



PERSPECTIVES

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Diverging Gulf Responses to Kashmir and Xinjiang Reflect Deep Divisions

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Recent diametrically opposed responses to the repression of Muslims by China, India, and other Asian countries highlight deep differences among the Gulf states that ripple across Asia.

Very different responses were recently on display in Gulf [reactions to India's unilateral withdrawal of Kashmir's autonomy](#) and [Qatar's reversal of its support of China's brutal clampdown on Turkic Muslims](#) in its troubled northwestern province of Xinjiang.

The divergence says much about the almost decade-long, fundamentally different approaches taken by Qatar and its main detractors, the UAE and Saudi Arabia, toward an emerging, more illiberal new world order in which minority rights are trampled upon.

The UAE and Saudi Arabia are leading a more than two-year-long economic and diplomatic boycott of Qatar in a so far failed attempt to force the Gulf state to alter its policies.

The feud reflects the Gulf states' different efforts to maneuver an environment in which the US has sent mixed signals about its commitment to Gulf security and China and Russia are seeking to muscle into US dominance of the region.

In what was perhaps the most surprising indication of differences in the Gulf, Qatar appeared to reverse its tacit acquiescence in China's clampdown, involving the incarceration in reeducation camps of an estimated 1 million predominantly Turkic Uyghur Muslims.

Qatar did so by [withdrawing from a letter it initially signed together with dozens of others countries expressing support for China's human-rights record](#) despite its clampdown in Xinjiang.

In a letter to the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC), Ali Al-Mansouri, Qatar's ambassador to the UN in Geneva, advised the council that "taking into account our focus on compromise and mediation, we believe that co-authorizing the aforementioned letter would compromise our foreign policy key priorities. In this regard, we wish to maintain a neutral stance and we offer our mediation and facilitation services."

Signatories of the letter included Qatar's detractors – Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt – as well as Kuwait and Oman, which, together with the feuding Gulf states, are part of the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

The withdrawal coincided with a [US warning](#) that kowtowing to China's "desire to erode US military advantages" in the Middle East by using its "economic leverage and coercion" and "intellectual property theft and acquisition" could undermine defense cooperation with the US.

"Many investments are beneficial, but we're concerned countries' economic interests may blind them to the negative implications of some Chinese investments, including impact on joint defense cooperation with the United States," said Michael Mulroy, the US Defense Department's top official responsible for the Gulf.

The Qatari move also came against the backdrop of the Gulf state, which is home to the largest US base in the region, being the [only country in the greater Middle East to host an expansion rather than a reduction of US facilities and forces](#). Qatar is believed to have [funded the expansion to the tune of \\$1.8 billion](#).

The US has [withdrawn some of its forces from Syria](#) and is negotiating a [US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan](#) with the Taliban.

Nevertheless, Qatar, an enlightened autocracy that has yet to implement at home what it preaches abroad, [is unlikely to reap the full soft power benefits](#) in liberal Western democracies of its withdrawal from the pro-Chinese letter despite Uyghur and human rights activists welcoming the move.

It is unclear what prompted the Qatari change of heart, though it did follow an incident last month at Doha's Hamad International Airport that drove home the limits of China's ability to flex its financial, economic, and political muscles to control the fallout of its clampdown beyond its borders.

Those limits were evident when Ablikim Yusuf, a 53-year old Uyghur Muslim seeking protection from potential Chinese persecution, landed at the airport. After initially intending to deport Yusuf to Beijing at China's request, Qatar reversed course.

But rather than grant Yusuf asylum under its newly adopted asylum law, the Gulf's first, Qatar gave him time to seek refuge elsewhere. Even that was in sharp contrast to countries like Egypt and Turkey, which have either deported Uyghurs or entertained the possibility.

As a result, Qatar's withdrawal drove one more wedge into the Muslim world's almost wall-to-wall refusal to criticize China for what amounts to the most frontal assault on any faith in recent history.

Turkey, Qatar's ally in its dispute with the Gulf states, as well as the Turkic republics of Central Asia, have been [walking a tightrope](#) as they attempt to balance relations with China and domestic public criticism of Chinese policy in Xinjiang.

Kazakhstan this month [silenced a detained Kazakh rights activist of Uyghur descent](#) by forcing him to plead guilty to a hate speech charge and abandon his activism and public criticism of China in exchange for securing his freedom.

The Qatari withdrawal complicates the Turkish and Central Asian balancing act and strengthens the position of the US, which is locked in multiple trade and other disputes with China.

The withdrawal and [US criticism of Chinese policy in Xinjiang](#) put Muslim states, increasingly selective about what Muslim causes they take up, in an awkward position.

The UAE, in sharp contrast to Qatar, has not only maintained its support of China but also, alongside Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, ignored requests for support on Kashmir by Pakistan, its longstanding regional Muslim ally.

Adding insult to injury, the three Gulf states are rewarding Indian PM Narendra Modi for his undermining of Kashmiri autonomy and [imposition of unprecedented, repressive security measures](#).

Modi is scheduled to travel this week to the UAE to [receive the country's highest civilian honor](#) and then go on to Bahrain for the first-ever visit to that country by a sitting Indian PM.

Meanwhile, Saudi national oil company Aramco announced a \$15 billion investment in an Indian oil company as Modi was clamping down on Kashmir.

For its part, Qatar has remained largely silent about Kashmir, other than [advising its nationals to leave the region](#).

If the policy divergences in the Gulf say anything, they suggest that differences among the region's rivals as well as in the greater Middle East are likely to deepen rather than subside.

A [study last year by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#) concluded that conflict in the region was fueled by a "dearth of regional communication channels, dispute resolution mechanisms, and norms for warfare as well as a surplus of arms imports."

There is little on the horizon to suggest that this state of affairs is going to change any time soon.

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