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SOCIAL EFFECTS OF THE QATAR CRISIS

By Dr. Courtney Freer

While the political dimensions of the four-month-old Qatar crisis have been analyzed at length - and largely echo those of the Council’s 2014 rift - there has been less scrutiny of the row’s social impact. The social ramifications mirror the ongoing political strife, yet are likely to outlast the crisis, and thus dim the prospects for any resolution. Furthermore, because this clash is so remarkably public, it has become nearly impossible for nationals not to take sides. During past Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) clashes, the ultimate unity of the Gulf states has been highlighted thanks to family, tribal, religious, and historical ties. Yet amid the current crisis, political intransigence has underscored the social differences, particularly national identities.

Surge of Creative Nationalism

The outpouring of nationalist sentiment in the Gulf certainly predates the current crisis, yet has been highlighted recently because of it. Indeed, in a June 2016 report, Kristin Smith Diwan, a senior resident scholar at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, identified a “new nationalism” in the Gulf, which “reflects the decline of the power of the welfare state to engender gratitude and loyalty” while also demonstrating “the elevated demands by and on citizens.”

Certainly with the passage of conscription laws in Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the introduction of greater austerity measures in the form of subsidy reductions, and the institution of VAT in 2018, the ruling bargain in the Gulf is changing. Nonetheless, the sense of national pride has strengthened, an outcome not predicted by rentier state theory. Although this nationalism initially seemed to reflect a sense of military pride and support for the Yemen war, enhanced by state-led efforts to host national events, it has morphed into a more grassroots expression of national commitment. The ongoing crisis and blockade have led to an unprecedented outpouring of nationalist support at the grassroots level.

While in the past, the state has introduced nationalist creative enterprises, for example through National Day celebrations, today they seem to be emerging more organically. GCC nationals are using both traditional and social media, from songs to cartoons, to express their support for their respective national leaders. The most noteworthy, a drawing of Tamim al-Majd by Qatari artist Ahmed bin Majed Almaadheed has gone viral in Qatar. In fact, many are using the drawing as an avatar for social media accounts, demonstrating their support for Emir Tamim. This image has become a springboard for similar political cartoons and drawings elsewhere.

Music has also been used to demonstrate national pride. The locally recorded “One Nation” (an anthem “in solidarity with Qatar’) was released in June and involved both local and international musicians. Its lyrics highlight Qatar’s strength and ends with the following lines: “We stand tall, above it all. Rain will fall, to plant the seeds that feed us all. We stand united, behind our leader with all our might. With you we rise, our nation’s pride.”

Not to be outdone, Saudi label Rotana released a “diss track” entitled “Inform Qatar in September”. Songwriter Turki al-Sheikh, an advisor to the Saudi Royal Court, wrote the song, which was performed by seven famous Arab singers, including Saudis Abdul Majeed Abdullah and Mohammed Abdul Majeed Abdullah. Rotana is owned primarily by Prince al-Waleed bin Talal of the ruling family. The song’s lyrics praise Saudi Arabia as “the epitome of might and enshrinement”.

"During past Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) clashes, the ultimate unity of the Gulf states has been highlighted thanks to family, tribal, religious, and historical ties. Yet amid the current crisis, political intransigence has underscored the social differences, particularly national identities"
while accusing Qatar of “twenty years of scheming, treachery, and conspiracy”.

Traditional nabati poetry of the Arabian Peninsula has also become prominent in the Qatar crisis. In June Dubai ruler Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashed al-Maktoum published a poem entitled “The Clear Path” on his Instagram account. In it, he urges Qatar to return to the fold of its former GCC allies: “Of one origin, people, existence / one flesh and blood, one land and faith [...] Yet Qatar turns to the nearby stranger, to the weak.” As Andrew Leber notes, the tone of this latest poem differs greatly from that of Shaykh Mohammed bin Rashed’s 2014 “Promises”, which was published in Qatari and Emirati papers. “And I feel all the Gulf is one country, one land, / One wonderful Gulf, filled with honorable men. Descended from one line, the most noble men, / Nothing shall come between these purest of hearts.” Juxtaposing these two poems illustrates the acrimony that has developed during the second crisis, which apparently has informed citizens’ creative endeavors as well. Indeed, former Million’s Poet contestant Nasser al-Faraana posted a half-hour video on Qatar’s foreign policy, ending with a poem that stated: “By God, with you are the armies of the Christians, / Them and the apostates [Shi’ite] and the Jews are your friends.”

