

American policy dissonance on the 2017 Gulf Crisis

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Abstract

Since the Suez crisis of 1956, the United States of America has been widely recognised as the dominant power in the Middle East. For sixty years, this domination has not only defined the regional balance of power, but it has also in some cases decisively shaped the internal politics of key regional states. Whilst contemporary U.S. influence (and interest) in the region appears to be in decline, no serious analyst can argue that the U.S. has lost the ability to shape key regional developments. In keeping with diplomatic norms, traditionally the U.S. has relied on its foreign policy establishment to formulate and implement its strategic policies in the region. The advent of Donald Trump and his peculiar brand of “arson” diplomacy threatens to undercut longstanding U.S. policy positions, notably the unwavering American commitment to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the smaller Gulf States. Whilst the U.S. establishment appears to be sufficiently resilient to major policy disruptions, the danger is that even minimal disruption resulting from unofficial presidential diplomacy can potentially produce regional instability.

Policy recommendations

- Small states such as Qatar should be prepared for a degree of U.S. policy upheaval in relation to the Gulf region during the Trump presidency.
- Recognise that U.S. influence (and interest) in the Middle East is on the decline. In this context, Trump’s declared desire to disengage from burdensome U.S. commitments in the region is not necessarily an aberration, but merely a blunt and acerbic expression of deep-seated American desires.
- The Gulf Cooperation Council states should act more independently of one another and diversify their arms supplies and alliances with a view to decreasing dependence on the U.S. in the long term.
- Encourage greater international involvement in regional security. This involvement can encompass both large international bodies (such as the European Union) and individual powerful states with an actual or potential global reach, such as Russia and China.
- Greater international involvement in regional security – in tandem with deeper indigenous security arrangements – can blunt the impact of future U.S. policy shifts or even a sudden loss of commitment.

Background

The rise to power of Donald Trump has caused surprise, anxiety and in some cases fear in geopolitical circles around the world. Trump's nationalist ideology has raised the prospect of the re-emergence of US ["isolationism"](#), marked by a gradual withdrawal of the U.S. from its global commitments.

This anxiety has been most evident in Europe where Trump's opposition to both the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and the European Union has raised fears of both greater vulnerability to external aggression (originating from Russia) and potential [disintegration from within](#).

With respect to the Middle East, Trump was critical of previous U.S. administrations on account of their instigation and perpetuation of intractable and unwinnable wars, in particular the war in Iraq. In keeping with his nationalist ethos, and as part of his campaigning strategy, Trump promised a withdrawal from the U.S.' commitments in the Middle East.

Campaign rhetoric notwithstanding – and in a conflicting and confusing turn of events - hitherto Trump has not initiated a major U.S. withdrawal from the region. In fact, he has [escalated](#) U.S. involvement in the proxy war in Syria ostensibly as part of a broader strategy to defeat the Islamic State (IS) group.

However, Trump has produced an apparent shift in U.S. policy by aligning American positions in the Middle East closer to that of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). For example, Trump shares the Saudi hostility towards Iran; in addition, he has [sided with Saudi Arabia](#) over the latter's political and economic blockade of Qatar. In addition, Trump is [fully aligned](#) with Saudi Arabia's position on Egypt, specifically Saudi's support for the Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi.

This article examines the prospect of U.S. policy dissonance in the Middle East in the context of divergent attitudes and approaches between the president and the American foreign policy community. The foreign policy community is understood to comprise the U.S. state department, U.S. intelligence agencies (principally the Central Intelligence Agency or CIA), and the Pentagon.

More specifically, the article examines the apparent divide between Trump and the U.S. establishment on the dispute between KSA and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on the one hand and Qatar on the other. This article argues that Trump is unique amongst modern U.S. presidents in so far as some of his attitude and positions are opposed by the entire U.S. policy-making establishment. Furthermore, this article argues that if left unchecked this gap can undermine regional security and by extension inflict substantial damage on U.S. positions and interests in the Gulf.

The Trump effect

Barely a year into his administration, Donald Trump's presidency is already proving to be one of the most controversial in living memory. On foreign policy, a striking feature of the Trump presidency has been a significant ratcheting up of tensions with two key U.S. adversaries, namely North Korea and Iran.

