Qatar crisis: Saudi Arabia as anti-hero?

By Gabriele vom Bruck,
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Several of Qatar's neighbours — Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain — were joined on 5 June by Egypt, Yemen and some smaller countries in dissolving diplomatic ties with Qatar, and placing it under siege by air, sea and land. In an official statement, the Saudi government referred to several 'grave violations' allegedly committed by Qatar, since 2006 the world's largest exporter of liquefied natural gas (LNG). It has accused Qatar's emir, Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, of 'instigating against the Saudi state and infringing on its sovereignty, supporting various terrorist and other groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State, using its media to attack Saudi Arabia, and undermining the war in Yemen.'

Gulf analyst Neil Partrick goes as far as to argue that the crisis 'represents the total failure of the Gulf Union project.' What light does the crisis throw on Saudi Arabia's charges against its junior but equally wealthy GCC partner, and what does it have to do with the relations of both Qatar and Saudi Arabia with Yemen, where both countries have been involved in military operations since 2015?

The Yemeni government headed by Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, exiled in Riyadh since 2015, has also sundered its ties with Qatar. The same day Saudi Arabia announced severing relations, the Yemeni government declared ominously that 'Qatar's practices of dealing with the Houthi coup militias and supporting extremist groups became clear.' Without specifying the dealings Qatar may have had with the Houthis in recent months, it implied that it had been disloyal to the Saudi-led

multinational coalition that is currently battling the rebels and remnants of the *army* of former president Ali Abdullah Salih, on a number of fronts. (Saudi Arabia launched its military intervention, Operation Decisive Storm, in March 2015.) Providing neither context nor proof, the Saudi-owned *Al-Arabiya* has accused Doha of secretly funding the Houthi rebels in Yemen.

This kind of accusation must have been particularly hurtful to the Qataris because it was made a day after six of their soldiers were wounded while fighting on the Saudi-Yemeni border. Meanwhile the Saudis ordered Qatar to pull its 1,000-troop contingent from the self-declared Coalition to Support the Legitimacy, in Yemen.

Futile earlier wars

A decade ago, Saudi Arabia and Qatar dealt with the conflict between Ali Abdullah Salih and the Houthis in substantially different ways. During the years preceding Saudi Arabia's current military campaign in Yemen, its army took part in Salih's devastating wars against the Houthis (2004-2010), destroying vital infrastructure and causing many civilian deaths. Saudi Arabia supplied weapons to the Yemeni government – among them missiles which may now be used against it by those who oppose its military intervention – and allowed the Yemeni army to use its territory for military operations against the rebels. These futile wars only strengthened the Houthis and exposed the Saudi army's incompetence. (For this reason, Saudi Arabia has not committed ground troops across its southern border in its current war against the rebel militia.) During the intermittent wars of the early 21st century, in an interview with the *Washington Post* (7 June 2008) Yasir al-Awadi, deputy chairman of the ruling Yemeni General People's Congress

(GPC) party in parliament, concluded that 'Saudi Arabia cares more about this war than Yemen does.' He conceded that Saudi Arabia put pressure on Yemen to 'crack down' on the Houthis. According to Nabil Khoury, who served as deputy chief of the US embassy in Sanaa between 2004 and 2007, 'the Saudis were almost obsessed with destroying the Houthis. And with that preoccupation with the Houthis…the Saudis were simply not motivated to go against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).'

