

Saudi-led Embargoes Against Qatar Failed

By [Paul Antonopoulos](#)

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2021 began with a historic decision in the Middle East as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain and Egypt decided to end their diplomatic and economic embargo against Qatar. The decision to end the embargo, that has been in place since 2017, was formalized during an extraordinary meeting of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), a group that brings together Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar.

Despite having only 1.9 million inhabitants, Qatar stands out internationally for its hydrocarbon production and unorthodox diplomacy. Qatar is an absolute monarchy commanded by the House of Thani and has the world's third largest natural gas reserves, but its foreign diplomacy antagonizes countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Although it is only a small country of less than two million people, it is not an isolated country that can be ignored, mostly thanks to its immense wealth, in addition to hosting major events such as the upcoming World Cup, and dominating the Arab media landscape through services like Al-Jazeera and other print, digital and broadcast media.

Saudi Arabia and its allies highlighted that Qatar uses Al-Jazeera as an instrument for international propaganda. Qatar's communication policy through Al-Jazeera consists of a form of public diplomacy, which is a strategic factor in shaping opinion in the Arab world.

However, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt decided to break diplomatic relations with Qatar and closed their borders to the country. Their justification was Qatar maintained close relations with Iran and supports terrorist and extremist organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood, among other things.

In fact, Qatar maintains diverse contacts with rival organizations and countries, which is not always viewed favorably by its neighbors. It is for this reason that Qatar is the seat for Afghan peace negotiations, but also a source of funding for groups that defend the Palestinian cause. In addition, Qatar pays the ransom price set by terrorist organizations that kidnap foreigners and locals alike in Syria.

The proposal to lift the embargo against Qatar came from the monocratic decision of two key people: the de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman, and the de facto ruler of the UAE, Mohammed bin Zayed.

After three and a half years of embargo, Qatar has not changed its posture - it maintains relations with Iran, Al-Jazeera is still being broadcasted globally, and it did not suffer any significant economic damage. Qatar was able to transport products by air via countries like Iran and Turkey, which eventually cancelled the effects of the air blockade. The land embargo was not able to generate a supply crisis either despite Qatar's only land border being with Saudi Arabia.

The tools used by decisionmakers in the Qatari capital of Doha to circumvent the embargo proved to be efficient. Lifting the embargo effectively means that these countries failed to achieve their goals and are trying to get out of a situation that they themselves created. But why then did Saudi Arabia and its allies decide to normalize relations with Doha if neither party was badly affected?

Rapprochement with Qatar could be a way of attracting the country to form an alliance of Arab states in the Persian Gulf to contain Iranian influence. In his speech to allies at the GCC, the Saudi monarch blamed Iran for instability in the region.

“There is an urgent need to join our efforts to promote our region and confront the challenges that surround us, especially that represented by Iran’s nuclear and ballistic missile programs,” said bin Salman during the meeting.

One of the main frustrations that Arab states have against Qatar is its uncompromising cooperation with Iran. Therefore, the lifting of the embargo may be an attempt to include Qatar in the group of Arab countries that have normalized relations with Israel. The measure aims to attract Qatar and, indirectly, Kuwait, to normalize relations with Israel.

Last year, Bahrain and the UAE established diplomatic relations with Tel Aviv, abandoning the historic position of refusing to recognize the Jewish state in solidarity with the Palestinian cause. However, Qatar is already beginning to improve its relationship with Israel as a way to increase its influence in U.S. political circles.

The eventual establishment of diplomatic relations between Doha and Tel Aviv would be harmful for militant and political groups in Palestine since Qatar is the richest Arab country to maintain support for them. On the other hand, the privileged relationship that Qatar has with Palestinian groups like Hamas may actually be of interest to Israel. Qatar can cooperate simultaneously with Israel and Palestine, placing itself as an intermediary between the Hamas terrorist organization and Tel Aviv, just as it does between the Taliban and Afghan government. Currently, the only channel Israel has with Hamas is through Egypt, and it may serve Israeli interests to establish another line of contact with the group through Qatar.

The expectation, therefore, is that Qatar will maintain diverse diplomatic contacts, serving as a relevant regional mediator. Although few terms of the GCC-Qatar treaty have been made public, there is no evidence that Doha has made any or major concessions to countries that imposed the embargo.

Qatar puts itself in the place of the winner by affably receiving Saudi Arabia’s invitation to rejoin the GCC. The lesson that Qatar leaves is that diversified foreign policy is one that does not surrender or make concessions under pressure, while maintaining relations without preconditions or going against third parties.

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Paul Antonopoulos is an independent geopolitical analyst.

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