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Assessing the U.S.-Qatar Relationship

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Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Deutch, distinguished members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the U.S.-Qatar relationship and the implications of the current divisions within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).¹

On June 4, 2017, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt announced they would cut ties with Qatar and take a number of steps against it; including cutting off access to airspace and borders and ejecting Qatari diplomats and citizens from these countries. Since then, the war of words has escalated on all sides. The United States has tried to play a role as a mediator, but thus far with little success. My objective with this testimony is not to recount the various moves and counter moves each side has made in the past few weeks, but instead to provide some context as to what created this situation, the implications for U.S. interests, and the potential way ahead.

Qatar is a complex American partner. On one hand, it has pursued a policy that has included building relations with a number of actors that the United States finds highly problematic, including extremist groups in Syria, the Taliban, Hamas, and the Muslim Brotherhood. On the other, it is host to a critical U.S. airbase and its flexible approach to these actors has made it a useful connector when diplomacy inevitably requires negotiation and engagement with unsavory characters.

¹ CNAS accepted contributions from the Embassy of the United Arab Emirates in fiscal years 2016 and 2017 for the total amount of \$250,000 in support of a project evaluating the pros and cons of the United Arab Emirates' seeking membership in the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR). CNAS produced a briefing for the UAE Embassy on the MTCR. The background research on the MTCR also informed an already ongoing CNAS project on drone proliferation policy. The public report can be found at <http://drones.cnas.org/reports/drone-proliferation/>. CNAS is a national security research and policy institution committed to the highest standards of organizational, intellectual, and personal integrity. The Center retains sole editorial control over its ideas, projects, and productions, and the content of its publications reflects only the views of their authors. In keeping with its mission and values, CNAS does not engage in lobbying activity and complies fully with all applicable federal, state, and local laws. Accordingly, CNAS will not engage in any representation or advocacy on behalf of any entities or interests and, to the extent that the Center accepts funding from foreign sources, its activities will be limited to bona fide scholastic, academic, and research-related activities, consistent with applicable federal law. A full list of CNAS supporters and the center's funding guidelines can be found here: <https://www.cnas.org/support-cnas>

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But whether one chooses to view Qatar positively or negatively, it is clear is that the intra-GCC split that has emerged in recent weeks has not been good for U.S. interests. Only two weeks after President Trump visited Riyadh to unify the Arab world behind the common objectives of countering extremism and pushing back on Iran, America’s Gulf allies have launched an internal feud that has largely distracted them and the United States. Meanwhile, this split has created new opportunities for Russia and Iran.

Going forward, the Trump administration should take a number of steps. First, it should settle on one consistent message and approach, as conflicting messages from the President and Secretary of State cause confusion and undermine the United States’ ability to mediate. Second, it should move away from viewing the Middle East through a purely black and white prism, as this approach focused so heavily on unifying and backing the Sunni Arab states that it failed to recognize the internal splits among them and inadvertently gave a green light to some U.S. Gulf partners to move ahead with these actions against Qatar. Third, as this crisis is not going to be solved anytime soon, the administration should settle in for the long haul and push all of the actors to start putting more of their energies back into the ISIS and Iran challenges. And fourth, it should encourage deescalation on all sides by at least getting U.S. partners to tone down their public rhetoric and maximalist public ultimatums and emphasize that while the U.S. is willing to play a constructive mediating role this is ultimately an intra-Arab disagreement that they will need to be at the forefront of solving.

Sources of Disagreement Between Qatar and Its GCC Neighbors

Qatar is far from an ideal partner and a number of its actions over the years have frustrated many of its Gulf neighbors as well as the United States. Indeed, Qatar has long been the black sheep of the Gulf Cooperation Council due to the independent foreign policy that it has pursued for the past twenty years – often in direct competition with Saudi Arabia and other GCC neighbors.

One of the most significant disagreements between Qatar and its neighbors has been over differing perspectives on the Muslim Brotherhood. With the start of protests across the Arab world in 2011, the Qataris supported Muslim Brotherhood–affiliated movements, while the Emiratis and Saudis viewed them as a major threat to regional stability. In Egypt, Qatar supported the then-elected Muslim Brotherhood government of Mohammed Morsi, providing his government with \$8 billion during its one year in office.² Meanwhile, the other Gulf states supported Gen. Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi, who overthrew the Brotherhood and initiated a broad crackdown against it. They infused \$23 billion of aid into Egypt in the 18 months after the Brotherhood was overthrown.³

Qatar’s support for Islamist groups also extends to Hamas. Qatar has hosted Hamas’s political leadership in Doha since 2012 and been a major contributor of aid into Gaza – a fair amount of which gets diverted by Hamas for nefarious purposes. And the disagreement over Islamists has also

² Robert F. Worth, “Egypt Is Arena for Influence of Arab Rivals.” *The New York Times*, July 9, 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/10/world/middleeast/aid-to-egypt-from-saudis-and-emiratis-is-part-of-struggle-with-qatar-for-influence.html>.

