

**Egypt**

**Saudi Arabia**

**Bahrain**

**Qatar**

**U.A.E.**



**NORTHWESTERN  
UNIVERSITY  
IN QATAR**

# **International Coverage of Qatar During the Blockade**



## International Coverage of Qatar During the Blockade

### Introduction

On June 5, 2017, four nations, led by Saudi Arabia and joined by Egypt, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates, broke diplomatic relations with their Gulf neighbor, the State of Qatar, and began a land, sea, and air blockade. Triggered by a hacked website at the Qatar News Agency in May and almost immediate media coverage from that date forward and especially after the blockade itself, what emerged was a high profile geopolitical crisis that engaged major powers, including much of the Arab world, the United States, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and others. The dispute was a serious breach for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations and set off a series of demands amid efforts to resolve the conflict.

What emerged was truly an information war defined by issues of cyber security and the heavy use of social media as well as the dissemination of false news. Much of a massive and well-funded public relations campaign led to especially vehement one-sided coverage in the nations, which were party to the dispute.

While coverage in Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E. was particularly vitriolic, coverage in Qatar was more measured in an apparent desire by the country to present a unified and resolute face linked to denials of any wrong doing which the blockading parties had charged.

International media was much less predictable since news worthiness was the main driver of coverage, linked to national self-interest. The coverage was fueled by active information, public diplomacy, and propaganda efforts aimed at swaying the international news coverage. Adding to the drama were demands from the blockading nations that included their insistence on the shuttering of Al Jazeera, which is based in Qatar and has a global footprint. Charges that Qatar was fomenting terrorism were denied as the United States, a longtime Qatari ally, wavered in its support after a summit in the Saudi capital where President Donald Trump entered the fray with a tweet that was in conflict with longstanding policy and the views of his two cabinet secretaries, the secretaries of state and defense, who pointed to the value of a U.S. air base in Qatar, the largest of

its kind in the Middle East. As new parties became involved, notably Iran and Turkey, this was fodder for greater news coverage and international interest in the dispute. Thus, the trajectory of the siege as seen from the perspective of international media as well as the topics that commanded attention is of considerable continuing interest as the crisis moves into its eighth month as this report is written.

To better understand the nature of the international news coverage of Qatar during the ongoing diplomatic crisis in the Gulf, Northwestern University in Qatar commissioned a media monitoring firm, Meltwater, to collect data on coverage of Qatar during the period between May 21 and September 25, 2017. The data are limited to specific markets and specific topics and do not presume to paint a comprehensive picture. The intent is to inject hard numbers into what can sometimes be an unwieldy and subjective discussion, and hopefully to give a big-picture sense of how, when, and where Qatar featured in the international media during the blockade.

Areas covered: The study analyzed articles from 20 of the largest English-language publications (by digital reach) based in three leading markets for English-language publishers: the United States, United Kingdom, and United Arab Emirates. A list of the news publications can be found at the end of this report.

Data extraction/articles analyzed: To cast the widest net possible for coverage of Qatar, articles were included for analysis if they used the word “Qatar” in the headline or lead paragraph.

Time period of coverage analyzed: The period begins the week of May 21, 2017, the week that the Qatar News Agency was hacked and distributed false quotes from Qatar’s Emir—the moment largely considered the instigating event for the blockade which was imposed June 5, 2017. The period ends September 25, 2017, the week following the United Nations General Assembly session in New York. The timeline extends into December 2017 as the GCC nations convened at a summit convened by the Emir of Kuwait.

At this date, no conclusion can be reached about the consequences of the coverage or the impact it might have. A cursory view suggests that the blockade has ignited and embraced topics that ranged from the Hajj to the World Cup, Donald Trump’s tweet, and the involvement of Iran and Turkey. This study is presented as a preliminary discussion paper, first introduced at a meeting of the Qatar Media Industries Forum in October 2017. Much gratitude to Robb Wood, NU-Q’s former director of external partnerships, for his leadership on the study and to Meltwater for gathering the data.

**Everette E. Dennis**

*Dean and CEO*

*Northwestern University in Qatar*

January 2018

## Timeline (2017)

**May 24**

Qatar's state-run news service, Qatar News Agency, is hacked.

**June 5**

Blockade begins when Saudi Arabia, the U.A.E., Bahrain, and Egypt sever ties with Qatar.

**June 23**

Four blockading nations issue a set of 13 demands.

**June 24**

Qatar rejects the 13-point demand list.

**July 17**

The Washington Post breaks story revealing that the U.A.E. was behind hacking of Qatar News Agency.

**July 21**

His Highness Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, Emir of Qatar, addresses the nation on TV.

**August 17**

Saudi Arabia reopens the land border with Qatar to facilitate the annual Hajj pilgrimage.

**August 24**

Qatar restores ties with Iran.

**October 23**

United Arab Emirates hires a U.S. firm to launch an anti-Qatar campaign.

**October 25**

Qatar and Russia sign military agreements.

**September 18**

Snapchat blocks Al Jazeera in Saudi Arabia.

**September 19**

His Highness Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, Emir of Qatar, addresses the opening session of the United Nations General Assembly; meets with U.S. President Donald Trump.

**December 5**

Kuwait hosts the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) summit.

