

Strategic Silence as a Frame for Understanding the 2017 Embargo Against Qatar

William F. Harlow*

On June 5, 2017, a coalition of states led by Saudi Arabia announced an embargo against Qatar. Several of the states were fellow members of the Gulf Cooperation Council with Qatar, and the embargo was thus taken against a close ally. The reason given for the embargo was Qatari support of terrorism, but the public explanation did not detail what specific things the government in Doha had done. As the crisis unfolded, the Saudi-led coalition continued to provide no further details even as other plausible explanations circulated in the press. In this paper, I examine the coalition's failure to communicate specifics as an act of strategic silence. Drawing from the scholarship on strategic silence, I also analyze the audience at whom the silence was intended and what goal the coalition hoped to achieve through its use.

Keywords: Qatar, Gulf Cooperation Council, Saudi Arabia, embargo, strategic silence

When the United States (U.S.) and the United Nations (UN) have announced their various embargoes of North Korea, there was (and remains) a clear dispute at issue: North Korea is accused of developing nuclear weapons in contravention of various UN resolutions, and the U.S. fears that those weapons will soon be targeted at the United States. The UN and the U.S. have clearly announced with each round of sanctions that they are being instituted in response to some specific action of North Korea. Whether sanctions are an appropriate response and who is at fault in the dispute is not at issue here. Rather, these statements are offered as typical of many embargoes and other international disputes—the country taking an action will make a clear public statement about why they believe the action to be necessary.

When Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (or UAE), Bahrain, and Egypt¹ announced an embargo against Qatar on June 5, 2017, they followed a similar pattern. As Salisbury (2017) observed:

In a sharp escalation, they have also closed their borders to Qatari aircraft and ships, and the Gulf states have said that Qatari citizens in their countries must leave within two weeks. It is unclear how the standoff will be resolved, but the Saudis and their neighbors are making a clear play for Western support, accusing Doha, Qatar's capital, of backing terror groups including al-Qaida and Islamic State.²

This statement closely tracked a statement issued by the government of the UAE on June 6:

* William F. Harlow (Ph.D., Texas A&M University) is Professor of Communication and Dean of Undergraduate Success at University of Texas of the Permian Basin. He can be reached by email at harlow_w@utpb.edu.

¹ These states will hereafter be referred to as the Saudi coalition. While the term "Gulf states" is more common in the press, I have changed terminology here since Egypt was part of the coalition and is located in a different geographic region. Also, Qatar—the object of the embargo—is a Gulf state.

² Peter Salisbury, "Qatar is in Trouble With Saudi Arabia," *The Guardian (London)*, June 6, 2017, Opinion section.

In support of the statements issued by the sisterly Kingdom of Bahrain and sisterly Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates severs all relations with the State of Qatar, including breaking off diplomatic relations... The UAE is taking these decisive measures as a result of the Qatari authorities' failure to abide by the Riyadh Agreement on returning GCC diplomats to Doha and its Complementary Arrangement in 2014, and Qatar's continued support, funding and hosting of terror groups.³

On the face of things, then, the Saudi coalition did precisely as one would expect states to do when launching a major international move against another actor: They clearly explained their grievances and the actions they would take as a result. Because the Saudi coalition believed the Qataris to be supporting terrorism, they were launching an embargo. Unfortunately, however, the situation did not remain that clear for long. As Heather Nauert, spokesperson for the U.S. State Department, noted in a press briefing: "Now that it has been more than two weeks since the embargo has started, we are mystified that the Gulf states have not released to the public nor to the Qataris the details about the claims they are making toward Qatar."⁴ Beyond noting that the coalition had not issued specifics, Nauert also questioned the root cause of the conflict: "...we are left with one simple question: Were the actions really about their concerns regarding Qatar's alleged support for terrorism, or were they about the long-simmering grievances?"⁵