Stephen Seche, US ambassador to Yemen between 2007 and 2010, was critical of Saudi Arabia's entry into the war. In November 2009 he said: 'We can think of few ways to more effectively encourage Iranian meddling in the Houthi rebellion than to have all of Yemen's Sunni neighbours line up to finance and outfit Ali Abdullah Saleh's self-described "Operation Scorched Earth" against his country's Shia minority. We urge the Department to engage in Washington and in relevant capitals to convey to these "friends of Yemen" that they are undermining their goal of a stable and secure Yemen by providing large amounts of money and military assistance to President Saleh's self-described "Operation Scorched Earth" against his country's Shia minority' ('Sa'ada solution requires more thought, fewer weapons (09SANAA2052),' 11 November 2009, accessed via Wikileaks Cablegate search

Whereas in Palestine, Saudi Arabia tried to upstage Qatar's mediation attempts to reconcile Hamas and Fatah in October 2006 by sponsoring the Mecca agreement between the two factions a year later, in Yemen it was on the warpath (it would begin its military adventurism there in 2009). In contrast to Saudi Arabia, Qatar tied its prestige to mediation efforts between Yemeni warring factions. In 2007, its leadership invited members of the opposing parties to Doha; they included General Ali Muhsin who led the military campaign against the

Houthis (currently vice president in the Yemeni government in exile), the late Dr Abd al-Karim al-Iryani (advisor to Salih) and MP Yahya Badr al-Din al-Houthi. After three years of intermittent fighting, on 16 June 2007, a ceasefire brokered by Qatar came into effect. But following renewed clashes, the fragile agreement collapsed. Peace talks resumed in Doha, and the two parties that had been at war and the Qatari prime minister signed a new agreement on 1 February 2008.

Concerned that the agreement might pave the way for Houthi leaders to take up government posts, Saudi Arabia opposed the deal. General Ali Muhsin, who had close ties with crown prince and minister of interior Nayef bin Abd al-Aziz, wanted to continue the war, and branches of the Islah party (see below) encouraged King Abdullah to come on board. Making false claims against the Houthis by accusing them of abducting a number of German, British and South Korean nationals in Saada, their home province, the Yemeni president then conducted yet another, even more destructive war against them.

The sixth war was prosecuted jointly by the Yemeni and Saudi Arabian armies. Saudi Arabia officially declared it a jihad against ‘evil-doers’ outside its borders which had been one of the Saudi state’s raisons d’être since the 18th century. In February 2010, a ceasefire was agreed by the Yemeni government, Saudi Arabia and the Houthis. However, neither were the latter incorporated into the state’s political fabric nor were steps taken to address reconciliation, confidence-building measures and reconstruction, so the door was left open for further future conflict.

Several of Qatar’s neighbours have accused it of harbouring `terrorist and sectarian groups that aim to destabilise the region including the Muslim Brotherhood…and Al-Qaeda.’ However, one wonders whether Saudi Arabia, which leads the campaign

to bring pressure to bear on Qatar to turn its 'foreign policy on its head', has a case. In 1990, Saudi Arabia encouraged the establishment of an Islamic party, the Yemeni Congregation for Reform (Islah). Described by *The Economist* as the 'local offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood', the party also embraces some Salafis and conservative Sunni businessmen. Having worked in partnership with the General People's Congress (GPC) party in order to undermine the Yemeni Socialist Party in the early 1990s, in later years Islah proved vital for the creation of a nominal opposition alliance, the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP). Islah's militia played a decisive role in defeating the South during the war of 1994 between northern and southern political elites and their armies. The party's supporters fought as paramilitaries on the side of the northern army, and portrayed the conflict as a 'War of the Believers'. In spite of demands made on Husayn al-Houthi by Ali Abdullah Salih to join the fight against the South, he declined.

Saudi support

Writing about the early 2000s, Sarah Philipps, senior lecturer in International Security and Development at Sydney University, explains that 'the Muslim Brotherhood, the basis of what is now a large part of the Islah Party, was also supported by Saudi Arabia. While Islah no longer receives money directly from the Saudi Arabian government (though some members, most notably Sheikh Abdullah [al-Ahmar] and his sons, continue to receive funds personally), it is widely believed that the party still receives money informally from ideological partners within Saudi Arabia' (1).