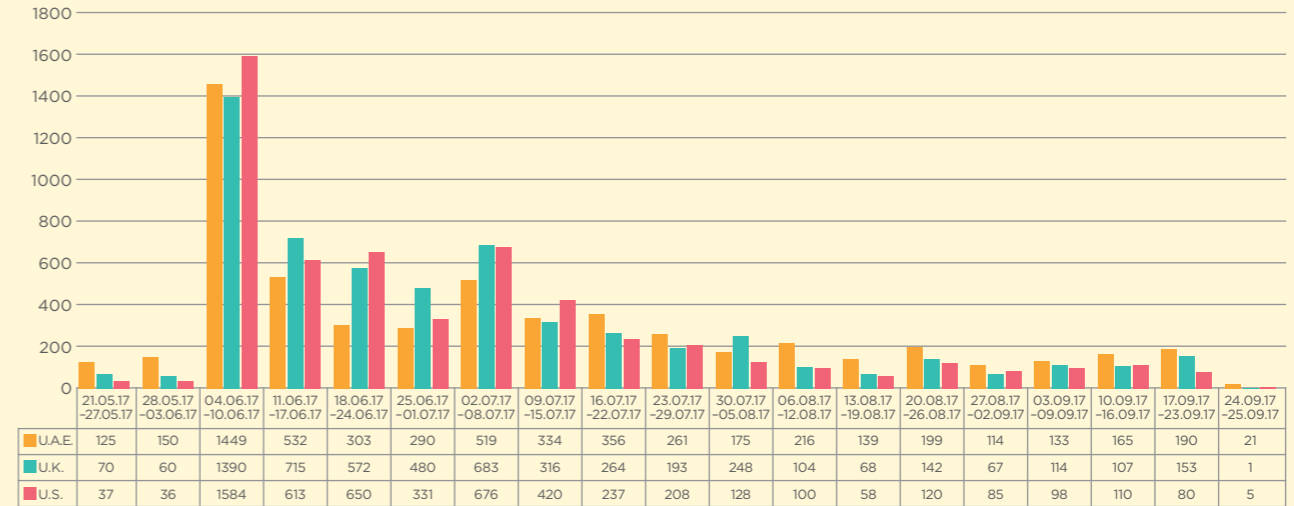
## Volume of Coverage

This chart shows the overall volume of articles covering Qatar each week during the period of analysis. The week of the June 5 imposition of the blockade sees a spike in coverage of Qatar. In most weeks analyzed, U.A.E. publications covered Qatar more frequently than U.S. or U.K. publications. A notable exception was in the four-week period following the blockade, in which U.A.E. publications covered Qatar significantly less frequently than their counterparts in the U.S. and U.K.

## Weekly Coverage

(Top 20 English Language Publications in the U.A.E., U.K., and U.S.)

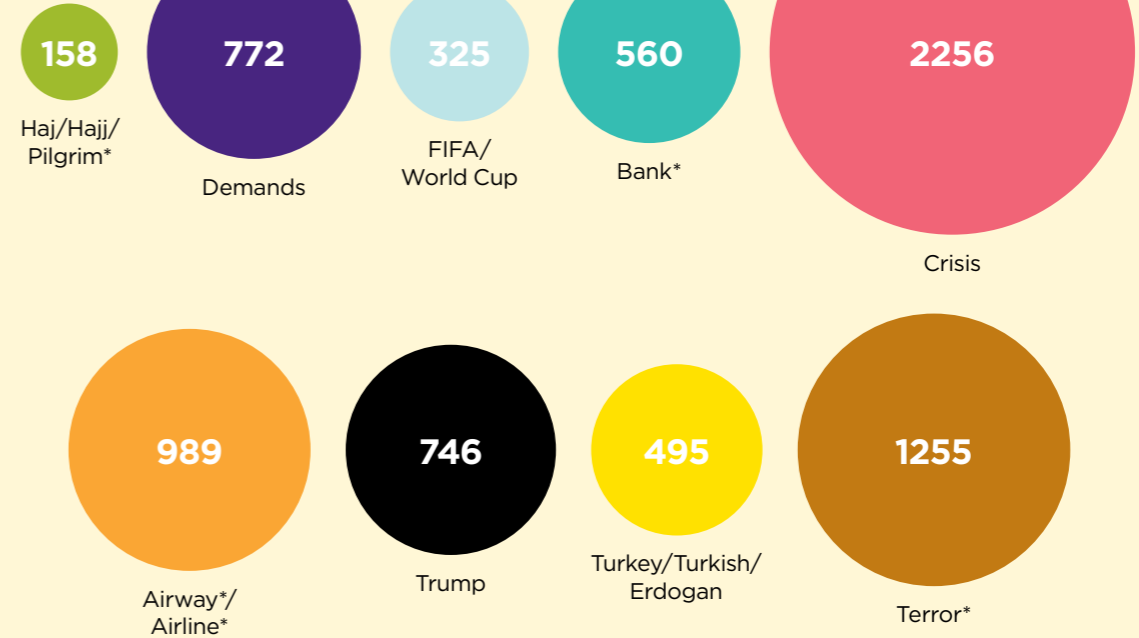
Volume of news articles containing the word 'Qatar' in headline or lead paragraph



## Key Topics

Each week, articles containing the word “Qatar” in the headline or lead paragraph were analyzed to identify common topics associated with coverage of Qatar. These are the key topics of interest that appeared frequently alongside Qatar in leading publications in the three markets covered. The term “crisis” was used universally, while coverage patterns of other topics such as “airline,” “terror,” and “Turkey” varied across markets.