Vitriolic Media Coverage

Although one of the root causes of the crisis was the political nature of al-Jazeera’s broadcasts, the crisis has had the effect of politicizing other media outlets. Because showing sympathy for Qatar has been criminalized in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, the only coverage in these states is necessarily one-sided.5 General lack of trust has led to a pitting of the two sides against each other, leaving little grey area. Evidence of this is the establishment of the website The Qatar Insider, funded by a Saudi lobbying group and launched in June, which led to the creation of the Qatari-funded Lift the Blockade website in September, largely meant to counter unsubstantiated claims made on the other site.

"Allegations in the media about Qatar have become particularly outlandish"

Allegations in the media about Qatar have become particularly outlandish. Abu Dhabi’s ambassador to Russia claimed that Qatar had given al-Qaeda information about Emirati troop positions in Yemen; a Saudi daily claimed that Qatar conspired with Iran to delay the execution of cleric Nimr al-Nimr in Saudi Arabia by negotiating the release of Qatari hunters in Iraq; the Emirati daily Gulf News openly questioned the level and liquidity of Qatar’s financial reserves; Sky News Arabia, co-owned by an Abu Dhabi company and the UK’s Sky, released a documentary in July claiming to reveal Qatari involvement in the 9/11 attacks; and the Saudi daily Okaz claimed that the Qatar-owned London department store Harrods was collecting the credit card details of shoppers from the quartet countries.6, 7, 8

Meanwhile, in Qatar, support for Sheikh Tamim has reached a fever pitch. There are some accusations that stories published by local media are downplaying the actual impact of the blockade while overstating support for Qatar abroad.9 This lack of nonbiased media in the region, though not an entirely new issue, mirrors ongoing debates in the United States about “fake news” and the responsibility of news outlets to their readership, as well as to the political leadership.

Further complicating the ability to find real news is the involvement of public relations firms in the blockade. The Financial Times announced in September Saudi Arabia’s plans to establish public relations hubs in London, Berlin, Paris, and Moscow this fall, with potential expansion to Beijing, Tokyo, and Mumbai. These hubs would disseminate press releases, published over social media, that invite “social influencers” for publicized visits to the kingdom, all in an effort to “distribute the Saudi perspective on global developments in response to negative/inaccurate publications about the kingdom.” They would also promote Saudi culture.
Attempts to Breed Factionalism in Al Thani Family

Perhaps most shocking have been the outright attempts to present alternative rule to Qatar. The Emirati and Egyptian press first presented Sheikh Saud bin Nasser Al Thani as “Qatar’s leading opposition figure”. The Egyptian press later touted Sheikh Tamim’s uncle Sheikh Abdulaziz bin Khalifa, a former energy minister living in Geneva, as a potential opposition leader. Now, Sheikh Abdullah bin Ali, with the support of London-based Qatari businessman Khalid al-Hail, seems to be the primary voice of the so-called Qatari opposition, with al-Hail helping to organize an opposition conference in London on September 14. Paris-based Sheikh Sultan bin Suhaim Al Thani has also appeared publicly, supporting Sheikh Abdullah’s calls to end the crisis through a Qatari national meeting, and criticizing his country’s position in the crisis and its past foreign policies.

While the Al Thani family has been notoriously fractious in the past - two consecutive coups took place in 1972 and 1995 - it is unprecedented for outside countries to comment on domestic political arrangements, particularly on issues of succession. Moves toward encouraging regime change in Qatar will likely only heighten the nationalistic fervor already afoot and strengthen support for Emir Tamim. Furthermore, by linking the crisis to Qatar’s monarch personally, and even to his father, Sheikh Hamad, the anti-Qatar quartet make compromise and trust with that leader nearly impossible.

Problematic Family/Tribal ties

Another major social component of the blockade is the difficulty for families to cross borders. As elsewhere in the Middle East, tribal ties overlap national borders, meaning that members of the same tribe or even the same family, despite physical proximity, often live in different countries. The livelihoods and educations of those Qatari nationals living in Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, as well as nationals of those countries living in Qatar, are constrained. On June 19, authorities in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE forced Qatari nationals to leave those countries, and since June 5 they have denied Qatari citizens entry into those states.

