



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

ASSESSMENT REPORT

# The Inconsistency in the US Position and its Potential Repercussions for the Gulf Crisis

Policy Analysis Unit | June 2017

US Inconsistency towards the Gulf Crisis

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## Introduction

Just two days after US President Donald Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia and his participation in the Riyadh summit, an unprecedented crisis broke out in Gulf relations, with an intense media campaign launched against Qatar by some of its neighbors followed by a wide-ranging blockade. Trump did not deny the connection between his visit to the region and the Gulf crisis, alluding on Twitter: "During my recent trip to the Middle East I stated that there can no longer be funding of Radical Ideology. Leaders pointed to Qatar—look!" He added, "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 extremism, and all reference was pointing to Qatar. Perhaps this will be the beginning of the end to the horror of terrorism!" It seems clear that Trump's arrival at the White House encouraged Saudi Arabia and the UAE to renew a dispute in stalemate with Qatar and take the opportunity to settle old scores.

## Ambiguous Intentions

Trump's remarks and his positions on the Gulf crisis contradicted those of State and Defense Departments and the White House itself. They called for calm and non-escalation. The day that Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain announced their decision to cut diplomatic ties with Qatar, US Secretaries of State and Defense, Rex Tillerson and James Mattis urged the conflicting parties to remain calm and find a peaceful solution to the crisis<sup>1</sup>. Similarly, Lt. Col. Damien Pickart, a US Air Force spokesman for the US Central Command said "The United States and the [US-led anti-ISIL] coalition are grateful to the Qataris for their long-standing support of our presence and their enduring commitment to regional security."<sup>2</sup> Trump's statements surprised Pentagon officials, and his accusations that Qatar was funding extremism contradicted the statements of the US ambassador to Qatar, Dana Shell Smith, who two days earlier said that Qatar had made "real progress" in curbing financial support for terrorists<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> "Press Availability With Secretary of Defense James Mattis, Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, And Australian Defense Minister Marise Payne," U.S. Department of State, June 5, 2017, accessed on 20/6/2017, at: <http://bit.ly/2qTPX5S>

<sup>2</sup> "US military: No plans to change our posture in Qatar," *Aljazeera*, June 6, 2017, accessed on 20/6/2017, at: <http://bit.ly/2rEdnJN>

<sup>3</sup> Mark Landler, "Trump Takes Credit for Saudi Move Against Qatar, a U.S. Military Partner," *The New York Times*, June 6, 2017, accessed on 20/6/2017, at: <http://nyti.ms/2rxSvTF>

Although White House spokesman Sean Spicer tried to limit the diplomatic fallout of Trump's tirades, the US president again contradicted his spokesman's explanations. "The United States wants to defuse and resolve this crisis immediately within the principles put forward by the president with regard to the elimination of the financing of terrorism," Spicer said on the day Trump pointed fingers at Qatar over Twitter. Spicer asserted that Trump had enjoyed "very productive" talks with the Emir of Qatar during his visit to Riyadh in May<sup>4</sup>. Yet the clearest example of the inconsistency in the US position on the Gulf crisis became evident on the 9th of June when Foreign Secretary Tillerson made a brief speech to his department, saying that Qatar should do more to stop supporting "terrorism".

On the other hand, Tillerson also stressed the need for all parties to seek a resolution to their disputes through negotiations. He also called on Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt to ease the blockade imposed on Qatar in the month of Ramadan, expressing concern about the potential humanitarian consequences of the blockade as well as the potential impact on the anti-ISIL coalition.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, within an hour, at a joint press conference with the Romanian president, Trump again directed accusations at Qatar, insisting that isolating the country was a victory for his ambition to stop all forms of support for those he described as "extremists". He continued to claim that Qatar was "a major source of support for extremism" and that success in putting pressure on it would mark the beginning of the end of "terrorism"<sup>6</sup>.

