

The Qatar Crisis in an Age of Alternative Facts

By [Kristian Coates Ulrichsen](#)

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The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) holds its annual Summit in Kuwait City this week, exactly six months since three of the six GCC states—Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—cut diplomatic relations and imposed economic sanctions on a fourth, Qatar. From the start, the so-called Anti-Terror Quartet (the three GCC states plus Egypt) has pursued a disinformation campaign that portrayed Qatar as a reckless threat to regional security. The media war has sought to secure the support of the neophyte political and foreign policy operators in the White House in the first international crisis of the era of alternative facts. This attempt to drag the US government into a dispute that has pitted core regional political and security partners against one another has highlighted the dangers of picking sides in a clash in which—from an American perspective—there can be no clear winners or losers.

The Qatar crisis originated in a hack of the Qatar News Agency and creation of a fake-news account of a speech in which Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani allegedly praised Iran and Hamas and criticized the Trump administration. Media outlets in Saudi Arabia and the UAE seized on these fabricated remarks in a two-week onslaught that preceded the actual diplomatic rupture on June 5. Significantly, the hack came just two days after the Saudi leadership at the Arab-Islamic-American Summit in Riyadh feted President Trump and when he called on Sunni Arab states to rally against terrorism and extremism. Subsequent tweets by President Trump in June and comments in October by Stephen Bannon, by then the former White House chief strategist, drew a direct line between their talks in Riyadh on May 21 and the later action taken against Qatar on June 5, and implied a degree of forewarning and tacit approval.

After years of tense relations with the Obama administration, not least over its secret negotiations with Iran that culminated in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in 2015, Saudi and Emirati leaders reached out quickly to senior figures in the incoming Trump presidency. Fortified by the expectation that the administration would follow policies on Islamism and Iran that aligned closely with their own hawkish approaches, the then-Deputy Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud, and the influential UAE Ambassador to Washington, Yousef al-Otaiba, [established](#) a close rapport with Jared Kushner. Their efforts to woo the inner circle paid off in May when Trump made his first international visit as president to Saudi Arabia – rather than to Canada or Mexico, as his five immediate predecessors had done – and the State Department [was said](#) to be cut out of much planning for the Riyadh Summit, which was handled instead by the White House and the Royal Courts in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi.

President Trump initially [tweeted](#) his support for the Saudi and Emirati embargo of Qatar on June 6, giving hope to the Saudis and Emiratis that the US government would turn against

one of its closest security partners in the region. However, policymakers in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi failed to foresee the resistance from the Departments of State and Defense to any fundamental reassessment of ties with Qatar. Having observed that the personalized decision-making process in the Trump White House was somewhat akin to their own Royal Courts, the Saudis and Emiratis appeared to assume that the whole of government would fall into line once the White House made a decision on Qatar. Responding to objections from the-then Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs Stuart Jones that the initial move against Qatar in June was unwise, Otaiba apparently responded, “Have you spoken to the White House?”

Although President Trump reportedly was unaware of the extent of US military and security cooperation with Qatar, it was Doha’s good fortune that both Secretary of Defense James Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson were acutely aware of the strategic and commercial value of the Qatar partnership to US interests. Mattis served as head of US Central Command—whose forward operating headquarters has been based in Qatar since 2003—between 2010 and 2013. Meanwhile ExxonMobil—where Tillerson spent his 41-year career prior to his appointment as secretary of state—was instrumental in developing the liquefied natural gas infrastructure that propelled Qatar to regional and international prominence in the 1990s and 2000s. Both men [pushed back](#) forcefully on the White House during the initial stages of the Gulf crisis.

There are signs that the initial move against Qatar in June may have been intended as the prelude to further and more forceful action against the leadership in Doha. In his remarks alongside President Trump at the White House in September, Emir Sabah al-Ahmad Al Sabah of Kuwait [stated](#) that

“what is important is that we have stopped any military action,”

without giving any further detail. Leaked emails from UAE Ambassador al-Otaiba [suggest](#) that King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia had come “pretty close to doing something in Qatar” during a previous iteration of the diplomatic spat in 2014. Al-Otaiba called also for the US to leave its bases in Qatar in [an op-ed](#) for the *Wall Street Journal* in July 2017 that some in the defense policy community regarded as an unacceptable foreign intrusion into US security considerations. His comments were amplified by conferences held in DC think tanks in May and October and by a spate of opinion pieces that have argued that the US could withdraw from Qatar with fairly minimal disruption.

The two Qatari military facilities Al-Udaid and As-Sayliyah constitute the nerve center of American power projection in the broader Middle East and host more than 10,000 personnel. Al-Udaid is the largest overseas airbase used by the US and the only one in the Gulf able to handle every type of aircraft in the US Air Force while As-Sayliyah is a forward logistics camp capable of servicing an entire armored brigade. After the US troop presence in Saudi Arabia became the focus of mounting dissent, not least by Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda prior to 9/11, the George W. Bush administration relocated the forward headquarters of Central Command from Prince Sultan Airbase in Saudi Arabia to Al-Udaid in Qatar in 2003. As former senior Pentagon official David Des Roches [has noted](#), the US military cannot currently replicate elsewhere in the Gulf the military and logistical infrastructure it uses in Qatar, and no other Gulf country has yet offered to build (and pay for) a comparable base for the US, as Qatar did in the 1990s.

From a US national security perspective, there are no good or bad sides in the Qatar dispute and attempts by the Quartet and their supporters to paint Qatar as a negative regional actor do not serve US interests. In July 2017, Qatar became the first country in the Gulf [to sign](#) a Memorandum of Understanding with the US on counterterrorism and in November held the first US-Qatar counterterrorism dialogue in Washington, DC. These are tangible developments that build upon (and implement) President Trump's call at the Riyadh Summit for closer defense and security ties between the Gulf States and the US. They also contrast with the vague and sweeping allegations that formed the basis for the derided 13 conditions the Quartet tried to impose on Qatar in June, as well as the spurious and historically revisionist content of some of the more outlandish attacks in the media. Such attempts by Qatar's detractors, and their supporters in the Beltway echo chamber, continue to challenge a White House inexperienced in foreign policy and open to alternative narratives that deviate, in some cases sharply, from core U.S. interests.

Kristian Coates Ulrichsen is a Fellow for the Middle East at Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy.

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