

U.S. Stands With Qatar's Foes, While Selling F-15s to Qatar

The deal could give the Gulf state the impression that it can defy its neighbors and remain a frenemy of the U.S.

By Eli Lake

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There is some logic behind the deal.

Photographer: Jack Guez/AFP/Getty Images

You would be forgiven for thinking the U.S. backs Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in their current standoff against Qatar. President Donald Trump himself has taken the Saudis' line against their fellow Gulf monarchy, [tweeting](#) last week that Arab leaders all pointed to Qatar as a serial financier of terrorism.

This was certainly the impression the Emirates' ambassador to Washington, Yousef al-Otaiba, gave to journalists this week. When asked about his meetings at the Pentagon and the State Department, the ambassador said, "I don't think we have a problem with the State Department. I don't think we have a problem with the Pentagon."

Earlier this week, General Joseph Dunford, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, [said](#) the Saudi-led diplomatic and economic boycott of Qatar would not affect military operations out of Qatar's Al-Udeid airbase.

This is why it's so strange that Defense Secretary James Mattis would [sign](#) a \$12 billion deal to sell F-15 fighter jets to the Qataris on Wednesday.

To be sure, the deal was in the works well before the current crisis between Qatar and its Gulf neighbors. And the sale is nowhere near as large as recent multi-billion arms packages negotiated between the U.S. and the Saudis or the Emiratis. Nonetheless, the symbolism matters.

At the moment the Saudis and Emiratis are compiling a list of demands for Qatar to meet as a condition for lifting the economic and diplomatic boycott. Otaiba on Tuesday told reporters this list would include things like expelling extremists; shutting down or reining in Qatari media operations that have been hostile to Gulf states; and implementing reforms to how the state tracks and counters terrorist financing. Otaiba expects the list of demands will be presented this week.

In other words, it's the worst possible moment to give the Qataris any reassurances. The kingdom will soon be asked to take dramatic steps to realign its

foreign policy and no longer play both sides in the Arab's hot war on radical Islam and cold war against Iran. The F-15 deal could give Qatar the sense that it can defy its Gulf neighbors and still enjoy a good relationship with the U.S., despite Trump's own statements that he backs the Saudi position.

Reuters on Thursday quoted one Qatari official [saying](#), "This is of course proof that U.S. institutions are with us, but we have never doubted that." Qatar's ambassador to the U.S. made sure to [tweet out](#) a photo of the signing ceremony yesterday, saying Qatar's purchase would create 60,000 new jobs in the U.S.

The U.S. relationship with Qatar has long been love-hate. The U.S. military relies on Qatar to host the al-Udeid Air Base, and in turn both the Obama and George W. Bush administrations have rarely criticized in public Qatar's hosting of extremists or lax regulations on terror financing. As I [wrote](#) this month, the outgoing U.S. ambassador to Qatar briefed participants in a policy conference in Washington on progress Qatar has made in cracking down on terror financing, a view that is not shared by the Treasury Department or experts inside the intelligence community.

At the same time there is at least a chance to pressure the Qataris at this moment to make a course correction. That course correction could emulate the same kind of strategic decisions that the Saudis and Emiratis have made in the last decade with regards to groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, al Qaeda and other adherents to radical Islam. Today, the state at least has played a more active role in rolling up these networks and shutting down their financing than it did in the early 2000s.

Back then, the Saudis hosted telethons to support Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood chapter that builds tunnels from Gaza into Israel for terror attacks and stockpiles crude rockets to launch into Jewish population centers. Today, the Saudis work closely in the shadows with Israel to fight against Iran and the Islamic State. Such a future is possible with Qatar as well -- with the right mix of sticks and carrots. That's why it's important at the moment for the U.S. to refrain from offering the Qataris any carrots when its neighbors have.