In regard to the latest Gulf crisis which erupted in [early June](#), Trump was quick to [take sides](#), by praising Saudi-led efforts to isolate Qatar. Trump's position came on the heels of a [speech](#) he made in Riyadh barely two weeks before the outbreak of the Gulf crisis, in which he not only praised Saudi counter-terror efforts, but went further in validating broader Saudi regional policy, notably in respect to the conflict in Yemen.

By [appearing to take credit](#) for the diplomatic, political and economic blockade of Qatar, Trump dissented from a long-established U.S. tradition of neutrality and mediation in the event of disputes and conflict between U.S. allies. Trump's position was all the more striking in view of Qatar's centrality to U.S. [military](#) and [counter-terror](#) posture in the region.

In the early days of the crisis there were fears that Trump's personal diplomacy ran the risk of seriously complicating the Gulf crisis on the one hand and potentially rupturing longstanding U.S. ties to Qatar on the other. In regard to the latter, the worst fears have not yet been realised inasmuch as the crisis – and Trump's incendiary role in it – has not adversely affected [Qatar-U.S. defence ties](#).

But the core of the crisis remains unresolved as the GCC core continues to embargo Qatar with a view to fundamentally altering the latter's foreign policy. This effort is led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, both of which appear to be determined to keep up the pressure on Qatar, even at the risk of undermining KSA's [internal security](#).

In recent months Trump has moderated his stance on the standoff, by default as opposed to by design, in so far as he is no longer talking or tweeting about it. Moderation by default notwithstanding, in view of the unresolved nature of the dispute, and taking into account the U.S. president's volatility and unpredictability, the risk of future aggravation cannot be ruled out.

What is also unclear is to what extent the U.S. foreign policy establishment (i.e. State Department, CIA and the Pentagon) can continue to contain – indeed to correct – Trump's penchant for parallel diplomacy. As the U.S. commander in chief, in theory Trump has the power to overrule the "expert" advice of the diplomatic, intelligence and defence communities.

Before addressing these central questions in depth, it is important to set out the foundational facts. Indeed, a comprehensive understanding of the pertinent issues require scrutiny of the deep background, notably the nature of the American relationships with both Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

The US-Saudi alliance

What is the nature of the U.S. alliance with Saudi Arabia? Exploring the nuances of this alliance helps to shed some light on the complexity of the U.S. position on the Qatar-GCC crisis. This is all the more important in so far as U.S.-Saudi relations have been described by some analysts as showing ["strains"](#) of late, largely owing to policy differences with the previous U.S. administration led by Barack Obama.

From an American perspective, the U.S.-Saudi alliance has been framed as the lynchpin of the U.S. position in the Gulf arena and more broadly as an important pillar of U.S. policy in the Middle East. From this vantage point, only the iron-clad alliance with Israel is more important to American strategic posture in the Middle East than the alliance with KSA.

The origin of the U.S.-Saudi alliance is infused with a heavy dose of mystique, as demonstrated by [historical accounts](#) of an alliance forged on the decks of USS Quincy cruising on Egypt's Great Bitter Lake. From a strategic point of view, the onset of the U.S.-Saudi alliance was principally an expression of the decline of the United Kingdom as the great power in the Middle East, and conversely it symbolised the rise of the United States as the region's pre-eminent power.

This alliance became all the more important following the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which removed another U.S. ally (the Shah) from the scene, only to see him replaced by an ideological regime deeply opposed to U.S.

interests in the region. It became stronger still during the Afghan “Jihad” of the 1980s, when the U.S. and Saudi Arabia (in addition to Pakistan) worked closely together to undermine the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. A major [unintended consequence](#) of this cooperation was the formation of the Al-Qaeda network which has been at the forefront of attacking both U.S. and Saudi interests for close to two decades.

