

An Analysis of Qatari Connections to Illicit Terror Financing and the Resulting Foreign Policy Implications

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ABSTRACT

Studying Qatar's relationship with illicit financing of terror, this paper seeks to understand the complicated relationship between Qatar's counterterrorism efforts and the resulting implications for United States foreign policy. The author argues that Qatar maintains a worryingly close relationship with terror financiers, demonstrated by a permissive legal jurisdiction that allows financiers to operate in the state and the close connections Qatar has historically held with such illicit channeling of funds. The implications of Qatar's relationship with terror are noted, with a focus on the 2017 Gulf crisis and changes in U.S. foreign policy towards the Gulf. Finally, policy recommendations for the U.S. government are provided that aim to encourage cooperation while mitigating risks of alienation and regional instability.

INTRODUCTION

On June 6, 2017, President Donald Trump released three tweets that dealt with a thorny topic in U.S. foreign relations: Qatar's financial ties to extremist groups. Qatar's alleged support of regional terrorist networks such as the Muslim Brotherhood have long been problematic to U.S.-Gulf relations. President Trump's tweets broke with then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's cautious stance just a day prior, encouraging "Gulf countries to mend ties."¹ By stating that "there can no longer be funding of radical ideology" and that "all reference was pointing to Qatar," President Trump simultaneously supported the Saudi claims that Qatar harbors terrorist financiers and denounced the

claims as an element of instability in the Gulf region.² When it comes to illicit terror support the United States and Qatar have a complicated relationship. As some U.S. agencies speak in cooperative terms others point to Qatar’s “permissive jurisdiction” which has allowed operatives to channel illicit funds to terrorist organizations.³

Exploring these accusations against Qatar and America’s response is vital to understanding bilateral relations and charting a trajectory for future U.S. foreign policy towards Qatar.

In 2003 Congress was alerted to several charities in Qatar supporting al-Qaeda. Since then, Qatar has been accused of not only providing refuge to terrorism financiers but also of directly funding terrorist groups.⁴ Such allegations are difficult to corroborate due to the secrecy of financial operations that are being tracked by the Qatari government. Apart from think tank analyses, news reports, and publicized findings by U.S. agencies, a lack of information obscures Qatar’s financial connection to terrorism. Nevertheless, Qatar’s role can be analyzed with countless sources — especially the State and Treasury Department records on terrorist convictions, frozen funds, and suspect cooperation with the U.S. government — and existing international law on terrorism financing and support.

This analysis looks at two simple questions: is Qatar supporting illicit funding of terror? If so, how should the United States respond? The best answer comes from three parts: history, implications of behavior and policy recommendations. With this, we can start to better understand Qatar’s historical connection to illicit terror finance (a key aspect contextually) and the current scope of counterterror operations in Qatar while offering a conceptual analysis of the broader concerns facing the region. Finally, policy recommendations will be provided for how the United States should address the findings generated in this report with the best steps moving forward.

CASE STUDY

First, the nature and history of Qatar’s connection to terror must be understood. The problem of terror financing is neither new nor unique to the small Gulf state. According to Gulf expert Dr. David Weinberg, “Qatar’s historical legacy of negligence against terror finance stretches back two decades.”⁵ That Qatari authorities are willfully negligent in permanently ending terror financing has resulted in a suboptimal legal framework as evidenced by the small number of overall convictions.⁶

Neighboring states have often criticized Qatar for its open support of organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood. Regional tensions came to a head in 2014 when several Gulf states fought with Qatar over allegations of harboring terrorists but the issue did not move to an international stage until

three years later when Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (the UAE) clashed with Qatar during the 2017 Gulf Crisis.⁷

In 2017, a coalition of states called the Anti-Terror Quartet (ATQ) – Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE and Bahrain – presented Qatar with a list of individuals and entities they wanted sanctioned for terrorist activities or financing. The list named fifty-nine individuals of varying nationalities under the jurisdiction of Qatar that were deemed key actors in regional terrorist networks. In 2018, Qatar released their own list of fifty-two actors, but only ten corresponded to the ATQ list. Further, ATQ's list included twelve entities, none of which corresponded with Qatar's list of fourteen entities.

