

## **Qatar-Gulf crisis: A fallout among thieves**

The world was taken by surprise by Saudi Arabia and its allies in the [Gulf Cooperation Council](#) (GCC) sudden move to cut diplomatic ties with Qatar and impose an economic blockade.

They accused Qatar of supporting Iranian-backed militant groups in the the region and of cultivating a closer relationship with Iran.

The conflict is an expression of the complexities of shifting local and global geopolitical rivalries in the region.

The action is aimed at bringing Qatar to heel but it will further destabilise the region and sharpen the dividing lines.

### **Economic and physical blockade**



Donald Trump and King Salman bin Abdulaziz: Riyadh May 2017

The Gulf allies (Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain) imposed an economic blockade in what was clearly part of a carefully prepared action to bring Qatar to heel and came shortly after Trump's visit to the region where he signed a [\\$110 billion arms deal](#) with Saudi Arabia. He indicated his support for the Saudi led action with the [accusation](#) that Qatar had, historically been a funder of

terrorism at a very high level..

Qatari diplomats and citizens were also ordered to leave and Qatar based media organisations such as Al Jazeera have also been taken off air. The economic impact so far has been limited with temporary disruptions to food supplies and [dips](#) in the stock and bonds markets.

The immediate triggers were [reports of an alleged speech](#) given by Qatar's Emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, to graduating military cadets where it is claimed he praised Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas. Qatar maintains this story is fake and a result of a [hack](#) of the Qatar News Agency (QNA). There are also allegations that a \$1 billion dollar ransom for the release of a hunting party made up of Qatari royals [ended up with Hezbollah](#) and other Iranian linked groups.

With the new Trump administration's view of Iran coming into alignment with Saudi Arabia, the Saudis took this as a green light for action.

Saudi Arabia has made no secret of [its aim](#), Saudi Arabia's foreign minister, Adel al-Jubeir, spelt out that:

*"..the damage caused by economic measures taken by some Arab states against Qatar should convince it [to] change its policies..."*

*"We believe that common sense and logic and will convince Qatar to take the right steps,"*

*"The decisions that were made were very strong and will have a fairly large cost on Qatar and we do not believe that Qataris want to sustain those costs."*

However, contrary to reverting to type and backing down, Qatar has dug its heels in and has called on the alliances it has carefully nurtured for the past decade or so. For instance, Turkey has completed signing of an agreement that allows it to station troops in Qatar and Iran has flown in food supplies.

Pressure for a resolution to the dispute has come from countries such as Germany who have [criticised the action](#) as a 'Trumpification' of the GCC dispute. The German Foreign Minister, Sigmar Gabriel, accused Trump of risking a new arms race and warned that A toxic conflict between neighbours is that last thing we need,.

There are signs of some back tracking by the US. The Secretary of State, [Rex Tillerson](#), asked for the easing of the blockade saying that it had caused unintended consequences and is hindering US military actions in the region and the campaign against ISIS.

A [statement by the Saudi Foreign Minister](#) also points to a reining back of the action:

*"There is no blockade of Qatar. Qatar is free to go. The ports are open, the airports are open," Jubeir said alongside a silent Tillerson who had called last week for the embargo on Qatar to be "eased".*

Saudi Arabia and its allies have since announced they are working on a ['list of grievances'](#) to present to Qatar, it is something of a puzzle that wasn't done at the start...

There also seems to be little appetite from ordinary people from the Gulf allies for the action. For example, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates have passed laws making it illegal to criticise the government or express any sympathy for Qatar, a tacit acknowledgement of dissent from their citizens.

## **Geopolitics: The jostling of rivals**

Gulf Co-operation Council states

Although Saudi Arabia has taken the lead role in the dispute, its dependency on the US relegates it to the role of proxy. However, Saudi's plentiful oil reserves and purchases of US and western arms gives it a leverage which can give it a degree of independence which can also make it an awkward ally.

Saudi Arabia, under the new, [more assertive](#) leadership of King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, has been more willing to adopt an aggressive stance in pursuit of its foreign policy aims. One example is the blockading and the bombing of Yemen in its fight against the Houthis, which has resulted in a humanitarian crisis.

Qatar, conversely, is driven by a choice of balancing between and playing off the regional and global powers against one another or becoming a vassal state. It's recent efforts are the consequences of a failed [1996 coup d'état](#).

The coup was [backed by Saudi Arabia](#), concerned at the prospect of Qatar pursuing a more [independent foreign policy](#). It aimed to restore Qatar's previous ruler, Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad al-Thani, who had been overthrown by his son Sheikh Hamad. The attempt ended in débâcle, with six hundred Bedouin tribesmen crossing into Qatar from Saudi Arabia getting lost and French mercenaries arriving on Doha's beach but unable to find their boats.

As part of its efforts at extending its influence in the region, Qatar has supported rival groups and political parties. In Egypt [it supported](#) the ill fated government of Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood. In Gaza it has supported Hamas, an enemy of Saudi Arabia's ally Israel.

Qatari policy has resulted in it becoming a [regional rival](#) in its own right to Saudi Arabia.

Since the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the removal of Iran's key foe Saddam Hussein, Saudi Arabia and the US have ceded ground to their rivals. Turkey has increased its presence with intervention in Syria and has moved to [back its Qatari ally](#). Russia, [militarily and diplomatically](#), and China, [economically and diplomatically](#), have extended their influence in the region at the expense of the US. All this jostling of rivals has highlighted and exacerbated the fragility of the US allied block.

While the action is without doubt aggressive, disproportionate and based on hypocrisy one should have little sympathy for Qatar. As with all the GCC countries, Qatar is responsible for systemic abuses and holds very little regard for workers' rights in particular and [human rights](#) in general. The dispute in this respect is very much a 'fallout among thieves'.

## **Further destabilise the region**

Most observers initial assessment was that Qatar would retreat as it has done in previous disputes. The Chinese state owned newspaper, Global Times, [wrote that](#):

*"This may be an unforgettable lesson for Qatar. Once it compromises, it may be allowed back into the original Middle Eastern geopolitical structure."*

The alliances Qatar has cultivated has meant that it's been in a stronger position to resist being forced into making concessions, or at least holding out for more time.

An example of the leverage Qatar now commands is how it has used its role in a territorial dispute between African neighbours [Djibouti and Eritrea](#). It withdrew its peace keeping troops without notice and Eritrean soldiers immediately occupied the territory, triggering a crisis in a strategically important area. This was clearly intended as a shot across the bows, that Qatar can cause real damage to its opponents strategic interests.

The Saudi King has a [reputation for bold moves](#). But the dividing line between bold moves and over playing ones hand is very thin, Saudi Arabia's gambit could backfire and result in a further geopolitical shift to its, and the US', rivals in the region.

The collective action is aimed at bringing Qatar to heel but regardless of outcome it will further destabilise the region, sharpening the dividing lines and increase volatility in a region awash with arms.

Gary Hollands – June 18<sup>th</sup> 2017

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