Aside from the obvious economic cost, the social problems resulting from the policy have led Qatari citizens to feel targeted. Sheikh Saif bin Ahmed Al Thani has accused the quartet of having “allowed politics to disrupt the social fabric of our union.” Qatar’s National Human Rights Committee estimates that more than 13,000 people are affected by the blockade, including at least 6,500 mixed families. The governments of Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have publicly acknowledged the negative effects of the blockade on mixed families and have established emergency hotlines, yet the scale of the problem makes it difficult to ensure that all can be helped. Of 12 Gulf nationals known by Human Rights Watch to have contacted the line, only two gained permission to travel back and forth, while the other 50 interviewed were scared to call and reveal their identities because they were living in Qatar. There have been no known exceptions regarding medical treatment or education.

Not only have GCC nationals come under such restrictions, Egyptians who remain in Qatar do not have access to an embassy, making it difficult for them to renew their passports and, consequently, their Qatari residency permits. Migrant workers have also felt the impact of the blockade. Saudi Arabia formerly allowed Qatari nationals to bring expatriate workers there for three months for a fee; some of these workers have thus been stranded without proper documentation or salary. The increase in food prices in Qatar due to the blockade has affected migrant workers with low salaries the most.

"Moves toward encouraging regime change in Qatar will likely only heighten the nationalistic fervor already afoot and strengthen support for Emir Tamim"
Claims of Harassment

Vitriol from leaderships of the countries involved in the blockade has possibly led to conflict on the ground. *The New Arab* reported claims in September from UK-based human rights lawyer Rodney Dixon QC that three Qatari officials were allegedly imprisoned, beaten, and tortured while visiting the UAE.15 Meanwhile, *Gulf News* reported that rights groups in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have condemned the “flagrant violation of human rights” of Qatari Hamad Abdul Hadi al-Merri, who was reportedly assaulted by employees from Qatar’s interior ministry and arrested upon his return from haj.16

A Space for Islamists and Islam

Two questions that underlie the issue of Qatar’s support for terrorism are: what exactly defines a terrorist, and what type of Islam is deemed politically acceptable within the Gulf? For instance, Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, though associated with the Muslim Brotherhood in the past, has supporters who are not members of that movement. His sermons and his television programs, when they were broadcast, would hardly have converted anyone to the Brotherhood.

The blockading countries’ conflation of Brotherhood figures with violent Islamists has proven dangerous, and has granted these governments a security excuse for crackdown on nonviolent Islamists. This anti-Islamist attitude is not new. As early as 2009, a Wikileaks document revealed that “[b]eing labelled a Muslim Brother is about the worst epithet possible in MBZ’s [Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed] vocabulary.”17 In countries that have historically supported a conservative interpretation of Islam, restriction on, and inherent suspicion of, Islamists are unsustainable, at least without some degree of opposition to such policies. This was evidenced by the September arrest of some 30 independent figures, including prominent clerics, in Saudi Arabia, as an attempt to consolidate political power and sideline potential rivals.18 Interestingly, shortly after this crackdown, King Salman issued a royal decree allowing women to drive – an unforeseen major social change that is likely linked to Saudi attempts both to modernize the kingdom and to win the ongoing PR war in the crisis.19

Where Now?

All of these social effects make the current crisis increasingly difficult to resolve. While in the past ruling families have primarily ironed out differences behind closed doors, today accusations are traded publicly, and the repercussions of domestic and foreign policies fall on national citizens. The crisis has become not just about élite politics but has affected grassroots sentiments and galvanized national identities in states that are relatively newly independent.

