

# IS SAUDI ON THE PATH TO WAR?

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*Considering the supposed list of demands from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), handled to Qatar through Kuwait mediation and leaked to the press, one can objectively raise the question.*

*This famous list has been at the heart of the crisis between Qatar and its former GCC partners and neighbors which entered its third week since the cutting off diplomatic relations with the small peninsula at the beginning of June.*

*The tension since gradually grew between the countries promptly shaping international alliances in order to fulfill their goals. From the UAE/KSA perspective, the goal is clear: cut Qatar off Iran and impose an unchallenged regional order under KSA's umbrella. On that latter however, nothing proves that UAE and KSA won't have tensions later on, but for now the concordant goals are reinforcing the current alliance.*

*From the Qatar perspective, the aim is of course opening up the imposed blockade and pursue with its own independent Foreign Policy.*

## **PRESSURES AND ALLIANCES**

As soon as the crisis emerged between the countries composing the economic alliance of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the various players started lobbying and even pressuring all-out. In reality, many are the observers claiming that Emirates Crown Prince and *de facto* ruler Mohammad bin Zayed (MbZ) has already been [lobbying](#) in Washington for Mohammad bin Salman (MbS) the newly appointed Saudi Crown Prince and son of the current King to become the [next king](#).

Some argue that it even composed a deal going as such: MbZ would help MbS becoming King of Saudi, and in exchange MbS would support MbZ to go after Qatar. Al-Jazeera journalist Jamal Elshayyal [wrote](#) in the Middle East Eye (the UAE/KSA accuses of being funded by Qatar): “The UAE, which has been on a public relations and lobbying overdrive for several years now (as has been revealed by the leaks from the email account of their ambassador to the US, Yousef al-Otaiba), promised to deliver Washington's approval to MBS if he joined them in the war against Qatar.”

If Trump’s support for the Saudi side has been blatant, the other bodies of the US administration have been more [balanced](#), particularly the Pentagon and the State Department. Worth mentioning that it is [most likely](#) precisely because Trump is the actual White House resident that the UAE and KSA made this sudden move against Qatar, both being confident Trump’s support was already gained.

On the 5th of June a [first salvo](#) of six countries issued statements explaining that they were severing diplomatic relations with Qatar due to security reasons. It included Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, UAE, Yemen, Egypt and the Maldives. They were quickly followed by [African countries](#) cutting or downgrading ties with Qatar. Senegal followed the lead on the 7th of June. On the 11th of June both Djibouti and Eritrea also announced siding with the Saudi regime. Leading Qatar [to withdraw](#) its peacekeeping forces from the contested [Djibouti-Eritrea border](#) that have been opposing the two countries since 2008. Then followed Comoros, Gabon, Niger and Chad.

"Are you with us or with Qatar?" Saudi King Salman is reported to have asked Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif while the latter was visiting the kingdom amid tensions.

Since the very beginning Turkey and Iran have been inclined to supporting Qatar for various reasons, one by showing off military capacities in the country, thanks to joint training movements and a bill urgently ratified by the Parliament allowing the allocation of more troops on Qatari soil. The other by easing the UAE/KSA imposed blockade and channeling food in front of an intense international media coverage.

Maybe because of this Turkish’s stand on the matter, maybe also because President Trump requested the Saudi to help the Syrian Kurds, the PKK-linked Syrian PYD praised Saudi and severely criticized Iran and Qatar in a statement by Salih Muslim, co-president of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria on the 16th of June. If the PYD’s opposition to Turkey is not for being surprising of course, the sudden statement in the midst of the Qatar crisis seemed to have aimed at reinforcing the Saudi case, considering the Kurdish cause is very popular in the West. As [reported by Aranews](#) on the 17th of June: “Moreover, the official said there is an Iranian-Qatari-Turkish alliance to undermine the Kurds. “We have suffered from this and we resist it until now. This alliance invaded our homes and caused the

martyrdom of many since 2012,” he said. “We have suffered a lot of the policies of genocide and the denial of existence at the hands of this alliance.” The PYD official said that while Turkey is the executer, Qatar is the financier of the policy to undermine the Kurds in Syria. “This alliance with its tools is dangerous for all the people of the Middle East, and for all the humanity,” he said.”

On the 9th of June already, Kurdish politician Ilham Ahmed [said](#) that Kurdish forces were “ready to cooperate with Saudi”.

