

QATAR AND THE GCC CRISIS AND THE IMPACT ON SCHOLARSHIP ON THE GULF

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The June 2017 rupture in relations between Qatar and four regional states—Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Egypt—has added yet another layer of uncertainty to what already was a challenging environment for scholars who work in, and on, the Gulf States. It builds upon the April 2015 unification of security “blacklists” by the six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), a decision taken, ironically, at a meeting of GCC Interior Ministers in the Qatari capital, Doha. Just as it has become harder to maintain access to their region of study, the deep polarization of the Gulf crisis has left scholars and students unsure of how the “red lines” deemed impermissible for research have shifted. A zero-sum mentality that has taken root among regional leaders has further squeezed the spaces for independent research and critical thinking.

POLITICAL SCIENCE AND THE GULF

Over the past decade, there has been an explosion of scholarly interest in the Gulf States, driven partly by infusions of funding from GCC-based donors to centers of Arab and Islamic studies worldwide and partly by the rapid expansion of higher education institutions in the Gulf itself. Funding from the Gulf became important to universities struggling to cope financially in an age of austerity and budget-cutting in Europe and North America and kept the concentration of expertise in area studies alive in some cases. It also enabled a new generation of doctoral students and early-stage researchers and

generated superb scholarship that broadened immeasurably the literature on the Gulf States across academic disciplines.

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The increasing scholarly interest in Gulf Studies has, however, clashed with a decreasing threshold of tolerance for academic—or any other—criticism, however well-grounded or rooted in facts and evidence. Moreover, changes to the nature of scholarly engagement and academic analysis in free-to-access online platforms have intersected with the rise of the Gulf States as regional powers invested heavily in shaping the direction and pace of change in the post-Arab Spring Middle East. While this has created opportunities for scholars and students to engage in and contribute to public debate of timely and relevant issues, it also has landed many academics on security lists in individual countries and, since 2015, on the new nationwide list. When the GCC-wide list was announced, it was portrayed as a “unified terrorist blacklist,” but observers wondered if the definition would stretch to encompass critical voices. Sure enough, within weeks, reports began to appear of scholars and even students being denied entrance to countries they previously had no problems accessing.¹

THE QATAR CRISIS

It is against this backdrop that the crisis in relations between Qatar and three of its GCC neighbors has unfolded since June 2017. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt cut diplomatic ties with Qatar and imposed an air, land, and sea embargo on the movement of people and goods from their quartet of states.

As with nearly everything else in the crisis—which shows no imminent sign of resolution at the time of writing in early-2019—the terminology itself is bitterly contested. Qatari claims of a blockade are countered by quartet insistence that it is a boycott. The failure to agree on basic terms illustrates the chasm between two sets of narratives that appear diametrically opposed on most issues of contention surrounding the blockade/boycott: what caused it, the Gulf States' different responses to the political upheaval of the Arab Spring, and prospects for resolving the standoff.

From the very start, the blockade/boycott has been accompanied by online and media campaigns that have been vituperative at times and cast the dispute in “us and them” terms that has left very little common ground in between. In this polarized environment, academics who have been asked to give their views on developments or who have chosen to provide analysis have been placed into one camp or the other, often against their will, simply by giving their opinion on bitterly-contested events. Many have been subjected to ad hominem attacks on Twitter and other platforms in an attempt to devalue their credibility as “expert” commentators.

The dispute in the Gulf has several immediate and secondary impacts on scholars and scholarship. On a practical level, it has made travel within the region more challenging, although not impossible, at least for international visitors rather than regional residents. Although direct flights between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE, and Egypt no longer exist, there are not yet any documented cases of

people being denied entry for having the “wrong” stamp in their passport. That said, it is unlikely, in the current atmosphere, that scholars and students based in Qatar would feel secure traveling to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, or Bahrain, or that entry would necessarily be granted, especially for Qatari citizens. The bitterness surrounding the crisis has additionally taken its toll on longstanding relationships among previously close-knit circles of local academics, which may take years to recover, if even possible.

