



## **Qatar's Anti-Saudi Seeds of the Islamist Quartet**

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The Islamist Quartet consists of Turkey, Qatar, Pakistan, and Malaysia. The seeds of its agenda were planted by Qatari Emir Hamad's and Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi's plot to take down the Saudi royal family and divide the Kingdom. Qatari lobbyists have since managed to bury the long history and strategic depth of these relationships by reshaping the narrative with a focus on the 2017 Gulf Crisis.

A recent episode involving Malaysia giving cover to a fugitive radical Salafist preacher from India wanted on money laundering charges, per request by Pakistan, sheds some light on the seemingly [new Islamist alliance](#) between Islamist Sunni countries largely in opposition to Saudi Arabia's traditional influence in the Muslim world: Turkey, Qatar, Malaysia, and Pakistan. The joint activity of this emergent Islamist Quartet, perhaps deliberately structured in opposition to the Anti-Terrorism Quartet or ATQ (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain), has thus far focused most of its activities on Kashmir, but also on populist anti-Israel rhetoric.

While Riyadh is investing in a growing relationship with India, Turkey has been engaging in humanitarian outreach in Southeast Asia, which includes funding social media and blogging astroturfing in Pakistan and Afghanistan. And while Saudi Arabia has [banned](#) Turkish soap operas with racist undertones against Kurds, these shows are [gaining popularity](#) in Pakistan (and in [many other places](#)).

But is this alliance truly new?

Despite the fairly recent announcement of the Quartet's "official formation" in [Kuala Lumpur](#), its conservative Sunni states spent years, even decades, forging relationships and common agendas before formalizing the relationship and signing agreements at that summit. For instance, Turkey's relationship with Pakistan has

been growing for several years in various spheres, and over 1,000 military Pakistani recruits are [training](#) in Turkey. Turkey has been investing heavily in Pakistan to counter its traditional Saudi orientation: the two countries have been expanding trade, while Turkey has grown vocal on Kashmir issues. The two have also expanded their cooperation on terrorism and separatism while stigmatizing and increasingly dehumanizing their Balochi and Kurdish minorities. They have both also expanded their [cooperation with Iran](#) on that front.

Iran enjoys similarly close cooperation with Malaysia, where a significant Iranian refugee community resides, and where IRGC operatives and intelligence personnel are known to proliferate and to surveil and even threaten dissidents. Malaysia [criticized](#) the US liquidation of Quds Force chief Qassem Soleimani, and has come to support Iran's anti-American political line overall while [expanding](#) trade ties.

Malaysia and Turkey have likewise grown their [military ties](#) over the past several years. Conservative and Islamist groups have been [amassing power](#) in Malaysia (and in Indonesia, perhaps another future member of this bloc) since the early 2000s, and for over a decade have been gaining political influence despite the seeming appearance of political moderation prior to the recent and seemingly unexplainable rise to prominence of Islamist parties in these countries.

Some Islamist political parties have been slowly growing their bases since the 1980s by focusing on bread-and-butter issues and (initially) staying away from chauvinist and extremist rhetoric. International Islamism has been more of a [background force](#), but with the growing ties between members of the quartet, outside influence and investment is to be expected—especially given that the rise of Islamist parties has taken a toll on political structures and economies. Turkey, too, has reoriented itself toward a more hard-line, populist Islamism following the slowdown of the economy after the first decade of AKP's meteoric rise to power.

But the core of the focus on countering Saudi influence goes back at least two decades, and hinges on Qatar's backstabbing of its "big sister." Much of that history has been not so much forgotten as deliberately suppressed and misrepresented by Qatar, and downplayed by the Saudis in an effort to deal with Doha quietly and without entangling the international community in the dispute.

With the outbreak of the Gulf Crisis in 2017, the Anti-Terrorism Quartet crossed the Rubicon in its relationship with Qatar. By that point, the scene was set, and Qatari lobbyists quickly took advantage of Saudi Arabia's silence on preexisting tensions to shape the narrative that informs the current geopolitical perception of the conflict.