Kurdish parties in Iraq are divided which also impacts the Syrian Kurds. Talabani’s PUK is indeed in near frontal opposition with Barzani’s KDP on various issues that have skyrocketed recently with the [Turkish air-strike](#) of PKK and YPG bases in Mt. Sinjar and Karashoq in Iraq on the 25th of April. If PKK and allied denounced such an act, that led to death of five, the KDP Minister of Peshmerga Mustafa Sayid Qadir on its hand [published a statement](#) while condemning the attack also claimed it was the “result of PKK’s presence in and around Sinjar. PKK has been problematic for the people of the Kurdistan Region and, despite broad calls to withdraw, refuses to leave Sinjar” and calling for “PKK to withdraw from Mt. Sinjar and surrounding areas.”.

If the Saudi regime has been for long supporting the Iraqi Kurds and more particularly Barzani’s wing, it has nothing to do with promoting its cause of independence but rather driven by supporting the Kurdish’s opposition to Shia-dominated Baghdad that the Saudi sees as Iranian-controlled. Yet, the current crisis managed to bring competing Kurds under the same Saudi “umbrella”, for now.





On the 7th of June, two days after the first strike against Qatar, Massoud Barzani's ruling party in Iraqi Kurdistan (KRG), the KDP, announced that a referendum regarding the independence of the KRG would be held on the 25th of September 2017. As soon as the [official Twitter account](#) of Massoud Barzani announced the scheduled date for the KRG independence a flow of Saudi Twitter accounts praised the move. However this

does not prove that it is the official Saudi's position over the matter.

Both sides of this Gulf crisis are therefore engaging in a race aiming at growing their respective alliances. On this matter, the UAE/KSA side can count on much more openly supporting states, most of which are African but also few regional actors that have huge mediatic impact in the West such as the Kurds. On its hands, Qatar enjoys fewer but far more powerful allies with Iran and Turkey, that however suffer from a terrible reputation on the global stage and more particularly in the West. Another important fact is that if Saudi and the UAE can count on their allies not abandon their cause, Qatar is not 100% assured that Iran and Turkey will stick around for long. For example, it is not in Qatar's interest that this crisis be extended while it is in Iran's interest for the crisis to deepen.

### **THE LIST**

The first unofficial list of demands quickly emerged after the beginning of the crisis. Even if the official statements by the countries that targeted Qatar mentioned the funding of extremists, the ties the country is enjoying with radical groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and finally with Iran, the full catalog of incriminations against the country was yet to be officially put forward.

As early as the 7th of June, Al Jazeera journalist Faisal Edroos is credited to have published the ten demands on his twitter account:

1. Immediate severance of diplomatic relations with Iran,
2. Expulsion of all members of the Palestinian resistance movement Hamas from Qatar,
3. Freezing all bank accounts of Hamas members and refraining from any deal with them,
4. Expulsion of all Muslim Brotherhood members from Qatar,
5. Expulsion of anti-GCC elements,
6. Ending support for 'terrorist organisations',
7. Stopping interference in Egyptian affairs,

8. Ceasing the broadcast of the Al Jazeera news channel,
9. Apologising to all Gulf governments for ‘abuses’ by Al Jazeera,
10. Pledging that it (Qatar) will not carry out any actions that contradict the policies of the GCC and adhering to its charter.

The list was regarded as unrealistic and quickly discarded, for it did not emerge from an official body of any country opposing Qatar.

Then for the following weeks except the growing tensions between the different parties, no official demands have been provided to Qatar that saw itself isolated and criticized, for its tolerance and even assistance to extremism and terrorism, by many public figures around the Globe.

In an unexpected turn of events, the US State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert said on the 20th of June that “The more that time goes by, the more doubt is raised about the actions taken by Saudi Arabia and the UAE”. Adding “At this point, we are left with one simple question: Were the actions really about their concerns about Qatar’s alleged support for terrorism, or were they about the long-simmering grievances between and among the GCC countries?”

The Washington Post’s journalists Anne Gearan and Karen DeYoung [wrote](#) : “At a high-level White House meeting on the crisis Friday, officials expressed frustration at the failure of Saudi Arabia, the Emiratis and the others to present a promised list of their demands of Qatar. “It’s been two weeks,” said one senior administration official, who spoke Tuesday of the sensitive issue on the condition of anonymity. “We still haven’t seen this list.””

Three days later, the list finally emerged as [reported](#) by Associated Press and it goes as follow:

1. Curb diplomatic ties with Iran and close its diplomatic missions there. Expel members of Iran’s Revolutionary Guard from Qatar and cut off any joint military cooperation with Iran. Only trade and commerce with Iran that complies with U.S. and international sanctions will be permitted.
2. Sever all ties to “terrorist organizations,” specifically the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamic State group, 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 currently in Qatar and end any joint military cooperation with Turkey inside of Qatar.
6. Stop all means of funding for individuals, groups or organizations that have been designated as terrorists by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, Bahrain, the United States 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. 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.
12. Agree to all the demands within 10 days of it being submitted to Qatar, or the list becomes invalid. The document doesn’t specify what the countries will do if Qatar refuses to comply.
13. 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.