As Summer 2017 passed, increasingly serious questions were raised about the root cause of the embargo. The Saudi coalition, however, maintained a consistent line that the action was a direct response to Qatari support of terrorism. Very little was publicly explained about what actions Doha had taken in support of terror organizations, and the Qataris strenuously denied the charges. That left outside observers wondering at the true source of the conflict. In this paper, I analyze the statements of the Saudi coalition as an act of strategic silence. While it is true that statements were made, Barry Brummett notes that a strategic silence can include statements which are less than what might be said.⁶ In order to advance my argument that the coalition explanations were an act of strategic silence, I first briefly explore the scholarly literature in that area. Working from that definition of silence, I then examine what speech might normally be expected of Saudi Arabia and compare that to the Saudi coalition's statements in this case. I then analyze these limited statements as an act of strategic silence. Finally, I draw inferences from that research as to the audience at whom the silence was directed and what the coalition hoped to achieve through its use.

Existing Scholarship on Strategic Silence

When communication scholars discuss "silence," they can mean several different things. Most frequently, they refer to a person or a group who has been marginalized and in not able to make their voice fully heard—someone who has been silenced. While that research is profoundly important, it is not my focus here. Rather, when I refer to silence I am referring to the intentional choice of an empowered actor who simply chooses not to speak or to say less than what might be

³ "UAE supports statements of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia on Qatar," *Gulf News*, June 5, 2017. Accessed at <http://gulfnews.com/news/uae/uae-supports-statements-of-bahrain-and-saudi-arabia-on-qatar-1.2038529> on September 13, 2017.

⁴ Gardiner Harris, "State Dept. Lashes Out Over Qatar Embargo," *New York Times*, June 21, 2017, p. A15. Accessed via Lexis Nexis.

⁵ Harris, "State Dept. Lashes Out Over Qatar Embargo," 2017. Accessed via Lexis Nexis.

⁶ Barry Brummett, "Towards a Theory of Silence as a Political Strategy," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66 (1980): 289-290.

said. I draw heavily from the definition of “political strategic silence” initially offered by Brummett, who defined it as “the refusal of a public figure to communicate verbally when that refusal (1) violates expectations, (2) draws public attributions of fairly predictable meanings, and (3) seems intentional and directed at an audience.”⁷ As noted previously, Brummett defined silence as relative to what might be said, thus meaning that some statements could be made and still allow the situation to be analyzed as one of strategic silence.

There are two significant limits of applying this definition to the embargo against Qatar. The first is that Brummett anticipated a unitary actor—a single actor, frequently a single person, making an intentional rhetorical choice. The Saudi coalition is not a unitary actor, but is instead a coalition of states united in common purpose. While Brummett’s definition heavily influences the understanding of intentional silence used in this work, it is incomplete since there is not a single public figure to be analyzed. Second, the best analysis will have to measure the intent of the silence. Establishing intent is best handled through archival research, interviews, and other things which are very difficult to conduct with an ongoing situation. Since this is a work of public and contemporary scholarship and not one of intelligence, I shall make the best extrapolations possible from publicly available data and hope to develop a solid argument. However, my conclusions here should certainly be revisited with time as other sources become available.

Another limit to Brummett’s definition is that too few scholars have expanded on it nor on something like it. Richard Johannesen (writing before Brummett) issued a “plea for communication research”⁸ into the functions of silence, and few have answered. Those scholars who have expanded on Brummett’s work specifically or on the concept of strategic silence more generally have typically examined either a silence in the United States or one directed to an external audience by the United States. For example, Martin Medhurst sharply criticized President Truman for his silence on Soviet expansion immediately after World War II.⁹ Truman was “given multiple opportunities to explain and justify his foreign policy,” and instead failed to “define and regulate the rhetorical environment.”¹⁰ Writing in *Foreign Policy*, John Dugard examined a similar silence when he evaluated President Reagan’s decision to confront apartheid in South Africa through a policy of quiet diplomacy.¹¹ Dugard said that some in the Reagan administration believed that the Carter administration’s denunciation of apartheid led to the overwhelming victory by the Nationalist Party in South Africa’s 1977 elections. Dugard disagreed and believed Reagan’s silence to be strategically ineffective: “The United States should focus attention on the growing evidence of renewed discrimination and repression in South Africa. Where quiet diplomacy has failed to produce reform, silence may not be wise.”¹² This was the start of an inquiry into whether silence was a strategically effective tool in foreign policy situations.

