



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

The Qatar Crisis: Signs of Weakness

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 497, June 14, 2017

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The decision by some Persian Gulf and Arab nations to cut diplomatic ties with Qatar is indicative of the deep crisis brewing in the region over the lack of real Sunni leadership. This situation could represent an opportunity for Israel if it treads lightly.

The decision by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Yemen, and other Arab nations to sever diplomatic ties with Qatar is a sign of weakness. The fact that the Sunni Arab world was unable to impose its basic approach on a small peninsular emirate is indicative of the deep crisis brewing in the Gulf over the lack of real leadership in the Sunni world.

Sunnis are the vast majority in the Muslim world, making up some 85% of Muslims – and yet somehow, the Iran-led Shiite minority is the driving force behind the processes moving the Middle East.

The diplomatic crisis in the Gulf is unlikely to be the result of US President Donald Trump's visit to the region last month or of any other encouragement by the US, as evidenced by the confused reactions coming out of Washington.

The Saudi-led move against Qatar is most likely the result of a process during which the moderate Sunni leaders came to realize that they will be unable get Qatar to align with the status quo they are trying to create as a group. Those moderate Sunni leaders are wary of Iran's power, as well as of the radical Sunni groups and a potential reoccurrence of the Arab Spring that rattled the Middle East in 2011.

Unlike its neighbors, Qatar has been pursuing its own independent policy on these three issues, playing all elements against the middle. This two-faced

policy – Qatar hosts one of the largest US military bases in the Persian Gulf while maintaining close ties with Iran, the US's biggest rival in the region – was working for Doha, but that no longer seems to be the case.

Qatar is ostensibly part of a group of Sunni states that seek to maintain the status quo in the region. But at the same time, it is the main supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood – loathed by Saudi Arabia – and of Hamas, the Brotherhood's Palestinian arm. Many of the Gaza Strip-based terrorist group's officials live in Doha.

The Arab states also claim that Qatar aids jihadi groups such as al-Qaida and Islamic State (IS), although these allegations are not necessarily solid.

Another major claim the Gulf states have made against Qatar concerns its influential Al Jazeera news network, which plays a key role in agitating the Arab street against Doha's neighboring regimes. It was instrumental in mobilizing the masses against Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in 2011, as well as in trying to turn the Egyptian people against Gen. Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi when he expelled the Muslim Brotherhood from power in Egypt in 2014.

Al Jazeera is boisterously critical of other regimes as well, but falls silent when it comes to criticizing the Qatari regime. This is despite the fact that the majority of the emirate's residents – some 88% – are foreigners, mainly foreign workers.

As in many other areas, Qatar has a two-faced approach toward Israel. On the one hand, it allows Israelis to visit and fly with Qatar Airways, one of the region's major long-haul carriers. On the other hand, it is the only Arab nation propping up Hamas, hosting terrorists who use Doha as a base of operations against Israel.

The Gulf states threatened to downgrade diplomatic ties with Qatar several years ago, but a compromise was reached. Things are different this time. Despite Kuwait's and Oman's mediation efforts, the volatile situation in the Middle East and the sense of mutual support among the nations have made the region's leaders adamant about putting an end to the Qatari game.

One must remember that despite the oil-rich principality's legendary wealth, Qatar is highly dependent on its neighbors for goods, particularly Saudi Arabia.

Should the Sunni gambit succeed and Qatar suspends its relations with Iran, ceases its support of the Muslim Brotherhood and perhaps also Hamas, imposes severe restrictions on Al Jazeera, and stops being friendly to extremist

elements in the Sunni world, the Sunni camp could become much more cohesive.

Such a Sunni alliance would be crucial to containing Iran's aspirations in the region. In many ways, effective Sunni leadership could bring about important changes in the Middle East.

Israel would have to find a way to work with such an entity, but this potential alliance and Israel would have common enemies. This would represent a true opportunity for Israel, one that can perhaps be leveraged with the handful of nations that have come together so far.

This article was originally published in Israel Hayom on June 11, 2017.

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BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family