There are few very valid points on which Qatar should indeed be held accountable. The safe haven the country has provided to some of the most virulent extremist preachers such as the famous Muslim Brotherhood theologian Yusuf al-Qaradawi who for long has been able to freely and widely spread anti-Semitic, homophobic, sectarian, misogynistic discourses on Al Jazeera and treated like rock star by the authorities. The many so-called foundations or private entities whose funding ended up fueling the various groups wandering and scattering death on war-torn fields around the Globe, and that the Qatar tolerated on its very soil. The interferences of Qatar in its neighboring domestic affairs is also widely known. Though, on all that, it remains quite surprising that the accusation of such wrongdoings are emerging from countries that don’t hesitate using the [same tricks](#), only financing different entities yet still contributing in bringing instability. While the activists, NGOs and some other Governments across the Globe continuously accused Qatar and its peers of doing so for the longest time, yet always found themselves facing a silent wall at best or [outraged denials](#) coming from these countries.

There are some demands that Qatar will however be unable to comply with. Saudis and Emiratis know that very well.

## THE DEAD-END

First the closure of news channel Al Jazeera. The TV network has been precisely designed to breach the Saudi-led news consensus broadcasting from the region, and provides with another perspective controlled this time by Doha. It is an “intellectual” and “ideological” tool aiming at providing the country with some independence toward Saudi Arabia. Putting an end to the 1996-born channel would mean not being able to promote Doha’s interpretations and angles over the events shaking the World and cutting the country from a widespread audience onto which Qatar can exert influence.

Ending diplomatic ties with Iran is likewise a clear attempt by the UAE/KSA side to prevent Qatar from engineering any foreign relationships out of a GCC frame. Even if the demands state that “Only trade and commerce with Iran that complies with U.S. and international sanctions will be permitted”, the framework authorizing such trade relationships remains highly uncertain.

In January 2016 some international sanctions against Iran have been lifted leading Iran to aim at reaching its [pre-sanctions of output](#) levels of around 4,5 million barrels of oil per day. In September 2016, the [OPEC agreed](#) on new oil output cut at the [Algiers Accord](#), allowing Iran to raise its production up to 3,797 million barrels per day. In order to compare, Iraq facing a disastrous internal situation since the US-led invasion of 2003, was authorized by the accord to reach 4,351 million barrels a day. By February 2017, following an Iranian ballistic missile test, the [US Department of Treasury](#) issued new sanctions therefore portraying a very uncertain business climate with Iran. For example the sanctions led Iran [to slow down](#) the production of the “North Dome” (called “South Pars” in Iran) the world's largest offshore gas field it shares with Qatar. In April 2017, Qatar Petroleum’s CEO [Saad Al-Kaabi announced](#) that the company was “lifting its self-imposed moratorium on further development of the North Dome” which would allow Qatar to drastically increase its natural gas production capacities. The field alone accounts for 60 percent of the country’s export revenue. Considering Qatar is basing its “independence” thanks to huge amount of wealth it secures from gas production, and considering that the North Dome field accounts for almost all of Qatar’s natural gas production, the vagueness of UAE/KSA demand that forces Qatar to comply with “U.S. and international sanctions”, together with the fact that Qatar cannot anticipate Iran’s provocative actions, puts the country in substantial uncertainty regarding its gas industry and therefore its revenues. Thus, there is little doubt the country wouldn’t be able to agree the UAE/KSA request.

Likewise, terminating “the Turkish military presence currently in Qatar and end any joint military cooperation with Turkey inside of Qatar” would reveal itself as being difficult for Qatar to undertake. The Turkish presence in the country is not quite of news, as already by 2015 Turkish military were training in Qatar following [an agreement](#) signed in 2014. The fact that this Turkish presence suddenly became an issue for the UEA/KSA coalition speaks

volume about the making of the demands that obviously evolved from the crisis outbreak and the handling of the list itself, and is obviously the result of Turkey's involvement in the crisis.

One of the most striking demands is the payment of "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." Putting aside the "humiliating" request, the demand will prove difficult to even implement as the "loss of life" and "financial losses" will be impossible to clearly determine.

By itself the list of demands is fully targeting Qatar's policies "independence" and would ask Qatar to definitely abandon its decade long Foreign Policy and influence constructions across the Globe. The list aims at bringing Qatar into Saudi Arabia's lap, making it no more than a "docile province".

