In *Security Dialogue*
52 (2): 118-134

Food as a weapon? The geopolitics of food and the Qatar-Gulf rift

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Abstract. On 4 June 2017, Qatar was suddenly put under an embargo by its regional neighbors – an effort spearheaded by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, who cut off most of its existing land, sea, and air traffic routes. With no domestic agriculture to speak of, Qatar's external logistics networks are essential for maintaining its food supply. The country's 2.6 million residents, many of whom flooded the grocery stores, were understandably concerned about their ability to secure food when news about the embargo broke. Eventually, new food supply chains were established, primarily with the assistance of partners in Iran and Turkey. The ongoing rift between Qatar and its neighbors in the Arabian Peninsula, manifested only in part by this effort to undermine the country's material supply networks raises a number of questions about an old idea: that of food as a 'weapon.' This article puts this concept in historical and regional perspective in the Arabian Peninsula through the lens of critical geopolitics, tracing the securitizing discourses about food security and their intertwining with narratives about territorial sovereignty, nationalism, and essentialist understandings of geography to explain the causes and effects of the food embargo in the ongoing Qatar-Gulf rift.

Keywords: food; geopolitics; political geography; nationalism; Arabian Peninsula; Qatar

On 4 June 2017, residents of Qatar rushed the country's grocery aisles, stocking up on as much food as they could fit into their carts or their budget. Qatar had just become the subject of a far-reaching embargo by its regional neighbors – an effort spearheaded by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, but also joined by Bahrain, Egypt, Mauritania, the Maldives, Senegal, Djibouti, the Comoros, Jordan, Libya, and Yemen. In addition to cutting all diplomatic relations, Qatar's only land border – with Saudi Arabia – was sealed, and air and sea travel was severed with the closing of airspace and territorial waters to all Qatari vessels and aircraft. All travel from the participating countries to Qatar was also barred. The 'blockade,' as it is referred to in Qatar, is actually a coordinated embargo – and it continues today with little sign of abating.[1]

With effectively no domestic agriculture to speak of, the embargo's most direct impact was on Qatar's food supply, which is maintained through its air, sea, and land connections to the outside world. The country's 2.6 million residents, many of whom flooded the grocery stores in early June 2017, were understandably concerned about their ability to secure food when news about the embargo broke. New supply chains were established rapidly, however, as the Qatari government and its sovereign wealth fund's subsidiary Hassad Food worked around the clock with partners in Iran and Turkey to re-source products and establish new distribution and logistics networks (Sergie and Wilkin, 2017).[2] Policy-makers in Qatar saw the quick turnaround of the situation as a sign of their successful planning efforts, which had actually begun with the introduction of the Qatar National Food Security Programme in 2008 (Al-Ali, 2017; Al-Ansari, 2018; Lambert and Bin Hashim, 2017; Miniaoui et al., 2018). Since the beginning of what I will refer to here as the 'Qatar-Gulf rift' in June 2017, Qatar's ability to quickly overcome the embargo's impact on food has also been framed as a major nationalist victory in official and unofficial discourse – a testament to the strength of the national will and perseverance in the face of hardship. This spirit is vividly captured in the local press coverage about the food situation, but especially about one particular company: Baladna Farms.

Baladna, which means 'our country' in Arabic, began in 2014 as a small sheep and goat farm, but was quickly transformed into a major dairy farm in 2017, when it received thousands of milk cows that were 'airlifted' by Qatar Airways from Europe and North America (*Economist,* 2018; Sergie, 2017). As a *Bloomberg* article put it, 'the nine-month Saudi-led embargo of Qatar has an undisputed mascot for Doha's defiance: the cud-chewing American cow' (Sergie, 2018). Indeed, Qatar today buzzes with discussions about Baladna's astonishing rise and its iconic status exemplifying the country's persistence in the face of what is resoundingly understood to be an unjust and illegal assault on the country's sovereignty. The company has come to symbolize the Qatari 'defensive' response to the Saudi and Emirati 'offensive,' in which those two governments used their own monopoly of the Gulf dairy markets as a weapon – but that Qatari actors were able to subvert this weaponization of food. Baladna's operations chief, the Irish-born

John Dore explains, for example: 'The people that have shot themselves in the foot are the Saudis. If the blockade was lifted, there is so much pro-Qatar sentiment and nationalist pride that the people will buy Qatar milk, not Saudi. […] If we can make enough milk, the people in Qatar will buy it' (quoted in Wintour, 2017). As Dore suggests, Qatar's new dairy industry is now inextricably connected to nationalist frames that have a long and global history of ideas about food security or food sovereignty.

