

Middle East engulfed by diplomatic chaos

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THE SMALL oil-rich peninsula of Qatar is at the centre of the biggest crisis seen in the Persian Gulf for 30 years, having been cut off by its neighbours, including Saudi Arabia and the UAE, due to allegations of its support for extremists. Although Qatar strongly denies these allegations, it is alleged that the country has provided funding for groups designated as extremists including the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas. The failure of Qatar to disassociate itself from Saudi Arabia's rival, Iran, also plays a part in the decision by the other Gulf States. The isolation of Qatar will have massive implications for diplomatic relations in the region, as the tiny state holds a disproportionate influence in the world due to its oil riches and position of importance in the Middle East. Elsewhere in the world, reaction has been a mixture of praise for this apparent sign that the Gulf States will not tolerate support for Islamic extremism, and caution that the move will only serve to destabilise this crucial region.

The Gulf States are seen as key actors in the fight against Islamic extremism and have been urged to do more by the west. The states that severed ties with Qatar have argued that the move is a step in this direction. It is no coincidence that the decision by Qatar's regional neighbours to isolate the country comes just weeks after the US President visited the Middle East. Trump urged Saudi Arabia to tackle "radical ideology", and this emboldened the Kingdom to carry out this move against its regional partner. Qatar maintain that there is no evidence that it is sympathetic to extremists, and argue that its isolation comes as a result of its attempt to act as a neutral state, particularly with regards to Saudi/ Iran relations.

These developments, which some have called the most alarming in the region since the Gulf War, have been met with mixed reactions in the west. Initially President Trump praised, and even took credit for the move. On 6 June, he tweeted that his visit to the region was "paying off". Later in the week he seemed to

retract this earlier support for the move, making a phone-call to King Salman of Saudi Arabia in which he urged the leader to ensure unity in the region. Qatar is an important ally for the west, with the US's regional airbase, Al Udeid, being in the country; a consideration which may have partly motivated Trump's change of heart.

Despite the US President's call for unity, the UAE has only hardened in its stance, and has even threatened to jail Qatari sympathisers. Qatar is largely dependent on its powerful neighbours and so the end to travel and diplomatic connections will have implications for the small state. For example, citizens have been stock-piling foods and flights through the regional hub of Doha, have also been heavily disrupted. This is a diplomatic crisis which has implications far beyond its epicentre of Qatar, or even the Gulf region. With Islamic extremism now being top of the agenda for countries in the west, many hoped that the Gulf states would be able to act as a restraint on such radical ideologies. Although this move by the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and others in the region has been justified as a move against extremism, it is likely that the isolation of Qatar will only serve to weaken the united front against Islamic extremism which is needed.



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