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BAHRAIN MONITOR

- Officials in Manama maintain hardline stance against Doha amid Qatar crisis
- Bahraini monarch opposes Arab boycott against Israel
- U.S. approves USD 3.8 billion arms sale to Bahrain
- Bahraini leadership blasts Amnesty International’s “inaccuracies” in report on Arabian archipelago state

September 8

Washington approves USD 3.8 billion in arms sales to Manama

In a sign of strong support for the archipelago kingdom, the U.S. State Department approved a USD 3.8 billion arms sale, comprising “F-16 jets, upgrades, and patrol boats”.20

September 8

Manama condemns Amnesty International

Bahraini officials blasted “inaccuracies” contained in an Amnesty International report. The report accused them of intensifying a crackdown by arresting, torturing, and restricting the travel of 169 activists/opposition figures and their family members between June 2016 and June 2017.21

"Among the quartet of countries, Bahrain is taking the lead in opening more formal relations with Israel"

September 14

Bahrain’s foreign minister says Doha is “bound to fail” in quest to harm the Saudi leadership and citizenry

Bahrain’s chief diplomat, Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmad Al Khalifa, tweeted a message intended for Qatar’s government. He stated that Doha’s plans for undermining the Saudi government and the country’s citizens will “fail” as have their actions which have “targeted Bahrain in the past and failed”. The foreign minister praised Saudi leaders for their willingness to “stand with their brothers on every occasion.”22

September 18

Bahrain accuses Doha of exacerbating Qatar crisis with alleged boat seizure

A Bahraini military official told the country’s state-media that the Qatars had seized three boats carrying 16 sailors over the span of three days, yet he provided no details regarding the location. Qatari officials confirmed having detained fishing boats which they maintained had unlawfully entered Qatar’s territorial waters.23
September 22

News leaks that the King of Bahrain favors ending the Arab boycott of Israel

Two rabbis of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, Marvin Hier and Abraham Cooper, revealed information at a Los Angeles event that Bahrain’s King Hamad believes that Arab countries should stop boycotting the State of Israel. King Hamad’s son also attended the event. Hier and Cooper praised Bahrain’s respect for Jews and highlighted Bahrain and Israel’s common understanding of the Iranian threat.24

Analysis: Among the quartet of countries, Bahrain is taking the lead in opening more formal relations with Israel. This role is first and foremost on behalf of Saudi Arabia, while Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman concentrates on reforms at home, but it is also on behalf of the other GCC countries, with the exception of Qatar. The move puts Doha squarely in Tehran’s geopolitical camp.

September 23

Minister of Foreign Affairs addresses UN General Assembly

On the podium before the UN General Assembly, Bahrain’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Shaikh Khalid Bin Ahmed Al Khalifa, emphasized Manama’s support for preserving security in the Gulf region and countering terrorist forces. “Terrorism is no longer confined to terrorist organizations that can be confronted and eliminated,” he declared. “Rather, that menace has become a tool in the hands of States determined to create crises in other countries in pursuit of their own agenda.”25
KUWAIT MONITOR

- Kuwait City and Ankara sign six accords
- Kuwait downgrades relations with Pyongyang under pressure from Washington

September 8

Saudi/UAE-led bloc praises the Kuwaiti emir for his efforts to resolve the Qatar crisis

The quartet of countries blockading Doha released a joint statement expressing appreciation for the Emir of Kuwait’s diplomacy in pursuit of a resolution to the GCC’s months-old crisis. Yet the anti-Qatar bloc of Arab states voiced their regret over the Kuwaiti leader’s comment, made while he was in Washington with President Trump, regarding the “success of the mediation in preventing a military intervention”.26

Analysis: Last year, while the Obama Administration was directing U.S. foreign policy, Washington began putting pressure on Kuwait to reconsider the nature of its relationship with North Korea. This year, the Trump Administration has stepped up such pressure because the issue of Pyongyang’s workers being employed in the Gulf and other regions around the world is a growing concern for Washington. In the future Kuwait could demonstrate further support for Trump by fully severing diplomatic relations with North Korea. Yet the decision to downgrade relations with the Hermit Kingdom is diplomatically significant because Pyongyang’s ambassador to Kuwait also represents North Korea to Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE, which along with Kuwait and Oman established official ties with the Northeast Asian country in the 1990s and 2000s. How these other Arab Gulf states respond to growing tension between the U.S. and North Korea remains to be seen. It is possible that more GCC members will follow Kuwait’s lead in terms of taking action against the Hermit Kingdom as a sign of support for the U.S. and their key trade partners, South Korea and Japan.