Qatar has taken steps to counter terror financing. They have also increased initiatives with the U.S.-Gulf Cooperation Council and coalitions against ISIS.⁸ Further, its membership in the Middle East and North Africa Financial Action Task Force and its cooperation with the United States has led to reforms in the central banking system targeting terrorist financiers. Pressure on Qatar in 2017 has led to a reworking of the legal structure necessary to apprehend and prosecute terrorist financiers. New legislation with a focus on countering illicit interstate flows of financial and material support have gained momentum since 2014 and culminated with cooperative efforts with the United States through 2017. Nevertheless, as the State Department notes “despite these efforts, entities and individuals within Qatar continue to serve as a source of financial support for terrorist and violent extremist groups, particularly regional al-Qaeda affiliates.”⁹ This is possible in large part because financiers within Qatar continue to have access to informal financial systems.¹⁰ Stopping terrorist financing requires more than legislation and cooperation; any counterterrorism efforts must be concentrated on dismantling the structures that allow Qatari financiers to operate with relative ease.

In addition to questions about the overall effectiveness of counterterrorism legislation, it also does not address a significant source of illicit financing: private donations. Donors have given to al-Qaeda senior leadership and regional offshoots such as al-Shabaab, al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, al-Qaeda operatives in Iran, and al-Qaeda in Iraq¹¹ Terrorist organizations, like al-Qaeda are largely funded through donations, a significant amount are derived from wealthy, Qataris.¹² Though these donations are prohibited under laws passed in 2014 and 2017 currently no individuals have been prosecuted.

The banking and charity sectors have loopholes which terrorist financiers use to their advantage. The 2015 Financial Action Task Force (FATF) report details that banking continues to be an effective way to both move funds and finance terrorism.¹³ Terrorist financing is an international phenomenon used by both individuals and networks. Groups such as the Taliban and al-Qaeda have sourced and transferred funds for their respective organizations, in addition to using the banking system to receive funds from donors and financiers.¹⁴

The Council on Foreign Relations notes that from the 1990s to early 2000s, “donations were once the largest source of terrorist funding, coming mostly from charities and wealthy individuals.”¹⁵ The Qatari government has taken recent action to counter this approach with sweeping legislation to channel all funds through two Qatari charities.¹⁶ With no funds frozen or charities shut down under this 2017 legislation, however, the results have been lacking.¹⁷ The charity landscape remains an easy campground for channeling funds with organizations remaining tied to illicit financing.¹⁸

The lack of permanent disruption for major financiers is one of the greatest indicators of Qatar’s ineffective legal framework and implementation. This can be attributed in large part with the struggle to implement anti-terror legislation in the first place. During his time serving as Assistant Secretary for Terrorist Financing under the U.S. Department of the Treasury, Daniel Glaser testified before Congress that “Qatar is making progress, but [they have] a lot of work to do in implementing its terrorist financing laws.”¹⁹ The laws have been criticized for their vaguely defined parameters, which have allowed financiers to operate with relative ease.²⁰ Five financiers in total have been prosecuted by Qatar, with only one serving prison time and none deterred from illegal activity.²¹ More disturbingly, these five individuals have undeniably supported a variety of regional terrorist networks, channeling millions of dollars to al-Qaeda and facilitating training for terrorist cells.²² Implementation of these laws have been inconsistent and ineffective.²³

Qatar’s connection to terrorist financiers has been noted post-9/11, particularly in connection to regional terrorist organizations. One report by the Center for Security Policy in September 2017 deems evidence for Qatar’s support to be “exhaustive”.²⁴ The Qatari state provided financial support to four terrorist organizations in 2001, Ahrar al-Sham, a Syrian Jihadist group, the Hamas branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Ennahda party.²⁵ Support has not been exclusively financial; weapons were provided to the Islamic group Libyan Dawn in 2014 and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and funding for weapons surges were made available in West African countries such as Mali.²⁶ The State Department noted in the annual *Country Report on Terrorism* that Qatar’s implementation of new legislation and action taken against financiers was insufficient in combatting terror financing.²⁷ As the report reads, “Despite these efforts, entities and individuals within Qatar continue to serve as a source of financial support for terrorist and violent extremist groups, particularly regional al-Qaeda affiliates such as the Nusrah Front,” the report notes²⁸ Qatar has tried to convince the world otherwise. *The New York Times* has alleged that Qatar sought to improve its global image while simultaneously funding al-Qaeda, Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood.²⁹

The Qatari relationship with terrorist financiers is far from hidden. Such funding trends remain well-known in Washington policy circles. In 2003,

Congress was alerted to several charities sheltered by Qatar that were both fundraising for and directly financing terrorist organizations.³⁰ Even a decade later, in December 2014, U.S. Congressmen Peter Roskam and Brad Sherman requested that the U.S. place sanctions on Qatar and provide Congress a full report on their financing ties to Hamas, al-Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood.³¹ While the academic literature may not be exhaustive, the U.S. government's demonstrated knowledge of the problem is notable. In May 2017, then- U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates famously said: "I don't know instances in which Qatar aggressively goes after the (terror finance) networks of Hamas, Taliban, or Al-Qaeda."³² Qatar faces unique issues when trying to counter terrorist financiers. Difficulty in reforming the banking sector and the adaptable nature of illicit finance make improvement strenuous.

