

Rift in the Gulf: Saudi Arabia and Qatar

by Michael Curtis



Just friends, lovers and partners no more, is the situation in the Middle East after an extraordinary series of demands made on June 22, 2017 by Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council against Qatar. In this world of ordinary people some of whom are afflicted with a high attention deficit disorder, international affairs in general do not often attain the attentive audience they deserve. Perforce, the U.S. administration is obliged to pay attention to and reach decisions regarding those demands and the unexpected blockade, land, sea and air, by Saudi Arabia and members of the GCC of Qatar, a situation with contradictory elements in play, and one that may be one consequence of President Donald Trump's visit to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia in May 2017.

Life does change rapidly in the Arab Middle East. A month ago, the leader of Qatar since 2013, the 37 year old Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, educated in Britain, including Sandhurst,

the British Royal Military Academy, was one of the Arab leaders being greeted by Trump in Riyadh, and watching the President's version of the sword dance. Now, Thani is subject to a list of demands by the boycotting countries with which Qatar must comply before the blockade and its political isolation with economic, diplomatic, and travel restrictions, is ended.

Why these demands? The most important are that Qatar shut down al-Jazeera, TV, regarded as the most widely watched propaganda tool for Islamists; end its diplomatic mission and reduce trade with Iran; declare major groups, Muslim Brotherhood, ISIS, al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, as terrorist groups; stop funding all terrorist groups; end Turkish military presence and its military base in the country and its training of Qatar soldiers; and expel members of Iran's Revolutionary Guard.

Strong differences have appeared in recent years. June 5, 2017 is not the first time problems has arisen. In 2014, Saudi Arabia temporally withdrew its ambassador from Qatar, largely because of a dispute over Egypt. Reports that Qatar had paid a ransom of \$1 billion to a terrorist group in Iraq to release members of its royal family who were kidnapped troubled other Arab countries. Differences go back to the Arab Spring in 2010 when Qatar supported some changes but the Saudis favored the status quo.

The two sides disagreed over politics in Egypt where Qatar supported the Muslim Brotherhood and the Saudis supported President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, and about Iran, with which Qatar shares a large natural gas field. Interestingly, Qatar is the only Gulf country that supports Hamas and which agrees with Turkey which considers that the Muslim Brotherhood is not a terrorist org. But the main issue is Qatar's alleged support of terrorist groups and individuals.

Qatar has contradictory elements. It has close ties with Shiite Iran, and also with fundamentalist Sunni extremists. It

is the home of Muslim Brotherhood spiritual leader, Yusuf al-Qaradawi. It harbors Al Jazeera TV channel. It houses leaders of the Taliban and Hamas yet also U.S. generals. Its leader, al Thani, has praised Iran as an Islamic power.

Qatar is a small country, independent since 1971, consisting of 11,000 square kilometers, (4,400 square miles or about the size of Connecticut) with a population of 2.7 million people, of whom only 250,000 are citizens. They have the world's highest per capita income, \$129,000 a year. Oil and gas account for 80% of exports, and contribute 90% of government revenue.

The country has emerged as an international player in more than one sense, not only as a member of OPEC and GCC and as the world's leading exporter of liquefied natural gas, but also as the improbable host of the Football World Cup competition in 2022, though the prospect of playing in 100 degree temperature is not enticing. Coincidentally, the state owned Qatar Airways rents space in the Trump Tower in New York City. Among other things Qatar is presently bidding to buy 10% of American Airlines.

The U.S. is in a dilemma being friendly with both sides. The US administration is divided as some officials want to help mediate the dispute while others, perhaps President Trump, regard the dispute as a Gulf family matter from which the US should abstain.

However, the US is an ally if not a family member. Qatar hosts a highly sophisticated U.S. military base, al-Udeid air base, the head-quarters of Central Command, (Centcom), the key US asset in the area, in which more than 11,000 U.S. and coalition service members are deployed. The U.S. has sold more than \$10 billion weapons to Qatar including Apache helicopters, patriot missiles, and aircraft. The US is selling Boeing F-15 fighter jets to Qatar at a cost of \$12 billion.

Should the US choose sides? The rapport with Saudi Arabia has become increasingly important, in the war against Islamist terrorism, and the extraordinary rise to power of the 31 year old Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) who had been defense minister and deputy crown prince. In June 2017, bypassing his more experienced and more cautious 57 year old cousin Mohammed bin Nayek, he was anointed Crown Prince and thus the future most powerful man in the country. He is the man with whom the U.S. administration has to deal.

Of course there are no national representative institutions in Saudi Arabia, and the personal element is all important. President Trump and Emir Thani now face the hard line, seemingly dynamic and assertive 31 year old prince MbS who is interested in changes in his country. Even the issue of women driving is being discussed.

Salman has been active in both foreign and domestic affairs. He was behind the Saudi led military campaign to eliminate terrorists in Yemen, and to counter ISIS in Syria. The country spends \$60 billion a year on weapons. He is anxious to reduce Saudi dependence on oil. In 2016, Salman launched Vision 2030, a program to diversify the Saudi economy, and increase private business. He introduced austerity measures, cut salaries of public employees, and reduced energy subsidies, so far without complete success. A major part of his plan is to sell 5% of the state oil company Aramco, probably the world's most valuable company, to assist in diversifying the economy and creating 1.2 million jobs.

Salman has four main tasks, all of which should interest the U.S.; cementing foreign relations by overcoming Islamist terrorism and limiting the power of Iran; overhauling the economy and allowing more private enterprise; controlling the extremist Wahhabism and limiting its influence so that it is reduced to a question of personal piety and reducing the power of the religious police; and allowing more freedom and human rights, especially regarding women, and encouraging public

entertainment and opening cinemas.

Salman is said to have good relations with Russia, as well as with the U.S., because of the common interest in the price of oil and control of terrorism, and is also said to believe in a stronger relationship and possibly partnership with Israel. Indeed, it is an enticing notion that he, together with Trump, may be the key to bring Palestinians to the negotiating table. There is already talk of increasing diplomatic and economic relations between the Saudis and the moderate Arab Sunni countries and the State of Israel.

The Saudi context is not altogether happy. The country is confronted with a number of issues: falling oil prices, (oil constitutes 80% of government revenue) now that oil, \$100 barrel in 2014 is \$40 in 2017; the increase in the youth population (45% of the population of 32 million is under 25); high unemployment (28% for youth); low growth of GDP, about a half compared with Iran's 4.5% growth, and the challenge of Iran's imperialism.

President Trump and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson should join in the effort to persuade Qatar to end its support of terrorism in all its forms and encourage Qatar to be more than just a friend to fellow nations in the Middle East.