

EMBARGOED: NOT FOR PUBLICATION BEFORE 17 JULY 2017

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FOREIGN AFFAIRS, AT CHATHAM HOUSE, 8.30 AM ON 17 JULY 2017

The crisis in the Gulf: why it happened and what happens next

The crisis between the Four States – Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE and Bahrain – with Qatar is a serious one. It is not just a local feud involving Gulf monarchies and Egypt. The dangers posed by a very wealthy state, with \$300 billion in reserves, which is wedded to extremist jihadism and terrorism, go far wider than that.

Let me say what else is it not.

It is not about Qatar becoming a vassal state. Why should we in the UAE or Bahrain want that, when we are ourselves small countries? Other GCC countries such as Kuwait and Oman have chosen very independent paths in foreign policy without sparking a crisis.

It is not about free speech, which does not exist in Qatar in the first place. The freedom that Qatar claims to provide is strictly for export only. How can you champion freedom if you do not practise it?

It is not a product of new leadership in Saudi Arabia or the United States. In the early 1990s, the UAE's then ruler Sheikh Zayed was already concerned at the possible direction that the then Qatari crown prince Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa might take, and urged him to work within the collective spirit of the GCC. In 2013 after a similar but milder crisis, the then Saudi King Abdullah obtained Qatar's agreement to mend its ways, the Riyadh Agreement, which Qatar later broke.

Nor is this principally about Iran, though Iran will try to benefit from Qatar's behaviour.

This is instead first and foremost about the support offered over the past 20 years by one of the world's wealthiest countries to the cause of jihadism across the Middle East, and for specific individuals and organisations, including some linked to Al Qaeda.

It is a crisis that is exacerbated by our loss of trust in Qatar, after it repeatedly broke its word to us. It has spent effort and money trying not to help us, as allies should, but to undermine us and destabilise various countries including the largest Arab state, Egypt. This effort is reckless and will bring no benefit to Qatar. We want it to end.

The UAE identified the threat of Islamist and jihadist extremism early on, in the 1980s, when we took steps to curb Islamist influence in our education system. Some observers thought we were being alarmist, but later tragic developments proved our concerns to be valid. Two Emiratis were among the 9/11 hijackers.

It was a lesson which we took seriously. We examined and overhauled our policy towards mosques, schools, and charities. We passed comprehensive legislation to tackle terrorist finance, which we have regularly updated. And we started a long and

sometimes lonely battle against the ideology of grievance and jihad which distorts our great religion and fuels terrorism. This is a process that began many years before the beginning of the Arab spring. It was not always easy; but it was right.

With this background I hope you understand why we regard it as necessary and urgent to shut down state support for extremism, jihadism and terrorism across the Arab world – and most of all among the Arab world’s wealthiest countries, the Arab Gulf. This current crisis with Qatar is at the heart of that effort.

Understandably many of our friends in Europe and beyond are concerned about this crisis. They see the Arab Gulf as a haven of stability in an unstable Middle East, and as an important and functioning common market. Many would argue that it is one of the few Arab bulwarks against further Iranian expansion. We understand and respect those concerns.

But as we know from meetings with American and European officials, they are also aware of Qatar’s duplicity. During the Iraq war, many American officials and commanders spoke openly about the contradiction of having American planes and military moving from al-Udeid base in Qatar, while at the same time their greatest enemy within Iraq, Al-Qaeda leader Abu Musab al Zarqawi, was being promoted by Qatar’s Al Jazeera television station.¹

Western governments also know about Qatar’s destructive role in Syria and Libya. The US State Department said openly in its 2015 country terrorism report that “entities and individuals within Qatar” had financed Al-Nusra, which is a regional affiliate of Al-Qaeda.² US Treasury Under Secretary David Cohen said in 2014 that Qatar’s funding of Syrian extremists “threatens to aggravate an already volatile situation in a particularly dangerous and unwelcome manner.”³

Qatar’s sponsorship of jihadist groups in Syria ultimately sabotaged wider efforts to assist a moderate, non-jihadi opposition to the Syrian regime. As a result Syrians today find themselves between the devil and the deep blue sea – forced to choose between Assad’s brutality and the cruelty of Daesh and Al-Qaeda.