IMPLICATIONS

Though Qatar's unsuccessful attempts to counter illicit finance have strained a relatively strong bilateral relationship that Washington built after the 1991 Gulf War, terror financing has always been a thorny issue between the nations. In testimony submitted to the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa, Dr. Matthew Levitt, an expert on counterterrorism at the Washington Institute, said "Qatar has been a longtime ally of the United States . . . however, the U.S. has also long criticized the Qatari government for its lax counterterrorism policies, and in particular, shortcomings regarding efforts to combat terrorist financing."³³ This unique relationship has enabled the U.S. to host its largest Middle Eastern military base in Qatar while cooperating on trade and investment ventures despite disapproving of Qatari policy.³⁴

U.S. involvement has become more unpredictable with the Trump administration, with some members of the U.S. government interpreting the President's remarks in June 2017 as an escalatory push towards confrontation.³⁵ The involvement of the United States is not unprecedented, as calls to act against Qatar have occurred in the U.S. Congress from 2013 to 2016, but the administration's engagement with the issue has historically been marked by a two-pronged diplomatic strategy where the U.S. officially encourages Qatar to increase counterterrorism efforts without explicitly accusing the state of funding terror.³⁶ Despite allegations and calls to action, no concrete steps have been taken. Qatar has neither been sanctioned nor placed on the state-sponsor of terrorism list. This is partially due to the presence of two U.S. military bases in the region and the history of economic cooperation between the two nations. Recent statements by President Trump raise questions regarding the stability of this relationship, however, therefore, an analysis of the recent dispute with Qatar and its impact on the Gulf States is necessary.

In June 2017, Qatar was subject to an embargo by Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates. These nations cut diplomatic ties and issued a trade embargo until Qatar complied with a list of thirteen demands, including shutting down *Al Jazeera* and severing ties with the Muslim Brotherhood.³⁷ According to the Institute for National Security Studies, the crisis was attributed to the Emir of Qatar's alleged inflammatory remarks and Doha's reported ransom payment to Iran-backed extremists, but the true causes behind the dispute are more complicated.³⁸

Rather than questions about support for *Al Jazeera* or connections to the Muslim Brotherhood, deeper issues about the regional balance of power underpin this dramatic face-off between Qatar and the four other Gulf nations. The conflict is derived from "profound differences between Qatar and the others about how to deal with Iran, political Islam, and issues of regional leadership."³⁹ This undercurrent predates the Emir's remarks and can be attributed to differences in opinion about regional governance. For example, while Saudi Arabia has shown opposition to Iran, Qatar has maintained affable, even friendly relations, in contrast.⁴⁰

A notable element that surfaced in the 2017 rift was the connection Qatar had with terror, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood and financiers. These concerns have manifested since 2014 when Qatar faced a similar dispute with Gulf states, but the issue had been dealt with internally and did not share the same publicity that the 2017 conflict has come to know.⁴¹ In 2017, public opposition resulted in Saudi Arabia and members of the Gulf Cooperation Council closing sea and land routes, withdrawing diplomats, and expelling Qatari nationals.⁴² Experts note that of the thirteen demands presented to Qatar, three explicitly dealt with state connections to terror and another two dealt with state-sponsored organizations accused of supporting terror.⁴³ Qatar's connections to terror financiers were noted in the same document presented by Saudi Arabia, with demand number eight commanding Qatar to "stop all means of funding for individuals, groups or organizations that have been designated as terrorists."⁴⁴ While the Gulf conflict could not be entirely attributed to Qatar's terrorist financing allegations, a significant portion of the public rationale behind the rift was Qatari connections with terror and its hesitancy to publicly condemn terror groups such as Hamas.⁴⁵