### Key Topic Frequency



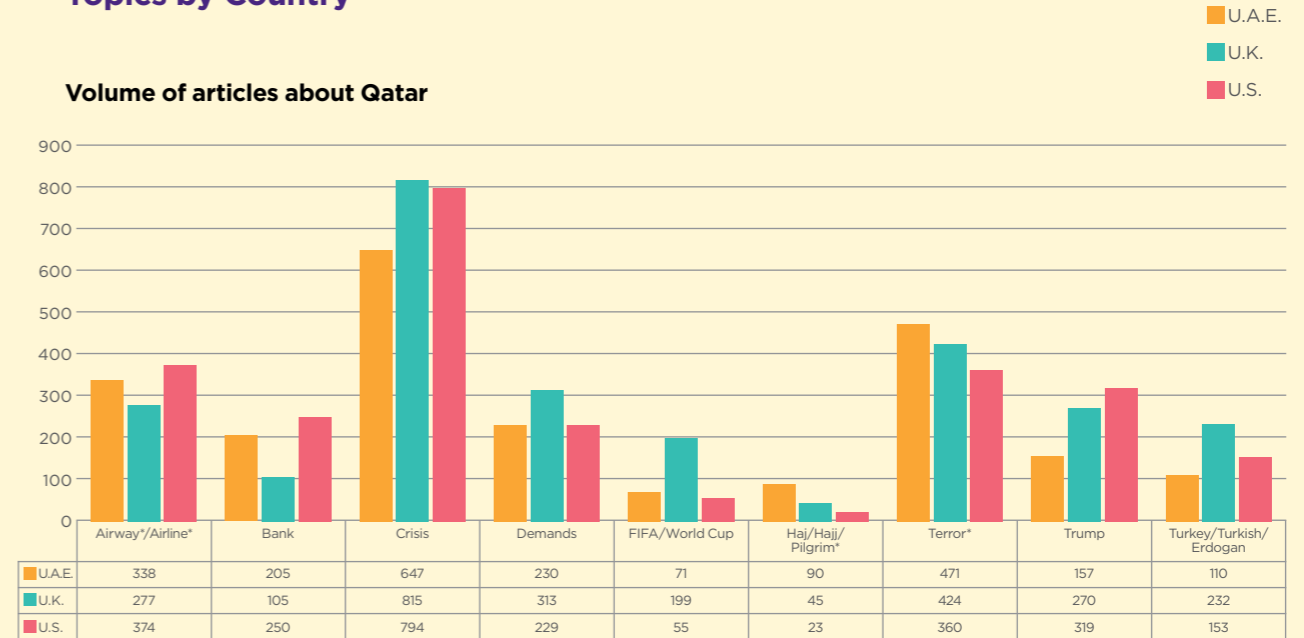
Frequency denotes the number of articles containing the corresponding word in headline or first paragraph.  
\*Represents multiple variants with the root word

## Topics by Country

Coverage of each of the key topics between May 21 and September 25, 2017, varied by country. The U.A.E. made less use of the term “crisis,” but more use of the term “terror” than did the U.S. or U.K. U.S. publications contained the most coverage of the airline industry over this period, while paying very little attention to the flurry of diplomatic and PR activity related to the pilgrimage to Mecca. The U.K. paid significantly more attention to Qatar’s hosting of the 2022 World Cup than the other markets.

## Topics by Country

Volume of articles about Qatar

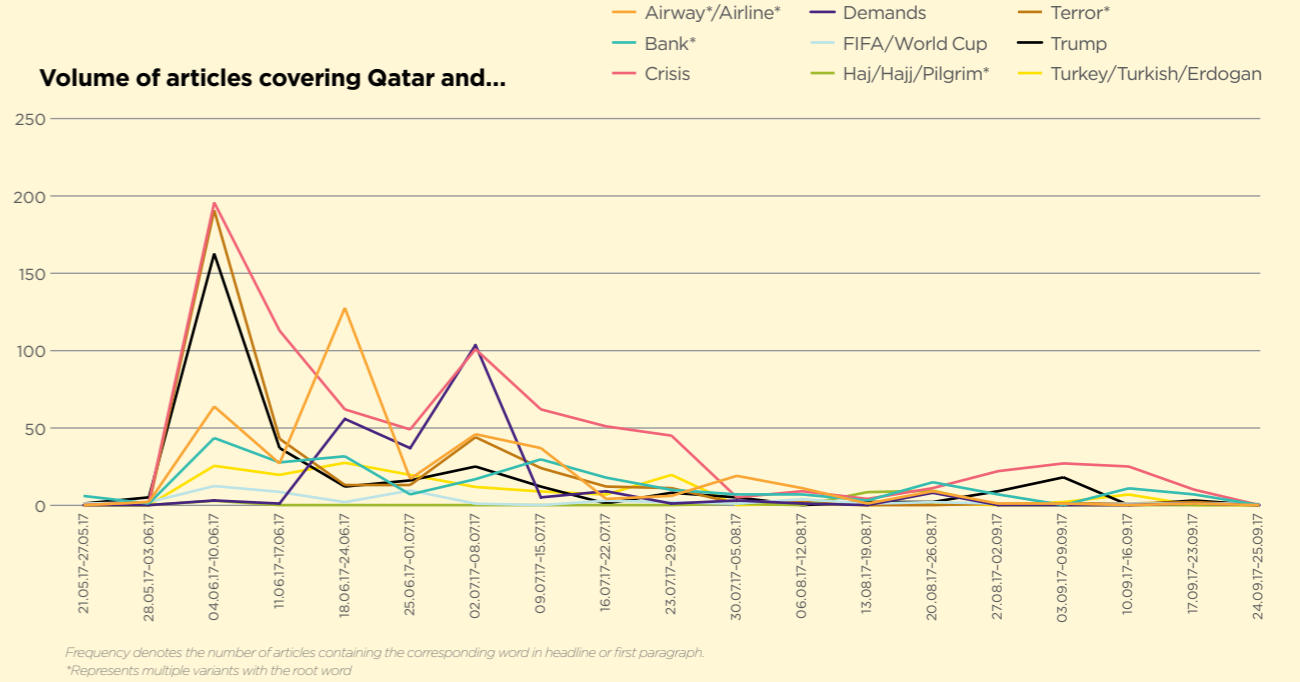


*Frequency denotes the number of articles containing the corresponding word in headline or first paragraph.  
\*Represents multiple variants with the root word*

## Topic Trends by Country—U.S.

On June 5, leading publications in the United States covered the sudden announcement of the blockade of Qatar alongside terms “terror,” “crisis,” and “Trump.” As the blockade progressed through the summer, more attention was paid to coverage of the airline industry and to the demands being made by the blockading countries.