Another aspect of the research on strategic silence is that so much of it is built on the assumption that there is a pre-existing crisis, speech is expected, and then speechmaking does not happen (or happens in a diminished capacity). For example, the literature concerning silence by U.S. presidents in moments of foreign policy crisis emphasizes two primary findings: Presidents can shift

⁷ Brummett, “Towards a Theory of Silence as a Political Strategy,” 289.

⁸ Richard L. Johannesen, “The Functions of Silence: A Plea for Communication Research,” *Western Speech* 38 (1974): 25-35.

⁹ Martin J. Medhurst, “Truman’s Rhetorical Reticence, 1945-1947: An Interpretive Essay,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 74 (1988): 52-70.

¹⁰ Medhurst, “Truman’s Rhetorical Reticence,” 52.

¹¹ John Dugard, “Silence is not Golden,” *Foreign Policy* 46 (1982): 37-48.

¹² Dugard, “Silence is not Golden,” 48.

arguments from the public to the private sphere by remaining silent,¹³ and “the appropriateness of silence as a strategy is largely determined by whether policy is already moving in a direction favorable to stated U.S. interests.”¹⁴ This is consistent with the work of Denise Bostdorff¹⁵ and Amos Kiewe,¹⁶ who argue in their turns that sometimes presidential speechmaking is what creates moments of foreign policy crisis in the first place. I also examined the use of intentional strategic silence by the President of the United States during crises concerning the valuation of the Chinese currency,¹⁷ apartheid in South Africa,¹⁸ the collapse of the Berlin Wall,¹⁹ and other situations, although these articles tend to support the conclusions previously discussed—Presidents often seek to hold discussions in private, and those discussions tend to be more effective when things are already going well. While studying a moment of domestic crisis, Kurt Ritter judged that President Lyndon Johnson did well to remain largely silent in the immediate aftermath of the assassination of President Kennedy. While the nation was in mourning, it would have been inappropriate for President Johnson to have given speeches asserting the powers of the presidency and laying out his own policy agenda. Ritter notes that “Johnson said as little as possible in public,” and this allowed him to quietly consolidate his power in the White House while the press portrayed him as a strong leader. President Johnson only gave a major address after the burial of President Kennedy.²⁰ While this article did not address a moment of foreign policy crisis, it did consider a similar set of circumstances: There was a crisis which existed before the president spoke, and the question was whether and how the President would respond to it.

The literature on intentional strategic silence is sparse, and much of what does exist considers silence as a construct of the President of the United States. According to this literature, silence is an option which the President might choose in response to a crisis—frequently, in response to a foreign policy or military crisis. The *International Encyclopedia of Strategic Communication* also makes two observations about strategic silence which go beyond the U.S. presidency. The first is that “strategic silence will quite frequently lead to an increased demand for information.”²¹ That can be a challenge since “silence might cause an outside actor to ask what is being hidden.”²² The second observation the *Encyclopedia* makes is equally important:

¹³ William F. Harlow, “Silence as the U.S. Strategic Response to Nigeria’s Elections,” *Relevant Rhetoric* 2 (2011): 1-14.

¹⁴ Harlow, “Silence as the U.S. Strategic Response to Nigeria’s Elections,” 10.

¹⁵ Denise M. Bostdorff, *The Presidency and the Rhetoric of Foreign Crisis* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1994).

¹⁶ Amos Kiewe, *The Modern Presidency and Crisis Rhetoric* (New York: Praeger, 1994).

¹⁷ William F. Harlow, “Silence as Presidential Argument in International Affairs,” *Texas Speech Communication Journal* 35 (2010): 76-95.

¹⁸ William F. Harlow, “The Triumph of Silence: President George H.W. Bush’s Refusal to Denounce Apartheid in South Africa,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 14 (2011): 45-68.

