

# Qatar opts for 'circumvention' tactics as dispute remains unresolved

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At the time that it continues to show no interest in addressing the accusations levelled at it by the Saudi-led Arab bloc, including charges of terror financing and support to extremists, Qatar has been focused on international moves aimed at burnishing its image and getting outside support to its stances in the ongoing row.

Doha has lodged a complaint with the United Nations over Saudi Arabia's haj preparations, widening the international scope of the dispute between Qatar and Saudi Arabia that has centred on Doha's suspected financing of terrorism.

■ Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani said he intended to turn to "sources of soft power at the international level."

Qatar's National Human Rights Committee filed a complaint with the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief over what it described as "obstacles" Saudi Arabia had implemented that could hinder Qatari nationals from performing the annual haj.

Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani announced in his only speech since the dispute began that he intended to turn to "sources of soft power at the international level."

In what some described as a dis-

tracting public relations ploy, the Qatar-owned Paris Saint-Germain football club signed Brazilian star forward Neymar from FC Barcelona for a record \$256 million.

"The announcement of Neymar's transfer to PSG was piloted among the high ranks in Qatar as a sort of communications strategy that would overshadow the debate around all other considerations, namely terrorism," Mathieu Guidere, an expert in Arab world geopolitics told Agence France-Presse.

Reports by Qatari media that Qatari nationals travelling to Saudi Arabia to perform the haj would be denied entry were dismissed by Saudi officials, who claimed Doha was politicising the annual Islamic event.

Saudi Director-General of Passports Major-General Sulaiman al-Yahya told the pan-Arab daily Asharq Al-Awsat that all nationalities going to Saudi Arabia for the haj were welcome. He said anyone doubting that Qataris would receive all services available to pilgrims should visit the King Abdulaziz International Airport to see provisions for pilgrims, "including those coming from Qatar."

"Currently, there are still Qatari brothers entering Saudi territory, not for the purpose of haj or umrah, but because they have family ties inside [the country]," Yahya said.

The move by Doha to politicise the pilgrimage drew comparisons to actions by Iran, which has called for the internationalisation of Muslim holy sites and whose nationals have staged political demonstrations during the haj.

Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir told the Saudi-owned Al-Arabiya news channel that "any call to internationalise (the man-



**Political games.** Brazilian superstar Neymar (R) shakes hands with Paris Saint-Germain's (PSG) Qatari Chairman and CEO Nasser Al-Khelaifi during a news conference at the Parc des Princes stadium, on August 4.

(AFP)

agement of) haj is an aggressive act and a declaration of war."

He said the kingdom reserves "the right to respond to anyone who tries to turn the issue of the haj into an international issue."

Gulf sources told The Arab Weekly that efforts by Qatar to politicise the pilgrimage were part of Doha's strategy to create a new crisis to avoid addressing issues related to sanctions levied by the Arab Gulf, which allege Qatar has supported terrorist groups.

The Gulf sources said Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt considered the Qatari Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani's comments to the United Nations, in which he complained about haj preparations, an attempt to divert attention from the demands issued by the quartet to resolve the crisis.

Doha also went to the World Trade Organisation (WTO), claiming that the sanctions imposed by Saudi Arabia and its allies were in violation of international law. Reuters reported that Qatar's complaint cites "coercive attempts at econom-

ic isolation" and details how the boycott is allegedly impeding the tiny Gulf country's right to trade in goods and services and intellectual property.

A UAE official said WTO members were within their rights to "impose economic measures if they felt their national security was being threatened."

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UAE Assistant Under-Secretary for Foreign Trade Affairs Juma Mohammed al-Kait noted in an official statement that WTO agreements permitted the suspension of privileges of a member country in specific cases and those cases had been proven against Qatar.

Kait said sanctions imposed by the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain were in line with Article 21 and Arti-

cle 14 of the General Agreement on Trade in Services.

The dispute broke out after statements attributed to Sheikh Tamim criticising US foreign policy and praising Iran were carried by the official Qatar News Agency.

Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt severed diplomatic ties with Doha on June 5, saying that Qatar interfered in their countries' internal affairs and supported radical groups such as Hamas, the Taliban and the Muslim Brotherhood. A list of 13 demands issued by the quartet must be met for talks with Doha to commence, the countries' foreign ministers said.