In Libya Qatar has supported the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group and Ansar ash-Sharia. In fact Qatar’s go-between with the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group is now head of the Qatari special forces.⁴ Yet this group is believed by the Spanish authorities to have been involved in the Madrid train bombings of 2004 in which nearly two hundred people died.⁵ According to the British press, a son of one of its members carried out the attack in the Manchester Arena in May, in which 23 adults and

¹ See for example <https://www.voanews.com/a/a-13-a-2004-04-27-21-1-67345137/272591.html>

² <https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2015/257517.htm>

³ <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/j12308.aspx>

⁴ <http://www.emiratesnews247.com/al-qaida-read-list-43-terrorist-units-persons-linked-qatar/>

⁵ <http://www.cnbc.com/id/45600052>

children died⁶. Again, Qatar's actions have sabotaged Gulf diplomacy and funded terrorism. This Qatari behaviour is known by Western governments to be destructive and they want it to stop.

This is not really about how certain groups should be classified, and whether they are terrorists or not. Yes we disagree with Qatar about the Muslim Brotherhood, which we regard as the gateway drug to jihadism. But in our list of 59 individuals and 12 organisations with links to Qatar and terrorism⁷, the majority have proven connections with Al Qaeda and similar organisations. And nobody denies that Al Qaeda practises terrorism.

Take for example Abdul Rahman al Nuaimi, who continues his activity with impunity from Qatar despite having, as the US Treasury has said, given millions of dollars to al Qaeda in Iraq and Al Shabab in Somalia.⁸

When it comes to financing of terror groups, none of us are perfect. The UAE has done much to stop individuals from donating to charities with covert links to terrorism. Our aim is to stop private financial support for terrorism from anywhere in the Gulf. That effort must continue and be stepped up.

But in Qatar, it is all too often the state that is directly supporting terrorist groups. Helping Nusra in Syria, and the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, was state policy. The United States has five times indicted as terrorists Qatari government officials, including ones who worked at the Qatari central bank, the Qatar Football Association, and the Ministry of the Interior⁹. As President Trump himself has said, Qatar "has historically been a funder of terrorism at a very high level."¹⁰

Just this year, the state of Qatar paid a ransom of approximately \$1 billion to free a group of Qatari falconers in southern Iraq. Multiple sources confirmed to the Financial Times that \$700 million was paid to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and to the Shia militias which they control.¹¹ Between \$200 and \$300 million went to Al-Qaeda related groups in Syria. In what may have been an additional payment, when Iraqi authorities searched the plane which the Qataris had sent to collect the hostages, they discovered half a billion dollars on board, hidden in sacks. As Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi declared, "Hundreds of millions for armed groups? Is this acceptable?"¹² It is not.

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/may/28/salman-abedi-manchester-arena-bomber-radicalisation>

⁷ <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2017/06/09/Arab-countries-release-list-of-terrorist-financiers-supported-by-Qatar.html> and see also <http://www.emiratesnews247.com/al-qaida-read-list-43-terrorist-units-persons-linked-qatar/>

⁸ <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2249.aspx>

⁹ See again <http://www.emiratesnews247.com/al-qaida-read-list-43-terrorist-units-persons-linked-qatar/>

¹⁰ <http://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/trump-calls-qatar-cease-funding-terror-n770476>

¹¹ <https://www.ft.com/content/dd033082-49e9-11e7-a3f4-c742b9791d43?mhq5j=e1>

¹² <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/qatari-royals-kidnapped-iraq-ransom-half-billion-shia-militia-syria-saudi-hunters-baghdad-a7703946.html>

Before I turn to how I see political developments and how this current crisis will play out, a word about Qatar's destabilisation of the four states. Qatar has spent billions of dollars to undermine what was already a very fragile Egyptian situation. Qatar's conspiring against Saudi Arabia – again, in association with jihadists - is documented and proven. In Bahrain a dynastic feud has been fuelled by Qatari money in attempts to undermine its neighbour.