Sheikh Abdullah bin Husayn al-Ahmar of the Hashid confederation was hugely influential in the northern parts of the country. As a leading figure of the Islah Party he represented the symbiosis of tribal and Islamic components favoured by

Saudi Arabia. He remained a constituent pillar of Islah's leadership as well as a close consociate of Ali Abdullah Salih until his untimely death in 2007. (Some of the sheikh's ambitious sons are still active in the party.) A few months before his death, al-Ahmar was elected as party head for the fourth time – partly because he was able to reconcile its Salafist and Brotherhood factions.

During the civil war in the 1960s, Saudi Arabia supported the royalists represented by the Hamid al-Din dynasty, but began paying tribal leaders (sheikhs) and was anxious to gain a significant measure of control over Yemen through them rather than the former ruling house, known to be fiercely independent and unwilling to concede disputed territory to Saudi Arabia (2). Sheikh Abdullah had fought on the republican side, but after the Saudis had recognised the Yemeni republic he developed close ties with them and helped them to pursue their interests in the newly founded state. For example, a formal 'Islamic front', encouraged and funded by Saudi Arabia and supported by Sheikh al-Ahmar, was established in 1979.

As during the earlier wars in Yemen (2004-10), Qatar and Saudi Arabia approached the Arab Spring protests in 2011 in fundamentally different ways. As Gerd Nonneman, professor of International Relations at the Doha campus of Georgetown University pointed out, one of the roots of the current conflict is Saudi Arabia's and the UAE's 'irritation with Qatar's independence of mind in foreign policy, including its support for the Arab Spring movements'. After negotiations about Ali Abdullah Salih's resignation following sustained protests, an agreement underwritten by the GCC in November 2011 laid out the terms of his political future after his resignation, and the principles of a transitional government. The Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), whose leadership had previously been taken over by the Islah Party, joined the new government.

Transition agreement

The transition agreement, strongly supported by key Gulf states, was designed to close the file of the popular protests and maintain the political status quo by replacing Salih with his deputy Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi. It stipulated that only members of established political parties (the GPC and JMP) were to be included in the new government. Representatives of movements such as Ansar Allah (Houthis) and the Southern Movement (al-Hirak) were given neither cabinet posts nor governorships. Officials resented the Houthis' role as a well armed – but uncorrupted – militia. But in 2011, they failed to offer the Houthis an opportunity to become part of the political process beyond their participation in the National Dialogue Conference (NDC), which would have given them a stake in the new government.

Tensions also arose because, unlike the Houthis, Islah was involved in discussions about the transition agreement and later gained a large number of portfolios and governorships (more than any other member of the JMP), especially in the northern region. With the support of Saudi Arabia, the transition agreement enabled Islah to dominate the government. Over the past two years Saudi Arabia and the Yemeni government in exile have insisted on a return to the transition agreement (besides implementing the UNSC resolution of 2016 and the outcomes of the NDC), which however would not contribute to solving the crisis in Yemen.

Unlike Saudi Arabia, the UAE has always been opposed to the Muslim Brotherhood and persecutes its members. However, Islah became Saudi Arabia's bête noir after some of the party's prominent members denounced its role in bringing down Egyptian president Muhammad Morsi's government in July 2013. (Morsi was a leader of the Egyptian Brotherhood.)

Consequently, Saudi Arabia placed Islah on its 'terrorism' list. All this changed after the Houthis' seizure of Sanaa in September 2014, and previously strained relations between the Saudis and Islah gradually improved. Islah leaders were able to manipulate the crisis by convincing the Saudis that it had damaged their party by blacklisting it. Apparently, in these circumstances, Saudi Arabia felt that Islah represented the least worst option in the North.

Since King Salman's accession to the throne, there has been a rapprochement between his country and Islah. In July 2015, four months after the start of Operation Decisive Storm, Saudi Arabia hosted a number of Islah's leaders. Prior to Saudi Arabia's intervention, many Sunnis of the regions south of the capital Sanaa were sympathetic to the Houthi movement because they resented an Islah-dominated government. Some are fighting on the side of the Houthis in Ibb and Taizz for this very reason. The UAE supports the Salafis in the current war in Yemen. The cause of the lasting stalemate in the fighting around Taizz, where Islah is heavily involved in the battle against the Houthis, may well be the UAE forces' reluctance to engage more decisively in case a victory there strengthens Islah.