³ Andrew Torchia, “Egypt Got \$23 Billion in Aid from Gulf in 18 Months: Minister.” *Reuters*, March 2, 2015. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-investment-gulf-idUSKBN0LY0V620150302>.

flowed into Qatari willingness to host Islamist dissidents that have been ejected from some of its regional partners. Additionally, Qatar's use of the Al Jazeera television station to attack Saudi Arabia and the UAE has infuriated Riyadh and Abu Dhabi.⁴

From an American perspective, Qatari policy in Syria and its slow response to terror financing are even more problematic. When the Syrian civil war erupted in 2011, Qatar was at the forefront of providing financial aid and weaponry – with little control or oversight – to Syrian opposition groups of all stripes. The Qataris were far from alone in committing this mistake, as a number of other Gulf state actors as well as Turkey pursued an “anybody but Assad” policy without fully vetting some of these “anybodies.” Certainly the United States made its own share of mistakes during this time period. If it had taken on a more hands-on role in supporting the opposition, it may have been able to steer some of its partners to invest more wisely in groups more amenable to its interests. And even when the United States did engage more in supporting opposition groups, American weapons found their way into extremist hands.⁵ But Qatar and Turkey in particular were the most aggressive in funding some of the more ideologically extremist groups including the al Qaeda affiliate Jebhat al Nusra. This caused a significant increase of Jihadist influence inside the Syrian opposition.⁶ And more broadly beyond Syria, the Qataris have been slower than other Gulf states in taking steps to curb terror financing.⁷ It is important to note, however, that other Gulf partners continue to exhibit problematic behavior.

Qatar and its neighbors have clashed over differing views on Iran. Saudi Arabia views Iran's Islamic Republic as an implacable enemy and the greatest threat in the Middle East. On the other hand, for practical economic reasons Qatar takes a more accommodationist approach to Iran. Qatar and Iran share the world's largest offshore gas field, which Doha calls the North Field and Iran calls South Pars. This field accounts for nearly all of Qatar's gas production and nearly 60 percent of its export revenue.⁸ This does not mean that the Qataris have been completely sanguine about some of Iran's problematic regional behavior and support for various proxies in the Middle East. And the Qataris have not aligned with Iran. But they simply are not in a position to take as hard of a line as some of their GCC partners. Though it is important to note that some other members of the GCC – most notably Oman – also pursue a strategy similar to Qatar's.

Qatar's Value as a U.S. Partner

Despite disagreements on some important issues, Qatar has been a valuable U.S. partner. Most importantly, Qatar's Al-Udeid Air Force base hosts more than 10,000 American troops and is a

⁴ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, “Qatar: The Gulf's Problem Child.” *The Atlantic*, June 5, 2017.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/06/qatar-gcc-saudi-arabia-yemen-bahrain/529227/>.

⁵ Bradford Richardson, “US-Trained Syrian Rebels Gave Weapons to Al Qaeda, Pentagon Admits.” *The Hill*, September 26, 2015. <http://thehill.com/policy/defense/255055-us-trained-syrian-rebels-gave-weapons-to-al-qaeda-pentagon-admits>.

⁶ Liz Sly, and Zakaria Zakaria, “Al-Qaeda Is Eating Us’: Syrian Rebels Are Losing out to Extremists,” *The Washington Post*, February 23, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/al-qaeda-is-eating-us-syrian-rebels-are-losing-out-to-extremists/2017/02/23/f9c6d1d4-f885-11e6-aa1e-5f735ee31334_story.html?utm_term=.40846df6e6f1.

⁷ Matthew Levitt, and Katherine Bauer, “Qatar Doesn't Need a Blockade. It Needs an Audit.” *Foreign Policy*, June 15, 2017. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/06/15/qatar-doesnt-need-a-blockade-it-needs-an-audit-al-qaeda/>.

