

Saudis Try Hostage-Taking as Diplomacy

Assault on Qatar gets Trump tweet support, but US government demurs

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*The Persian Gulf nation of Qatar has been held in a weird kind of [hostage situation](#) since June 5. That's when Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and a few other countries decided to try to [isolate and manipulate](#) Qatar by cutting diplomatic relations and imposing an embargo and something of a blockade. A blockade is, by definition, an act of war, but the blockaders didn't actually declare war, or send troops, or even make a clear statement of *casus belli* at the time. Qatar has long been a [scapegoat for hardliners](#) devoted to regional stability on their own terms only.*

The hostage-taking, terrorist-supporting nations accused Qatar of [supporting terrorists](#), expelled Qatari diplomats and Qatari citizens, called their own nationals home from Qatar, closed Qatar's only border (with Saudi Arabia), and shut down air and sea routes to the tiny emirate, generally regarded as a near-absolute, hereditary monarchy with little freedom to begin with. Qatar is a [small country](#), smaller than the state of Connecticut. Its military of 11,800 is the second-smallest in the region. Qatar has a population of roughly 2.6 million, only 300,000 of whom are citizens. The rest are foreign workers, a quarter of them from India, with other large contingents from Nepal and Bangladesh. Qatari citizens have the highest per capita income in the world.

This surprise hostage move was [duly reported](#) as the "biggest diplomatic crisis in years" in the region, as the Saudis acted with Egypt, Bahrain, and the UAE to de-stabilize the region in response to what they claimed was Qatar's de-stabilizing of the region. So what kind of crisis is it when a coalition of dictatorships takes a neighboring state virtual hostage, for no coherently stated reason, and then takes more than two weeks to present any hostage demands (never mind how absurd)?

Let's review the bidding here. The region, from Israel to Afghanistan, is not known for its stability in recent years, decades, centuries, or millennia. The current period of extreme de-stabilization was touched off by "I'm a war president" Bush, backed by a supine Congress (except for **Rep. Barbara Lee**). The Middle East of the past 14 years is a Republican-led, bipartisan master disaster that has destroyed millions of lives for nothing more apparent than the appearance of American "leadership." But the US has had plenty of help in the worst sense of the word from just about every other country in the region, except possibly Oman, some of the time. Also pitching in to spread the carnage have been several NATO allies, as well as Russia. If that leaves out anyone, don't worry, there's more than enough blood to go around for every official hand and a good many feet.

The governments holding Qatar hostage now are mad because Qatar had the effrontery to offer some support to the democratic elements of the Arab Spring of 2010-2011, when there

was some hope to rid the region of the brutal police states that stabilized the region. Only Tunisia has survived. Egypt's present military dictatorship is mad at Qatar for supporting the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and elsewhere and sees this hostage taking as a chance for revenge.



An aerial overhead view of "Ops Town" at Al Udeid Air Base (AB), Al Rayyan Province, Qatar (QAT), taken from a US Air Force (USAF) KC-135 Stratotanker during Operation IRAQI FREEDOM. (Source: Wikipedia)

Qatar is not exactly a stalwart defender of political freedom and human rights, but judged by its enemies, Qatar looks pretty good. And Qatar is also home to the largest US military base in the region, the [Al Udeid Air Base](#). That air base runs the bombing campaigns in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, much to the benefit of the Qatari hostage-takers. Better yet, Qatar is a member of the [Gulf Cooperation Council](#), the other members of which are hostage-takers Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, and UAE, as well as Oman. The US air base also runs the bombing campaign in Yemen, where Qatar is allied with its hostage-takers in the illegal, genocidal war that has brought Yemen to the verge of mass starvation. Presumably the aggressors believe that mass death in Yemen will help stabilize the region. The government of Yemen, housed in Saudi Arabia, is also a titular Qatari hostage-taker.

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!

@realDonaldTrump tweet, June 6, 2017

With [mad tweets](#) like that, the president took credit for the hostage-taking, even as his secretaries of State and Defense would try to distance their country from the mess. Trump's [business history](#) provides a clear basis for asking whether his decisions with regard to Qatar are shaped by conflict-of-interest. The Saudis have been doing millions of dollars of business with Trump for decades. The UAE has paid Trump millions of dollars for putting his name on golf courses. Qatar has not done business with Trump.

On June 14, the Defense Dept. signed a [\\$12 billion deal](#) to sell Qatar dozens of F-15 fighter jets. On the same day, **Secretary of State Rex Tillerson** [expressed support](#) for the arms deal approved by his department and said the Saudi-led blockade was creating problems for the US military effort against ISIS. Asked about the apparent gap between his comments and what Trump had been tweeting, Tillerson assuaged Congress,

“There is no gap between the President and myself or the State Department on policy,... there is no daylight between he and I.”

On June 20, **State Dept.** spokesperson **Heather Nauert** rebuked the Saudi-led hostage takers:

Now that it has been more than two weeks since the embargo started, we are mystified that the Gulf states have not released to the Qataris, nor to the public, the details about the claims they are making toward Qatar.... The more that time goes by, the more doubt is raised about the actions taken by [Saudi Arabia](#) and the UAE.... At this point, we are left with one simple question: were the actions really about their concerns regarding Qatar’s alleged support for terrorism? Or were they about the long-simmering grievances between and among the GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] countries?

Noticeably absent from State’s official view was any mention of Iran, even though the hostage-takers complained about Qatar’s normal engagement with Iran. President Trump has long joined in demonizing Iran, regardless of the weight of evidence that Saudi Arabia (for example) has long been a greater supporter of terrorists than Iran. Iran, like Russia and Turkey, has called for a peaceful resolution to the hostage-taking.

Turkey has directly supported Qatar diplomatically, militarily, and with supplies in defiance of the embargo and blockade. Qatar, like Yemen, imports most of its food. Turkey has an army base in Qatar, with about 150 troops who train Qataris. Turkey, like Qatar, supported the Muslim Brotherhood during the Arab Spring and has taken in hundreds of political refugees from Egypt, which arrested and killed unknown numbers of people opposed to the military coup. Among the [hostage-takers’ demands](#) presented June 23 is that Qatar shut down the Turkish military base.

The demands viewed as a totality amount to a demand that Qatar hand over its sovereignty to Saudi Arabia and its fellow hostage-takers. The hostage-takers want Qatar to shut down Al Jazeera, the Qatari news organization that has been far too truthful about the region. The hostage-takers want Qatar to break off diplomatic relations with Iran, a regionally destabilizing act that is consistent with the suspected Saudi desire to bring on a full-scale religious war between Sunni and Shiite Muslims. Iran is Shiite. Qatar and its hostage-takers are all Sunni.

Given the nexus of contradictions and conflicts of interests surrounding the Qatar hostage situation, it’s no surprise the [German foreign minister](#) has referred to it as the “**Trumpification**” of regional politics:

“Such a Trumpification of relations with one another is particularly dangerous in a region that is already rife with crises.”

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Featured image: Wikipedia

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