From the disciplinary perspective of political geography, this article contextualizes the recent Qatar-Gulf embargo by analyzing the geopolitics of food as a discourse of power, drawing on the theoretical and methodological insights of critical geopolitics (for an introduction, see Dodds, 2007; Dodds et al., 2013; Moisio, 2015). Now a mainstream approach in political geography, this constructivist toolkit centers the analysis on how people actually narrate food 'security' and 'sovereignty' as a thing in the world, or locate and define the spatial and temporal bounds of food as a 'weapon' or a food 'crisis.' In addition to a systematic reading of news, government publications, and social media posts on the pertinent themes since 2017, I conducted primary research in Qatar from February-March 2019, including approximately 20 informal discussions in the context of a participant observation of Qatar's food landscape under the embargo, and stemming from a broader IRB-approved study of environmental policy and 'post-oil' development in the Gulf. Given the ethnographic approach of this part of the research, none of these discussions were recorded or transcribed; rather, I made extensive field notes after my meetings. These findings were then paired with my textual analysis to contextualize the broader narratives and transformations underway in Qatar, both since I began working in the country in 2012 and since the embargo began in 2017. In what follows, I show how the shifting history and spatiality of food discourses is essential to understanding why Qatar's neighbors saw an embargo targeting food supplies as such potent political weapon. Although the 'food weapon' idea is based on problematically essentialist understandings of geography, it nonetheless has important material and ideological implications in the Arabian Peninsula and offers a useful window onto the ongoing challenges of the Qatar-Gulf rift today.

Securitized food discourses and Gulf geopolitics

Since the start of the embargo of Qatar began in 2017, securitized discourses about food have made a resurgence across the Arabian Peninsula. Intertwined with globally-hegemonic tropes and imaginaries of state-based nationalism, food security narratives are pervaded by the themes of in/dependence, territorial sovereignty, national vulnerability, and the precarious integrity of food supply chains, which might become a site of attack in political confrontations (Barnes, 2009; Boland, 2000; Conversi, 2016; Duminy, 2018, Gross and Feldman, 2015; Hopma and Woods, 2014; Nally, 2015; Thompson, 2019; Wegren et al., 2018; Wengle, 2016; Woertz 2019). Yet as international as these securitized imaginaries of food as a 'weapon' are, they also have a specifically regionally history in the Gulf region. This is not only because the Arabian Peninsula is dominated by desert landscapes, but also because of local governments' reactions to the threats made by U.S. President Richard Nixon to use the 'food weapon' in retaliation for the OPEC oil embargo in 1973 (Bowen-Jones and Dutton, 1983: 162; Woertz, 2013b: 139). Since then, food security has been a central narrative in defining agricultural, water, and energy policies in the Gulf region – what is increasingly being analyzed as a the 'food-water-energy nexus' in the Middle East (Allan et al., 2015; Keulertz and Allan, 2019; Keulertz et al., 2016; Lambert, 2014; Murad et al., 2017).

Food, water, and energy have long been connected with the notions of sovereignty and security – and the material connections that underpin them – which necessarily shift over time and space (Koch and Perreault, 2019). It is the shifting nature of these securitizing and nationalist discourses that the constructivist lens of critical geopolitics homes in on, showing how they actually *constitute* geopolitical imaginaries, like the territorial state or a national geo-body, rather than working on an a priori geographic reality. Much of the academic and policy-oriented writing on food in the Arabian Peninsula to date has been defined by a realist approach, which does precisely this. That is, realist approaches assume 'food security' or 'food sovereignty' to be something real in the world, which only needs to be defined properly and then measured and located. This is exemplified in two key edited collections on the topic, *Water and food security in the Arabian Gulf* (ECSSR, 2013) and *Food security in the Middle East* (Babar and Mirgani 2014).[3] In the latter, for example, the introductory chapter emphasizes the technical definition adopted at

the World Food Summit of 1996 of food security as a state 'when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life' (quoted in Babar and Kamrava, 2014: 11). This is different from food sovereignty, the authors suggest, insofar as actors in the Gulf states are not 'adequately' self-sufficient with respect to control over and access to food sources: 'Despite their wealth and affluence, high income countries such as Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the UAE lack control over their food sources and are highly dependent on imports—thus lack food sovereignty' (Babar and Kamrava, 2014: 11).