And finally the fact that Gulf countries coalition are requesting Qatar to agree the demands within 10 days raises questions about the real goal of the coalition. The ultimatum is so severe that many observers doubt Qatar will be incline to accept.

### **THE WARMONGER**

The risk of a military intervention is being made likely by the very "10 days" ultimatum. But there is another factor that comes in reinforcement of such claim.

The 21st of June's Saudi Royal Decree enacting the rise of Mohammad bin Salman (MbS), Saudi King's own son, within the kingdom's upper layers of command. As a Minister of Defense he did not hesitate to lead a coalition, composed of the several Arab countries and the whole GCC countries except Oman, to strike the Houthis rebels in Yemen. Since March 2015 the Operation Decisive Storm has been involved in the Yemen civil war and revealed itself not being a particular success despite the huge amount of military resources dedicated to it. The quite unpopular intervention has been stuck on the Yemeni field and reports of war crimes have been mushrooming ever since. The latest being an [AP investigation](#) on clandestine prisons "run by the United Arab Emirates or by Yemeni forces created and trained by the Gulf nation" together with a [Human Right Watch report](#) issued on 22nd of June putting forward similar claims.

Even if Saudi kicked Qatar out of the coalition early June, it doesn't prevent Qatar from any wrongdoings in the handling of the Yemeni war as it played a [key role](#) in the Saudi-led intervention.

The Operation Decisive Storm however brings to light a significant side of MbS's personality, who revealed being a ruthless war chief in a hurry and eager to prove his talents to appear as an intransigent leader both domestically and internationally. Yemen can therefore be understood as a test field for the newly appointed Crown Prince and a strong message addressed to regional partners and to the old Iranian opponent.



#### **Second Deputy Prime Minister**

Minister of Defense:

Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud

Born: August 31, 1985

Education: BA in law, King Saud University

Positions Held: Secretary General of the Riyadh Competitiveness Center; special adviser to the chairman of King Abdulaziz Foundation; adviser at the Experts' Commission of the Council of Ministers; special advisor to the governor of Riyadh Province; President of the Crown Prince's Court and Special Advisor to the Crown Prince, since 2013; Minister of State and member of the Cabinet, 2014-2015. Chief of Royal Protocol, January 23-April 29, 2015; special advisor to the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques and Minister of Defense since January 23, 2015. Named Deputy Crown Prince and Second Deputy Prime Minister on April 29, 2015.

The veil of [mystery surrounding MbS](#) has been jealously kept alive by the Saudi regime since his father's accession to the throne. His biography is short and until recently even his real date of birth was a secret. During the last couple of years, the media credited him to be sometimes 30, 31, 32 up to 35. [Rumors](#) even claimed he was barely 27 in 2015. His official biography as a member of the Saudi Council of Ministers didn't even have a birth date. It since changed, and he is now said to be born on the 31st of August 1985, therefore being 31 today.

Now uncontested "leader" of Saudi Arabia, the Yemeni intervention should resound as a warning to the regional powers that MbS is much capable of driving his country in another military field of operation.

Even if in May 2017, MbS is [credited with saying](#): "We will not wait until the battle comes to Saudi Arabia but we will work to have the battle in Iran rather than in Saudi Arabia", it remains highly improbable that the Saudi would frontally engage with Iran. However the determination of the Crown Prince could lead him to pursue his influence quest at Qatar's expense, thus a Saudi military engagement against the neighboring country should not be artlessly discarded.

#### **THE CARDS**

Yet Qatar still holds some major cards in its hand. Even if its current allies could reveal less incline to be mired into a direct confrontation with the powerful Saudi Arabia, the tiny peninsula possesses some leverage.

First of which is the US air base of [Udeid](#) that remains "the biggest concentration of US military personnel in the Middle East", and leading military position undertaking the war against the terrorist organization ISIS in both Syria and Iraq. There is also the [considerable influence](#) worldwide bought by its sovereign funds such as the Qatar Investment Authority. As Jane Kinninmont, a Gulf expert at the Chatham House think-tank [said in 2012](#): "There is a feeling that it needs a lot of allies. So Qatar pursues alliances both with larger countries and smaller ones that it can rely on in places like the UN general assembly."

The recent case involving some senior Barclays bankers illustrated this deep links between Western companies and Qatar and as [the Guardian](#) published on the 20th of June: "The SFO said the charges related to the two fundraisings the bank embarked on in June and October 2008 with two investment vehicles related to Qatar, including one used by the prime minister at the time, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jaber al-Thani, and a \$3bn (£2.3bn) loan advanced

to Qatar in November 2008.”

