



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

ASSESSMENT REPORT

# The Anti-Qatar Quartet Meets in Cairo: a Damp Squib

The Anti-Qatar Quartet Forced to Back Down on Demands

Series: Assessment Report

Policy Analysis Unit | May 2017

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## Introduction

A four-way meeting between the foreign ministers of the countries leading the blockade on Qatar—Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt—held on Wednesday, July 5 has failed to deliver any expanded punitive measures against Doha. The meeting, hosted in Cairo, was held following the expiration of a 10-day interlude granted to Qatar to comply with the quartet’s list of 13 demands, and a subsequent 48-hour grace period requested by Kuwait, which is mediating the Gulf crisis. This paper seeks to understand why these countries have failed to escalate the steps taken against Qatar. It also aims to determine if the recent crisis in intra-GCC relations has been resolved, or if it such a conclusion is premature.

## Unrealistic Ultimatums

Responding to pressure from the US State Department, the four countries leading the blockade of Qatar issued a list of 13 demands which they demanded Doha comply with on June 23, in exchange for lifting the blockade had imposed. This followed a complete rupture in bilateral ties between this quartet and Qatar, including an end to diplomatic relations and the dismissal of Qatari nationals living in their territory and the suspension of air, sea and land travel between Qatar and these countries’ ports and Qatar as well as a complete economic blockade.

The ultimatum included a demand to close the Al Jazeera broadcasting network and a number of other media outlets sponsored by Qatar, such as *Al Araby* television network and *The New Arab* newspaper. The blockading countries also demanded that Qatar reduce the level of its diplomatic relations with Iran and shut down a Turkish military base. The ultimatum demanded that Qatar hand over dissidents from each of the countries concerned and share information about opposition figures from these countries. They further demanded that Qatar pay out an unspecified amount in “damages” to the countries concerned in compensation for the harm which Qatar’s foreign policy had caused them over the years.

Qatar responded by rejecting the list of demands outright. In its detailed response delivered to Kuwait, Doha refuted each demand by pointing out that they were either based on fabrications or that they would constitute an infringement on its sovereignty. Qatar also affirmed that it was prepared to meet any possible challenges to its sovereignty and independence. Diplomats from a number of major world powers, including the United States along with Germany and Turkey,

shared the Qatari authorities' puzzled reaction to a list of demands which appeared to be impractical, and to shield an ulterior motive different from the one ostensibly motivating the blockade. Likewise, a number of prominent journalists, academics and human rights advocates from around the world protested what they saw as an attempt to stifle free speech in the Arabian Peninsula.

## The American Connection

Donald Trump's ascension to the White House, and his subsequent visit to Riyadh to attend a meeting with a number of Gulf leaders, provided the catalyst that sparked the latest Gulf crisis. Indeed, President Trump himself acknowledged the connection between his visit to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf crisis. To quote from the president's Twitter feed: "So good to see the Saudi Arabia visit with the King and 50 countries already paying off. They said they would take a hard line on funding... [continued] extremism, and all reference was pointing to Qatar. Perhaps this will be the beginning of the end to the horror of terrorism!!"<sup>1</sup>

Clearly, the arrival of Trump at the White House emboldened both the UAE and Saudi Arabia to reignite a previously dormant intra-Gulf conflict and attempt to settle old scores with Doha. The countries leading the blockade were clearly relying on Trump, whose stance towards the Gulf crisis diverged even from those of the Pentagon and State Department. The countries leading the anti-Qatar campaign seemed confident that they would be given enough time by the new incumbent in the White House to pressure Qatar into backing down. Nonetheless, Trump would eventually foil further attempts to bog Qatar down, with a phone call to his Egyptian counterpart, Abdelfattah El-Sisi. Immediately preceding the four-way meeting in Cairo between the foreign ministers of the blockading countries, Trump used the phone call to enjoin all of the Arab parties involved in the Gulf crisis to "negotiate constructively to resolve the dispute"<sup>2</sup>.

