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A Message from Concerned Businesspeople of the Arab World Lift the Siege of Qatar

The Saudi-led campaign to isolate Qatar needs to end before it causes lasting damage, not just to Qatar, but also – inevitably – to all of the Gulf countries and much of the broader Arab world.

At issue are some pointed differences between the Qatari leadership and its counterparts in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain. Those differences are significant, but the details are much less important than the fact that this is a family dispute. All of the main “antagonists” share not only culture, language, faith, and (until recently free-flowing) borders, but also membership in both the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), as well as similar histories and monarchical traditions. Most importantly, their populations (along with those of fellow GCC members Kuwait and Oman) are intertwined by marriage at every level, including ruling families.

As a result of this closeness, hurting one member of the “House of the GCC” hurts all of its brethren by extension, with deleterious impacts on tens of millions of GCC citizens, plus millions of official residents, many of whom have been serving Gulf societies for many years, even decades. In addition, since the wealth and generosity of most GCC countries is so important to the economic development of less fortunate Arab countries, anything that unnecessarily reduces that wealth means fewer family resources available for sharing with poorer cousins. All members of the family have a duty, therefore, to resolve the impasse before its side-effects start making themselves felt further afield – and to do so in a manner befitting of brothers and sisters.

Siblings disagree from time to time, but they remain siblings ALL the time, which means that the only appropriate mechanism for resolving their differences is dialogue. If all parties commit to peaceful negotiations, as the government of Kuwait has been trying to bring about, any disagreements can be settled without the threat of escalation, preserving both GCC and broader Arab unity, as well as the dignity and sovereignty of each individual state. Absent such dialogue, the danger is that punitive measures can only cause the number of disagreements to grow, widening the gap between the two sides and making it still more difficult to defuse the situation.

That is precisely what has happened: what is effectively a non-military siege of Qatar has quickly reached alarming proportions, including air, land, sea, and even postal embargoes that have separated children from their parents, flouted the rules of organizations like the International Air Transport Association, cost businesses across the GCC enormous sums of money, undermined the country’s food security, and imposed severe hardships on thousands of cross-border families by undermining their basic civil and human rights. In fact, by some measures, not since the Berlin Blockade – widely regarded as one of the most dangerous periods of a decades-long Cold War between mortal ideological rivals – has a civilian population been subjected to such harsh measures in peacetime.

This is not how siblings resolve their differences. Siblings are open and honest with one another, and when they disagree on a few particular items, they never forget that their shared interests are far more numerous and incalculably more important. In the case of the GCC family, the one overriding factor is that much of the region has been blessed with virtually bottomless deposits of oil and natural gas. Some GCC countries have exhausted much of their reserves, but several still derive mammoth revenues from these resources, and the benefits flow across borders, both within and beyond the Gulf.

This wealth has made it possible for the peoples of the GCC to achieve incredible feats of industrialization and modernization, and there is enough left to fund similar rates of development for generations to come. Above all else, then, the purpose of the GCC is to guard its patch: to ensure that nothing and no one reduces either the collective or the individual ability of its members to protect what is theirs, reap the rewards of a bounty bestowed on them by God himself, and spread some of the lucre to their friends and allies.

Around the world, virtually all friendly governments and multilateral organizations have stated their belief that dialogue is the only way for the GCC to go. Other countries in the region have had to make difficult choices over whether and how to back one side or the other, declare themselves neutral, or just keep their heads down and hope the entire mess goes away soon. Even churches in Qatar, Lebanon, and other parts of the Arab world are praying for a speedy and peaceful resolution of the dispute. If that does not come about, the purpose of the GCC may well be academic because the current fractures will tear it apart, much to the detriment of all concerned.

In such an environment, the government of Kuwait is to be commended for having undertaken a mediation effort despite the risk of alienating some or even all of the parties. And thankfully, there are signs that the effort is already having a positive influence: some of the countries enforcing the blockade on Qatar have announced exceptions for humanitarian reasons, offering hope for families facing a host of draconian punishments, including forced separations. This is an important first step, and the officials responsible for these exceptions deserve respect for doing the right thing in difficult circumstances.

These initial results prove the tactical value of dialogue, and pressing on with it can only serve to reduce tensions and enlarge the scope for discussion. The greater that scope, the more likely the interlocutors are to recognize the strategic necessity of reconciliation – and of eschewing similar confrontations in the future.

The Saudis and those who have sided with them have a lot to gain by lifting the most onerous restrictions in short order. The suddenness and severity of the isolation campaign have left no doubt that they are serious, so now a decisive step toward reconciliation would demonstrate good will to both Qatar and the international community.

However long it takes to end the siege of Qatar, there is no substitute for talking things over: all members of the GCC have too much to win if they rely on dialogue and diplomacy – and too much to lose if they don’t.

Concerned Businesspeople of the Arab World is an informal gathering of individuals dedicated to a peaceful resolution of the Qatar crisis. Its members have extensive business experience across the Middle East, including the Gulf, and are united by one thing above all else: recognition that if the crisis deepens, no one in the GCC can win, and everyone will lose.

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