FIELD RESEARCH

Conducting field research in the Gulf is also getting more challenging, in part as it has become harder for academics to avoid being buttonholed as being on one side or the other, especially if they have spent significant time in any of the disputant states or been based at any of the branch campuses of U.S. universities in Qatar or the UAE. Such connections are more likely to attract “red flags” in security files and give rise to misunderstandings—willful or otherwise—like the 2018 arrest of British PhD student Matthew Hedges in the UAE. As policymakers and officials in Gulf States now feel surrounded by threats from within the region as well as beyond, there is a danger that information (and access) will become even more securitized and the range of sensitive “no-go” research areas expanded, even if they do not directly involve or relate to the Qatar rift.

The fact that Hedges was held in solitary confinement for five months before being accused of spying (for British Intelligence) and handed a life sentence sent shockwaves through the academic community of Gulf scholars and prompted an urgent reassessment of the risks of undertaking field research in the UAE.² While not linked directly to the Qatar crisis, the Hedges case, which ended in him being granted a presidential pardon after intense international pressure, became emblematic of how greater securitization of information had shifted the red lines in unpublicized yet consequential ways. The situation for scholars in the UAE—and probably also in Saudi Arabia—could

get still more challenging. In the wake of the Hedges fiasco in early December 2018, the UAE government announced changes to the penal code, which broadened the definition of classified information considered “secrets of the nation’s defense” to include:

Military, political, economic, industrial, scientific or social security-related information, or other information, which are unknown except to persons who have such a capacity by virtue of one’s position or status, and which the interest of the country’s defense requires that it remains undisclosed to others.³

Faced with this potentially all-encompassing definition, many scholars may choose to self-censor while they are in-country, as the threat of crossing the state-security threshold and getting oneself banned (and having that ban extended regionwide by the GCC) may act as a potent disincentive to publish anything that could be deemed—still less actually be—critical in any way.

CONFRONTING THE CHALLENGE

The crisis over Qatar has therefore added new layers of complexity to scholarly endeavor in the Gulf. One silver lining has been that the fracturing of the GCC has extended to its regionwide security blacklist. Qatar stopped following the GCC list soon after the blockade began in 2017, but it may yet be reinstated if or when the rift is resolved. Until that point, however, the polarization in Gulf politics has become so great that it may become increasingly difficult to undertake regionwide field research, carving Gulf Studies into silos that mirror, however

unintentionally, the two sides of the regional great schism.

This matters, because the changing political economy and political culture of GCC states is a topic of great academic—and policymaking—relevance, and analytical understanding of the deeper shifts underway in GCC state and societies will be limited if scholars’ access to the region continues to be restricted. Existing professional relationships among scholars will mitigate the geopolitical tensions that currently bedevil the field of Gulf Studies, and meetings at academic events beyond the region can keep open most avenues of communication and collegiality. For at least the foreseeable future, it is likely that the most productive forms of research collaboration may occur in “neutral” settings in Europe, Asia, or North America, although the political context in the U.S. under the current administration has added further hurdles that have made it more difficult for many scholars in the region to attend events in the United States.

Participation in multi-author research projects and/or edited volumes is another way that scholars are likely to overcome geopolitical obstacles and continue to engage with perspectives and scholarship that transcend regional divides. Maintaining such ties is critical to ensuring that the crisis over Qatar does not place additional stress on the field of Gulf Studies, leaving open the possibility that conditions improve in the future, however unlikely that may seem at present.

¹ ‘GCC to Have Unified Terror Blacklist; KSA Efforts Hailed,’ Arab News, May 2, 2015.

² ‘MESA Board Statement on Deteriorating Security Conditions for Researchers in the UAE,’ November 15, 2018.

³ Samir Salama, ‘UAE Widens Scope of Penal Code to Fight Corruption,’ Gulf News, December 5, 2018.