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 shutting 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 coverage of 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.

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Dean and CGS
Northwestern University in Qatar
January 2018
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 13
Qatar says any talks to shut down Al Jazeera will remain off the table.

June 23
Four blockading nations issue a set of 13 demands.

June 24
Qatar rejects the 13-point demand list.

July 13
His Highness Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, Emir of Qatar, addresses the nation on TV.

July 17
The Washington Post breaks story revealing that the U.A.E. was behind hacking of Qatar News Agency.

July 21
Qatar rejects the 13-point demand list.

August 17
Saudi Arabia reopens the land border with Qatar to facilitate the annual Hajj pilgrimage.

August 21
Qatar rejects the 13-point demand list.

August 24
Qatar restores ties with Iran.

August 28
Saudi Arabia says customs officials will begin processing passengers at Rafah Crossing.

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.

October 23
United Arab Emirates hires a U.S. firm to launch an anti-Qatar campaign.

October 25
Qatar and Russia sign military agreements.

December 5
Kuwait hosts the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) summit.

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.

November 14
Kuwait …
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.
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

- Ha/Haj/Pilgrim*: 158
- FIFA/World Cup: 772
- Bank*: 325
- Crisis: 560
- Airway*/Airline*: 2,256
- Demands: 989
- Trump: 746
- Turkey/Turkish/Erdogan: 495
- Terror*: 1,255

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>U.A.E.</th>
<th>U.K.</th>
<th>U.S.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Airway/Airline*</td>
<td>338</td>
<td>255</td>
<td>437</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bank</td>
<td>277</td>
<td>635</td>
<td>699</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crisis</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>470</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demands</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIFA/World Cup*</td>
<td>229</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>471</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haj/Hajj/Pilgrim*</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terror*</td>
<td>471</td>
<td>424</td>
<td>360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trump</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey/Turkish/Erdogan</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Frequency denotes the number of articles containing the corresponding word in headline or first paragraph.
*Represents multiple variants with the root word.
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.
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.
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.
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.
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.
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.
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.
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.
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.
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.
## 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
- National Public Radio
- Los Angeles Times
- CNBC
- AOL.com
- CNET.com
- New York Post
- NBCNEWS.com
- The Atlantic

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