Recently Saudi Arabia accused Qatar of 'penetrating Yemen by bribing Islah', a practice many Yemenis would associate with Saudi Arabia's past dealings with the Islamist party and other important Yemeni political leaders. The Saudi-owned *Al-Watan* alleged that in exchange for espionage and intelligence work, Qatar had provided military commanders and senior officials of both the Islah Party (especially of the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood) and Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi's government with lavish financial donations and real estate in Qatar. By attempting to buy these people's loyalty, Qatar had sought to undermine the mission of the coalition and impeded a political settlement of the crisis in Yemen. Saudi Arabia also

expressed concerns about Qatar's increased accumulation of military assets. At the beginning of talks with the emir of Qatar this May, during his first visit to several Gulf states since taking office, President Trump noted that 'one of the things we will discuss is…[Qatar's] purchase of lots of beautiful military equipment.'

Blaming Qatar

Al-Watan's claim that Qatar seeks to establish its control over the Arabian peninsula was echoed by General Thabet Husayn Salih, deputy director of the Yemen National Centre for Strategic Studies. He argued that Qatar had a plan to rule the entire peninsula through the parties representing 'political Islam' and through charities and other means. Similarly, Abdullah al-Mikhlafi, deputy minister of information in Yemen's government in exile, held that Qatar had bought off senior officials and military commanders in order to obstruct the coalition's military operations in Yemen, and had assassinated some southern commanders. He suggested that rather than supporting the militia (Houthis), Qatar should contribute to building a unified national Yemeni army and to defeating the Houthis.

One of the reasons for accusing Qatar of undermining the war in Yemen is likely to be a revelation made by its popular Al Jazeera channel on 27 May, a few days before the intense media campaign against Qatar began. It reported that UAE forces run secret prisons in southern Yemen which are out of control of the Yemeni authorities, providing a list of the detention centres in Aden and Mukalla, both important port cities. As noted by Gary Sick, senior research scholar in the Middle East Institute at Columbia University, Al Jazeera 'has unquestionably offended Qatar's neighbours to the point of royal frenzy,' and this report will have ruffled feathers in Abu Dhabi and Riyadh.

About a month later Associated Press, drawing on interviews with former detainees, confirmed and expanded the report. It claimed that almost 2,000 men had disappeared into a secret network of prisons where they were detained and tortured. The leaders of the US Senate Armed Services Committee have asked Defence Secretary James Mattis to investigate the involvement of US interrogators at the prisons, as claimed by Associated Press.

Qatar is now being made to pay the price for highlighting potential human rights violations. Although Al Jazeera has greatly reduced its scrutiny of Gulf leaders since Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani took office as emir on 25 June 2013, its investigative journalism has never ceased rousing their anger. Against this backdrop, the recent demand (one of 13) made by Saudi Arabia and its allies that the channel be shut down as the price for lifting the siege becomes intelligible – a measure of unprecedented censorship of a sovereign country.

It is hard not to interpret the charges levied against Qatar by Saudi Arabia as having been made for reasons of expediency. After all, the majority of Islah leaders – among them the party's general secretary, Muhammad al-Yadoumi, and Abd al-Majid al-Zindani (who has already had links with the Muslim Brotherhood prior to 1962 and represents the Brothers' more radical inclination) – have taken up residence in Saudi Arabia since the Houthis' takeover of Sanaa. Saudi Arabia considers Yemen its backyard and wishes to maintain and increase its control there. It already has to compete with the UAE for political clout in the Hadramaut, Yemen's largest oil-rich province with access to the Arabian Sea. Hence, Saudi Arabia is likely to be worried that the turmoil in Yemen may provide Qatar, which cultivates diplomatic and economic relations with Iran, with an opportunity to extend its influence in the war-torn country. Moreover like the UAE, Qatar may dispute its

dominant neighbour's claims to the spoils of war in Yemen. Ironically, as a result of its denunciation by its neighbours and their proclamation of a state of siege, Qatar had no choice but to extend its relations with Iran, which has offered the beleaguered country its airspace and port facilities.