## Topic Trends by Country—U.S.



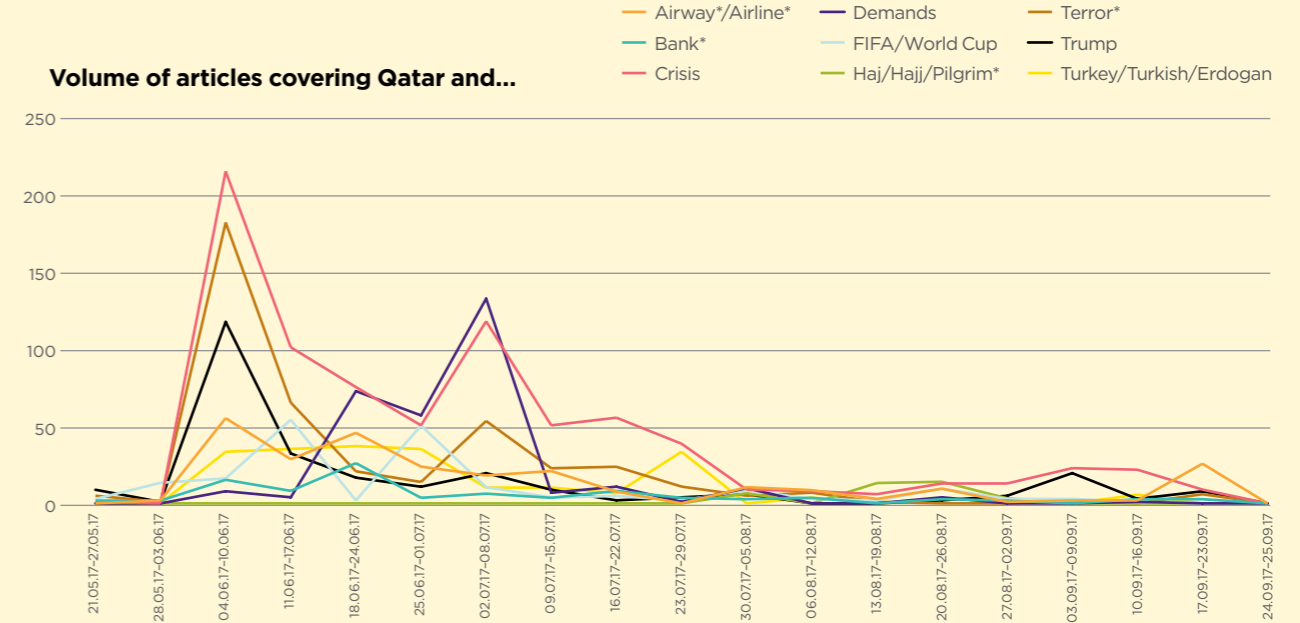


## Topic Trends by Country—U.K.

Similar to the coverage in the United States, coverage in the United Kingdom focused on the sudden announcement of the blockade of Qatar alongside terms “terror,” “crisis,” and “Trump.” As the blockade progressed through the summer, more attention was paid to coverage of the airline industry and to the demands being made by the blockading countries.

## Topic Trends by Country—U.K.

Volume of articles covering Qatar and...

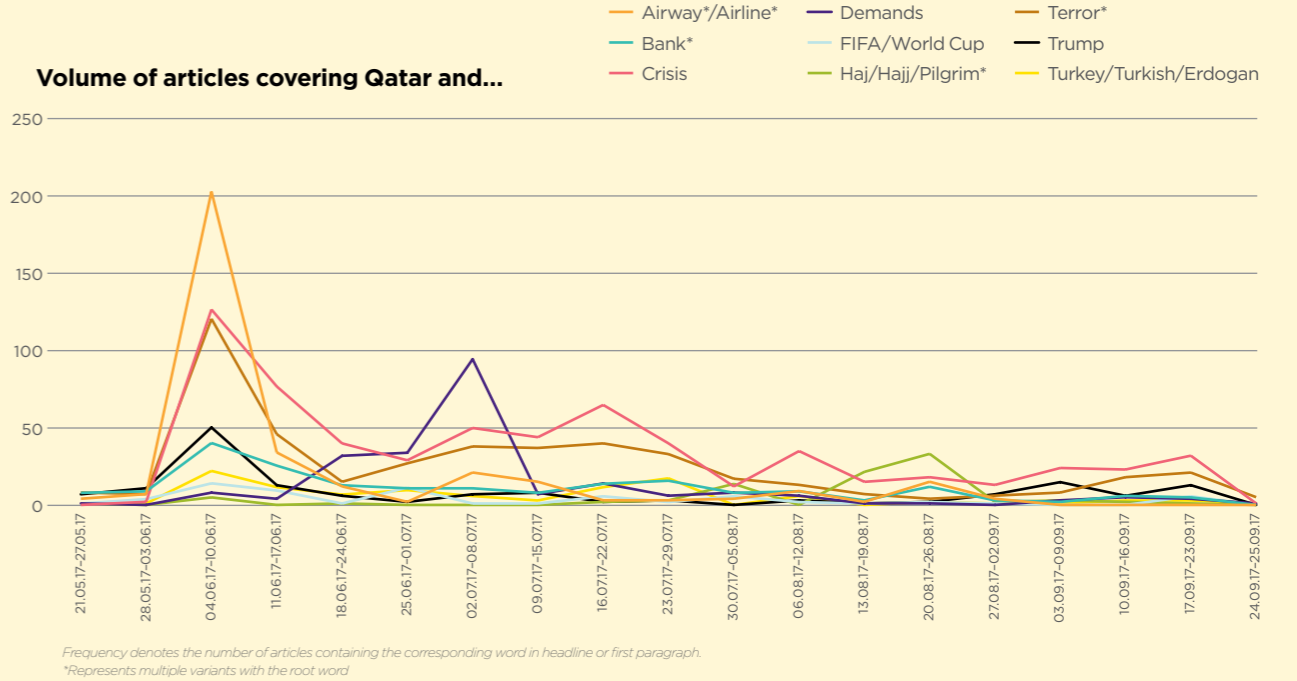


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## Topic Trends by Country—U.A.E.

