



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Briefing

Human Rights in Qatar

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The rift between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Bahrain that erupted in June 2017 is the latest in the decades-long tension within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The official reasons given for the split included support for the Muslim Brotherhood and other political Islamist groups, the tone and coverage of the Qatar-backed Al Jazeera channel, friendly relations with Iran and Turkey, and financial support for troubling groups in Syria and other parts of the region. The boycotting countries [issued](#) 13 demands required of the Qatari government to resolve the crisis, which included ending support for various groups, shuttering Al Jazeera and other Qatari-funded news outlets, and ending alleged interference in the internal affairs of other countries. In many ways, the latest episode echoes the 2014 crisis between the same parties, but with far tougher demands and efforts to force Qatar's hand.

The disagreements among these parties are hardly new. For decades, Qatar has shown its willingness to defy regional leader Saudi Arabia and stake out its own policy positions in the Middle East and elsewhere. Much like the UAE, Qatar is a small but decadently rich state that uses its significant financial resources to punch above its weight in the political and diplomatic realms. But Qatar has shown a desire and willingness to demonstrate policy independence and even to confront Saudi policies to a degree not shown by the UAE or other GCC states. By establishing ties with groups like Hamas, the Taliban, and

opposition voices from Egypt and the GCC, Qatar has attempted to build credibility and carve out a role as an indispensable mediator in some of the world's most difficult conflicts. This has angered many of its neighbors and tenuous allies.

This continued to be case during and after the 2011 Arab uprisings, when Qatar initially distinguished itself from its Gulf neighbors by aiming to side with revolutionary actors and emerging new political forces. It used Al Jazeera as a tool to help [shape](#) narratives of the protests in several countries. Qatar showed public support for the cause of the uprisings, particularly in the republics that witnessed unrest: in Tunisia and Egypt its Al Jazeera network [coverage](#) was a key factor in the anti-regime protests; in Libya it was among the first to recognize the opposition National Transitional Council; in Syria it [led](#) initial anti-Assad campaigns; and in Yemen it broke with the GCC by openly [calling](#) for Ali Abdallah al-Saleh's resignation. As scholar Kristian Coates Ulrichsen has [described](#), in some cases Qatar managed "to align its support for the protection of human rights and democratic expression in a manner that resonates powerfully with the (western-led) international community."

A closer examination of Qatar's apparent support for democracy and human rights lays bare how hollow this commitment truly is. Its backing of the GCC-supported crackdown on Bahrain's pro-democracy movement in 2011 is the starkest example of the shallowness of its commitment to democratic values. Since 2011, Qatar has also [undermined](#) Libya's political prospects by supplying weapons in conjunction with Turkey and Sudan to groups in the country's west, while Egypt and UAE funnel weapons to the other factions, all in violation of a UN arms embargo. Additionally, Qatari [support](#) for violent rebel groups in Syria has exacerbated the conflict, and its backing of former Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi even as he became increasingly autocratic has raised serious questions about the country's intentions.

Domestically, Qatar's record of respecting human rights and universal values, for citizens and non-citizens alike, is troubling. A look at political rights in the country is alarming:

- The Emir continues to hold absolute executive power. Legislative elections for the Shura Council originally slated for 2004 have been repeatedly delayed despite promises. As it stands, the body's membership is entirely appointed by the Emir and it cannot propose new legislation.
- The government does not allow the establishment of political parties or politically oriented groups, and citizens currently have no ability to seek political changes. Freedom House since 1999 consistently has rated Qatar's political freedom a 6 out of 7, with 7 being the worst possible score. In 2017, Qatar scored just 26/100 on Freedom House's aggregate freedom index.
- Freedom of expression remains severely limited: all print media in the country is controlled by the royal family or those close to it; citizens can be jailed for criticizing the Emir; and critical websites have been blocked by the government. The case of Mohammed al-Ajami, a poet originally sentenced to life in prison after publicly reading a poem deemed critical of the government, is perhaps the most well-known example demonstrating how little dissent is tolerated. Al-Ajami was eventually pardoned after three years. Additionally, Reporters Without Borders [ranks](#) Qatar 123rd in the world in terms of press freedom.
- The U.S. State Department [noted](#) in its 2016 human rights report, "Although the constitution provides for an independent judiciary, the emir, based on recommended selections from the Supreme Judicial Council, appoints all judges, who hold their positions at his discretion. In 2015 approximately 55 percent of the judges were foreign citizens dependent on residency permits."

Qatar's extreme wealth allows it to continue distributing rents to its 260,000 citizens, and this has in large part [stifled](#) domestic calls for political reform and questions about the government's activist foreign policy. And while it might have the wealth to sustain the status quo, Qatar should take

advantage of the opportunity provided by its wealth to undertake real reforms. If it seeks greater influence in the region and to separate itself from the shadow of its neighbors, Qatar has an opportunity to demonstrate leadership to undertake reform at home and to set an example for the Gulf and beyond, but we've seen no inclination that it's willing to do so. Elections and loosened restrictions on political expression alone will not usher in significant changes, but they can serve as key opportunities for discussion about further democratic reforms and help Qatar regain at least some credibility.