

Soothing the Sunni Rift?

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Despite new proposal by four nations led by Saudi Arabia and Egypt, Doha still being blacklisted

A possible breakthrough occurred on Wednesday in the month-long impasse that has divided the Sunni Muslim world, when four Arab nations dropped seven of the thirteen demands which they had insisted Qatar comply with. The June 22 declaration said that Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt were severing relations with Doha ostensibly because of its support for terrorism, and announced the four nations were deporting Qatari nationals from within their borders and prohibiting Doha's aircraft and naval vessels from entering their respective ports. The accompanying list of demands included shutting down the Al Jazeera news network, cutting ties with the Muslim Brotherhood and ending support for Islamic extremists.

To date, though, Doha has refused to bow to external pressure, denying all allegations levied against it. Instead, Qatar has accused its regional neighbors of collusion, and of enforcing a "siege" in the form of severe restrictions spanning land, air and sea.

According to Avi Melamed, Salisbury Fellow of Intelligence and Middle East Affairs for the Eisenhower Institute in Washington, D.C., "There are a lot of ins-and-outs and games going on," but, he told The Media Line, "the bottom line is that both sides are looking for ways to find a respectful ending to this episode, where everyone gets to walk away getting something, but not humiliated."

Melamed highlights four core issues which account for the ongoing tensions. "First and foremost is Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood—formally defined by Saudi Arabia and Egypt as terror groups," he said, "as well as the ongoing provoking role of Al Jazeera, which has resulted more than once in severe diplomatic strains between Qatar and Arab states." Next is Iran, which is "definitely a major component, as its relations with Qatar are very significant within the context of [Shiite] Tehran's regional ambitions."

Doha's ties to Islamic radicals throughout the region is also a source of tension. "One of the major issues that upset Riyadh is that a few Salafi jihadists were caught with Saudi passports," Melamed revealed. Lastly, is the perceived abrogation by Qatar of a 2014 agreement with Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain, which ended an eight-month rift, again precipitated by Qatar's alleged support for terrorist groups (at the time the three countries took the unprecedented step of recalling their ambassadors from Doha).

Thus far, however, Melamed sees little tangible effect of the latest row. "There have been talks about suspending Qatar from the GCC," he pointed out, "but I don't see anything happening for the moment. In the context of Syria, it will be interesting if there are ramifications in future talks. For now, it doesn't seem like there are dramatic implications."

As such, Melamed expects to see an eventual resolution.

The wild card in the process may be the United States, which has acted as the primary mediator between the feuding countries. Initially, Washington fully backed Qatar's isolation, in the wake of President Donald Trump's visit to Riyadh in March. Speaking to The Media Line, Dr. Emmanuel Navon, an International Affairs expert at Tel Aviv University and at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya, elaborated: "Trump pushed for the move after he visited Saudi Arabia—his advisers told him he had to isolate Iran, with which Qatar has close relations, mainly because together they hold some 40% of the natural gas resources in the world."

According to Dr. Navon, the chief factor in the dispute is the Shiite regime in Tehran. "The whole terrorism thing is nonsense," he asserted, "nobody takes it seriously—even the Americans know about Saudi Arabia's involvement in 9/11."

Nevertheless, the eventual formation of a unified Sunni bloc against Iran is no guarantee: "Whenever you have rapprochement [in the Middle East]," Dr. Navon explained, "you always have one country trying to lead the group. This is why in 1958 the United Arab Republic between Egypt and Syria very quickly fell apart, because Cairo wanted

to dominate.” Then, citing former Israeli foreign minister Abba Eban’s classic quote—”nothing divides the Arab world more than its attempts to unite”—Dr. Navon emphasized that “there are so many competing and clashing interests between the countries.”

In this respect, the White House itself has seemingly backtracked from its original position, with a view to maintaining a semblance of neutrality. After all, the U.S. maintains its biggest concentration of military personnel in the Middle East—some 11,000 troops—at Qatar’s Al Udeid Air Base. Accordingly, U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson conducted several days of shuttle diplomacy last week, even signing a memorandum of understanding with Doha on countering terrorism financing. Tillerson likewise questioned the original list of demands presented to Qatar, acknowledging that some elements would be “very difficult to meet.”

Spurred on by Washington’s delicate balancing act, cooler heads appear to be prevailing, with the gap between the Sunni countries shrinking. A compromise may therefore be on the horizon. As Melamed suggested to The Media Line, the whole episode may, in reality, always have been “more about the black sheep of the family getting back into line.”