September 13

Kuwait and Turkey sign agreements

Kuwait’s prime minister and his Turkish counterpart met in Ankara to sign six accords. The agreements cover several sectors, including civil aviation, scientific research, and sports.27

September 17

Kuwait downgrades relations with North Korea

With tension remaining high between Washington and Pyongyang, Kuwait took diplomatic action against North Korea, informing Pyongyang’s ambassador that he must leave within one month. The Kuwaitis also expelled four other North Korean diplomats. In response, the U.S. embassy in Kuwait City praised Kuwait as a “key regional partner on (North Korea) and many other issues.”28
OMAN MONITOR

- Oman’s chief diplomat meets with his Iranian and Indian counterparts, as well as with Yemen’s internationally recognized president in New York
- To boost tourism, Omani officials ease rules for Chinese, Indian, and Russian nationals to obtain visas

September 11

Oman helps secure release of Indian priest kidnapped in Yemen

Oman’s state news agency reported that Omani officials had helped coordinate with “Yemeni parties” the release of Tom Uzhunnalil, a priest from India who was abducted in Yemen last year. It is not clear which faction held Uzhunnalil in Yemen.29

September 23

Yemen’s internationally recognized president receives Oman’s top diplomat in New York

The President of Yemen, Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, received Oman’s chief diplomat, Yusuf bin Alawi, at the Yemeni leader’s residence in New York for a meeting on recent developments in the Yemeni crisis.30

September 24

Oman’s top diplomat meets with his Iranian and Indian counterparts in New York

At the Permanent Mission of the Sultanate in New York, Oman’s Minister Responsible for Foreign Affairs, Yusuf bin Alawi, met with Iran’s Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mohammed Jawad Zarif, and India’s Foreign Minister, Sushma Swaraj. The three discussed strengthening relations between Oman, Iran, and India, specifically in the energy sector, among others. Muscat’s chief diplomat expressed Oman’s continued interest in finding more ways for the Sultanate to benefit from Iran’s gas. All three officials voiced their strong support for the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.31

September 25

Qatari and Omani economy ministers open ‘Opex 2017’

At the Doha Exhibition and Convention Centre, economy ministers from Qatar and Oman opened the second installment of Opex, the Omani Products Exhibition. The ministers expressed optimism about the future growth of Doha-Muscat trade.32

September 30

Oman loosens rules for Chinese, Indian, and Russian nationals to obtain visas

Officials in Muscat announced that the Sultanate will permit certain citizens from China, India, and Russia to acquire a non-sponsored tourist visa. These applicants must already reside and/or have an entry visa to a handful of Western countries, including the United States and the United Kingdom.33
QATAR MONITOR

- Qatari emir visits Turkey, Germany, France, and the U.S., marking his first international trip since the months-old GCC crisis erupted
- Emir Tamim is the only GCC head-of-state to address the United Nations General Assembly
- Qatar signs a fighter jet deal with the United Kingdom
- U.S. president urges his Afghan counterpart to shut down the Taliban’s office in Doha

September 12

Qatar praises Iran at Arab League meeting

Diplomats of the Arab states blockading Qatar had harsh words for Doha at an Arab League meeting in Cairo, accusing the Arabian emirate of sponsoring terrorism and destabilizing the region. Sultan Saad al-Muraikhi, Qatar’s permanent envoy to the Arab League, stated that, as “advocates of peace”, Qataris do not “work like bats at night and our decisions are issued in broad daylight.” He also called Iran an “honorable state”.  

Analysis: This meeting intensified the Qatar crisis, with such accusations and insults deepening wounds. The harshness of the words exchanged illustrates how severe the tensions between Doha and the quartet countries have become several months into the GCC’s unprecedented diplomatic row.

September 13

Qatar crisis costs Doha USD 38.5 billion, according to Moody’s

The ratings agency Moody’s has estimated that, as a result of the blockades and boycotts against Qatar since June 5, the Arabian emirate has burned USD 38.5 billion of its financial reserves and that roughly USD 30 billion has left the country’s banking system.  

September 14

President of Turkey hosts Emir Tamim in Ankara

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan hosted the Qatari emir at his presidential palace in Ankara. The meeting marked Emir Tamim’s first trip outside Qatar since the ongoing GCC crisis erupted on June 5.

