

Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates, 04-06-2017

The decades old schism between Saudi Arabia on one side and Iran on the other had contributed to increasingly polarized relations in the Middle East. Over the years, Bahrain, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) had become more firmly entrenched within the Saudi bloc. The Emirate Qatar, however, decided to steer a more independent course. It maintained trade relations with Iran and sponsored the Al-Jazeera news channel which was openly critical of Middle Eastern regimes outside of Qatar. A regional crisis had been brewing for a couple of years: in 2014, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries had recalled their ambassadors when Qatar recognised the Muslim Brotherhood government of Egypt led by Mohammed Morsi, and had threatened Qatar militarily through repeated intrusions of Qatar's airspace.¹ Qatar was also accused by both regional and Western governments of funding extremist groups. The 2014 crisis had abated without further escalation, but three years later, on 25 May 2017, following years of minor diplomatic friction, Saudi Arabia and the UAE blocked a number of Qatari websites including Al Jazeera, following the airing of statements in which Qatar's Emir Tamin bin Hamad Al Thani praised both Iran and Qatar-Israel relations. Qatar's government denied the veracity of these statements saying that it had been the victim of hacking. Its denial was rejected by the accusers.² Then on 5 June 2017, the four Arab countries cut land, sea, and air lines of communication to Qatar, expelled Qatari diplomats, and threw the country out of the coalition that fought a conflict in Yemen. This imposed considerable economic costs on Qatar's economy.³ The Saudi government defended its decision on account of Qatar's 'embrace of various terrorist and sectarian groups aimed at destabilising the region.'⁴

The US, with a military base in the country, announced it had 'no plans to change our posture in Qatar.'⁵ Two weeks later further fuel was added to the fire when Saudi Arabia together with Bahrain, Egypt and the UAE presented Qatar with an ultimatum. The ultimatum contained thirteen demands including terminating Al Jazeera; expelling Turkish troops from Qatar; cease contacts with extremist groups (specifically al-Qaida, the Islamic State, Hezbollah, and the Muslim Brotherhood); transfer individuals considered to be terrorists by the coercers; halt support for opposition groups in the coercer's home countries; hand over information on these groups; reduce relations with Iran to trade allowed under the international sanctions regime under the supervision of the Gulf Cooperation Council, a regional body dominated by Saudi

¹ Andreas Krieg, ed., *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, 1st ed. 2019 edition (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 2.

² Patrick Wintour and Patrick Wintour Diplomatic editor, 'Saudi Arabia and UAE Block Qatari Media over Incendiary Statements', *The Guardian*, 25 May 2017, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/25/saudi-arabia-and-uae-block-qatari-media-over-incendiary-statements-iran-israel>.

³ Richard Nephew, 'The Qatari Sanctions Episode: Crisis, Response, and Lessons Learned.' (New York: Columbia University, October 2020).

⁴ Patrick Wintour and Patrick Wintour Diplomatic editor, 'Gulf Plunged into Diplomatic Crisis as Countries Cut Ties with Qatar', *The Guardian*, 5 June 2017, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/05/saudi-arabia-and-bahrain-break-diplomatic-ties-with-qatar-over-terrorism>.

⁵ Ibid.

Arabia; agree to monthly compliance checks; and align itself with other regional states.⁶ The full list of demands read as follows:

1. Curb diplomatic ties with Iran and close its diplomatic missions there. Expel members of Iran's Revolutionary Guards and cut off any joint military cooperation with Iran. Only trade and commerce with Iran that complies with US and international sanctions will be permitted.
2. Sever all ties to "terrorist organisations", specifically the Muslim Brotherhood, Islamic State, al-Qaida and Lebanon's Hezbollah. Formally declare those entities as terrorist groups.
3. Shut down al-Jazeera and its affiliate stations.
4. Shut down news outlets that Qatar funds, directly and indirectly, including Arabi21, Rassd, Al-Araby Al-Jadeed and Middle East Eye.
5. Immediately terminate the Turkish military presence in Qatar and end any joint military cooperation with Turkey inside Qatar.
6. Stop all means of funding for individuals, groups or organisations that have been designated as terrorists by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, Bahrain, the US and other countries.
7. Hand over "terrorist figures" and wanted individuals from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain to their countries of origin. Freeze their assets, and provide any desired information about their residency, movements and finances.
8. End interference in sovereign countries' internal affairs. Stop granting citizenship to wanted nationals from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain. Revoke Qatari citizenship for existing nationals where such citizenship violates those countries' laws.
9. Stop all contacts with the political opposition in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain. Hand over all files detailing Qatar's prior contacts with and support for those opposition groups.
10. Pay reparations and compensation for loss of life and other, financial losses caused by Qatar's policies in recent years. The sum will be determined in coordination with Qatar.
11. Consent to monthly audits for the first year after agreeing to the demands, then once per quarter during the second year. For the following 10 years, Qatar would be monitored annually for compliance.
12. Align itself with the other Gulf and Arab countries militarily, politically, socially and economically, as well as on economic matters, in line with an agreement reached with Saudi Arabia in 2014.
13. Agree to all the demands within 10 days of it being submitted to Qatar, or the list becomes invalid.⁷

Qatar was given ten days to comply with the demands or the coalition threatened unspecified consequences. Some observers argued that US policies under President Trump had emboldened

⁶ 'Arab States Send Qatar List of Steep Demands', accessed 20 May 2022,

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/7/12/arab-states-issue-13-demands-to-end-qatar-gulf-crisis>.