The climb down of the four foreign ministers gathered in Cairo, who chose to make more limited and also less concrete demands of Qatar in their July 5 press conference, can be attributed to that telephone call from Trump. Following the call, the foreign ministers of the

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<sup>1</sup> See: <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/872084870620520448> and <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/872086906804240384>

<sup>2</sup> Readout of President Donald J. Trump's Call with President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi of Egypt, White House Press Office, July 5, 2017, available online: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/07/05/readout-president-donald-j-trumps-call-president-abdel-fattah-al-sisi>

countries leading the blockade on Doha made sure to declare their adherence to international law.

## Trump's About-Turn

A number of domestic and regional factors made it possible for Qatar to stare the challenges in the face and refuse to buckle under pressure. The Qatari population rallied around its leadership and supported their country's independence and freedom. Doha's even-tempered, and effective diplomatic and media campaign likewise played a role in winning over large parts of Arab and wider global sympathy. This shone a light on the logically flawed fearmongering promoted by Qatar's antagonists, which aimed at restricting freedom of speech in the Arab world. While these factors played an important contribution to foiling the anti-Qatar campaign, a number of factors on the global stage played a role, too. Chief among these is growing tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

Ahead of the upcoming G20 Summit in Hamburg, Trump had no desire to be managing crises on multiple fronts. Growing defiance from North Korea, which tested an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile capable of striking the United States on July 4, meant that the White House would not be able to devote so much bandwidth to an intra-Gulf crisis. As a response, Trump used his phone call with the Egyptian president to demand that the Arab countries refrain from further escalation against Qatar. Pyongyang has repeatedly tested long-range missiles before and throughout the five months of the Trump presidency. These missile tests are likely aimed at forcing Washington to sit down at the negotiating table and begin discussions on lifting the long-running embargo on North Korea. The success of the latest ICBM test firing have sharpened the US president's frustrations with China, which has so far proved unable to curb its junior ally<sup>3</sup>. In April, Trump ordered a cruise missiles strike at the Shuyarat airbase in Syria in response to the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons against its own people. The strike was deliberately ordered while in the US president was holding his first meeting with his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping. At the time, the timing of the strike was understood to indicate American willingness to follow the same course of action with North Korea.

The success of a North Korean ICBM test firing—symbolically timed for American Independence Day—not only shows up the futility of US reliance on China to restrain Pyongyang, it also

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<sup>3</sup> Steve Holland, "Trump growing frustrated with China, weighs trade steps: officials", *Reuters*, June 28, 2017, available online: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-china-idUSKBN19I1XF>

illustrated the emptiness of the “Red Lines” discourse Trump had espoused when becoming president. Eager to show himself to be a more effective, resolute and decisive military leader than what he portrayed Obama to be, Trump will now have to find a way to respond. He will already have to face the rapidly developing Chinese and Russian commitment to block any attempts to sanction the use of force against North Korea through the UN Security Council.<sup>4</sup> By comparison, the Gulf crisis seems to be an ill-timed nuisance for the White House and Trump eventually resorted to asking his allies on the Peninsula and in Egypt to tone down their anti-Doha stance.

## Conclusion

In addition to a favorable change in the international state of affairs—specifically, the emergence of this latest Korean missile crisis—Qatar’s robust economic health and the vigor of its diplomatic and media efforts have allowed the country to resist any further expansion of the blockade. This is not to say however that the intra-Gulf crisis has come to an end. This only means that the crisis will remain dormant for the time being, for reasons which are outside of the control of the countries blockading Qatar. In fact, the anti-Qatar quartet plans on holding a further meeting in Bahrain on the feet of their failed summit in Cairo. In the meantime, Qatar will have to continue making its case to the world with the same dedication as it has displayed since the outbreak of the crisis and to plan for its post-crisis agenda.

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<sup>4</sup> See Michelle Nichols, “Russia objects to U.N. condemnation of North Korea, says test was not ICBM”, *Reuters*, July 6, 2017, available online: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-missile-un-idUSKBN19R2CO> and “Russia, China: N Korea missile test ‘unacceptable’”, *Al Jazeera*, July 5, 2017, available online: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/07/russia-china-korea-missile-test-unacceptable-170704145934120.html>