In brief, the Gulf Crisis began in June 2017 with the accession of Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman and an exchange of hacking allegations between Doha and

Abu Dhabi that brought the two countries to the brink of war. This confrontation was the culmination of a long chain of events that needs to be understood to gain a full appreciation of the extensive background and depth of the relationships contained within the Islamist Quartet, which is now being presented to the West as something radically new and different.

The real story starts in 2003, when Qatar exploited a misunderstanding between Libya's Muammar Qaddafi and Saudi Arabia's then-Crown Prince Abdullah at a summit in Sharm al-Sheikh to exacerbate a [bitter dispute](#) between their countries. Qaddafi and Qatar masterminded a plot involving al-Qaeda operatives, including Libyans, Saudis, and an American Muslim of Eritrean background, [Abdulrahman Amoudi](#), to assassinate the Crown Prince in November 2003 while he was visiting the Qassem region. The complicated plot branched out to the [training camps of Sudan](#), to Lebanon, and even as far as Iran, where several al-Qaeda operatives planned to travel to find shelter.

At about the same time, Saudi Arabia obtained recordings of secret conversations between Qaddafi and Qatar's then-Emir Hamad in which they plotted the [downfall](#) of the Saudi royal family. In the recordings, they discussed a 12-year project to bring the Kingdom to an end and divide it into two smaller entities.

Doing so would have put tiny Qatar at a geopolitical advantage and weakened Saudi Arabia's regional influence. Qatar was playing both pan-Arabist and Islamist cards to bring about that result, with the assassination the first step in the conspiracy.

The Emir confessed to funding and cultivating various "[opposition](#)" movements in Saudi Arabia. They apparently included the secessionist "[Hejaz](#)" movement, which maintained that Riyadh is not "real" Arabia and that Mecca and Medina are the true representatives of Saudi culture. He also funded and assisted Islamist Saad al-Fakieh, known for his plan for a "constitutional" Islamist kingdom (he eventually escaped to Britain). Another beneficiary of the Emir's funding and support was Professor [Muhammed Massari](#), who was linked to the assassination plot. The Emir also supported revolutionary movements and upheavals in other Arab states, including Egypt, Bahrain, the UAE, Algeria, and Morocco, which ultimately culminated in the "Arab Spring" uprisings in 2011.

The Saudis realized Qatar was a continuous source of problems and started pushing back, severing diplomatic relations in 2014—but not airing the recordings until then.

Qatar's funding of terrorist groups and meddling in the affairs of Arab countries came to the fore, causing significant tensions across the region. In 2013, Emir Hamad's primary wife, Sheikha Mozah, organized a "coup" that forced Hamad out of power and replaced him with Crown Prince Tamim, who was supposed to start relations

with other states with a clean slate. With Tamim's ascent, diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia and others were restored, and Tamim came to Riyadh in 2014.

During that visit, he signed an agreement remarkably similar to the [13 demands](#) put forth by the ATQ three years later. He agreed to stop the meddling and the funding of terrorists (including in Libya), to sever relations with Iran and Islamists, and to stop using Al Jazeera to incite riots in other Arab states.

Clandestinely, Qatar under the new Emir continued all those activities. In September 2015, Qatar, which was then part of the Arab Coalition fighting Iran-funded Houthi separatists in Yemen, [secretly revealed](#) to the Houthis the location of a clandestine base built by the Saudis but populated by Emirati soldiers. This led to the killing of [45 Emirati soldiers](#), 10 Saudis, and five Bahrainis.

With that, the Saudis finally realized Qatar was not going to change. This set the stage for the confrontation with Qatar about its [non-compliance with existing agreements](#) in the summer 2017 following Muhammad bin Salman's ascent.

Through this entire period, Qatar has been taking advantage of political trends in other Muslim states to stir up trouble for the Kingdom. It has funded anti-Saudi activists and rebranded them as "opposition," "dissidents," and "human rights groups," despite their clear record of subversive activity benefiting foreign states.

The Islamist Quartet eventually formed with Qatar as the funding center, and largely [conforms](#) with Qatar's agenda.

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