## Behind the US Inconsistency

The apparent contradiction in Trump's position on the Gulf crisis indicates that there is neither a clear foreign policy strategy nor a coherent vision within his administration. During a visit last month to NATO headquarters in Brussels, the US president refused to confirm his country's commitment to the principle of joint defense among NATO members, even though a senior US official had indicated that he would do so. US officials say a line in Trump's pre-prepared letter was removed shortly before Trump delivered his speech, which stunned his foreign and defense secretaries and his National Security advisers<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> "Remarks on the Middle East," U.S Department of State, June 9, 2017, accessed on 20/6/2017, at: <http://bit.ly/2shvkAU>

<sup>6</sup> David Smith, Sabrina Siddiqui, & Peter Beaumont, "Gulf crisis: Trump escalates row by accusing Qatar of sponsoring terror," *The Guardian*, June 9, 2017, accessed on 20/6/2017, at: <http://bit.ly/2rb5U7Q>

<sup>7</sup> Susan B. Glasser, "Trump National Security Team Blindsided by NATO Speech," *Politico*, June 05, 2017, accessed on 20/6/2017, at: <http://politi.co/2sHFczV>

The tight circle around Trump, specifically his chief adviser Steve Bannon and his son-in-law-cum-adviser Jared Kushner seems to be behind this inconsistency in US foreign policy<sup>8</sup>. Bannon believes that the United States is engaged in an existential conflict with "radical Islam"<sup>9</sup>. This justifies, the escalation with Qatar, on the basis that Qatar supports certain Islamist groupings, even if classified as "moderate", such as the Muslim Brotherhood. Media reports indicate that both Kushner and Trump have personal connections to both Mohammed bin Zayed and Mohammed bin Salman the Crown Princes (and de-facto rulers) of Abu Dhabi and Saudi Arabia, who are leading the anti-Qatar alliance. The failure of their Qatari business ventures years ago also created a lot of animosity towards the Qatar by Trump and Kushner<sup>10</sup>.

America's vital interests in the Middle East, particularly in the Arabian Gulf, face major challenges stemming from the US president's inefficiency, inexperience, and his adoption of tough and impractical ideological rationales, as well as personal vendettas, to guide foreign policy. Furthermore, Trump, who seems to be engulfed in domestic problems and faces the possibility of isolation, is grasping at any sort of political achievement, fabricated or otherwise. As he enjoys more flexibility and power in foreign policy than domestic politics, he may see that an escalation with Qatar, under the pretext of combating financing terrorism, as an opportunity to finally score a goal in the midst of his accumulated failures.

## Potential Repercussions for America's Interests in the Gulf and the Middle East

Despite the inclinations of Trump, his son-in-law Jared Kushner and Bannon towards a UAE-Saudi alliance led by Mohammed Bin Zayed and Mohammed Bin Salman, the motives, calculations and interests of the United States differ from the motives of this alliance to blockade Qatar. For the UAE and Saudi Arabia, the motivation remains the settling of scores dating to the 2011 Arab Spring and earlier. Irrational vengeance does not motivate the Americans. The alliance also rejects any independent Qatari foreign policy, any political influence or soft power independent of Riyadh and is also opposed to the liberties which Qatar affords to the media as well as to Doha's contacts with mainstream Islamist groups.

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<sup>8</sup> Gerald Feierstein, "Can the Trump Admin get its Act Together on G.C.C. Crisis?," The Middle East Institute, June 12, 2017, accessed on 20/6/2017, at: <http://bit.ly/2rPnDxg> \_

<sup>9</sup> Mark Landler & Eric Schmitt, "H.R. McMaster Breaks With Administration on Views of Islam," *The New York Times*, February 24, 2017, accessed on 20/6/2017, at: <http://nyti.ms/2mh6P3F> \_

<sup>10</sup> Clayton Swisher, "Trump Says Qatar Funds Terror. Here's His Record Of Trying To Get It To Fund Him," *Huffington Post*, June 11, 2017, accessed on 20/6/2017, at: <http://bit.ly/2rfJxy5>

The security and stability of the Arab Gulf is one of the pillars of American strategy in the Middle East, specifically because of its energy reserves, and the role of the Gulf Cooperation Council in efforts to contain Iran. The tone of US-Qatari relations was set by the Gulf War in 1991 when the two countries signed a military cooperation agreement, and were strengthened in 2003 with the relocation of the US military headquarters in the region to the base from the Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia. The base, located 40 kilometers southwest of Doha, is the largest US military base in the Middle East, home to about 11,000 US troops.