Furthermore, the close bond between the two states has periodically proved inimical to KSA’s internal unity, if not national security. This came into sharp relief during the Kuwait crisis of 1990-91 when KSA hosted large numbers of American (and British) troops as part of a military plan to oust occupying Iraqi forces from Kuwait. The presence of American troops on Saudi soil was sufficiently controversial in conservative Islamic circles as to touch off the first wave of [dissent](#) in the Kingdom.

The U.S.-Saudi alliance was strong enough to survive the cataclysm of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, relatively unscathed. Whilst the passage of the “Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act” (JASTA) in September 2016 under the Obama Administration, appeared to have the potential to undermine U.S.-Saudi relations, hitherto this has not come to pass, not least because the White House can use its [veto](#) to blunt the legislation.

However, it has come under greater pressure in recent years, due to a number of geopolitical events, including the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in 2003, the U.S. reluctance to decisively intervene in the Syrian conflict, and last but not least the landmark nuclear accord with Iran in July 2015.

The Trump Administration’s pivot toward Saudi Arabia is [not so striking](#) in view of the decades-long U.S.-Saudi alliance. Nor does Trump’s [close bond](#) with Saudi Crown Prince

Mohammad bin Salman (MBS) necessarily constitute a radical departure from the norm. Starting with Franklin D. Roosevelt, and continuing with Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush and now Donald Trump, U.S. presidents have gone out of their way to lavish praise on Saudi leaders with a view to forging that all-important personal bond with Saudi Kings and Crown Princes.

What makes Trump *different* to his predecessors is his willingness to override the U.S. establishment in order to promote a specific policy or viewpoint. This is clear both in his immediate knee-jerk reaction to the Gulf crisis, in addition to his deployment of his son-in-law [Jared Kushner](#) as a personal envoy to Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, there are unconfirmed [reports](#) that Trump stands to benefit personally from his close bond with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

Trump’s close bond with MBS notwithstanding, the key question at this juncture is whether this unconventional U.S. administration can reverse the long-term trend of deterioration in U.S.-Saudi ties. Some analysts – particularly those biased toward the supposedly superior judgement of the “institutions” as opposed to the presidency – paint a picture of [continual decline](#), even with the advent of the Trump presidency.

Implicit in this argument is the belief that big geopolitical trends, and specific policy differences, continue to pull the U.S. and KSA apart. Another key inference is that the U.S. policy-making institutions – where *real* “expertise” on the KSA and the region supposedly resides – no longer have a high level of confidence as to the long-term durability of the Saudi regime.

U.S. attitude towards Qatar

Qatar’s emergence in the 1990s as an independent player in the Gulf arena has

posed a number of challenges to U.S. positions and policies in the area. Central to these challenges is Qatar's geopolitical profile as a "soft" power. Indeed, since the mid-1990s Qatar has built the foundations of its strategic profile and geopolitical reach on a range of cultural, educational and media enterprises.

In the cultural and educational field, the "[Qatar Foundation](#)", which was founded in 1995, symbolises Qatar's commitment to transforming into a regional, and in some cases global, pioneer in the fields of science, research and development, across multiple sectors.

In the media sector, the emergence of the state-funded Al-Jazeera broadcaster in late 1996, constituted a breakthrough moment in the region's bland and highly controlled news and analysis landscape. Through relatively independent reporting, and by presenting a broad range of views and analysis, Al-Jazeera created a regional, and indeed in some cases (as for instance on its coverage of terrorism) a global, media revolution whose repercussions are still unfolding.

Qatar's pioneering of high quality and relatively independent journalism would inevitably produce political consequences, one of which has been the apparent [inability of the United States](#) to fully come to terms with it. Indeed, the U.S. government found Al-Jazeera's coverage of the "War on Terror" objectionable ostensibly on the grounds that the Qatari broadcaster – or at least sections of it - was [too close to the al-Qaeda network](#). Critics quipped that the real reason was because the U.S. government was less than pleased with Al-Jazeera's objective coverage of the issue.

Another bone of contention has centred on Qatar's sponsorship of political Islam as embodied by the Muslim Brotherhood and its myriad offshoots. The U.S. intelligence community is instinctively wary of democratic

or non-jihadist Islamists, even though in principle the [CIA is opposed](#) to conflating political Islamists with jihadists.