On the face of it, these statements are not wrong: the Gulf countries' agricultural sectors are not able to meet local demand and food is thus overwhelmingly imported. What this writing misses, however, is how local (and non-local) actors frame this situation as a 'problem' and how this is then framed as a security threat. Simply identifying a problem or threat, critical security studies and feminist IR scholars have long emphasized, is an act of power – and one that allows certain actors to simultaneously propose very particular 'solutions' or policy interventions (e.g. Booth, 2005; Campbell, 1992; Dalby, 2002; Enloe, 2000; Kennedy-Pipe, 2004; Pettman, 1996). This is especially apparent in the historical research on food, water, and politics in the Gulf states. As historical research and contemporary accounts amply illustrate, prior to establishing independent states, early leaders in the Arabian Peninsula were deeply concerned about their ability to provide food and water to their populations (Bowen-Jones and Dutton, 1983; Crary, 1951; Elhadj, 2004; Ellis, 1956; Jones, 2010, 2012; Joseph, 2018; Joseph and Howarth, 2015, Lambert and Bin Hashim, 2017; Melamid, 1987; Nowshirvani, 1987; Sanger, 1947, 1954). Doing so was a key source of their legitimacy – and a question of their individual security.

Prior to the development of oil economies, the colonial-era archives show that these leaders were regularly requesting – and often quite persistently – British and American support for various agricultural initiatives. Such support was especially prevalent during the post-war 'Green Revolution', when both imperial powers were beginning to exert their influence through new forms of scientific expertise and corporate power organized around agriculture (Hodge, 2007; Latham, 2011). This took many forms, but one of the best known examples in the Gulf region is the United States agricultural mission to Saudi Arabia headed by Karl Twitchell in 1942 (Woertz, 2013b; for his own account, see Twitchell, 1944, 1958). While agricultural development was a particular concern for Gulf leaders mid-century, hydrocarbon extraction eventually allowed the region's governments to prosper and food and other goods could more easily be imported. By 1971, all states in the Arabian Peninsula had gained full sovereignty and local rulers – now endowed with the aura of royalty – did not have so much of their credibility staked to the provision of basic life essentials. Security for themselves and their populations had further shifted as newfound wealth allowed them to source food, water, and energy in new ways.

Yet food became securitized in the Gulf in a different manner by the early 1970s. First, during the 'world food crisis' of 1972-75, scare grain supplies on the world market sent prices soaring and led to famine in parts of Asia and Africa. The events led to a 12-day UN World Food Conference in Rome in 1974, which helped define a more global discourse about 'food security' as an issue demanding international coordination in terms of aid, but also reflected a deeper awareness about the growing interconnectedness of food supply chains worldwide (Gerlach, 2015; Jachertz, 2015). Leaders in the Arabian Peninsula themselves had rapidly become dependent on these global networks for grain supplies, for example, which at the time was overwhelmingly dominated by the United States (Wallensteen, 1976). And this relates to a second shift in the 1970s: US President Richard Nixon's threat to use the 'food weapon' in retaliation for the Arab Gulf leaders' role in the 1973 OPEC oil embargo. As Eckart Woertz (2013b: 139) notes, they had already seen the US try to leverage food as a foreign policy tool in the Middle East in the 1960s, and it was only rejected in response to the oil embargo for reasons of impracticality. But the very idea of a food as a 'weapon' meant that food became securitized in discussions about foreign and domestic policy alike. So even though the region had limited population size and could have easily found alternatives, 'the mere threat of a food embargo was enough to worry policy-makers' (Woertz, 2013b: 139). US policymakers eventually pulled back from the 'food weapon' narrative by the 1980s, carefully seeking to 'depoliticize the food trade out of concern for domestic farm interests' (Woertz, 2013b: 139). And even today, with the Trump administration's flurry of food-focused sanctions on China and elsewhere, combined

with his assault on NAFTA, the specific language of food as a 'weapon' has largely been absent from international affairs since the 1970s.

