

Qatar Has to Get off the Fence in Saudi-Iranian Middle-East Turf Fight

While the spat between terror-sponsoring Qatar and other Arab states could end up benefiting the U.S. and Israel, experts say Qatar finds itself at a crossroads in its relationships with the region's leading Sunni and Shi'a powers.

Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and other Arab countries have cut diplomatic relations with Qatar, citing the Gulf state's terror ties and cooperation with Iran. The Saudis lead the charge, calling on Qatar to end support for Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood—terrorist adversaries of Israel. Prominent Hamas terrorist Saleh al-Aroui and other terrorists from the Gaza-ruling Palestinian group have reportedly been expelled from Doha. Khaled Mashaal, Hamas's ex-political leader, also formerly lived in Qatar.

According to a report in the Financial Times, one of the main triggers of the Gulf spat was Qatar's alleged payment of \$1 billion to Iran and jihadists for the release of members of the Qatari royal family who were kidnapped in Iraq. Unnamed officials told the newspaper that the hostage deal, carried out in April, led to the release of 26 Qatari royals and about 50 fighters captured by jihadists in Syria.

"Around \$700 million was paid both to Iranian figures and the regional Shi'a militias they support, according to regional government officials. They added that \$200 million to \$300 million went to Islamist groups in Syria, most of that to Tahrir al-Sham, a group with links to al-Qaeda," the report stated.

Brandon Friedman, a research fellow at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel Aviv University,

told the current Gulf spat appears to center on Iran and the reported \$1 billion hostage deal, whereas a previous Gulf crisis in 2014 was ignited by Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood.

The earlier spat came in the aftermath of current Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi's overthrowing of President Mohammed Morsi, a Muslim Brotherhood leader.

Friedman, an expert on Arab-Iranian relations, said Qatar uses payments to Iran and Islamist groups "to insulate itself from them and to accumulate political capital."

"In the case of Iran, Qatar's largest offshore gas field adjoins Iran's offshore gas field. Therefore, Qatar has a reasonably legitimate security interest in avoiding an adversarial relationship with Iran," said Friedman, noting Qatar "has tried to be all things to all sides."

Yet according to Friedman, Qatar is discovering the pitfalls of its approach.

"It seems as if they are being forced to choose a side in the Saudi-Iran rivalry, and it isn't an easy choice for a small, vulnerable state like Qatar," said Friedman, who suspects the Saudis "want to hear Qatar announce they will meet them, signaling they are choosing the 'right' side."

Eran Segal, a researcher at the Ezri Center for Iran and Persian Gulf Studies at the University of Haifa, told it seems the Saudis are motivated to curb Qatar's independent foreign policy.

"Qatar cannot afford cutting relations with Iran," said Segal, mainly due to the North Field, a natural gas field Qatar shares with Iran. At the same time, Qatar "cannot withstand a long feud with the three Gulf states encircling the country," he said, referring to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE.

America's Role

President Donald Trump affirmed the Arab states' response to Qatar's support for terrorism, tweeting June 6, "So good to see the Saudi Arabia visit with the King and 50 countries already paying off. They said they would take a hard line on funding."

Segal sees the U.S. as the key player in the unfolding Gulf drama, noting that more than 11,000 American soldiers are stationed at Qatar's Al Udeid Air Base.

"Will Saudi pressure on the Americans create space for further escalation against Qatar, or will the Trump administration try to de-escalate?" he asked.

Should Qatar's Critics Look in the Mirror?

Another source of Western concern about Qatar is Al Jazeera, the Doha-based satellite TV station, which is popular in the Arab world and has been accused of incitement. Doha's ambassador to the U.S., Meshal bin Hamad Al Thani, claimed in an interview on Al Jazeera this week that Qatar's cooperation with Hamas "is an engagement in the context of the peace process."

Yet Saudi Arabia and other "moderate" Arab states calling out Qatar's terror funding have radical tendencies of their own. According to emails of former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton released by WikiLeaks, Saudi Arabia and Qatar provide "clandestine financial and logistic support to ISIL (Islamic State) and other radical Sunni groups in the region." Meanwhile, in the latest anti-Semitic broadcast on Arab television, a video posted by the Middle East Media Research Institute Thursday shows a Jordanian TV host denying the Holocaust. {eoa}

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