Chilly relations with the US

Al-Watan holds that Qatar has tried to penetrate Yemen not only by extending its patronage to the leaders of Islah, but also through its support for al-Qaida. Six months after the start of Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen, Giorgio Cafiero and Daniel Wagner scrutinised the relationship between the Saudi-led coalition and AQAP (Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula) in *Foreign Policy* (23 September 2015). (The US declared AQAP a 'foreign terrorist organisation [FTO]' in 2010.) The authors argued that 'Saudi Arabia has united with a variety of Yemeni Sunni factions in an effort to crush the Houthi insurgency. This has entailed the kingdom cooperating with Sunni Islamist groups that Saudi Arabia – along with other Arab and Western governments – have designated as "terrorist" organizations…The Obama Administration has identified AQAP as the world's most dangerous al-Qaeda branch, and the gravest terrorist threat to U.S. national security…By positioning itself as a disciplined Sunni force capable of effectively countering the Houthi insurgents, AQAP has unquestionably established itself as a de facto partner of the U.S.-backed Saudi-led campaign in Yemen, despite being the primary impetus for Washington's ongoing drone campaign there.' Michael Horton, senior analyst for Arabian affairs at the Jamestown Foundation, has recently identified AQAP as the thoroughbreds in the coalition's stable and in one of its recent editions,*The Economist* (10 June 2017) said that 'instead of breaking al-Qaeda, Yemen's war could end up spreading it.'

This June, Ahmad Said bin Bouraik, governor of the Hadramaut, advised Trump to stop his drone campaign against AQAP, suggesting that its defeat should be left to local forces. However, since the Yemeni army dismembered the emirate established by AQAP in the southern provinces in 2013 in partnership with the Houthis, no serious effort has been made to eliminate the group. Unlike other Yemeni cities, which have been controlled by the Houthis for a number of years, the Hadramaut's provincial capital was never bombed by coalition forces when it was occupied by AQAP.

Another feature of the campaign against Qatar is the criminalisation of Abd al-Wahhab Muhammad Abd al-Rahman Al-Humaiqani, secretary general of the Salafi al-Rashad Union, established in 2012. He is the only Yemeni whose name appears on the Qatar-linked 'terrorism' list issued by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain and the UAE. The charges these countries hold against him are reminiscent of those made by the US Treasury several years ago. In a public statement released in December 2013, it designated al-Humaiqani a 'Specially Designated Global Terrorist' (SDGT). According to Laurent Bonnefoy and Judit Kuschnitzki (2015), the statement implied that the Rashad Union was a terrorist cover-up: al-Ḥumaiqani and the AQAP leadership had planned to establish a new political party in Yemen, which AQAP wanted to use as a cover for the recruitment and training of fighters and a means to attract broader support. Al-Humaiqani was accused of having served as a recruiter and financier for AQAP and of having orchestrated a car bombing in March 2012 that targeted a Yemeni Republican Guard base, killing seven.

Al-Humaiqani lives in Riyadh, and until recently has not been looked at unfavourably by his Saudi hosts. His indictment by the US administration prevented neither the Yemeni government nor Saudi Arabia from allowing him to continue to

play a role in politics. He took part in the National Dialogue Conference was held in Sanaa in 2013-14 as part of the Yemeni crisis reconciliation efforts. After Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen in 2015, he was a member of the team that represented the Yemeni government in exile in the failed UN-sponsored roundtable talks in Geneva between the latter and the Houthis in June 2015. US officials' concerns about al-Humaiqani's role in the Geneva talks were ignored, underscoring conflicting strategies pursued by those countries toward the Yemeni crisis. Al-Humaiqani serves as advisor to President Hadi, a post which would have been approved (if not even encouraged) by his Saudi patrons.

