

STATES OF MATTER

Gulf of bad blood

The Saudi organised boycott of Qatar spells a further unsettling of the geopolitics of a volatile region



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Fall through the floor Diplomats have been recalled; land borders to Qatar closed and all air and sea links to it shut down. Seen here are passengers stranded at Doha's Hamad International Airport AP/HADI MIZBAN

A few days after the Riyadh summit, Qatar's emir was reported to have addressed a military graduation ceremony where he decried the hardline towards Iran, questioned Trump's credentials, and wondered if he was really capable of charting a sensible strategic course. The remarks were published on the website of Qatar's official news agency, but erased amid claims of hacking. Television footage of the military ceremony revealed that the emir had not spoken at the event.

Saudi Arabia was not waiting for clarifications, allowing its own tightly controlled media to run a series of stories pillorying Qatar for breaking ranks in the struggle against extremism. The theological warriors were soon unleashed, with an open letter signed by all known male descendants of Mohammad bin Abdul Wahhab, the founder of the hardline Islamic creed that is official Saudi ideology. Without naming names, the letter accused a certain Arab emirate of falsely claiming Wahhabi descent and demanded that the 18th-century religious warrior's name be effaced from a mosque in its capital city.

Saudi Arabia and its satellites – Kuwait, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates – followed up with harsh measures, confounding in their abruptness. Diplomats were recalled, land borders to Qatar closed and all air and sea links shut down. Nationals of the three kingdoms living in Qatar were ordered to return and vice versa for all Qataris living within their borders.

The US State Department responded cautiously, urging the mitigation of the harshest sanctions. Trump had little problem though, in reversing sentiments expressed at Riyadh just days earlier and repudiating his own top diplomats. Qatar he said, had "historically been a funder of terrorism at a very high level". And then, in another spectacular reversal of logic, the US within days signed off on a deal supplying Qatar with \$15 billion worth of advanced combat aircraft.

As the confusion spread, Tehran was hit by two terrorist strikes targeting symbols of national prestige: the Iranian parliament and the mausoleum of Ayatollah Khomeini. The Islamic State militia claimed responsibility, but Iran had no doubt that the Saudis were to blame.

Two weeks after the Saudi move against Qatar, the US State Department confessed to being hopelessly confused about its intent or purpose. Pakistan was, in evident irritation at the slight inflicted on its Prime Minister and mounting worry of an aggravation of internal schisms, contemplating the withdrawal of General Sharif from his command post in the Islamic alliance. Only in Tel Aviv was there a sense of satisfaction. As a minister in Israel's right-wing government put it, the alliance with the Saudis was "suddenly breaking out of its dark confines and being showcased internationally".

Terrorism simply was what the US said it was

Terrorism was once the absolute evil against which every claim of allegiance to civilisation could be benchmarked. The term though had so many inflections that consensus was impossible and in matters of disputed interpretation, power was the final arbiter. Terrorism simply was what the US said it was.

Accidental US President Donald Trump travelled to Riyadh in Saudi Arabia in May, as part of his first official overseas visit, bending lower to receive the honours and baubles his hosts had showered on two immediate predecessors, and signalling a new belligerence towards tangled regional geopolitics. Reaffirming old alliances was the flavour of the visit and the leader of brittle ego returned the flatteries he received by mouthing the Saudi catechism on terrorism.

For Saudi Arabia, the occasion was one for reasserting its leadership over the monarchies in the region – all rich on petroleum resources but collectively less than a fifth its size. Beyond that came the greater ambition, of claiming global leadership over the faith of Islam. Deliberations with the US were followed in quick order, by a gathering of the potentates of the oil exporting monarchies and the still grander assembly of the US-Arab-Islamic summit involving over 50 countries.

A grand alliance of the faith has been a Saudi dream since it actively began military actions against Houthi rebels in Yemen. After initial reluctance, when it politely turned down an invitation to join the Yemen misadventure, Pakistan signed up to the grand plan by seconding its highly regarded former milit-

ary chief, General Raheel Sharif, to a lucrative post-retirement billet as commander of the Islamic Military Alliance.

Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif arrived in Riyadh with the expectation of an opportunity to address the summit, but remained part of the audience. There was further mortification for him in Trump's omission of any mention of Pakistan and his pointed reference to India as a terror victim.

It was clear that there were just two voices that really mattered. In Trump's words, the ultimate goal of the gathering was "stamping out extremism and providing our children a hopeful future that does honour to god". For an objective posed in such lofty terms, Trump had a rather narrow focus for his ire. Iran was for him, the epicentre of an "evil" that threatened to swamp the "good". It was in the Trumpian locution, guilty of a trifecta of evil, providing terrorism with "safe harbour, financial backing, and the social standing needed for recruitment". Its baneful acts had sowed a wide arc of chaos and bloodshed, and among its "most tragic and destabilising interventions" was the unending bloodshed of Syria, where its client regime had committed "unspeakable crimes".

Trump's speech identified Qatar, the operational base for the US Central Command, as a "crucial strategic partner". And then, in circumstances that remain murky but clearly hint at dark undercurrents and unstated agendas, all the solidarity just evaporated.