¹⁹ William F. Harlow, “And the Wall Came Tumbling Down: Bush’s Rhetoric of Silence During German Reunification,” in *The Rhetorical Presidency of George H.W. Bush*, ed. Martin J. Medhurst (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2006), 37-55.

²⁰ Kurt Ritter, “Lyndon B. Johnson’s Crisis Rhetoric After the Assassination of John F. Kennedy: Securing Legitimacy and Leadership,” in *The Modern Presidency and Crisis Rhetoric*, ed. Amos Kiewe (New York: Praeger, 1994), 73-89.

²¹ “Strategic Silence,” in *The International Encyclopedia of Strategic Communication*, eds. Robert L. Heath and Winni Johanesen, in press.

²² “Strategic Silence,” in press.

Public messages, even in favorable circumstances, come with real costs. Since multiple audiences watch the addresses of key figures, then a discourse meant to address one audience will frequently be seen by another and have unanticipated consequences.²³

How, then, would the construct of strategic silence apply to non-U.S. actors when there was not a publicly known crisis before an announcement was made? The crisis of the embargo against Qatar started when the embargo was announced, and in this case an ongoing silence raised the question of what audience was being targeted. However, that crisis was created in a context other than that anticipated by the existing literature on strategic silence. The existing literature assumes the communication patterns of a democratic state which is expected to communicate publicly on most issues. That norm does not apply in Saudi Arabia and its allied states. The next section of this essay explores the Gulf crisis in greater depth and argues why it should nonetheless be analyzed as an act of strategic silence. Part of the answer will lie in the “increased demand for information” generated by the silence. Even if the normal expectations of democratic states do not apply to the Saudi coalition, the demand for information placed on them by all manner of international partners do remain consistent. One of the tests of silence is that speech is expected, and whether something is expected is a function of the audience expecting it rather than the rhetor who might deliver it.

History of the Embargo Against Qatar

In analyzing any public act—particularly an act of communication—the first fundamental question to answer is when the film should start rolling. Even if there is a film on the screen, that show did not spring from nothing. Actors were preparing to meet the anticipated needs of the audience long before the show started. Applied to the Saudi coalition’s embargo against Qatar, then, the question becomes what happened before the June 5 announcement. Presumably, several sovereign states didn’t all wake up on the same morning and decide it would be funny to embargo a neighbor and claim terrorism to be the cause of the disagreement. *Something* happened prior to that date. To the foreign observer, however, what that something is will likely be unknowable for some time. That means a brief context for Saudi outspokenness on foreign policy will be helpful. While the embargo was the act of a coalition, it is being led by Saudi Arabia.

Maisel argues that Saudi foreign policy is based on “four major goals: preserving an Islamic way of life at home and abroad, protecting against external threats to national and regional security, providing for the national economic welfare and extending economic assistance to those in need throughout the Arab and Muslim world, and survival of the regime.”²⁴ Leadership of the Islamic world features twice amongst those goals, and that has long been a particularly prominent feature of Saudi Arabian foreign policy. Former King Faisal’s greatest interest was foreign affairs, and when he attended the 1945 United Nations conference in San Francisco his “primary focus was on the Muslim world and the preservation of its values.”²⁵ Later, King Fahd would follow Faisal’s pattern of seeking international alliances and “could be more active in regional affairs.”²⁶ William Ochsenwald and Sydney Nettleton Fisher support this argument, noting that, “In 1968, when Great

²³ “Strategic Silence,” in press.

²⁴ Sebastian Maisel, “Kingdom of Saudi Arabia,” in *The Government and Politics of the Middle East and North Africa* (6th Ed.), eds. David E. Long, Bernard Reich, and Mark Gasiorowski (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2011), 116.

²⁵ Maisel, “Kingdom of Saudi Arabia,” 97.

²⁶ Maisel, “Kingdom of Saudi Arabia,” 98.

