

Why Does the U.S. Want to Designate Qatar 'A Major Non-NATO Ally'?

by Hugh Fitzgerald



The American government wishes to name Qatar a major non-NATO ally. Given that Qatar has been a protector and a sponsor of the Muslim Brotherhood, and is also the only Gulf Arab state that continues to have friendly relations with Iran, this latest policy move is confusing. The story is [here](#).

The United States hopes to move forward with naming Qatar as a major non-NATO ally, a status that provides foreign nations with benefits in defense, trade, and security cooperation, a senior U.S. official said on Thursday.

"We're going to move ahead, we hope, with designating Qatar a major non-NATO ally," Timothy Lenderking, the US deputy assistant secretary of state for Arabian Gulf affairs, told reporters in a conference call...

“Major non-NATO ally” (MNNA) status gives a country preferential access to US military equipment and technology, including free surplus material, expedited export processing and prioritized cooperation on training...

Currently 17 countries have MNNA status, including Gulf Arab states Kuwait and Bahrain, which hosts the US Navy’s Fifth Fleet.

Why was Kuwait given MNNA status? After a few months of gratitude for the Americans rescuing them from Saddam Hussein’s invaders in 1991, Kuwait reverted to its previous anti-American stance., Kuwait has also been distinctly hostile to Israel, and aside from Qatar, been the only Gulf state to criticize the UAE for normalizing relations with Israel.

Qatar, host of the largest US military facility in the Middle East, has been locked in a dispute with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt since 2017

The United States has strong ties with all the states involved and sees the rift as a threat to efforts to contain Iran. It has pushed for a united Gulf front.

The U.S. may have “strong ties” with Qatar but that is only because – unlike Qatar’s Gulf neighbors, especially the UAE and Saudi Arabia – America has chosen to overlook Qatar’s links to the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran. The Arab states opposed to Qatar cannot understand why the Americans treat Qatar with kid gloves instead of joining them in reading Qatar the riot act. And Qatar has chosen this very moment, when the Americans are talking about conferring MNNA status on it, to insist that it will not “normalize” relations with Israel.

The Americans have pushed “for a united Gulf front,” but this will be very difficult to accomplish: for three years, both sides have heaped contumely on each other. Qatar has used its

mouthpiece, Al Jazeera, to bitterly criticize both Saudi Arabia (dwelling on the murder of Jamal Khashoggi) and the UAE. Al Jazeera's scurrilous insults will not be forgotten.

The American thinking seems to be this:

First, the air, sea, and land blockade of Qatar by the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain, imposed since 2017, has not worked: the Qatari regime is still standing, and has not modified its policy of support for the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and friendship with Tehran.

Second, since that stick has not modified Qatari attitudes and behavior, the Americans would like to now offer Qatar a very big carrot: designation as a Major Non-NATO Ally (MNNA). That status gives a country "preferential access to US military equipment and technology, including free surplus material, expedited export processing and prioritized cooperation on training." This is a very big deal. In the past, however, it has always been given to reward a state for certain policies and behavior, helpful to the U.S., that it has adopted. In the case of Qatar, this MNNA status would be awarded not because it had given up its support of the MB or Iran, but in the hope that eventually it will do so.

How likely is that? Qatar has for decades been the firmest supporter in the Arab world of the Muslim Brotherhood. It hailed the brief reign of Mohamed Morsi in Egypt. For decades it has offered the MB cleric, the Egyptian Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a secure place from which to broadcast his message – he is the most important Sunni cleric in the world – to an audience of between 40 and 60 million people. Would the Qataris suddenly turn him out, and end their support of the MB, the group that has helped to fashion the views of ordinary Qataris, and the royal family, over many decades? The hope of the Americans that, by rewarding Qatar they may change its policies, seems as naïve as the American strategists who predicted that when American soldiers entered Iraq in 2003, they would be greeted

as “liberators,” met with “outbursts of joy” that would be hard to contain. Nothing of the sort happened, and by June 2004 only 2% of Iraqis had a favorable opinion of the American-led Coalition forces. The Qatari support for the MB is deep and of long standing. The Qataris are not about to give up the views on which they have been raised since childhood, just because the Infidel Americans are giving them access to military equipment and technology.

Nor can Qatar’s friendly relations with Iran likely be given up. Qatar lives in Iran’s immediate neighborhood, while America is thousands of miles away, and has been steadily decreasing its presence in the Middle East. Iran is militarily the most powerful state, after Israel, in the Middle East. Qatar has judged that it has more to gain by having friendly relations with a generally aggressive Iran than by joining the Saudi-UAE-Bahraini alliance against it. Were Qatar to turn on Iran at this point, the Islamic Republic is likely to react badly. There are also economic ties that cannot be overlooked. A big portion of Qatar’s oil comes from a field that is connected to a field in Iran. Iran and Qatar jointly control the world’s largest natural gas field. Proper exploitation of that field, by both Qatar and Iran, requires close collaboration. Economically, even if it wished to, Qatar cannot disentangle itself from Iran. And it needs to stay on Iran’s good side lest its much larger neighbor decide to claim a bigger share of the natural gas produced from that field.

There is something bizarre about the American strategy of conferring MNNA status on Qatar before it has done anything to merit it. Whatever the motivation, such an act will enrage the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain, which have been our firm allies against Iran, and yet have still not been rewarded with that coveted MNNA status. Have the Americans considered how this wooing of Qatar looks to our Middle Eastern allies? And how likely is it that this American reward in advance for Qatar will change its longstanding policies that are so deep-

seated? If Qatar has been unwilling to modify its policies toward both the MB and Iran in order to have a sea, air, and land blockade lifted, would it be willing to do so now? Will the carrot work, when the stick could not prevail?

First published in