There have been reports that a significant faction in the Trump Administration wants to [designate](#) the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) a terrorist organisation and subject it to a raft of sanctions. This is yet another indication that the Trump Administration is at odds with the U.S. intelligence community. If the MB is declared a terrorist organisation, such designation will bear negatively on U.S.-Qatar relations in so far as the latter [hosts MB leaders](#).

These challenges notwithstanding, the pertinent fact remains that the United States continues to maintain strong bonds with Qatar. Since establishing formal high-level diplomatic relations with Qatar in 1974 (marked by the arrival of the first U.S. ambassador), the U.S. has continually upgraded relations with the Emirate. Formal defence ties commenced in June 1992, as symbolised by the signing of a Defence Cooperation Agreement. This agreement has allowed the U.S. to build its [largest regional air force base](#) on Qatari soil.

Furthermore, Qatar is host to the forward headquarters of the U.S. Central Command, with U.S. troops stationed at the Al Udeid military base, located just outside Doha. The centrality of this base – and the wider American military presence in Qatar – to U.S. military operations across the region was underscored by the Pentagon's immediate reaction to Trump's anti-Qatar position. The U.S. Defence Secretary James Mattis met his Qatari counterpart in Washington D.C. only days after Trump's description of Qatar as "[funder of terrorism](#)", to finalise an [arms deal to the tune of \\$12 billion](#) centred on the purchase of F-15 fighter jets.

Although this deal was part of a broader arms purchase (reportedly worth \$21 billion) initially agreed at the end of Barack Obama's term in

November 2016, nevertheless it can be argued that by highlighting a key component of it immediately on the heels of Trump's anti-Qatar remarks, the Pentagon leadership was attempting to assert the *true* U.S. policy on Qatar.

The Pentagon's immediate corrective reaction to Trump's ill-considered attack on Qatar coincided with apparent disquiet inside the State Department over Trump's dissension from established U.S. positions. This was dramatically underscored by the decision of the U.S. ambassador to Qatar, veteran diplomat [Dana Shell Smith](#), to step down in the midst of the regional crisis. Although the State Department maintained that her departure was part of a "normal rotation" for career diplomats, Smith had tweeted critical commentary on the Trump administration before stepping down.

The confusion sparked by contradictory statements and positions on Qatar – which clearly set Trump apart from the establishment – led to growing calls in the American think tank community for the U.S. government to [clarify](#) its policy on Qatar. This confusion – and the resulting clamour for *clarity* – can be considered as the immediate or short-term consequence of Trump's dissension from established positions.

Trump Vs. U.S. Intelligence

Beyond the Pentagon and the State Department, there are strong indications that the U.S. intelligence community is opposed to some of Trump's basic foreign policy instincts.

The strongest indication to date that the Trump Administration is at odds with the U.S. intelligence community revolves around the unfolding drama on alleged Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections. Whilst the U.S. intelligence community has determined that the Russians

["interfered"](#) with the elections, by contrast Trump and his team attribute this intelligence assessment to "fake" news.

This has created an unprecedented situation where a serving administration has openly identified the intelligence "bureaucracy" as an [adversary](#). Needless to say, the intelligence bureaucracy is central to American foreign policy formulation and implementation. It is the intelligence community which supplies the raw data, trenchant assessment and expert analysis which inform policy-making.

On the Gulf crisis, the key question is to what extent (if any) is the Trump Administration at odds with the intelligence community? Needless to say, on account of the nature of their work, intelligence services do not habitually state their position on key policy issues. Absence of unequivocal statements notwithstanding, it is clear that tacit support from the intelligence community in part explains the Pentagon's forthright praise of Qatar's ["enduring commitment to regional security"](#) in the wake of Trump's anti-Qatari tweets. Put simply, we can make a strong conjectural case that absent backing from the intelligence community the Pentagon would be more circumspect in adopting an oppositional stance vis-à-vis a serving president.

That is not to say the U.S. intelligence community does not harbour any concerns in relation to Qatar. As stated earlier, the U.S. intelligence community, and specifically the CIA, is opposed to the Trump Administration's plans to designate the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organisation. However, there are indications that U.S. intelligence is concerned about Qatari attitudes to extremist groups in the region, and specifically to the [al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria](#).