September 15

Emir of Qatar visits Germany

Emir Tamim held a joint press conference in Berlin with Chancellor Angela Merkel, during which the Qatari monarch declared, “We have big trust in the German economy and German companies.” He emphasized that Qatar maintains “strategic relationships” with German firms and that Doha will continue investing in them. The Qatari monarch expressed gratitude for Berlin’s supportive role throughout the GCC’s diplomatic row and called for a solution to the Syrian civil war based on diplomatic compromise involving all parties.

Analysis: Emir Tamim’s visit to Germany underscored Berlin’s support for Doha amid the months-old Qatar crisis and the deepening of Germany’s relations with the Arabian emirate. Bilateral cooperation is growing across a range of sectors, including technology, where German skills excel on a global scale. For Germany, the Qatari emir represents a potentially useful ally when it comes to calming tensions between Berlin and Ankara.

September 17

Doha and London sign fighter jet deal

The U.K.’s defense secretary, Michael Fallon, and his Qatari counterpart, Khalid bin Mohammed al-Attiyah, met in Doha and signed a statement of intent for the British to supply the Arabian emirate with 24 Typhoon fighter jets. According to The Telegraph, the deal will
likely be worth billions of dollars and secure many jobs in the U.K.’s defense sector.\textsuperscript{38}

**September 19**

**Emir of Qatar speaks before the UN General Assembly and meets with Donald Trump**

After visiting Turkey, Germany, and France, Emir Tamim traveled to New York and addressed the UN General Assembly, condemning the “unjust” blockade of Qatar and calling it an attempt to destabilize the Arabian emirate. Emir Tamim declared, “We have refused to yield to dictations by pressure and siege... At the same time, we have taken an open attitude towards dialogue without dictation.” Later he met with President Trump, who stated that he expected the GCC’s ongoing row will “be resolved soon.”\textsuperscript{39}

**Analysis:** Emir Tamim’s speech put Qatar’s case in front of the international community. The reactions were mixed and reflective of the emerging divide over this row. The Emir’s speech won wide praise, of course, in Doha, where citizens and expats alike approved of the Tamim’s message to Qatar’s neighbors. It is notable that the Qatari monarch was the only head-of-state of a GCC country to speak at the podium before the UN General Assembly.

**Economy and Trade Minister says Qatar’s economy is “heaven” despite the siege**

According to Ahmed Bin Jassim Al Thani, Qatar’s Economy and Trade minister, the country’s economy is performing “better than ever” despite the Saudi/UAE-led bloc blockade. He described the Arabian emirate’s economy as “heaven”. Ahmed Bin Jassim Al Thani maintained that the blockade offered Qatar an “opportunity” that prompted officials in Doha to open new trade corridors with Turkey as well as with the two GCC states that have maintained ties with Qatar: Kuwait and Oman. He stated that the Qataris had activated a contingency plan only hours after the Qatar crisis erupted and that “consumers... never felt anything in terms of supplying goods.”\textsuperscript{40}

**September 25**

**Foreign minister: Qatar crisis is pushing Doha economically closer to Iran**

While speaking to reporters in France, Qatar’s Foreign Minister, Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, declared: “[The Saudi/UAE-led bloc] said Qatar was now closer to Iran. By their measures they are pushing Qatar to Iran. They are giving Iran, or any regional forces, Qatar like a gift... Is that their objective, to push country, a GCC member state toward Iran? This is not a wise objective.” He emphasized that despite growing economic links between Qatar and Iran, Doha and Tehran continue to harbor differences on regional issues such as the six-and-a-half-year conflict in Syria.\textsuperscript{41}

**September 26**

**Trump urges Afghan president to close Taliban office in Qatar**

According to sources close to the U.S. and Afghan governments, American President Donald Trump urged his Afghan counterpart, Ashraf Ghani, to shut down the Taliban’s delegation in Doha.\textsuperscript{42}

**September 28**

**America’s Pentagon chief makes unannounced visit to Doha**

U.S. Secretary of Defense, James Mattis, visited Emir Tamim and his counterpart, Khalid bin Mohammad al-Attiyah, at the al-Udeid base in the Arabian emirate.\textsuperscript{43}
SAUDI ARABIA MONITOR

- Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia speaks with the Qatari emir for first time since the GCC crisis broke out, yet the talk quickly backfires and pushes the involved parties farther away from reconciliation
- Kingdom foils a terrorist attack plotted by Daesh (Islamic State)
- Government crackdown on activists, scholars, and civil society members intensifies
- Riyadh condemns the leadership in Myanmar for its human rights abuses

September 4

UN official: Riyadh should finance all humanitarian aid efforts to Yemen

Top UN official David Beasley declared that Saudi Arabia, and no other country, should finance measures to address the humanitarian crisis in Yemen. He assigned the Riyadh-led military coalition responsibility for Yemen’s dire conditions. “Either stop the war or fund the crisis. Option three is, do both of them.”