Coverage of the blockade in the U.A.E. differed from that in the U.S. and U.K. in a number of significant ways. The effect on the airline industry appeared prominently at the start, as Doha and Dubai were, until that point, close trading and travel destinations. The demands of the blockading countries dominated coverage in the weeks following the imposition of the blockade. For two weeks, the diplomatic discussion of the Hajj pilgrimage was the most salient topic.

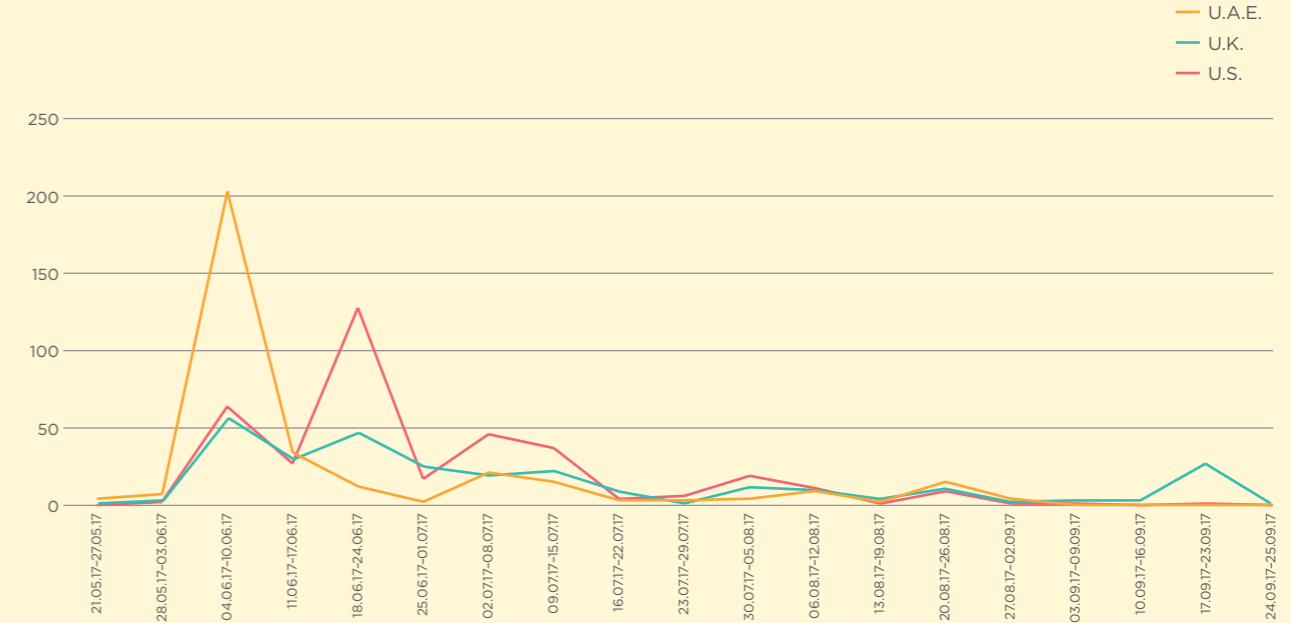
## Topic Trends by Country—U.A.E.



## Theme Trends—Airlines

The blockade of Qatar had a significant and immediate effect on common daily travel between Doha and Dubai. This was reflected in the prominent and instant coverage of the airline industry by U.A.E. publications.

### Theme Evolution Over Time—Airway\*/Airline\*

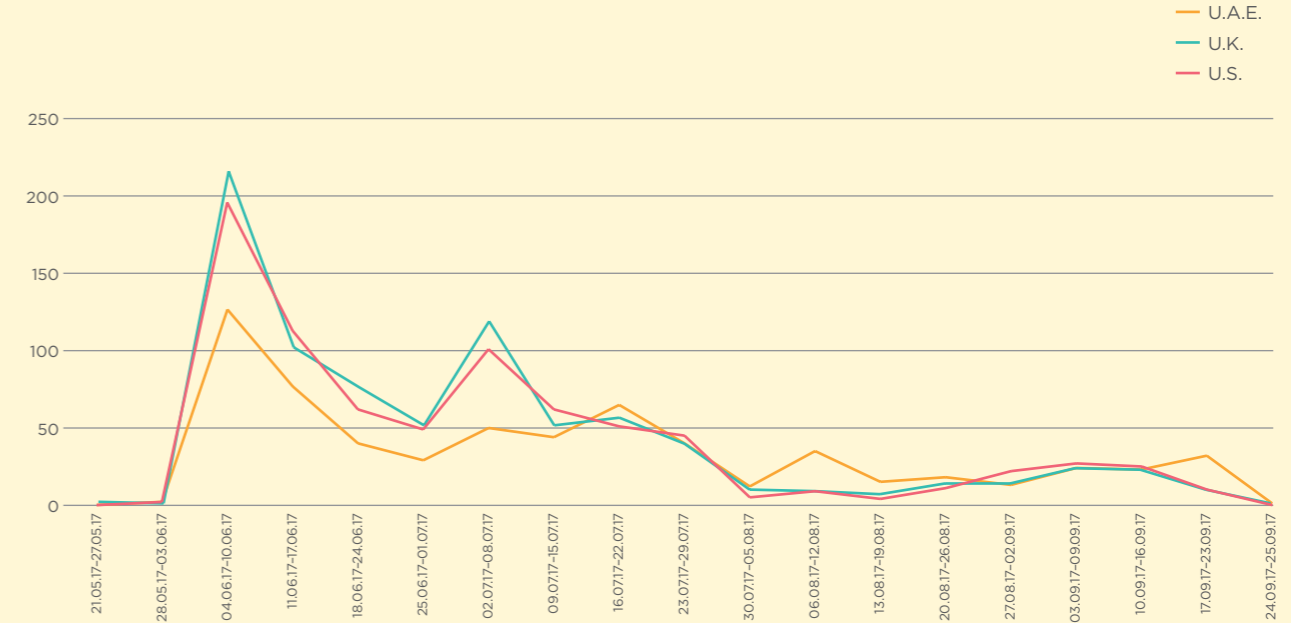


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## Theme Trends—Crisis

The U.S. and the U.K. tended to use the intense term “crisis” when covering Qatar over this period. Publications in the U.A.E., one of the countries involved in the conflict, used the term significantly less.

