal for U.S. F-15 Jets Amid Gulf Crisis," *Bloomberg*, June 14, 2017, at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-06-14/qatar-said-to-sign-deal-for-u-s-f-15s-as-gulf-crisis-continues>.

6 "Remarks by President Trump and Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani Before Bilateral Meeting," The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, September 19, 2017, at: <https://bit.ly/2IHsTKi>.

7 "The Emir of Qatar and Trump Affirm the Strengthening of Their Strategic and Defense Relations," *Al Jazeera Net*, 9/7/2019 at: <https://bit.ly/2XqHPsm>.



culmination of Qatar's efforts to change the position of the US President, who gradually shifted from the idea that Qatar supports terrorism to recognize it as a "major ally" in achieving stability and security in the region.⁽⁸⁾

Meanwhile, after the killing of Saudi writer Jamal Khashoggi at his country's consulate in Istanbul, Saudi Arabia and the UAE's miscalculations on the war in Yemen and its involvement in war crimes there, the misplaced wager on General Haftar in Libya, and their domestic human rights record, the international community has come to view the blockade as one link in a chain of poorly calculated misadventures of the new administration in Saudi Arabia.

The Future of the Crisis

Despite the great efforts made by Kuwait during the past three years, there has been no real progress towards a solution. During 2019, more than one occasion saw hopes raised that a breakthrough could lead to ending the crisis, as Qatar participated twice in summits held in Saudi Arabia, in Mecca in May 2019 and in Riyadh in December 2019. Nevertheless, there were no steps towards a resolution. Qatar's calls to lift the blockade and unify the efforts of the GCC states to confront the Covid-19 pandemic have not been heard by the capitals of the blockading countries.

While Qatar appears determined to protect its sovereignty and independent decision making, especially in foreign policy, the blockading countries are betting on regional and international changes that could weaken Qatar's position. They want to force the country to submit to the demands that have become a source of surprise to the international community, including the United States. But the crisis in the United States due to the health and economic repercussions of Covid-19 and the wave of anger triggered by the murder of George Floyd, another unarmed black man to be killed by the police, and the possible ramifications for the US elections, could lead to a blockading countries to change their plans.

But Qatar has made its willingness to compromise clear; it will make concessions, but it will not accept guardianship, or any tactical solution by the blockading countries to lead in that direction once conditions arise that are more favourable to renew their campaign. Consequently, Doha has insisted on the necessity of finding a permanent solution based on respecting the sovereignty of states. This includes their right to decide their policies that achieve their interests without harming the interests or interfering in the internal affairs of other countries and working towards the principle of equality in sovereignty, and the right of every state to fulfil its own security needs. If there is no agreement on these principles in dealings between sovereign states, the crisis is likely to continue.

The GCC crisis has damaged its global image as well as its institutions and goals, and it is in the interest of all member states that the crisis end with a just settlement based on mutual respect and interests.

⁸ "Trump: US-Qatar ties 'work extremely well,'" Al Jazeera, Apr 11, 2018, at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/04/trump-qatar-ties-work-extremely-180410135820276.html>