⁸ Tom Finn, “Qatar Restarts Development of World's Biggest Gas Field after 12-Year Freeze.” *Reuters*, April 3, 2017. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-qatar-gas-idUSKBN175181>.

central node from which the United States conducts air operations in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan as well as other operations across the Middle East.⁹ It is the home of USCENTCOM's Combined Air Operation Center (CAOC) from which all American air operations are coordinated. And USCENTCOM's forward headquarters is also in Al Udeid – making it an important command and control hub in the event of a major military contingency in the Middle East. The base has hosted U.S. military aircraft for over 15 years and during that time has been a reliable partner, allowing access for a broad array of military operations.¹⁰ This is one of the central reasons why Secretary Tillerson and Secretary Mattis have been so reluctant to take sides in the current intra-GCC dispute and have instead sought to mediate an end to the disagreement.

It is important to note that the base does not give Qatar absolute leverage over the United States, and indeed, the Qataris have traditionally refrained from trying to use the base as leverage or bringing it into broader political discussions. If the United States were to lose access, it would still have a number of major military bases in the Gulf and Central Asia that it could use to offset this loss. It could also seek to build new facilities in partner nations or, in the event of an emergency, rely on resources like an additional carrier strike group to offset these losses. But the reality is that these types of steps would be financially costly. They would also likely involve at least some reduction in U.S. capacity to conduct strikes against ISIS and in Afghanistan. And if the United States moved other naval assets into the region to compensate, those assets would have to come from elsewhere – most likely the Pacific. This would then hurt the U.S. ability to counter or deter China and North Korea. So, while the al-Udeid airbase is not an absolute necessity, losing it would come with a very real cost.

In addition to the importance of al-Udeid, Qatar has also sometimes played a useful role as a connector because of its willingness to host groups that the United States finds problematic. Take for example Qatar's relationships with Hamas and its role in Gaza. Even while Israeli officials continue to strongly oppose Qatar's relationship with Hamas, they acknowledge that the Qataris have played a constructive role in flowing aid to Gaza.¹¹ Because of intra-Palestinian politics, the Palestinian Authority and Fatah have taken a completely uncompromising position toward Hamas and have done all they can to squeeze Gaza. The Israeli government on the other hand has started to recognize that this policy leads to an unsustainable situation. There is a danger that if pressure in Gaza becomes too intense, the people turn on Hamas, creating political incentives for Hamas to provoke a conflict with Israel that allows it to regain political support but only at a great cost to all the parties involved. Israel has seen this cycle before and does not want to repeat it. Therefore, in recent years, Israel has looked the other way and in some cases worked quietly with the Qataris to ensure aid gets into Gaza, even recognizing that portions of it get diverted to support Hamas. If this Qatari aid were to evaporate the likelihood of another war in Gaza would increase.

⁹ Tara Copp, "Pentagon: Al-Udeid Air Base Still Open, but US Prepared in Case Qatar Rift Escalates." *Military Times*, July 18, 2017. <http://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2017/07/17/pentagon-al-udeid-air-base-still-open-but-us-prepared-in-case-qatar-rift-escalates/>.

¹⁰ Greg Jaffe, and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "For Qataris, a U.S. Air Base Is Best Defense against Trump Attacks." *The Washington Post*, June 6, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/06/06/for-qataris-a-u-s-air-base-is-best-defense-against-trump-attacks/?utm_term=.475a80a48f81.

¹¹ Barbara Tasch, "Here's Why Israel Is Helping Qatar Aid Hamas in the Gaza Strip." *Business Insider*, June 18, 2015. <http://www.businessinsider.com/why-israel-allows-qatar-to-support-hamas-in-gaza-2015-6>.

Qatar has also come under criticism for allowing a permissive environment for Taliban representatives to operate in. But at the same time, it has hosted peace talks with the Taliban and often acted as a conduit for the United States in efforts to negotiate agreements to end the Afghan war.¹² From Libya, to Sudan, to Lebanon, Qatar's willingness to host various groups and take all sides has made Doha a useful location for holding peace talks and trying to reach agreements to end various regional conflicts.

Implications for the United States and the Way Ahead

Overall, from the American perspective the picture of Qatar is one of an imperfect partner. The United States has real and important disagreements with Qatar and would like to see its behavior on some issues change, but on other matters Qatar has been a valuable partner who has helped promote U.S. interests. In this context, the recent public split between Qatar and its neighbors has been damaging to U.S. interests, yet it is hard to see any resolution in the near future.