The US Combined Air and Space Operations Center (CAOC) oversees US military air power in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq and 18 other nations. The base boasts the longest runway in the Gulf, with a length of 12,500 feet and accommodates 120 fighter jets, and the result of a US\$ 1 billion investment made by the Qataris in the 1990s. The base houses an advanced air force headquarters for the US Central Command, and other US air units<sup>11</sup>. US officials, especially the Defense Department, fear that all of the US concessions in Qatar may be threatened if the diplomatic escalation continues.

In addition to the above, there are further concerns among US officials if the crisis continues, the most important of which are listed below:

- Russia could utilize the cracks in the Gulf Cooperation Council order, if the US takes the side of one state against another<sup>12</sup>.
- If the Gulf Crisis continues, it risks disrupting the balance in the region in the context of pressure to contain Iran and the war on ISIL. Washington fears that if Qatar's Gulf neighbors continue to isolate it, it may seek to strengthen ties with Iran. Regarding the war on ISIL, Pentagon officials are concerned that the boycott of Qatar and travel ban may prevent military officials from these countries from visiting the base for collective coordination<sup>13</sup>.
- The continued deterioration of the crisis may put America's allies in the region on the verge of a possible confrontation, especially with the Turkish announcement that it will ratify previous joint military agreements with Qatar<sup>14</sup>.
- US officials are concerned that the blockade of Qatar may have economic implications for US companies operating in the Persian Gulf, for example if Saudi Arabia, the UAE and

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<sup>11</sup> Brad Lendon, "Qatar hosts largest US military base in Mideast," *CNN*, June 5, 2017, accessed on 20/6/2017, at: <http://cnn.it/2rLlvZJ>

<sup>12</sup> Landler, "Trump Takes Credit...,"

<sup>13</sup> Anne Barnard & David D. Kirkpatrick, "5 Arab States Break Ties With Qatar, Complicating U.S. Coalition-Building," *The New York Times*, JUNE 6, 2017, accessed on 20/6/2017, at: <http://nyti.ms/2rylCGe>

<sup>14</sup> Ghitis.

Bahrain pressure such companies to withdraw from Qatar or face economic sanctions and a ban on working in their countries<sup>15</sup>

- Pressure on Qatar to sever ties with some groups that the United States labels terrorists, such as the Hamas movement, or even others with which it is doing war, such as the Taliban, would, counter-intuitively, harm US interests. Qatari mediation makes possible US contact with these movements when needed. “There’s got to be a place for us to meet the Taliban. [Hamas] have to have a place to go where they can be simultaneously isolated and talked to”<sup>16</sup> said one US official. A Taliban office which opened its doors in Doha in 2013 was allowed to operate at the request of the United States<sup>17</sup>. In this sense, Qatar, with its media and political openness to various currents, represents a unique opportunity and offers breathing space in a tightly controlled region. This seems to have been accepted by the administrations of George W. Bush and Obama before, who allowed the coverage of Al-Jazeera News Channel despite their resentment.

## Conclusion

The inconsistency in Trump's attitude towards the Gulf crisis is a continuation of the administration’s approach to foreign policy since coming to power. Trump's distaste for the ruling establishment, his rejection of its advice, as well as the absence of a moderating force on US foreign policy, make inconsistency the hallmark of this administration. In this sense, the Gulf crisis is not a departure from the status quo. The American position on the Gulf crisis will be determined by which approach will prevail: the approach of the ruling establishment with its experts, its bureaucrats, its calculations and concerns, or Trump's triviality and weakness. There is no actual guarantee at the moment that the establishment will regain control.

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<sup>15</sup> Barnard.

<sup>16</sup> Arshad Mohammad and Steve Holland, “US is trying to calm Qatar Saudi Tensions” (Arabic), Reuters, 6/6/2017, accessed on 20/06/2017 at: <http://bit.ly/2sK7YDE>

<sup>17</sup> “Qatar hosted Taliban 'at request of US government',” *Aljazeera*, June 11, 2017, accessed on 20/6/2017, at: <http://bit.ly/2reT3kZ>