Britain announced its intention to give up special privileges in the Persian Gulf, Saudi Arabia began to exert its influence in the Gulf.”²⁷ Saudi Arabia later sought to assert regional hegemony in 1981 with the creation of the Gulf Cooperation Council.²⁸

While Saudi Arabia has long asserted public leadership in regional affairs, this is not merely a matter of historical interest. Turki Al Faisal bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud, former head of Saudi intelligence, Ambassador to the Court of St. James, and Ambassador to the United States gave a speech in Washington in 2013 where he quite clearly laid out Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy priorities and the reasons for them. Ambassador Al Faisal noted in that speech that the Saudi relationship with Iran was of overriding importance. Specifically, he said:

In addition to these differences, Saudi Arabia has two other concerns about Iran. First, it is in our interest that the Iranian leadership does not develop a nuclear weapon, for their doing so will make nuclear-arms proliferation in the Middle East the norm... The other concern we need to address in the coming decade is the Iranian leadership’s meddling and destabilizing efforts in the countries with Shia majorities, Iraq and Bahrain, as well as those countries with significant minority Shia communities, such as Kuwait, Lebanon, and Yemen.²⁹

That is interesting for two reasons. First, it shows a clear example of contemporary Saudi leadership continuing the tradition of involvement in regional affairs and clearly outlining their foreign policy concerns. Second, it lays the groundwork for the idea that the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran would be of overriding importance. Near the end of that speech, he explained that Saudi Arabia had foregone a seat on the United Nations Security Council in order to allow it to more effectively exert public pressure concerning issues of foreign policy importance. In the following quote, the emphasis is mine:

There is nothing whimsical about the decision to forego membership in the Security Council. It is a decision based on the ineffectual performance of the body and *the necessity of prodding all the members of the UN to enact the reform* that will allow for the Palestinian people to shed the inhuman and immoral Israeli occupation of their land; that will rid the Middle East of the lewd display of dancing around nuclear proliferation by the P5+1 and Iran, and removing Syrian chemical weapons while Israel continues to build up its nuclear, biological and chemical arsenals; and that will bring to a stop the butchering of the Syrian people by a bloodthirsty president who is now enjoying the protection of the Security Council.³⁰

To use the analogy from earlier of “rolling the film,” one cannot simply start with the June 5, 2017 announcement of the embargo. Rather, one has to examine the decades-long Saudi history of asserting leadership in regional affairs. While Saudi Arabia does not have the same obligation to explain itself as would a democratic state, it quite frequently does so nonetheless—from a place of policy convenience rather than one of moral obligation. Since Saudi Arabia quite frequently speaks in foreign affairs, silence in that arena can indeed be strategic.

While Saudi Arabia has long asserted public leadership in regional affairs, such an assertion does not answer the question of what happened between Saudi Arabia and their coalition partners

²⁷ William Ochsenwald and Sydney Nettleton Fisher, *The Middle East: A History (6th Ed)* (New York: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2004), 708.

²⁸ Ochsenwald and Fisher, *The Middle East*, 709.

²⁹ Turki Al Faisal bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud, “Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Policy,” *Middle East Policy* 20, no. 4 (Winter 2013): 38.

³⁰ Al Faisal, “Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Policy,” 44.

concerning this embargo prior to June 5, 2017. A series of interactions specific to this embargo happened before this date which informed the interactions on and after it. That, however, is part of the fundamental puzzle of the Saudi coalition's silence—there are no public statements from the embargoing states indicating what those interactions might have been. Another factor which distinguishes this act of silence from the other cases analyzed in the scholarly literature is that those other cases each contained a clear precipitating event or history. That history was publically known, and the question was whether the actor in each situation would respond with an act of public rhetoric. Here, the silence was fundamentally different. The public announcement of the embargo precipitated the crisis, and then the silence commenced with the failure to explain the background of the original announcement. Why, then, should we analyze this event using Brummett's framework for strategic silence? To answer that question requires studying the events in greater depth.