It comes along with funds provided to major US think-tanks, like the other [Gulf States](#) for that matter, such as the [Brookings Institution](#).

It is undeniable that Qatar will not bend without putting up a fight and that the country is already at work in order to gather as many support it can find on the Global stage. The media warfare has been engaged between the two sides and soon the international community – more accurately the leading Western powers, Russia, China and India – will most probably have to intervene somehow.

Last but not least, Qatar holds a precious mean of leverage thanks to the gas it provides to the UAE that for now will still flow [according](#) to Qatar Petroleum’s chief executive Saad Sherida al-Kaabi on the 18th of June saying "But if we cut the gas, it does great harm to the UAE and the people of the UAE, who are considered like brothers ... we decided not to cut the gas now." The Dolphin gas pipeline is credited to flow “2 billion cubic feet of gas per day to the UAE”. As Bloomberg’s journalist Anthony Dipaola [putted it](#) on the 8th of June: “When it comes to natural gas shipments, the United Arab Emirates needs Qatar more than Qatar needs the U.A.E.”

Another country that needs Qatari gas is Egypt, that also severed its ties with country, as “Egypt also looks to Qatar for a significant amount of its gas consumption, sourcing about 65 per cent of its liquefied natural gas (LNG) imports from Qatar, covering 10 per cent of its total daily consumption, according to Wood Mackenzie, an energy consultancy” [wrote](#) The National’s journalist Anthony McAuley on the 5th of June.

### **THE END -GAME**

Both sides can therefore count on strong assets and only the international community will be able to put an end to the current crisis. The drastic list of demand is by essence a game changer.

It could solely be a pressuring tool designed by the UAE/KSA alliance to frighten Qatar or it can be a real non-negotiable series of request. In both cases the alliance took a [serious risk because](#) if it reveals just being pressed against Qatar the peril posed by the country not to comply with it is huge and in that case the prestige and the full control of Saudi over the GCC will not fail to be durably weakened.

On the other hand, if Saudi is willing to military engage Qatar, the risk of the international community preventing it is likewise high and therefore the authority of the country over the GCC and the whole Middle East could be severely damaged.

However, if MbS will probably not directly engage Iran, the real target, it seems that the new regime wishes to raise tension with Tehran presumably in order to push the Iranian regime to make the first step toward confrontation. Recently the Saudi regime carried a [crackdown on](#)

[its Shia](#) population with the demolition of Shia town of “al-Awamiya's historic district on 10 May on Saudi eastern coast, with plans to tear down several hundred homes”.

This could aim at provoking the regional Shia community that is seen by the Sunni power as being “agent” of Iran and spark a sectarian crisis in the hope to force Iran to meddle and step in. However, the recent re-election of Rouhani as President of Iran, claimed to be more inclined to restore normal relationships with the international community, is said to have been a strong message by Iranian people who dismissed intransigent Iranian hardliners candidates supported by Ayatollah Khamenei ( like Ghalibaf and Raisi).

The message coming from Iranian people could therefore be understood as a will to downgrade sectarian tensions in the region and pursue the economic development of the country. Thus, it would be unlikely Rouhani’s Iran would undergo any frontal confrontation in order to protect the regional Shia community, and would keep on making sectarian public statements condemning the GCC regimes without truly stepping in. Yet, numerous reports are stating of a growing tension between President Rouhani and Ayatollah Khamenei, and as in June “Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, humiliated Rouhani in public, saying he should not polarise the society in the same way – in Khamenei’s opinion – that Banisadr did” [wrote Saeed Kamali Dehghan](#) in the Guardian.

Rouhani faces [virulent attacks](#) from the Iranian hardliners who obviously wish to weaken him in Iran and could use the coming sectarian crisis in order to highlight Rouhani’s “weak” Foreign Policy. The possibility of Rouhani being internally cornered by hardliners and forced to show military muscles in order to regain its legitimacy is not to be fully discarded.

In any way, the GCC in its current form, is dead. The trust – even if it has never been total - between the various countries composing the economic alliance and that [Riyadh was hoping](#) to turn into a “Gulf Union” in 2011, will never be regained once more. Obviously the relationship, between the UAE and KSA on one hand and Qatar on the other, has been irremediably broken. Yet, Kuwait and Oman might also have very well understand that they could be the next ones targeted by the alliances’ grievances and if they for now both try to mediate in the incumbent crisis, they might remain suspicious toward MbZ and MbS from now on.

Saudi putted its own survival in the balance – and with it, the one of the whole GCC – and only Iran is able to make some gain from the current crisis whether it takes days or years to be resolved.