This behaviour does nothing to advance Qatar's national interest. So why is it happening? As it seems to us, Qatar since 1995 has been a rebel looking for a cause. It found that cause in jihadism – not because the architects of this policy are actually jihadists themselves, but because they believed that extremist Islamist movements were going to dominate the Middle East and they wanted opportunistically to harness them as allies. As the Financial Times reported in May 2013, “they are simply not choosy about the beliefs held by useful friends.”¹³

This is definitely not a people's project or even an elite project. It has harmed Qatar's relations in the region and its reputation. It is a policy that has gone wrong, fuelled by money and wayward ambition. Qatar foolishly tried to ride the tiger of jihadism.

We want a permanent solution, not a prolonging of the crisis. But we do have an issue of trust. Over the last two decades, bilateral pressure on Qatar has not yielded results. In 2013 and 2014, after a similar but milder crisis, Amir Tamim of Qatar signed the Riyadh Agreement¹⁴. He promised to turn the page. He pledged to stop his support for extremism and jihadism, and end interference in his neighbours' affairs. None of these promises were kept. Indeed when we now ask Qatar to agree to these very same demands that it accepted in 2013, the Qatari Foreign Minister announces that those demands are unacceptable.

Hence our harsh measures intended as a wake up call. So where do we go from here?

First, diplomacy remains our only path. We said, early on, that we would not escalate beyond what we consider sovereign measures granted to us by international law.

Second, we need a regional solution and international monitoring. We need to be certain that Qatar, a state with \$300 billion in reserves, is no longer an official or unofficial sponsor of jihadist and terrorist causes.

Without that change of behaviour, it is in our interest to continue to seek a separate path from that of Qatar. This is our message: You cannot be part of a regional organisation dedicated to strengthening mutual security and furthering mutual interests, and at the same time undermine that security and harm those interests. You cannot be both our friend and the friend of Al Qaeda.

¹³ <https://www.ft.com/content/f2d9bbc8-bdbc-11e2-890a-00144feab7de?mhq5j=e1>

¹⁴ <http://i2.cdn.turner.com/cnn/2017/images/07/10/translation.of.agreementsupdated.pdf>

Qatar talks about the necessity of dialogue. But it first leaked the thirteen demands made by the 4 states. If the Qataris wanted dialogue, why did they not try first to work through the mediator with a counter proposal in a mature fashion? Why didn't they say that certain items were accepted and others not? Instead They said: "We reject all your demands. Let's talk" – but what was there left to talk about?

We do see signs now, however, that our pressure is working. Qatar signing an MOU with the USA on terror financing is a positive development. Furthermore, the Qataris promised the Americans to re-examine the list of 59 individuals and 12 organisations published by the Four States and to take appropriate action, in recognition of the validity of this evidence. It is very different from Qatar's early attempts to dismiss this evidence.

Qatari officials have claimed that no US designated terrorists walk free in Doha; that they have all been prosecuted, jailed, had their assets frozen and are banned from travel. And perhaps soon that will be true.

These steps are results of the pressure put on Qatar. And they are welcome – even if it seems that Qatar finds it easier to make these concessions to our Western friends rather than sit around a table with its own Arab Gulf neighbours to discuss their concerns and past experiences.

We are ready for this process to take a long time. We will not again agree to sweep these problems under the carpet. Much is at stake here that affects the narrative of our religion and the forces fighting over its future direction. Qatar is one of the premier state supporters of the jihadi interpretation of our religion. If we succeed in changing their behaviour, it will make all our futures safer.