## Theme Evolution Over Time—Crisis

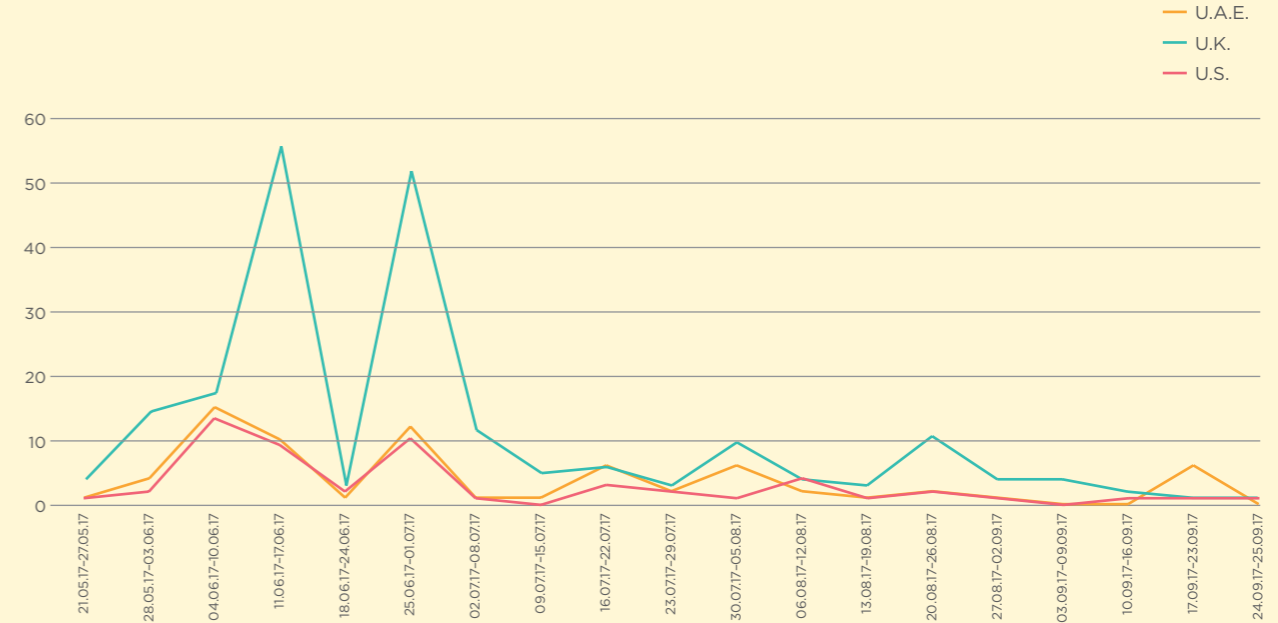


Frequency denotes the number of articles containing the corresponding word in headline or first paragraph.

## Theme Trends—FIFA/World Cup

Top publications paid more attention to Qatar's hosting of the 2022 World Cup than its counterparts, especially in the weeks following the imposition of the blockade. This is the period when the demands of the blockading countries were being discussed intensely. U.K. publications had been critical of Qatar's handling of the 2022 World Cup before the blockade had begun, and there was some speculation that the U.K. might win a bid to host the 2022 games if FIFA were to retract Qatar's right to play host.

## Theme Evolution Over Time—FIFA/World Cup

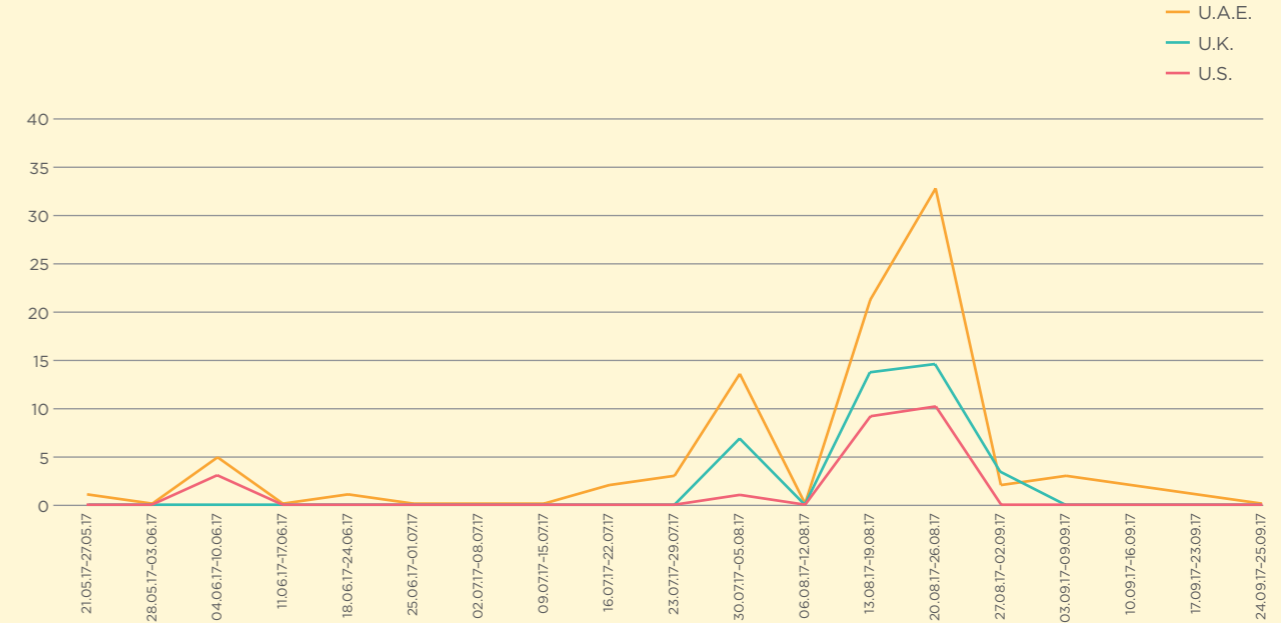


Frequency denotes the number of articles containing the corresponding word in headline or first paragraph.