⁷ Patrick Wintour, 'Qatar given 10 Days to Meet 13 Sweeping Demands by Saudi Arabia', *The Guardian*, 23 June 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/23/close-al-jazeera-saudi-arabia-issues-qatar-with-13-demands-to-end-blockade>.

especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE to take action, encouraged by close personal relations between Trump's son in law and the Gulf monarchies' crown princes, and Trump's policies aimed at isolating Iran.⁸ Initially, US President Trump had in fact called the ultimatum a blow to 'radical ideology', seemingly further isolating Qatar.⁹ This, however, put him at odds with other members of his administration that cherished their country's longstanding close relationship with Qatar and above all appreciated the importance of the US military base in the country. Soon senior members of the US administration started calling on all sides to resolve the crisis peacefully.

Compliance with the demands would in effect seriously infringe on Qatar's sovereignty. The scale of the demands and the coercing coalition initially did not bode well for Qatar. The prospect of military action was not ruled out, despite the fact that Turkey and the US had military forces in the country. After the crisis, reports suggested these expectations not to be ungrounded.¹⁰ Sources reported of Saudi intentions to annex Qatar's gas fields, as well as plans to replace Qatar's Emir Tamin bin Hamad Al Thani.¹¹ Unsurprisingly, the ultimatum stirred considerable unrest in the country: the Qatari economy took a significant hit, the population started hoarding food, and many of the 1.6 million foreigners on a total population of 2.5 million started considering their exit options. Qatar publicly denounced the accusations. Turkey announced it had no plans to withdraw its armed forces; instead, the Turkish parliament had ratified an agreement to strengthen bilateral cooperation on 7 June.¹² The US government urged moderation and called for further dialogue. Qatar said that the demands were 'made to be rejected' and that it was ready to 'defend our country'.¹³ Kuwait's Emir Sabah al-Ahmad Al Sabah played an important role as a go between and mediator from the outset of the crisis. Shortly before the expiration of the deadline, he requested and received a 48 hours extension. Qatar finally rejected the ultimatum. On 5 July, following a meeting of their ministers in Cairo, the coercing coalition replaced its thirteen demands with the following six general principles that Qatar was to accept:

1. Commitment to combat extremism and terrorism in all its forms and to prevent their financing or the provision of safe havens.

⁸ Krieg, *Divided Gulf*, 7.

⁹ Roger Cohen, 'Opinion | The Prince Who Would Remake the World', *The New York Times*, 21 June 2018, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/21/opinion/sunday/saudi-arabia-women-drivers.html>. 'Qatar: Deadline Shifts in Gulf Crisis', *The National*, accessed 20 May 2022, <https://www.thenational.scot/news/15387742.qatar-deadline-shifts-in-gulf-crisis/>.

¹⁰ Alex Emmons, 'Saudi Arabia Planned to Invade Qatar Last Summer. Rex Tillerson's Efforts to Stop It May Have Cost Him His Job.', *The Intercept*, 08/01/2018, <https://theintercept.com/2018/08/01/rex-tillerson-qatar-saudi-uae/>.

¹¹ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 82–84, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197525593.001.0001>; Dexter Filkins, 'A Saudi Prince's Quest to Remake the Middle East', *The New Yorker*, 2 April 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/04/09/a-saudi-princes-quest-to-remake-the-middle-east>.

¹² Nabil Sharaf, 'Saudi, UAE Demands to End Qatar Crisis: Commands, Diktats, and Ultimatums', Arab Center Washington DC, accessed 20 May 2022, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/gcc-demands-to-end-qatar-crisis-commands-diktats-and-ultimatums/>.

¹³ 'As Gulf Deadline Looms, Qatar Says Demands "Made to Be Rejected"', *France 24*, 2 July 2017, <https://www.france24.com/en/20170702-qatar-gulf-crisis-deadline-looms-saudi-egypt-bahrein-uae-neighbours-ultimatum>.