Journalist Jon Gambrell noted the following on June 6, 2017: "Saudi Arabia and other Arab powers severed diplomatic ties Monday with Qatar and moved to isolate the energy-rich nation that is home to a major U.S. military base, accusing it of supporting terrorist groups and backing Iran. The decision plunged Qatar into chaos and ignited the biggest diplomatic crisis in the Gulf since the 1991 war against Iraq."³¹ The following week, Nader Kabbani of the Brookings Institution in Doha spoke on the causes of the embargo and said, "Where is all this heading? That's the question everyone is asking here. At the moment everyone is just trying to figure stuff out... but a lot of it is guess work."³² Academic Junaid Ahmad noted that the crisis seemed to have come out of "thin air."³³ As noted previously, the U.S. State Department publically expressed frustration that a list of Saudi demands and specific claims had not been made public. Essentially, the Saudi claim that Qatar supports terrorism remained the only official statement from the states enforcing the embargo from June 5 until today.³⁴

While official statements from the embargoing states remained consistent, public speculation about the cause of the embargo did not. While there was likely an opportunity for the Saudi coalition to at least partially control the narrative surrounding the blockade—or at least to control that narrative in English-language press—by providing more specifics of their accusations, they consistently provided a non-specific claim that the Qataris financially supported terrorism even as press accounts offered differing possibilities. Where there is an increased demand for information, someone will fill that void even if they do not know all of the facts. For example, Salisbury referred to the Arab Spring of several years earlier and noted that "...as unrest spread across the Middle East and leaders who had seemed to be immovable monoliths began to topple, an unlikely champion of the revolutionaries on the streets emerged: Little Qatar and its Arabic and English-language news service, al-Jazeera."³⁵ That claim would be repeated by others over the intervening months in one of two iterations—either al Jazeera had given unfavorable coverage too many times, or it allowed Doha to punch above its strategic weight through a large and well-funded media organization.

³¹ Jon Gambrell, "Arab Nations Cut Ties With Qatar in new Gulf Crisis; Support for Iran, terror groups cited for move," *The Calgary Herald*, June 6, 2017, p. N2. Accessed via Lexis Nexis.

³² As quoted in Peter Beaumont, "Qataris Ponder 'The Situation' as Blockade Against Emirate Bites; Talk of the Week-Old Crisis, its Implications and the Alleged Hacking and Fake News That May Have Fueled it is Unavoidable in Doha," *The Guardian (London)*, June 12, 2017, World News section. Accessed via Lexis Nexis.

³³ As quoted in Beaumont, "Qataris Ponder 'The Situation,'" 2017. Accessed via Lexis Nexis.

³⁴ I wrote this article in September 2017 and am revising it in November of the same year. I made this specific claim on September 19, 2017. It is possible, of course, that the situation may change at some later point.

³⁵ Salisbury, "Qatar is in Trouble With Saudi Arabia," 2017. Accessed via Lexis Nexis.

That was not the only alternative explanation offered in the press. The BBC speculated that, “The effect of the diplomatic blockade on Qatar is increasingly expanding. When we look at the accusations directed at the country, it is very clear that there are different reasons behind the blockade. The most important reason is that Qatar is rising in the natural gas field, especially in liquefied natural gas (LNG).”³⁶ This raises the possibility that the entire dispute was one of energy production. While also discussing the concerns of supporting terrorism, Peter Beaumont reported that, “The reality appears to be an attempt led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE to punish Qatar for its independent foreign policy underwritten by an expansive and canny global investment strategy from London to Tokyo.” Part of this independent foreign policy was “a conciliatory relationship with Iran” which was objectionable to many of the blockading states.³⁷ Multiple journalists also noted that questions concerning Qatari support of terror might as easily have been asked of the states imposing the blockade, and various other purported causes were proffered.