## Topic Trends—Hajj/Pilgrimage

In August, Saudi Arabia announced a deal to allow Qataris to cross the land border for the purposes of pilgrimage to Mecca. However, the deal was made to feature a Qatari who was not part of Qatar's government. This was widely seen as an attempt on the part of the blockading countries to undermine the Qatari government. Publications in the U.A.E., one of the blockading countries, covered the incident significantly more than publications in the U.S. or U.K.

## Theme Evolution Over Time—Haj/Hajj/Pilgrim\*

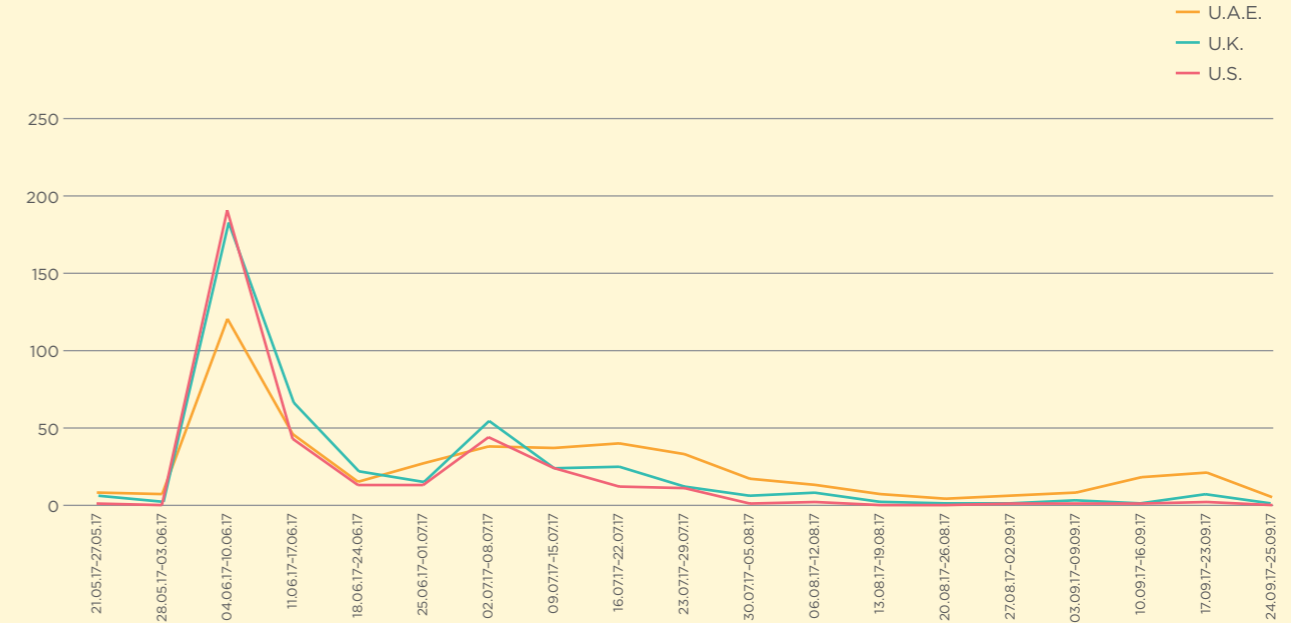


*Frequency denotes the number of articles containing the corresponding word in headline or first paragraph.  
\*Represents multiple variants with the root word*

## Topic Trends—Terrorism

Although the blockading countries cited support for terrorism as one of the key complaints against Qatar, it was the U.S. and U.K. publications that used terror as a key term at the outset. At the outset, publications from the U.A.E., a blockading country, cited terrorism less frequently than its Western counterparts.