"The four countries are ready for dialogue with Qatar with the condition that it announces its sincere willingness to stop funding terrorism and extremism and its commitment to not interfere in other countries' foreign affairs and respond to the 13 demands," Bahraini Foreign Minister Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed al-Khalifa said after meeting July 30 in Manama.

"These demands are not negotiable. We cannot shrink [the list] down," Jubeir added.

## The military option in the Qatar crisis

### Viewpoint



Ahmad Abou Douh

Qatar is doing its best to push the boycotting countries to choose options that had previously remained out of the question. Talk of building a military base on Bahrain's Hawar Islands is a forceful threat while a range of diplomatic solutions are still available to the boycotting countries.

Then again, bringing up this option could serve as a wake-up call to Qatar to bring it back to its senses.

For Qatar, the main problem with the military base would be the identity of those who control it. The thought that Egypt might be the major partner in the construction of the Hawar military base would give Qatar unbearable nightmares. Why?

If the Qatari regime dared to threaten Egypt's stability, it would be because it thought it was protected due to the geographical distance, the security umbrella of the Gulf countries and the American base in Al Udeid. So, bringing Egyptian military might close to Qatar would be a scary option for Qatar.

There is a compelling reason as to why the possibility of an Egyptian

military presence in the Gulf is concerning to the Qataris. When the crisis broke out, Qatar ran to Turkey for protection. Turkey, however, is not a Gulf country. So, Qatar had militarised the crisis and allowed a non-Gulf Islamic force to have a military presence in a strategically important region.

While Egypt is also not a Gulf state, it enjoys a level of legitimacy by being an Arab country, unlike Turkey. For the Gulf people, Egypt is like an older brother with an imposing presence from the point of view of history, cultural heritage and military might.

For the Egyptians, a military presence near Qatar would be a dream come true. Many Egyptians say the time has come to teach Qatar a lesson.

Egypt could have meted out some punishment on Qatar if it were not for two reasons: The strategic importance of its relations with the Gulf countries and the lack of any Egyptian naval presence in the Gulf. With the crisis with Qatar, both impediments are gone. Now Egypt's political influence can reach beyond the Red Sea and this political influence would have to be backed up militarily.

Historically, Egyptian expansion in the Gulf region has not been welcomed, especially by Saudi Arabia. During the time of Muhammad Ali Pasha, the Egyptian presence in the Arabian Peninsula delayed the creation of a Saudi state but it

would go on to compete with Egypt for leadership of the Arab region and, during the 1960s, Saudi Arabia fought Egypt's presence in the Yemeni war tooth and nail.

Today, however, things are different. Saudi Arabia is militarily capable of defending its own internal stability and Egypt is no longer a threat to its influence in the Arabian Peninsula. On the contrary, each country sees the other as a vital ally.

Today, an Egyptian military presence in the Gulf would no longer be seen as a threat but rather as a reassuring security factor. Perhaps an Egyptian military presence nearby might push Qatar to reconsider its role in the region. Al Jazeera would change its tune and halt its non-stop media campaign against the boycotting countries. Even the Qatari Foreign Affairs Ministry would revise its discourse. The Qataris would have to think twice before donating one cent to terrorist organisations.

What about Turkey's military presence in Qatar? Frankly, I don't think the Turkish brigade in Qatar would amount to any advantage in the show of muscle flexing we're talking about. If Turkey can send 3,000 soldiers, the boycotting countries would have no difficulty sending many times more troops. There would be no need to engage the Turkish forces.

The one real problem in the scenario outlined above would

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be the Americans. Washington is not very keen on having the Gulf region placed under the protection of an Arab military coalition. In the American mind, that task can only be devolved to the West. They seem to think they are the legitimate heirs of the British colonisation in the Gulf. The United States is not ready to share its hunting ground with the Arabs. The Americans want to share in the costs but not in the forces.

Still, convincing the Americans to accept an Arab military presence in the Gulf would not be impossible. All that must be done is convince them that their interests in the Gulf would be safe and that the Arab military force would be temporary. They must understand that punishing Qatar presents no risk to their interests.

An Arab military base on the Hawar Islands would take the boycotting countries from reaction to action. Qatar did not expect this scenario because the four boycotting countries are always talking about dialogue and nothing else. Dialogue, however, is not enough to bring Qatar to better sentiments.

The Qatari regime would start paying attention when it learns that "all options are open." That's what the Americans keep saying to Iran and that is the only way to deal with rogue states.

Ahmad Abou Douh is an Egyptian writer.

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