2. Prohibiting all acts of incitement and all forms of expression which spread, incite, promote or justify hatred and violence.
3. Full commitment to Riyadh Agreement 2013 and the supplementary agreement and its executive mechanism for 2014 within the framework of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) for Arab States.
4. Commitment to all the outcomes of the Arab-Islamic-US Summit held in Riyadh in May 2017.
5. Refrain from interfering in the internal affairs of States and from supporting illegal entities.
6. The responsibility of all States of international community to confront all forms of extremism and terrorism as a threat to international peace and security.¹⁴

As the situation continued unresolved, international pressure to de-escalate mounted. In addition to Trump's reversal, the leaders of France, Germany, the EU as well as the UN, were calling on regional states to reach a peaceful resolution.¹⁵ In September 2017, during a visit to the White House, Kuwait's Emir Sabah al-Ahmad Al Sabah commented that 'what's important is that we have stopped military action,'¹⁶ Al Sabah was according to many accounts, including his own, instrumental in if not solving the crisis then at least stabilising it in the months that followed, amongst others by insisting that the meeting of the Gulf Cooperation Council in December 2017 took place with Qatar present.¹⁷

Following receipt of the ultimatum, Qatar had immediately launched a public affairs campaign to rally other leaders to its cause. Emir Tamin bin Hamad Al Thani had already made a public announcement on 21 July 2017 stating that the 'plotters carried out an attack on the sovereignty of the state of Qatar' (with his foreign minister adding that Qatar rejected a world 'governed by ultimatums'). Two months later, in front of the General Assembly in New York, he accused them of interfering in Qatar's internal affairs. In February 2018, at the Munich Security Conference, he denounced their demands as undermining 'regional security.'¹⁸ Meanwhile, Qatar continued to cultivate close relations with the US, UK, and France, through the acquisition of fighter jets and other costly defence platforms, closer strategic dialogues, and joint exercises from 2017-2019;¹⁹ with Turkey through the deployment of 23 Turkish soldiers to over 300 in December 2017; and with Iran through the establishment of diplomatic relations.

With the crisis stabilised, crisis resolution failed despite multiple mediation attempts by Kuwait and the US which were rebuffed by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The blockade continued unabated but the threat of military action had faded. Only when the international context began to change, with notably attempts by the young Saudi leader Mohammed bin Salman to improve his international standing (after facing widespread condemnation for his ordering of the killing of

¹⁴ 'Joint Statement by the Foreign Ministers of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain | The Embassy of The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia', 5 July 2017, <https://www.saudiembassy.net/statements/joint-statement-foreign-ministers-saudi-arabia-egypt-united-arab-emirates-and-bahrain>.

¹⁵ Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis*, 88–90.

¹⁶ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, 'Analysis: Has the Gulf Reconciled after the Qatar Blockade?', accessed 20 June 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2021/6/5/has-the-gulf-reconciled-after-the-end-of-the-qatar-blockade>.

¹⁷ Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis*, 97.

¹⁸ Ulrichsen, 105–6.

¹⁹ Ulrichsen, 212–17, 222.

Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul),²⁰ and US president Donald Trump soon to be replaced by incoming President Biden, did the parties agree to a rapprochement. On 5 January 2021, the parties agreed to solve the crisis at the al-Ula summit. Although the official; communique did not offer any specific elaboration,²¹ Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan announced that 'what happened today is... the turning of the page on all points of difference and a full return of diplomatic relations.'²² Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt agreed to lifting the blockade and restoring diplomatic relations with Qatar.²³ In return, Qatar expressed good will but did not offer acceptance neither of any of the thirteen demands nor of the six general principles.²⁴ The weeks following the parties did as promised but the crisis continued to haunt regional relations and animosities continued to linger for a long time thereafter.²⁵

²⁰ 'Jamal Khashoggi: All You Need to Know about Saudi Journalist's Death', *BBC News*, 24 February 2021, sec. Europe, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45812399>.

²¹ 'Full Transcript of AIUla GCC Summit Declaration: Bolstering Gulf Unity', Al Arabiya English, 6 January 2021, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2021/01/06/Full-transcript-of-AIUla-GCC-Summit-Declaration-Bolstering-Gulf-unity>.

²² 'Saudi Arabia's FM: AIUla Declaration Ends Dispute with Qatar, Restores All Ties', Al Arabiya English, 5 January 2021, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2021/01/05/Saudi-Arabia-s-FM-AIUla-declaration-ends-dispute-with-Qatar-restores-all-ties>.

²³ Samuel Ramani, 'The Qatar Blockade Is Over, but the Gulf Crisis Lives On', *Foreign Policy* (blog), accessed 20 June 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/27/qatar-blockade-gcc-divisions-turkey-libya-palestine/>.

²⁴ 'Resolving the Gulf Crisis Outside the Gulf', Crisis Group, 26 January 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/resolving-gulf-crisis-outside-gulf>.

²⁵ Talha Köse, 'Qatar Blockade Is over but Still Early for Regionwide Reconciliation', *SETA*, 14 January 2021, <https://www.setav.org/en/qatar-blockade-is-over-but-still-early-for-regionwide-reconciliation/>.