### Theme Evolution Over Time—Terror\*

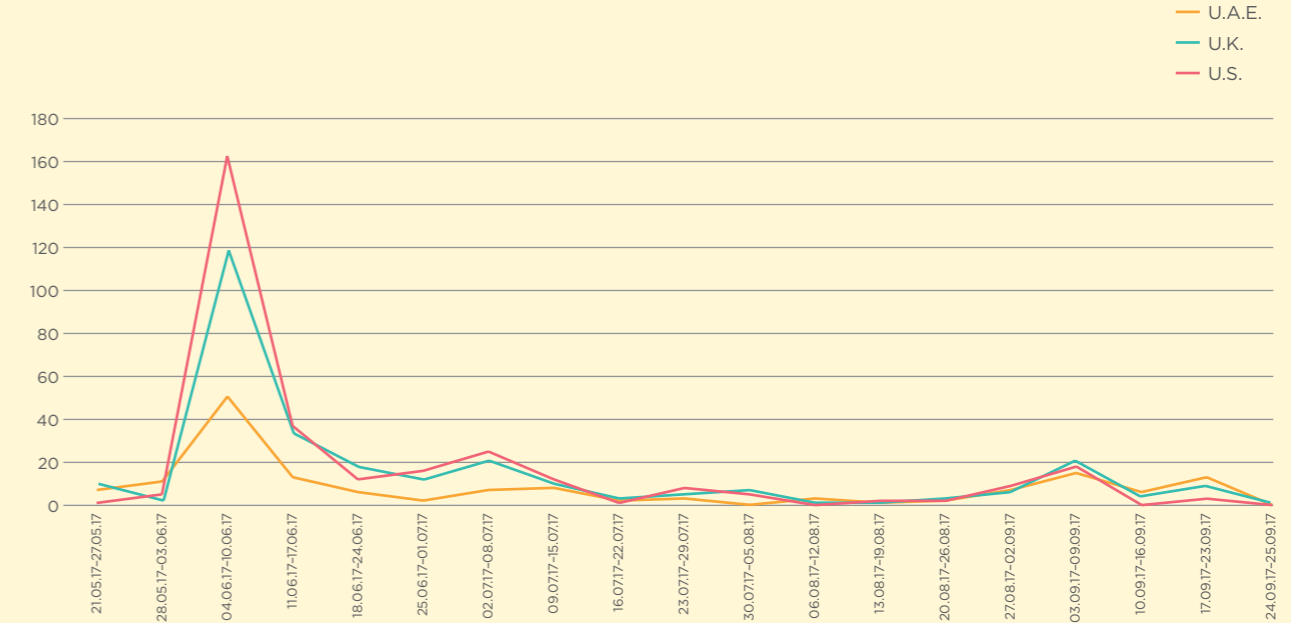


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## Topic Trends—Trump

The blockade of Qatar was imposed only weeks after U.S. President Donald Trump visited Saudi Arabia. Once the blockade was imposed, President Trump tweeted support for the blockade. U.S. publications, and to a slightly lesser extent U.K. publications, frequently cited Trump in discussion of the blockade at the outset. U.A.E. publications paid significantly less attention to Trump's role in the conflict.

## Theme Evolution Over Time—Trump



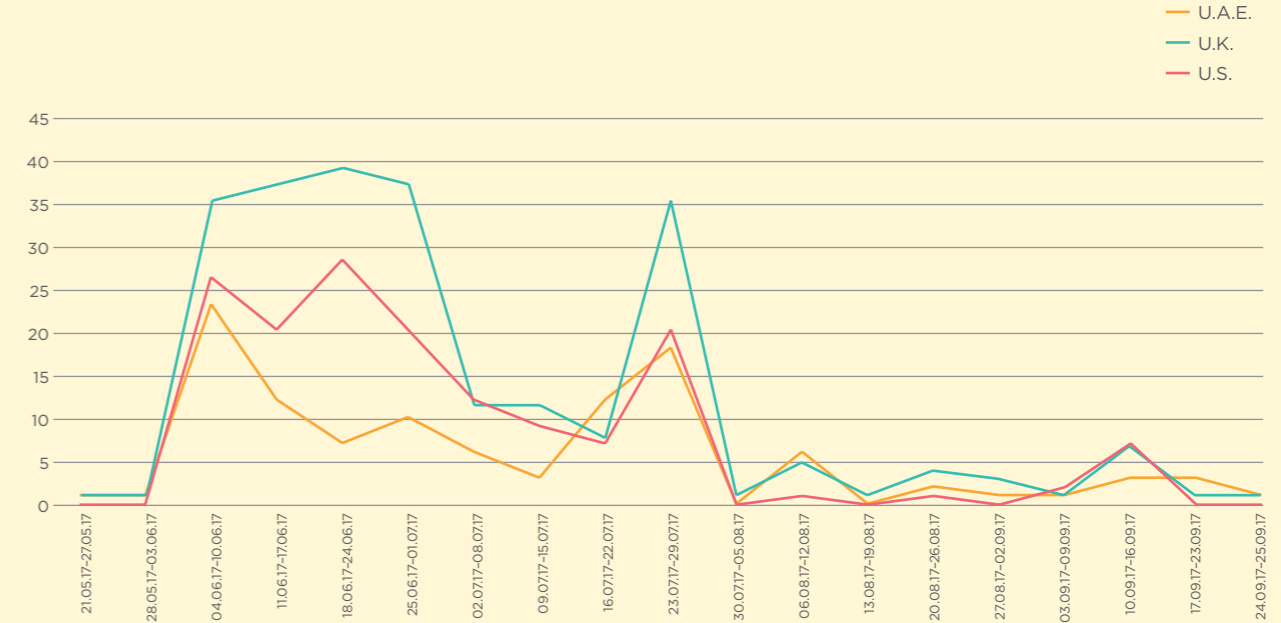
Frequency denotes the number of articles containing the corresponding word in headline or first paragraph.



## Topic Trends—Turkey

Turkey's role in the conflict between Qatar and the blockading countries has been closely watched in diplomatic circles. While Turkey's involvement did not receive a high volume of coverage in major publications, leading U.K. outlets appear to have been more attuned to the subject than either the U.S. or U.A.E.

## Theme Evolution Over Time—Turkey/Turkish/Erdogan



*Frequency denotes the number of articles containing the corresponding word in headline or first paragraph.*

## Articles

Articles analyzed for the study were from the following English-language digital publications:

### U.A.E.

Gulf News  
The National  
Khaleej Times  
Al Arabiya English  
Sport360  
Emirates 24|7  
ArabianBusiness.com  
Zawya [EN]  
StepFeed  
AMEInfo  
MSN UAE  
What's On Dubai  
Lovin Dubai  
ShortList Dubai  
Gulf Business  
Popsugar Middle East  
UAE Interact  
Emirates Woman  
Hotelier Middle East  
The Gulf Today

### U.K.

Daily Mail Online  
The Guardian  
The Observer  
The Telegraph  
The Independent  
Mirror.co.uk  
Express.co.uk  
BBC News Northern Ireland  
International Business Times UK  
The Economist (eClips Web)  
MoneySavingExpert.com  
Sky Sports  
The Blog—Huffington Post  
ITV.com  
The Register  
London Evening Standard  
BT.com  
Sky News  
Yahoo! News UK  
Western Telegraph

### U.S.

BuzzFeed  
The Huffington Post  
Forbes  
The Washington Post  
CNN  
Fox News  
USA Today  
Bloomberg  
Business Insider  
Yahoo! Finance  
Time Magazine  
Chron.com  
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