September 8

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman speaks with Emir of Qatar

The Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman (MbS), spoke by phone to Qatar’s Emir Tamim for the first time since Riyadh severed diplomatic and economic relations with Doha on June 5. In fact, the conversation marked the first direct official contact between the two governments since the GCC crisis erupted. According to Qatar News Agency (QNA), President Trump coordinated the phone call. Prospects for reconciliation were hampered once the involved parties accused QNA of misreporting facts surrounding MbS and Emir Tamin’s conversation. Responding to QNA’s alleged “distortion” of truths, Saudi Arabia’s state media declared: “The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia announced the suspension of any dialogue or communication with the authority in Qatar until a clear statement is issued clarifying its position in public.”

September 12

Saudi authorities foil Daesh attack in Riyadh

Saudi Arabia’s state-owned news agency SPA reported that authorities have thwarted an attempted Daesh terror attack, seizing firearms and grenades in the process. The terrorist act, plotted by two Yemenis who were reportedly trained to use explosive belts, was intended to target the Saudi Defense Ministry headquarters in Riyadh. In addition to the two Yemenis, authorities detained two Saudi nationals, based on their suspected involvement. SPA also reported on the arrest of several individuals suspected of spying for foreign governments in Saudi Arabia.

Analysis: The Saudi announcements occurred following King’s Salman’s decree announcing the creation of the State Security Presidium. For some observers, the three events—the decree, and the two halted plots—illustrates the Kingdom’s intent to further crack down on subversion. These interlocutors argue that the issue of “foreign spies” is an intentional link back to Qatar.

Saudi Arabia cracks down on preachers, activists, and scholars

Human rights activists made known that Saudi authorities have arrested up to 20 well-known preachers, poets, media figures, and academics as “prisoners of conscience”. Saudi sources maintain that these suspects were arrested as “espionage activists...having contacts with external entities including the Muslim Brotherhood.” The International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS), based in Qatar, condemned the arrests. An official IUMS statement declared that these
influential figures “should not be used as pawns in political disputes” and called on the King of Saudi Arabia to release them.47

September 15

Riyadh rejects statements from Tehran about Saudi Arabia seeking Iranian mediation in Yemen

Saudi Arabia’s state-owned news agency SPA denied that a senior Saudi advisor had told the senior advisor to Iran’s Parliament that Riyadh sought Iranian mediatory help with Yemen’s Houthi rebel movement. The Iranian News Agency carried this story.48

September 17

Snap Inc. removes al-Jazeera channel from its Snapchat app in Saudi Arabia

To make it more difficult for users of Snapchat to access al-Jazeera content, Snap Inc pulled the Qatari state-owned news network’s content from its Snapchat app in the kingdom as a response to pressure from the government in Riyadh.49

Saudi Arabia’s foreign minister: GCC crisis over Qatar rift is not the UN’s matter

Following his meeting with UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, Riyadh’s foreign minister, Abel al-Jubeir, told the media that the Qatar crisis is not a matter for the UN.50

Analysis: Al-Jubeir’s comments are the clearest yet that Saudi Arabia wants the United Nations to stay out of efforts to resolve the Qatar crisis. The reason is clear. One dimension of the GCC’s ongoing row is the tribal dynamic among the involved states’ ruling families.