The Gulf crisis of 2017 has largely been alleviated, but important issues still simmer under a somewhat improved diplomatic relationships. One prevalent problem is the complicated position facing the U.S. due to its alliance with both Saudi Arabia and Qatar. While the Council on Foreign Relations states that "U.S.-Saudi relations have never been in complete harmony," President Trump's statements were reported to include a "joint 'strategic vision' that included \$110 billion in American arms sales and other new investments."⁴⁶ Saudi Arabia and the United States are firm allies on economic issues, while the political and

diplomatic spheres are more prone to disagreement. In the same manner, Qatar is a key U.S. trading partner and military ally. Qatar emerged as an important U.S. ally during the Gulf War and has continued to be a vital player for U.S. military and diplomatic relations in the Middle East.⁴⁷ This close alliance, while not impervious to diplomatic problems and periods of tense relations, has lasted from the 1990 Gulf War until the present day.

The complementary relationship the United States shares with Qatar and the Gulf States, Saudi Arabia in particular, made it difficult for U.S. policymakers to take sides with either state without alienating and offending the other. The United States appeared to be taking a neutral stance, with Defense Secretary James Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson calling for a peaceful resolution to the dispute.⁴⁸ The position of neutrality the United States appeared to take was upset when President Trump tweeted about Qatar supporting ideological extremists, appearing to drop impartiality and side with Saudi Arabia in the blockade of Qatar.⁴⁹ This made the U.S. position more precarious as it appeared far less objective to the international and regional audience.

The United States is caught in a web of relations that predates tensions, despite the improving ties between the United States and Qatar after the Gulf War.⁵⁰ The division between countries such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, represented by competing interests of regional hegemony and a favorable U.S. alliance, makes the U.S. a point of tension in Gulf relations. The difficulty facing the U.S. now is the regaining of authority that previous diplomatic relationships enjoyed, while maintaining positive, or at least beneficial, relationships with Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and other Arab states. Ultimately, there is a chance that Gulf countries realize “the most Washington can offer is a neutral position that will not benefit them” and come to view the U.S. as nothing more than a voice of past-power.⁵¹ Nevertheless, the U.S. has several options available to rebuild both Gulf relationships and play a positive role in the region’s affairs.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The first step the United States should take should be to reaffirm the U.S. government’s willingness to work with Qatar on counterterrorism through shared initiatives and cooperative frameworks. As previously noted, this is a difficult task, not simply because the relationship between Gulf states is complicated, but because the U.S. response has been, at best, insufficient. Charles Dunne of the Arab Center in Washington DC notes that, “the U.S. response has been at various times inconsistent, neglectful, and diplomatically chaotic, as the White House initially undercut then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson’s efforts to resolve the confrontation.”⁵² The U.S. needs to create a more cohesive policy in its diplomatic relations with Qatar, one that should

consider Qatar's past cooperation with the U.S. and efforts to build a solid relationship between the two countries.

Evidence of this continued relationship was present throughout the Gulf conflict as demonstrated by then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's efforts to relieve the conflict. Tillerson and Qatari Foreign Minister Mohammed Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani signed a memorandum of understanding that "laid out our mutual commitments for increasing information sharing, disrupting terrorism financing flows, and intensifying counterterrorism activities."⁵³ However, measures such as these do not reflect a perfect progression of U.S. foreign policy. The U.S. has encountered several shifts in official policy during the Trump administration, and this instability has signaled to the Gulf states a lack of cohesive judgement and thinking on how to resolve Qatar's illicit terror financing problems.⁵⁴

Simultaneously, the United States should urge Qatar to review its current policies towards the apprehension and prosecution of terrorists and sponsors of terrorism within its borders, as well as any connection Qatar has to regional terrorist organizations. It should remind Qatar that it "will have to change its policies if it wants to get out of the box it is now in."⁵⁵ Qatar needs to prove that it can effectively halt financiers from continuing in their illicit activities and show that the government is dedicated to halting terror financing both rhetorically and legally. The political will of Qatar must be bent towards utilizing the legislative and cooperative forces already in place to end terror financing and provide proof of results. The United States should be careful not to provide Qatar with a list of demands, such as the one made by the ATQ. Rather, they should work to ensure that the cooperative measures already in place yield actual results. Five prosecuted financiers, two of whom were acquitted and all of whom have returned to their previous illicit activities, reflect poorly on Qatar's ability or willingness to counteract a systemic problem.⁵⁶

