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Gulf Studies Center

Educational Diplomacy at Stake: Closure of a US University Branch in Qatar

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GULF STUDIES CENTER
Gulf Insights
Cluster: Politics and Security
No. 88 February 2024



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Introduction

For students in Education City (EC), Qatar, Fridays usually signify a day of relaxation and joy following the intense academic demands of the week. However, the second Friday of February 2024 brought anxiety and confusion to students studying at Texas A&M University, one of the six American university branches in EC. They awoke to the [news](#) that the university's board members in the distant United States (US), citing political instability in the Middle East, had sealed the fate of their institution. Students [expressed](#) concerns about their studies—whether they would receive their degrees and what would become of their future, among other issues. This decision, coinciding with Israel's war on Palestine, prompts a crucial inquiry: what is the relationship between Texas A&M campus in Qatar and the escalating tensions thousands of miles away?

While regional conflicts undoubtedly played a role, this decision was not made in a void. Long before the current conflict, worries about these branches – particularly their ties to Qatar – had been voiced by various actors, primarily in the US. Prior to the ongoing war, multiple articles and reports

published by the Israeli lobby and the right-wing groups in the US have questioned the role of these institutions. Influential groups like the [Clarion Project](#), a non-profit organization advocating for educational institutions to sever ties with entities they deem anti-Western, have expressed reservations about Qatar's alleged support for certain ideologies. The [Jewish News Syndicate](#), known for its close ties to the Israeli government, also published articles raising similar doubts. Even more pointed accusations came from the [Institute for the Study of Global Antisemitism and Policy \(ISGAP\)](#), a Jewish think tank “committed to fighting antisemitism on the battlefield of ideas.” ISGAP [reports](#), with titles like "Hijacking Higher Education: Qatar, The Muslim Brotherhood, and Texas A&M Buying Nuclear Research and Student Information," alleged misappropriation of sensitive information and links to Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood.

Beyond these reports, articles and editorials in publications like Daily Wire and The Jerusalem Post also amplified calls for caution. A 2019 [article](#) in the Daily Wire urged universities and think tanks to re-evaluate their ties with Qatar, while a [piece](#) in The Jerusalem

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Post titled "Qatar's new tactic is to control the world of academia" warned Qatar's alleged attempts to influence academic discourse.

Links with Hamas and Muslim Brotherhood

While Qatar has faced criticism for its associations with Hamas and other non-state actors, government officials [assert](#) that the state welcomed these groups to establish their political offices at the behest of Washington. This decision aimed to provide the US and its Western allies with a platform for direct communication and negotiation. Qatar's subsequent efforts to mediate major agreements like the Taliban-US deal and facilitate prisoner exchanges between the US and Iran bolster this claim, highlighting its critical role in Western diplomacy. Additionally, Qatar's involvement in facilitating hostage swaps between Hamas and Israel suggests that the presence of Hamas in Qatar serves the interests of the US and Israel more than those of Qatar itself.

This complexity is further evidenced by the country's hosting of the strategically crucial Al Udeid Air Base, one of the largest US military bases in the Middle East. Besides, President Biden's [designation](#) of Qatar as a "major non-NATO Ally" in 2022 underscores the trust and confidence the US places in the country.

Rift in the US Domestic Politics

The decision by the board members of Texas A&M University to close their Qatar branch, while not necessarily reflective of the official stance of the US government towards Qatar, signals a rift in the US domestic politics over support to Israel. It is noteworthy that Texas, where the main campus of the university is based, is a stronghold of the Republican Party, which traditionally maintains strong ties with Israel. However, amidst the backdrop of escalating violence in Gaza and growing casualties, there appears to be a shifting discourse within the US administration, particularly among Democrats, regarding Israel's actions in its assault on Palestine. While the Israeli lobby and many Republican politicians advocate for a more assertive stance in support of Israel, President Biden's recent criticism of Netanyahu's military operations in Rafah and his [characterization](#) of the Israeli response in Gaza as "over the top" signal a potential recalibration of the US policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Although it may seem ironic for the US president to criticize Israel while simultaneously providing military aid and defending them, these recent developments, nevertheless, indicate a change in tone.

While some right-wing groups, particularly those aligned with the pro-Israeli lobby, have accused Qatar, it's crucial to recognize that these have not

necessarily been echoed or endorsed by the official US administration. In contrast, their claims have been debunked and are not considered to be rooted in genuine concerns; rather, they are perceived as “[disinformation](#),” solely driven by political agendas. Notably, the university's closure drew [disapproval](#) from US Ambassador to Qatar, Timmy Davis, suggesting the administration seeks to distance itself and prevent educational institutions from embroiling in the current conflict.

Potential Implications

The Texas A&M closure ripples beyond Education City, casting uncertainty on the future of other US universities in the region. Beyond immediate anxieties, it raises questions about Qatar's educational landscape and international student mobility. To address the situation, the remaining universities have proactively reaffirmed their commitment to Qatar. Meanwhile, the Qatar Foundation's sharp [criticism](#) of the university's board members underscores the loss of opportunities for both countries. This supports the conviction that the closure was politically motivated, potentially jeopardizing US-Qatar relations.

Beyond immediate worries, the closure has ignited discussions about the long-term impact of American university branches in Qatar. Some argue it could empower Qatar to shape its educational system independently,

potentially implementing curriculum changes that align more closely with national values. This perspective resonates with a segment of Qatari society concerned about the influence of US institutions. They perceive the use of English as the primary language of instruction and the potential exposure to American values as challenges to their cultural identity. Such apprehensions may fuel calls for greater control over these universities, casting a shadow on the future of international university branches in the country.

Conclusion

While the Texas A&M closure undeniably raises questions about the impact of politics on education, targeting universities for political gains serves no one. This action not only impacts Qatar's students and academic ecosystem but also potentially undermines US soft power goals in the region. For decades, education has been a cornerstone of US foreign policy, facilitating cultural exchange and promoting American values through international partnerships. Similarly, international universities in Qatar offer a chance for international students to engage with local and Arab cultures, enhancing the country's image and fostering understanding. However, it is important to recognize that within Qatari society, there are considerations regarding potential negative influences or clashes

in values associated with such partnerships.

Ultimately, universities function best as neutral havens for the exchange of diverse perspectives and ideas. They cultivate mutual respect and understanding, regardless of origin, and can offer fertile ground for cultural harmony and cooperation. In this context, the closure of the university raises questions about safeguarding the integrity and autonomy of educational institutions, crucial elements for advancing knowledge and nurturing global cooperation.

About the author

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