While the Saudi coalition did not back off from their claims of supporting terror, several weeks later they did issue a list of conditions which Qatar needed to meet to end the embargo. The *New York Times* noted on June 28 that, “The Saudis and the United Arab Emirates provoked the row by breaking diplomatic relations with Qatar and imposing an effective embargo, ostensibly because of Qatar’s coddling of terrorists and other issues.”³⁸ They then discussed the specifics of the conditions established by the Saudi coalition:

The Saudis and the emirates might have tried to work out their differences with Qatar instead of acting unilaterally and only later outlining what steps could be taken to get the embargo lifted. The demands they finally made public on Friday were obviously intended to humiliate Qatar rather than to serve as the basis for negotiations. Among them were that Qatar shut down the news network Al Jazeera, abandon ties with Islamist organizations, provide details about funding for political dissidents and close a Turkish military base.³⁹

This situation has not fundamentally changed in the intervening months. In late October, the Saudi Arabian foreign minister said that the Qatar crisis was a “non-issue, a small issue” while continuing to offer the explanation that the embargo was rooted in Qatari funding of terror.⁴⁰ However, the issue does not seem to have been a small one at all. *The Economist* noted that “the boycott is also hurting others across the Gulf, including some of the countries which imposed it.”⁴¹ The dispute has spilled into various multilateral meetings, the embargo remains in place, and diplomatic representation remains withdrawn. The Saudi coalition continues to insist that the dispute remains one of supporting terror even as journalists and others seek to fill the information void with other potential causes—even as the list of demands to resolve the crisis features items such as closing a Turkish military base. Press accounts continue to fill the information void, speculating that the real reason for the embargo is LNG, the al Jazeera media outlet, Qatar’s relationship with Iran, Qatari investments, and any number of other things. In the next section of this essay, I shall

³⁶ “Turkish comment says energy main reason for Qatar crisis,” BBC Worldwide Monitoring, June 13, 2017. Accessed via Lexis Nexis.

³⁷ Beaumont, “Qataris Ponder ‘The Situation’ as Blockade Against Emirate Bites,” 2017. Accessed via Lexis Nexis.

³⁸ The Editorial Board, “A Way Out of the Qatar Mess,” *The New York Times*, June 28, 2017, p. A 26. Accessed via Lexis Nexis.

³⁹ The Editorial Board, “A Way Out of the Qatar Mess,” 2017. Accessed via Lexis Nexis.

⁴⁰ Habib Toumi, “Qatar crisis is a non-issue, says Saudi foreign minister,” *Gulf News*, October 25, 2017. Accessed via Lexis Nexis.

⁴¹ “The Boycott of Qatar is Hurting its Enforcers: If Saudis and Emiratis Will Not Trade with Doha, Iranians Will,” *The Economist*, October 19, 2017. Accessed at www.economist.com on October 26, 2017.

examine this act of silence by speculating on the audience at whom the silence is directed and what, if anything, might be being hidden.

Practicing Strategic Silence While Yelling Terrorism in a Crowded Theater

The Saudi coalition's embargo against Qatar fundamentally offers at least two possibilities—either the claims that Qatar supports terror are the material reason behind the embargo, or they are not. This is a work of public scholarship rather than intelligence analysis, so I make no finding about whether that claim is true. What I argue instead is that in either case the Saudi coalition is practicing an act of strategic silence in a sense very similar to that articulated by Brummett.

Assume, for the moment, that the charges are true. The Saudi coalition has, at best, not filled “the increased demand for information,” which has led to speculation about “what is being hidden.” International press can plainly see that the embargo has started and is having an impact on the region, and they seek to fill an information void. When the coalition was not forthcoming with information about what acts of terrorism Doha supported nor answers to basic questions such as “why now?”, the press filled that void with speculation of their own. The variety of explanations proffered makes it extraordinarily unlikely that all of those explanations are true. If the Saudi charges are true, then their failure to answer these alternative explanations is best explained as an act of strategic silence. Perhaps the best alternative to that possibility is that the Saudi coalition simply does not care about the alternative explanations—they are not a democratic state obligated to give explanations of themselves to any particular audience. However, Saudi diplomatic history shows a trend of public leadership in regional affairs, and actors in international disputes overwhelmingly want to control the narrative concerning those disputes regardless of their obligations to their own people. It is unlikely that the coalition simply does not care. Thus, if their charges are true they are practicing a strategic silence in not explaining those charges at greater depth. That would mean they anticipate gaining something from the silence—either protecting a source of information, or not revealing a weak hand, or not forcing multiple states with different enemies to publicly reveal which organization they are targeting, or some other thing which the coalition seeks to gain or protect. The cost must be outweighed by the perceived benefit.

