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Qatar

Campaign Against Qatar is Latest in Series of Attacks by the Region's Old Establishment

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There has been an avalanche of commentary on the crisis between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Egypt (and a bunch of hangers-on) in the last couple of weeks. Some tell you one side or another is going to win, others worry it's the beginning of a new regional war. Everything is pointing to this crisis lasting longer than those who initiated it (Saudi and the UAE) intended it to. Whatever happens in the end, the crisis shows the interplay of several lines of tension among regional powers, from the Iran-Saudi divide to Islamist-anti-Islamist polarisation and revolutionary vs. counter-revolutionary narratives. The overlap is confusing, and so much of the media treatment (including in the US and UK press, a sad statement of the influence of Gulf money and ideology) absurdly biased.

The piece below is written by the noted Lebanese leftist intellectual Gilbert Achcar, most recently the author of a well-reviewed book on the Arab uprisings, *Morbid Symptoms - Relapse in the Arab Uprising*. Although it is published in the Qatar-owned London-based newspaper al-Quds al-Arabi, Achcar has the merit of being a cheerleader for neither Qatar nor its opponents. He traces the history of Qatar's tensions with its neighbors, the spectacular rise and potential fall of its aggressive foreign policy, its bet on the Muslim Brotherhood, and its opponents' successful efforts to roll back the Arab uprisings. For Achcar, the fundamental difference between the two camps is that Qatar sought to adapt to the Arab Spring by banking on the Muslim Brotherhood successfully harnessing its energies, while Saudi Arabia and the UAE sought to roll it back and restore the establishments that were shaken by the uprisings. It is a view underpinned by his assessment, in *Morbid Symptoms*, that another revolutionary wave looms – one that may very well wash away those who seek to resist it and reward those that seek to ride it.

As always, this translation is made possible by Industry Arabic. Use them for your Arabic needs. [*The Arabist*]

To understand the significance of the violent campaign launched by the Saudi, Emirati, Bahraini, and Egyptian governments against Qatar, we must look beyond the vagaries of the Qatari ransom money allegedly held by Iraq and the charges leveled against Qatar of supporting terrorism. Such charges lose all credibility when they come from actors that have for decades engaged in just that, we must return to the scene before “Arab Spring” to see how it was affected by the Great Uprising.

During the reign of Emir Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani, the Emirate of Qatar took an approach to regional affairs not unlike Kuwait's after it declared independence from Britain in 1961. The announcement outraged the Republic of Iraq, which demanded the emirate be restored as part of its territory. But Kuwait benefited from the tension that existed between Iraq, under the leadership of Abdel Karim Qassim, and Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt, which advocated acceptance of Kuwait's Arab independence over its status as a British protectorate. And in order to deter its Iraqi neighbor from ambitions of annexation, Kuwait pursued a policy of Arab neutrality, maintaining good relations with the two poles of the so-called “Arab Cold War,” Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

The similarity is that Qatar, as is well-known, has a historically strained relationship with its neighbor, Saudi Arabia, particularly since declaring independence from Britain in 1971. After seizing power in 1995, Emir Hamad pursued a policy that sought to make up for the emirate's small size by reinforcing ties with the two main axes of regional conflict, as evident by extensive deployments of US troops throughout the Gulf: the United States and the Republic of Iran. Qatar's success is most obvious in its ability to simultaneously host the United States' most important regional airbase and cultivate its relationship with Iran and Hezbollah. The policy of good relations with opposing forces also

manifests itself in Qatar successfully establishing diplomatic relations with Israel, while also supporting Hamas.

Qatar's role during the reign of Emir Hamad was not limited to cultivating good relationships with different parties in the Kuwaiti sense, which is neutral and negative, but it also used its substantial wealth to play an active role in regional politics by supporting the Muslim Brotherhood. When Saudi Arabia renounced the Brotherhood, after sponsoring it since its inception in 1928, due to its opposition to American intervention in Kuwait in 1990, the weight of Qatar's political role greatly increased with the establishment of Al-Jazeera, which resonated with Arab society by welcoming Arab voices of opposition, in particular the Muslim Brotherhood.

