

by [Stephen Zunes](#) June 16, 2017

Trump's Support for Punishing Qatar Is Misguided

Trump stands alongside King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia, and the President of Egypt, Abdel Fattah Al Sisi. Trump has supported the two nations, and others, in their diplomatic war against Qatar.



The decision by the Saudis and allied dictatorships to [sever ties](#) with Qatar and impose draconian sanctions on the tiny nation has precipitated a major regional crisis, and President Trump's [support](#) for this provocative move has made matters even worse.

The Saudis accuse Qatar, a longstanding U.S. ally, of supporting terrorists and other Islamist extremists. But the blowback actually has more to do with the small but wealthy kingdom's insistence on maintaining foreign-policy independence from regional hegemon Saudi Arabia.

Qatar had been part of the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council, a military alliance and common market, and the fact that three other members—Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain—have all severed economic and military ties is significant.

It's true that the Qatar government is a conservative family dictatorship which tolerates [little dissent](#) and [abuses](#) foreign workers. There is little doubt it has provided support for [hardline Islamist movements](#), some of which have engaged in terrorism, and failed to crack down sufficiently on individual Qataris financing terrorist groups.

For example, Qatar has long [provided](#) aid and served as the external diplomatic base for Hamas. Indeed, in recent years, Qatar has been a [far more significant supporter](#) of the hardline Palestinian Islamist group than either Syria or Iran. But huge bipartisan majorities in Congress and both the Obama and Trump Administrations have grossly exaggerated Syria and Iran's support while, until now, largely ignoring the role of Washington's Qatari allies.

In fact, a number of the governments accusing Qatar of supporting terrorism—particularly Saudi Arabia—have been far more significant supporters and funders of Islamist extremists and related terrorist organizations. Qatar is at most a minor player in this regard, but this hasn't stopped President Trump from reacting to the Saudi-led pressure on Qatar by [proclaiming](#), "Perhaps this will be the beginning of the end to the horror of terrorism!"

Interestingly, while supporting the closure of all the borders, sea lanes and airspace to Qatar, Trump subsequently [approved the sale](#) of an additional \$12 billion of U.S. arms to Qatar's military.

Many of the key demands by Saudi Arabia and its allies, apparently supported by Trump, have little to do with terrorism, such as the insistence that Qatar [sever diplomatic relations with Iran](#), which would be difficult given that the two countries share the world's [largest reserves](#) of natural gas along their maritime border. Another demand is for the [expulsion](#) of members of political groups and other individuals opposed to the policies of GCC countries, Egypt, and allied dictatorships, including those [involved](#) in the nonviolent pro-democracy movement in Bahrain.

Saudi Arabia and its allies are also [calling](#) for the shutdown of Al-Jazeera, the Qatari-funded but editorially independent news service based in Doha. The news source has allowed nonviolent dissidents opposed to these governments an opportunity to share their grievances. For example, the Al-Jazeera's award-winning 2011 documentary ["Shouting in the Dark"](#) about the brutal repression by the regime in Bahrain against pro-democracy protesters [angered](#) that U.S.-backed monarchy, which was the first to join Saudi Arabia in cutting ties with Qatar.

The United Arab Emirates [praised](#) Trump's "leadership in challenging Qatar's troubling support for extremism" and has declared anyone expressing "sympathy" with Qatar's position could be imprisoned. Other governments joining the Saudi campaign against Qatar include the U.S.-backed military dictatorship in Egypt, the corrupt and repressive regime in the Maldives—which overthrew the country's democratically elected environmentalist president in 2012—and the nominal governments of Yemen and Libya, which control only a minority of their respective countries' territories.

U.S. military and intelligence officials are understandably [upset](#) at President Trump's uncritical embrace of the Saudi-led moves against Qatar, for which he has [taken credit](#). Qatar is home to the United States' [largest](#) military base in the Middle East, the regional command center coordinating operations in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, and 11,000 U.S. military personnel.

The kingdom has [assisted](#) the United States in freeing hostages, providing valuable intelligence, and strategic planning. Republican leaders in Congress and even members of Trump's own [Cabinet](#) have been scrambling to minimize the damage.

In short, this new crisis in the Persian Gulf is complex and requires a thoughtful and nuanced approach—something apparently beyond the capabilities of the current U.S. administration.