The second possibility, of course, is that the charges are false. If the charges are false, then there are at least two possibilities for the lack of other statements by the Saudi coalition. One is that they initially believed the statements to be true, later learned the allegations to be false, and maintained the public statements as a way to save face. This is unlikely, however, because any number of private conversations might have cleared up that misunderstanding without maintaining the embargo for the long term. The second possibility is that the Saudi coalition launched the embargo for some other reason or reasons and consistently declined to state what those reasons were. While this would obviously involve a level of misdirection, there would clearly still be an intentional strategic silence. Not explaining what the international community is asking you to explain—the reasons for the embargo—easily falls into the framework established by Brummett.

If the Saudi coalition is practicing a strategic silence, the interesting question becomes to which audience or audiences is the silence directed. The first two of Brummett's three tests are straightforward—this silence clearly violated expectations that the coalition would more clearly communicate the reasons behind the embargo, and there are any number of public attributions of the meaning of the silence. To whom, then, is the coalition directing their silence? Unfortunately, answering that question requires drawing inferences from the limited amount of information which is publicly available.

One possibility is that the different states enforcing the embargo have different reasons for doing so. If this is the case, then it would be exceedingly difficult to come up with a coherent public statement explaining different reasons from different places. Far better to give one blanket statement in public which allows different actors to air their individual grievances without explaining them in public. This would also explain multiple press accounts with multiple possible reasons for the embargo. The challenge with this explanation is that in the normal course of things one embargoing state might have its concerns resolved before another does. If that were to happen, it would be unlikely the coalition could hold together. It would also be awkward for the first state to end its embargo while its erstwhile partners continued to accuse Doha of terrorism. In any event, the audience here would be plural—different states wish to withhold their reasons from different audiences, and the public explanation of terrorism lets that happen.

Another possibility is that the audience is the Qataris themselves. It is conceivable that the Saudi coalition has some other grievance against Qatar, and they might expect that the Qataris should be the ones to approach them to resolve whatever that grievance is. While that sort of interplay seems more likely in an interpersonal relationship than it does in international statecraft, it is at least a possibility.

Yet another possibility is that the silence is directed at some third party. Both Turkey and the United States have military bases in Qatar, and the Saudi coalition might have wished to gain the support of one of these states, or both of these states, or of some other party closely aligned with the Qataris. If the U.S. or Turkey believed the Qataris guilty of terrorism, they could support—or at least not interfere with—an embargo much more easily than if they believed the embargo to be premised on some more pedestrian dispute. Indeed, this scenario may have briefly played out as President Trump made limited initial statements in favor of the embargo. Since that time, however, other officials of the United States has been trying to help mediate the dispute and Turkey has actively worked against the blockade by flying food into Qatar. It is possible that this was still an act of strategic silence directed at one of those parties and the act backfired, and it is also possible that the silence was directed at some other international partner.

A final possibility is that the strategic silence is directed at the international community writ large. If the Saudi coalition had a routine dispute with Qatar and wished to advance that dispute through an embargo, the international community would be unlikely to support the embargo without some good reason. Supporting terror, if true, would constitute such a good reason. However, there has not been a widespread international movement to join the embargo.

What seems clear in this situation is that the Saudi coalition has not wished to lay all of their cards on the table. The failure of an empowered actor to speak when speech is expected is quite frequently a strategic silence, and that certainly seems to be the case here. Time will tell the details, of course, and contemporary scholarship such as this must necessarily be quick to acknowledge the limits of writing before all of the facts are known. However, scholars also cannot fail to comment on current affairs until such time as there is perfect information—so doing would mean that insights would not be available until long after attention had passed and good records became publicly available. On the face of it, the coalition is employing a strategic silence in their embargo against Qatar. The key question is the audience at whom the silence is being directed. Knowing the answer to that question—or making reasonable extrapolations about it—will bring one much closer to understanding the situation overall.