

EXCERPTED FROM

Isolating Qatar:  
The Gulf Rift,  
2017–2021

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ISBN: 978-1-955055-15-4 hc



LYNNE RIENNER PUBLISHERS

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Boulder, CO 80301 USA  
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This excerpt was downloaded from the  
Lynne Rienner Publishers website  
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# Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vii
Introduction	1
1    Qatar and the Gulf Rift: Small States in the International System	3
2    The Making of Modern Qatar	17
3    The Emergence of a Regional Player	35
4    Al Jazeera and Qatari Soft Power	55
5    The Boycott Begins	75
6    Qatar Responds	93
7    The World Reacts	117
8    The End of the Rift	145
9    How Did Qatar Prevail?	167
<i>Bibliography</i>	175
<i>Index</i>	185
<i>About the Book</i>	191

# Introduction

**In June 2017, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt** stunned the world when they announced a comprehensive boycott of the small Gulf nation of Qatar. Trade and financial links were severed; diplomatic offices were emptied; airspace was closed. The boycotting nations expelled Qatari citizens and ordered their own citizens to leave Qatar. The action was ostensibly to punish Qatar for its alleged support for terrorism, its intervention in other Arab states' internal affairs, and its sponsorship of the outspoken Al Jazeera news network. Given the huge discrepancy between Qatar and its antagonists in land area, population, arms, and other traditional measures of power, it seemed that disaster loomed for the small but fabulously rich nation.

But the disaster for Qatar never came. Instead, the nation's leaders deftly used its enormous wealth and extensive reserves of soft power to nullify the effects of what soon came to be called the Rift. In fact, by the time the Rift ended in January 2021, Qatar appeared to be stronger, more economically secure, more confident, and more assertive than it had been when the crisis began. The events of the Gulf Rift crisis call into question many cherished notions of international relations theorists, especially about the role of small states in the modern international system. The prominence of national interest as a guide to nation-states' actions and the extent to which nation-states are willing to subordinate those interests to the goal of international organization also bear rethinking as a result of the Rift.

In this volume I examine the events of the Rift and the challenges those events present to a proper understanding of the realities of international relations in the twenty-first century. I begin with an examination of existing theories about the place of small states in the global political system and

the potential role of international organizations in that system. Chapter 2 then summarizes Qatar's history both before and after independence, showing that defending its national interests—often by balancing its relations with more powerful states, but without making binding commitments—has been a hallmark of Qatari foreign policy for centuries.

A sea change came to Qatari foreign policy with the ascension of Emir Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani in 1995. Chapter 3 chronicles Qatar's rise to a position of global influence seemingly beyond its power. Hamad used an imaginative mix of foreign policy tactics to achieve security and promote Qatari soft power. Chapter 4 discusses a major part of Qatar's rise to global prominence, which was the appearance of the Al Jazeera television network, which has also given rise to some of the most bitter recriminations directed at Qatar and Qataris.

In Chapters 5 through 7, I discuss the years of the Rift itself. Chapter 5 examines the events of June 2017, when the Rift occurred and when the full extent of the effort to isolate Qatar became known. In this chapter I point out some glaring omissions in the Rift nations' actions toward Qatar. Chapter 6 describes the actions that the Qatari government and people took to counter the effects of the Rift. Qatar's enormous wealth plays a major role in the story, but the sedulous efforts of the government to promote Qatari nationalism, even among the country's huge expatriate community, may have a more long-lasting effect.

In Chapter 7 I turn to the global reaction to the crisis. Here I demonstrate that, far from embracing a global or regional focus, most nations saw the Rift as an opportunity to embrace and pursue their own interests. Not only did the Rift nations fail to convince potential partners of the truth of their accusations against Qatar, but they also failed to spur much effective action even among those nations sympathetic to the Rift nations' goals. Chapter 8 tells the story of the end of the Rift, which came in January 2021. Since most of the principals involved in the negotiations ending the Rift cited the key role of the outgoing Donald Trump administration, efforts by US officials receive considerable attention. A concluding chapter returns to the questions raised at the start and assesses the long-term impact of the Rift on the region, the world, and the study of international relations.