Charged with terrorism

The US Treasury's report also charged alHumaiqani with having used the Qatari-based al-Karama foundation for Human Rights in order to disguise his 'channelling financial support to AQAP'. Apparently, however, until recently it did not bother Qatar's neighbours that al-Humaiqani was heading the Yemen Office of that foundation. He also works for the Mu'assasat 'id al-khayriyya, an NGO founded in Doha in 1995. This NGO has also been accused by Qatar's adversaries in the GCC of supporting 'terrorism'. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the NGO is one of several Qatari charities that comprise a 'fairly well-developed sector providing aid and support at home and abroad'.

Following Trump's speech on 21 May in Saudi Arabia, al-Humaiqani was made a scapegoat. The timing would seem to reflect the Saudi leadership's desire to please President Trump who during his visit urged unity in the fight against radicalism in the Muslim world. Branding al-Humaiqani a 'terrorist' enabled it to point the finger at Qatar's ruling House which

employs him at a couple of its pious foundations. Trump saw the allegations made against Qatar by several Arab nations as an endorsement of the concerns he had raised in Riyadh. He tweeted: ‘During my recent trip to the Middle East I stated that there can no longer be funding of Radical Ideology. Leaders pointed to Qatar - look!’

Al-Humaiqani was defamed by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain and the UAE because of his ties to a number of Qatari charities, but was not accused of having links to al-Qaida, as alleged by the US Treasury earlier on. By pillorying al-Humaiqani about a fortnight after Trump’s visit to the region, Saudi Arabia and other GCC members pursued two goals. On 9 June, Trump claimed that ‘Qatar…has historically been a funder of terrorism at a very high level, and in the wake of that conference in Riyadh, nations came together and spoke to me about confronting Qatar over its behaviour, so we had a decision to make: do we take the easy road or do we finally take a hard but necessary action?’

Hence, the Quartet demonstrated compliance with the US’s grievances about ‘Islamic extremism’ in the hope that it would no longer sell military hardware to Qatar and possibly consider relocating its al-Udaid base, built in 1996, from the small emirate so that it would be left as vulnerable as Bahrain and Yemen. The base houses the US air force and other coalition personnel and assets and has been used for operations over Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq and Yemen. However, its relocation would be hugely expensive and is unlikely to be contemplated by the US administration. Also, the Quartet wished to show that Qatar’s charitable organisations had evidently fallen into disrepute by being linked to ‘extremism’.

Al-Humaiqani’s indictment by the Quartet has backfired on the battlefields of central Yemen. Protesting his inclusion on the

‘terrorism’ list, the forces fighting the Houthis in the governorate of al-Baida (al-Humaiqani’s birthplace) withdrew from their positions, thus allowing the Houthis to make gains in the area. This action demonstrates the proliferation of the Salafists in the central southern region since they lost their main centres in the North in 2013.

Riyadh’s official media don’t let an opportunity pass to discredit these organisations. During this Ramadan, one of Qatar’s charities, RAF (which was also accused of being linked to ‘terrorism’), had distributed free meals to civilians who had taken shelter in camps around Mosul where the Iraqi army is battling ISIS. Because the food had been prepared in a restaurant outside the camp and remained inside cars until *iftar* (the break of the fast), hundreds of the beneficiaries fell ill with food poisoning and had to be hospitalised. According to the *New York Times International* (15 June 2017), ‘it did not take long for the episode to become bound up in geopolitics.’ One of Saudi Arabia’s television stations showed photographs of sick children languishing on the floor of an overcrowded clinic, commenting that the ‘RAF Qatari terrorist association’ had provided the meals and poisoned the displaced citizens of Mosul.

Saudi Arabia’s voracious media campaign against its independently minded neighbour and its attempt to isolate it may well turn out to be another instance of its overreach.

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