September 18

UK’s Labor Party bans Saudi Arabia and Sudan from attending its party conference

The Labor Party has barred Saudi Arabia and Sudan from its party conference to be held in Brighton in late September. The Arab League responded by canceling a conference reception. Labor Party leader Jeremy Corbyn maintained that the move was necessary to guarantee that there is a “political process to bring about a ceasefire” in Yemen, where he said it was illogical for London to send aid while also arming Saudi Arabia amid its ongoing military campaigns in that Arabian Peninsula country.51

September 19

King of Saudi Arabia orders USD 15 million in aid for Myanmar’s Rohingya minority

In response to the Rohingya refugee crisis and exodus from Myanmar, the Saudi monarch ordered that the kingdom deliver USD 15 million in aid to assist those in need.52

September 23

Riyadh condemns Myanmar’s government for “repression” of Rohingya Muslims

Saudi Arabia’s government strongly denounced the government of Myanmar for its treatment of the country’s Rohingya in the state of Rakhine. Speaking before the UN General Assembly, Saudi Arabia’s foreign minister, Abel al-Jubeir, stated: “My country is gravely concerned and condemns the policy of repression and forced displacement carried out by the government of Myanmar against the Rohingya minority.”53
September 26

King of Salman declares that Saudi women will have the right to drive

In a move that marks a watershed moment in Saudi history, the country’s leadership announced that it has ended its policy of not permitting women to drive in the kingdom. The change, announced by a royal decree, will be implemented in June 2018.54

Analysis: The widely hailed announcement that women will have the right to drive in 2018 is the beginning of a transformation previously unseen. What remains to be understood is the extent to which this reform exacerbates tensions within the kingdom between the Saudis who favor such change and the conservatives who do not support steps toward gender equality. Unquestionably, this decree factors heavily into Vision 2030, the Saudi government’s economic agenda aimed at decreasing the kingdom’s dependence on oil, which calls for more female participation in the workforce.
UNITED ARAB EMIRATES MONITOR

- Yemen’s Houthi rebels threaten to attack the Emirati capital
- U.S. president speaks with Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan about regional threats

September 8

President Trump speaks with Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi

In addition to speaking with Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince and the Emir of Qatar, President Trump spoke with the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. In his talks with these three Arab Gulf leaders, Trump emphasized that “all countries must follow through on commitments from the Riyadh Summit to defeat terrorism, cut off funding for terrorist groups, and combat extremist ideology.”

September 9

Abu Dhabi’s top diplomat says that Doha found itself in “a difficult position” after media attacks

The UAE’s Minister of State of Foreign Affairs, Anwar Gargash, voiced his belief that Qatar was in “a difficult position” after Doha’s “naïve media reactions” against Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which he said were “unfortunate” and problematic because “they ignore the root of the problem.” Gargash continued, “The confused brother must understand that the crisis is not artificial, but has been born as a result of his support for extremism, conspiracy to [de]stabilize his neighbors and is a genuine political crisis which can be treated in means other than through its media.”

September 14

Houthis threaten civil targets in the GCC

In response to Saudi Arabia’s demands that the Yemeni port of al-Hodeida come under UN administrative control, Houthi fighters threatened to wage ballistic missile strikes capable of reaching Abu Dhabi and various civilian centers in Saudi Arabia. In response, the UAE’s Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Anwar Gargash, tweeted: “Al Houthis’ comments threatening the UAE and its capital are tangible proof of the need for the Decisive Storm (Operation) ... Iran’s militias have vile objectives and represent a real threat... We are not afraid of the Houthi threats and stupidity. It reveals the desperation of those who defend fragmented illusions, and it certainly reveals the intentions for the Arabian Gulf region security and stability.”

Analysis: A Houthi missile strike on Saudi Arabia’s major cities or on Abu Dhabi would drive a dagger into the heart of the two countries. Houthi missile technology is improving, suggesting outside help in perfecting the missiles that the rebels have in their possession. Houthi missile technology does not need to be accurate to send a message, because any missiles landing in the UAE desert would achieve that objective.

September 26

After “lobbying by UAE”, U.S. administration drops Sudan from travel ban list

Sudan, which the U.S. State Department recognizes as a sponsor of terrorism, is no longer on the list of countries facing traveling restrictions. The Trump administration decided to drop Sudan thanks to Emirati lobbying, according to various sources, including The Intercept.

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ENDNOTES


10 “Qatar should stop funding terrorism, says leading opposition figure”. The National. Thenational.ae. 3 June 2017. Web. 4 October 2017. <https://www.thenational.ae/world/qatar-should-stop-funding-terrorism-says-leading-opposition-figure-1.52119>.
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