However, these concerns do not appear to be serious enough to force the U.S. intelligence community to dissent from the military establishment's clear-cut and supportive

position on Qatar. Another way of framing the argument is that continuity of defence ties (and the strategic and security benefits which accrue from these ties) supersede intelligence-related concerns and political disagreements.

Furthermore, the Trump Administration appears to be at logger heads with the broader American policy establishment with respect to Saudi Arabia. There are growing [reports](#) of Trump's inner circle, led by his son-in-law Jared Kushner, effectively circumventing U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson by talking directly to Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman.

This unofficial diplomacy has centred on the most sensitive regional topics and has been [reportedly successful](#) to the point of creating the necessary conditions for America's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. Kushner made an [unannounced trip to Riyadh](#) in October 2017 – his third within a year – just before the declaration of intention to move the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, as well as before MBS's crackdown on ["corruption"](#). Therefore, by directly influencing the new Saudi strongman, Mohammad bin Salman, via Kushner, Trump has effectively bypassed official U.S. diplomacy.

Trump's personalised contacts with the new Saudi leadership has led him to [praise](#) their effort at ostensibly "combatting" corruption, which has taken the form of unofficially detaining senior members of the Saudi royal family and leading businessmen at the [Ritz-Carlton Hotel](#) in Riyadh.

By contrast, the U.S. State Department has urged Saudi authorities to stick to the rule of law and to prosecute alleged corrupt officials and businessmen in a ["fair and transparent"](#) manner. In this instance, the tone and approach of the State Department could not be more different from that of the U.S. president.

Implications of policy dissonance

The U.S. presidential system allows for an ideological foreign policy, and one that partially dissents from the consensus and advice of the American policy-making community. The best recent example is the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in March-April 2003, which was essentially driven by an ideological quest to remove Saddam Hussein with a view to "democratising" the region.

Moreover, the then U.S. administration of George W. Bush ignored the assessment of the U.S. intelligence community, which pointed to a lack of a credible Iraqi nuclear weapons programme. In fact, the Bush administration applied pressure on the intelligence community to produce "evidence" supportive of the administration's policy.

An important balancing point to consider is that the U.S. institutions – and the intelligence community in particular – often commit mistakes of commission and omission. Indeed, American intelligence has consistently [failed to predict the biggest geopolitical events](#), including the Iranian revolution, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The fallibility of the intelligence community notwithstanding, it is clear that in the absence of viable alternatives, the centrality of intelligence-led assessment to foreign policy cannot be eroded without incurring significant costs. Herein lies the danger of Trump's personalised approach to diplomacy.

More broadly, the nuances of the American presidential system notwithstanding, it is a mistake to compare Trump to Bush junior, or indeed to *any* modern American president. George W. Bush was not at odds with the entire U.S. establishment to the extent that Trump appears to be. In fact, Bush enjoyed the support of both the Pentagon and the State Department in his quest to topple Saddam

Hussein. It was only the U.S. intelligence community which was not entirely convinced of the case for invasion.

Conclusion

In view of Trump's estrangement from the establishment, the key question revolves around the potential impact of this rift on U.S. policy towards the Gulf crisis and wider regional issues. The answer lies in part on the extent of the push-back by the policy-making establishment, especially if key institutions (notably the Pentagon) feel that excessive U.S. alignment with Saudi Arabia threatens Qatar's national security.

There is already evidence of push-back as the U.S. establishment has been [unusually effusive](#) in reinforcing its commitment to Qatar's defence and security. Institutional resistance is likely to escalate if Donald Trump

secures a second term in office and continues to pursue parallel diplomacy.

In the final analysis, it is important to consider the U.S. election cycle and the fact that the ideological and policy excesses of one president are usually corrected by his successor. This cycle was evident in the transition from Bush Junior to Obama, and in turn from Obama to Trump. Through the electoral cycle – and the attendant rotation of elites – the U.S. system guarantees a degree of policy moderation consistent with the institutional interests of the American establishment.

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