The most important consequence of the GCC split is that it has created a new massive distraction in the Middle East. In May, President Trump traveled to Saudi Arabia where he brought leaders from across the Arab World together to focus on two priorities: 1) fighting ISIS and other extremist groups; and 2) countering Iran. And yet two months later many of the United States' most important partners in this fight are dedicating the majority of their diplomatic efforts not to those objectives, but instead to countering each other and making the case in Washington for their positions. Meanwhile, even Secretary Tillerson has focused most of his diplomatic efforts in the Middle East on mediating an end to this conflict, which means he has less time dedicated to the challenges posed by ISIS and Iran.

The divides within the Arab world also give Russia and Iran more room to meddle in Arab politics and to insert themselves into regional affairs – as is evident from Moscow's assertive diplomacy with Doha and Tehran's offer to airlift food into Qatar to compensate for the Saudi blockade.¹³ The intra-Arab split further reduces American influence. Indeed, numerous regional actors have already taken sides. Turkey has weighed in on Qatar's behalf and deployed forces to Qatar. Iraq has found itself awkwardly stuck in the middle. Iran has taken advantage of the division and aligned itself with Qatar in an attempt to draw it closer. And Moscow is clearly pleased to see this division among American partners.

Going forward, the Trump administration should take various steps to adjust its current policy and respond to this crisis. First, it needs to have one clear message to all of its partners. The President cannot publicly criticize Qatar while the Secretary of State simultaneously assumes the posture of an objective mediator. This simply undercuts any efforts at diplomacy, as all the players are confused about U.S. policy and choose to hear what is most in their interest. Indeed, the Saudis and Emiratis

¹² Declan Walsh, "Qatar Opens Its Doors to All, to the Dismay of Some." *The New York Times*, July 16, 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/16/world/middleeast/doha-qatar-blockade.html?_r=0.

¹³ "Russian, Qatari Foreign Ministers to Discuss Diplomatic Crisis in Middle East." *TASS*, June 10, 2017. <http://tass.com/politics/950827>.

primarily have tried to go through a more sympathetic White House, while the Qataris engage with the Pentagon and the State Department.

Second, the administration must stop viewing the Middle East through a simple black and white perspective. It was no coincidence that Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain decided to act against Qatar only weeks after the President's visit to Riyadh. These countries walked out of Riyadh believing that they had a blank check from the President and that he would support them no matter what. And while this crisis is not the Trump administration's fault and is ultimately about intra-Arab disagreements, this sense of impunity undoubtedly played a role in these states' decision to sever ties with Qatar.

Instead of a blank check, a better approach would be to offer Saudi Arabia a clear quid pro-quo: the United States will recognize Riyadh's leadership in the region and will do more to counter Iranian influence if the kingdom will do more get its own house in order by setting aside intra-Arab disputes, mitigating the fierce polarization (mostly over Islamism) within and between Arab societies, and focusing Arab efforts directly on Iran and the Islamic State – the threats both agree are top priorities.

Third, the United States should accept the reality that this split is going to be around for a while and start preparing to deal with it as a long-term, persistent problem instead of just a crisis to be solved. All parties have taken public and uncompromising positions, which means resolution anytime in the near future is unlikely. Instead of high-profile shuttle diplomacy, what is needed is quieter work behind the scenes and a resumed focus on other major challenges that the United States shares with its GCC partners.

The first message to U.S. partners needs to be that it is still focused on the challenges posed by ISIS and Iran and that the United States expects them to remain focused on those challenges as well. Even as the United States continues to manage this disagreement, its focus is returning to the bigger challenges the region faces. And it expects its partners to do the same instead of focusing their diplomatic energy on trying to convince Washington to take their side in this fight.

At the same time, the United States should emphasize to all sides that it expects them to deescalate the public rhetoric surrounding the disagreement and stop the media war. If the United States can persuade them to tone down the rhetoric and public stories, then over time there may be more political flexibility to reach an agreement. The United States should also make clear that it is willing to play a central role in any mediated outcome and essentially act as a guarantor of any agreement. However, it must recognize that this is ultimately an intra-Arab disagreement and they must take the lead in solving it.

Finally, the United States can use this crisis as an opportunity to engage with all of the GCC actors in trying to change behavior that it finds problematic. When it comes to terror financing, there is now an opportunity to create one level bar that the United States expects all its regional partners to abide by. Qatar may have been slower than some of the other GCC partners to address terror financing challenges, but the reality is that Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in particular still have huge challenges. The United States should use this crisis to press all of them to clean up their acts.