Small States, Insecure States and the Gulf Crisis
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The 2017 Gulf crisis pits Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Egypt and the Yemeni government in exile, against Qatar and the small Gulf state’s allies—Turkey, Iran, and Oman. What is this fight about? And what can the conflict teach us about the behavior of both small states and insecure states in contests to project power and deflect aggression?

This jointly authored paper, draws upon the analytic skills of a political scientist and a scholar of Islamic studies. Both have spent many years doing research in the states involved in the current GCC crisis: Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain, Oman, Yemen, and Egypt. They have been visiting scholars and professors at Kuwait University, Sheikh Zayed University in Abu Dhabi, American Research Center in Egypt, American University of Kuwait, Texas A&M Qatar, and the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies in Riyadh. Deborah’s current research focuses on the Internet and resource security in the region. Brannon’s research is in the fields of Islamic law and political Islam.

This paper argues that the failure of the “Saudi and friends” boycott of Qatar can be explained by examining the dual concept of small states and insecure states. Ironically, the Saudi-led attempt to enforce 13 demands aimed at constraining Qatar’s power projection and independence—manipulating information, food, and Islamic rituals—has
had the opposite effect: new alliances, increased independence, and weakened GCC neighbors.

In the process of this analysis, we explain how and why information, commodities and religion can be weaponized; and why Qatar has succeeded in disrupting the effectiveness of these tactics. Along these lines, we argue that an inability to get others to do what you want them to, especially for a regional hegemon, like Saudi Arabia, can shed light on weaknesses in state power that were not visible otherwise.