Finally, while Qatar has effectively won the standoff, relationships with other Gulf states have deteriorated significantly as compared to the early 2000s, in large part because of Qatar's independent foreign policy and connections to terror.⁵⁷ The United States should work to encourage Doha to increase levels of cooperation and diplomacy with other Gulf states by focusing on repairing relations within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The U.S. strategy in the Middle East, while not explicitly in support of a unified Gulf region, would be aided by a quartet of Gulf states that can cooperate on issues such as counterterrorism and trade. While fundamental differences regarding regional hegemony and policy have driven the countries apart, the possibility for a repaired relationship is not unforeseeable. What makes repairing this relationship difficult is the state of U.S. diplomacy, which is "not ready for a comprehensive dialogue" in its current state due to a lack of experienced diplomats and no central direction.⁵⁸ The United States must regain the experienced leadership

and authority necessary to encourage inter-Gulf cooperation and soothe tensions, particularly if it wants to see active progress made in counterterrorism efforts. Regardless of the U.S. stance towards a suboptimal counterterror environment in Qatar, acting with decisiveness is paramount. Past criticism has noted that the United States has shown “hesitation and confusion and refrained from giving sufficient support to U.S. institutions working to resolve the crisis.”⁵⁹ A clear, decisive foreign policy requires conscious goals and an administration-wide consensus on what the U.S. response must be towards conflicts of this nature. Without this consensus, the United States robs itself of tactful diplomacy and strategic pressure.

Several claims can be made in contention to this analysis, most notably, that Qatar is not linked to terrorist financiers. Dr. Matthew Levitt states that “some of the recent accusations made against Qatar are exaggerated, blown out of proportion, or simply not based on fact.”⁶⁰ There is a marked prevalence among the Arab States, especially Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates, to accuse Qatar of egregious crimes related to terrorism that are simply not based in fact or are exaggerated. However, these false claims do not abrogate the overwhelming amount of evidence showing a multitude of instances where Qatar is directly and indirectly related to funding and harboring terrorists. The Center for Security Policy argues that “the allegations are credible and compelling that Qatar is a state sponsor of terrorism” and the nature of the evidence brought against Qatar supports this supposition.⁶¹ A legal framework that does not significantly counteract terrorist financiers, the connection of Qatari-based charities with regional terror support, and the U.S. statements and classification of Qatar as a haven for illicit finance are indicators that Qatar faces a much more serious problem than simple bias or dislike, no matter how prevalent those factors may be from Qatar’s fellow-Gulf states.

Another disputed claim is the exact role that the United States plays between Gulf states and Qatar, with some arguing that the Trump administration has not damaged relations with Qatar and the United States was a true mediator of the conflict and does not suffer any credibility issues today. Critics point back to President Trump’s interview with the Christian Broadcasting Network during July 2017 when he stated, “we are going to have a good relationship with Qatar and not going to have a problem with the military base.”⁶² President Trump appeared to be making amends for his earlier comments towards Qatar while in Saudi Arabia. Notwithstanding, the self-inflicted damage the United States caused to its credibility was in large part due to the ineffective and unclear stance the administration took. In an interview with the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) in June of 2017, Philip Gordon, the White House coordinator for the Middle East, argued that there was a “really confused and chaotic U.S. response” that exacerbated the crisis.⁶³ Dissonance between military communications and statements made by

the White House was partly to blame; Qatar's desire to only make "symbolic" concessions while countries such as Saudi Arabia demanded a "zero-sum game" were equally at fault.⁶⁴ At best, the United States was sending unclear signals regarding their role. At worst, it failed to act decisively in a conflict, resulting in further alienation amongst Gulf States, yet another negative in a region already facing terrorism and destabilization.

The Gulf crisis uncovered previously hidden problems, such as the Qatari involvement with terrorist financiers that is near undeniable. In addition, Qatar maintains a permissive jurisdiction in which financiers can operate, largely unimpeded. Further, as illustrated by the Gulf conflict, questions of regional hegemony and independent foreign policy have risen to the surface.

An effective U.S. response to the broader issue of terrorism and destabilization requires three steps: that the United States work with Qatar to continue its cooperative initiatives and encourage effective counterterrorism methods, that the United States be clear that Qatar needs to take more active steps in curbing illicit financing of terror and provide quantifiable proof of their effectiveness, and finally, work to improve the damaged relationship between Qatar and the GCC nations. Pursuing a stable Gulf region should be of significant concern to the United States, particularly as the Middle East works to develop and stabilize. To achieve these goals, the United States must demonstrate clear, cohesive policy and responses to issues such as Qatari connections to terrorist financiers or a breakdown in relations among GCC nations.

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