So when the volcano of the Great Arab Uprising erupted in 2011, Qatar was able to play a significant role through its sponsorship of both the Muslim Brotherhood and Al-Jazeera. As a result, the two axes of conflict that had dominated the Arab world – the old establishment and the fundamentalist opposition led by the Muslim Brotherhood – found support in the Gulf Cooperation Council. But while Saudi Arabia supported the old establishment throughout the region – with the exception of Libya where it remained neutral and Syria where sectarianism produced an alliance (between the Assad regime and) Iran – Qatar supported the uprisings, especially where the Brotherhood was involved, with the exception of Bahrain for obvious reasons. The conflict between the Emirate and the Kingdom since the onset of the “Arab Spring” was evident by Qatar's support for the Tunisian uprising, while Saudi Arabia granted asylum to deposed Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

Moreover, the Obama administration saw Qatar as a means to ward off the danger of Arab uprisings that might take root in a way that would threaten US interests. So it played both sides, at times supporting the old establishment with Saudi Arabia (as in Bahrain), and at others, trying to contain the uprisings with Qatar through the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates (like in Tunisia and Egypt). But Qatar's role urging Washington to adopt a policy of keeping pace with the uprisings was a cause of Saudi indignation, and outraged the United Arab Emirates, which had designated the Muslim Brotherhood public enemy number one. The pressure the two Gulf countries placed on Qatar continued to build after Qatari bets on the Muslim Brotherhood failed to pay out when the Egyptian army overthrew President Mohammed Morsi and violently suppressed the Brotherhood. That was followed by Emir Hamad's decision to step down in place of his son, the current Emir, Tamim, only to see Gulf pressure reach its first peak in 2014, forcing the new emir to change course. [\[1\]](#)

After the peak, it seemed that the Gulf conflict had come to an end. Through the consensus of the three aforementioned gulf states to support the Syrian opposition against the Assad Regime, which strained relations between Qatar (and with it, the Muslim Brotherhood) and Iran, and, later, Qatar's participation in the military campaign against Ali Abdullah Saleh and the Houthis in Yemen – all against the backdrop of a new king ascending to the Saudi throne – it seemed as if peace between GCC members was possible. This trend has been supported by Saudi Arabia's longtime pursuit of a Sunni consensus against Iran that includes the Muslim Brotherhood and coincides with tension between Riyadh and Cairo. The trend also aligned perfectly with the politics of the Obama administration.

However, Donald Trump's election as president of the United States changed the equation. The new president is a supporter of a policy of confrontation in the face of change and revolution in the Arab world. He is also extremely hostile to Iran and has an intimate friendship with Israel. Some of his closest advisors have classified the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist group, concurring in this with the UAE (as evidenced by recently uncovered correspondence of its ambassador to Washington). This fundamental change in the equation led Saudi Arabia to reconcile with al-Sisi's Egypt, who together, accompanied by the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, launched the current frenzied attack on Qatar in order to impose a radical change on its policy.

Thus, the latest episode reversing the Great Arab Uprising and the counterattack launched by the ancien regime all across the region, supported in most arenas by the Gulf axis and by Iran in Syria and Yemen, is almost complete. But

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a new uncontrollable wave of revolution is coming sooner or later (indeed, its harbingers are already visible in Morocco and Tunisia). [2] If this day comes and there is no one to contain it, then Riyadh and Abu Dhabi may well regret eliminating Qatar's role within this space.

Source : [al-Quds al-Arabi](#), 7 June 2017.

English Translation **The Arabist** "[In Translation: And if Qatar folds?](#)".

PS:

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[1] Note that Emir Tamim came to power in Qatar a week or so before the overthrow of Morsi, not after.

[2] Here Achcar refers to the protests in southern Tunisia (mostly Tataouine), (see [Southern Tunisia reaches boiling point](#) and in Morocco (starting in the Rif), see [The grassroots protest movement in the Rif region](#).