

“IS THE MIDDLE EAST BEING 'QATAR-IZED'?”



SUMMARY OF A ‘MIDDLE EAST FORUM’ WEBINAR WITH DANIELLE PLETKA



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Danielle Pletka is a distinguished senior fellow, and formerly vice president, of foreign and defense policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI). Before joining AEI, she was a senior professional staff member for the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations.

Note: Daniel Pletka represents the views of the right-wing neo-conservatives who have a hardliner view concerning US-Arab and in particular US-Gulf relations. Nonetheless, she believes that the US interests are served by having a presence in the Persian Gulf (i.e., no retrenchment) and that the Gulf states have no real option apart from the US as no other party can deal with their issues of security. This is the kind of view that widely debated and needs to be monitored by its advocates in Washington.

INTRODUCTION

Qatar manages to walk the balance beam between powerful actors, maintaining friendly relationships with both the United States and Iran, and efforts to punish the small emirate for its double game have failed repeatedly. This success has made it a model for some of its neighbours, with the Persian Gulf currently in a process of what might be called 'Qatar-ization.'

In this MEF webinar, Daniel Pletka spoke about the kind of forces that have combined to accelerate this shift – something that US adversaries such as the Islamic Republic of Iran can exploit to their own advantage.

BRIEF SUMMARY OF COMMENTS MADE BY DANIEL PLETKA

- This discussion is a follow up to article written by the speaker some months ago in Foreign Policy.
- The crux of Pletka’s message is that Qatar has been a perennial spoiler in the Persian Gulf constantly trying to play both sides (i.e., on the one hand with the US and its allies and through Al Jazeera with all their enemies).
- Indeed, setting their cosy relations with the likes of Taliban aside, during the Iraq war, quite importantly, Qatar played a key role that supported the likes of Al Qaeda and ISIS to a point that objections were ultimately raised by the Pentagon especially against Al Jazeera and its disturbing propaganda in support of people like Bin Laden – something that clearly contributed to the bad ties that emerged between them and

countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE (as well as Bahrain and Egypt).

- Nonetheless, it is also a fact that the US has a crucial air base in addition to many pre-positioned equipment based in Qatar which it has used in recent years for carrying out numerous operations in and around that region.
- Finally, while Qatar has been a bastion of support for Sunni radicals, Qatar has also promoted a policy of working closely with their Shia counterparts in the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI).
- According to Pletka, some of the shenanigans played by the Qatari state may be the result of a constant insinuation by the US that it wishes to “pivot away from the Middle East” and focus more on the likes of China.
- A consequence of the local impression that the US is not really there anymore (with the Abraham Accords also seen as a way of divesting the US on security issues by involving the Israelis on issues of Gulf security) has been the kind of reconciliation talks that have been going on between Iran and Saudi Arabian (in dealing with issues such as the Houthis) and the UAE (who has returned its Ambassador after a 6-year absence) as well as the kind of rebuttal the Saudis have made to Biden’s preferred options having to do with oil production and pricing.
- But no matter how all the others in the Middle East and specially the Gulf states may try emulating the Qatarized version of things, at the end of the day when high stake security issues rise to the fore, it will not be Moscow or Beijing that will rescue them – i.e., the only real option is none other than the USA.
- Meanwhile, the leading Gulf states will continue playing the game and saying that they will not side with the US against other countries (e.g., Russia).
- In response to her own question that how long such a situation can last, she responded by saying until the end of the Biden administration!

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