While the metaphor of food as a 'weapon' has a long circulated in the Gulf region, it has not been explored by many scholars. In one study from 1976, however, Peter Wallenstein outlines several key components of the idea. First, he notes that there are four general outcomes that actors might seek in employing any kind of economic 'weapon': influencing the terms of a specific business contract, influencing a buyer's economic policy, influencing a buyer's foreign and defense policies, and subverting an entire government (Wallensteen, 1976: 280). The latter two are what is generally meant when people think about the role of food as a weapon in international affairs today. But as he shows, it is not such an easy tool to deploy, practically speaking, because of several determining factors that rarely align in any particular political context: the particular spatial conditions of scarcity around the food item in question, including 'supply concentration and demand dispersion,' as well as what he terms 'action independence' (Wallensteen, 1976: 280-284). Given the intensely global nature of food supply chains today, few places in the world actually have a monopoly on certain food items or supply chains. This means that alternative suppliers and trade routes can easily undermine an embargo. Similarly, even among the most dominant countries within the geopolitical world order, coordinating action around a food embargo is not only difficult, but potentially costly.

The technical questions of how to impose an effective embargo may be an interesting theoretical exercise, but equally important are questions about the political work that the metaphor does. That is, how do certain actors draw upon the *idea* of food as a weapon to advance certain policies or rationalize certain decisions? And what kind of geopolitical agendas might it advance or undermine? Notably, the 'food weapon' idea – detached from any practical questions of how to actually deploy it – is underpinned by essentialist assumptions about geography that neglect the globalization of agribusiness, logistics, supply chains, and of course, the extraordinary human capacity to innovate through technologies and reconfigure political allegiances. The shortcoming of these assumptions were lessons quickly learned by the Saudi and Emirati leaders who spearheaded the embargo of Qatar in 2017 – as well as their Qatari counterparts who sought to overcome the sudden severing of their usual food supply chains. Perhaps because of the embargo leaders' overly simplistic understanding of geography, it may have seemed like a more destructive weapon than it really was for Qatar – at least, if the idea was to accomplish the fourth of Wallenstein's outcomes, subverting the country's government.

In any case, the essentialist assumptions about geography that are baked into the 'food weapon' discourse continue to captivate. Two recent Chatham House reports, *Chokepoints and Vulnerabilities in Global Food Trade* (Bailey and Wellesley, 2017) and *Edible Oil: Food Security in the Gulf* (Bailey and Willoughby, 2013) exemplify the persistence of realist perspectives about the geography of food supply chains. In discussing the Arabian Peninsula, the authors emphasize the significance of maritime chokepoints as risk factors for these countries. The idea of a 'chokepoint' – some kind of passageway that could easily be blocked – has a long history in realist writing about geography, which deterministically construes physical geography as something outside of politics (see especially Agnew, 2003; Hepple, 1992; Megoran, 2004; O'Loughlin, 2000; Ó Tuathail, 1996). While the statistics offered by the authors are indeed impressive (e.g. that Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE import nearly all of their wheat through the Strait of Hormuz), they fail to capture the deeply political nature of all questions related to how food circulates in the world.

Geography is not, as classical geopoliticians once argued, a passive backdrop on which human drama unfolds, but a field of power – subject to all range of possibility and unexpected outcomes as people compete to make sense of, shape, imagine, and produce space. And physical geography, today and as always, cannot be understood outside of the technologies humans have developed to overcome its limitations – whether those are boats, rail, airplanes, or the internet. The unfortunate effect of these essentialist approaches to geography is that they depoliticize questions of food supplies and put them to a simple challenge of the physical siting of a country's ports and the extent of their food import dependence. Reduced to a simple formula, 'food security' in this imaginary, is something that can be measured and calculated across time and space. Of course, these sorts of formulas are the currency that thinktanks like

Chatham House trade in. But such approaches systematically fail to account for the dynamism and unpredictability of political events, such as the sudden embargo that Qatar faced in 2017. They also tend to overemphasize status quo supply routes, neglecting the ability of interested actors to locate alternative configurations for food supplies – again, such as the decision-makers did in Qatar that June.

Taking a more nuanced approach in *Money, Markets, and Monarchies*, Adam Hanieh (2018) has recently explored Gulf food geopolitics through the lens of political economy. His study pushes away from the over-emphasis on securitized discourses to instead focus on the less sensational, but far more diffuse, agro-commodity circuit that includes agricultural inputs, storage, processing, trade, processing, and distribution, which link the region 'to both the global food system and the production and circulation of food across the wider Middle East' (Hanieh, 2018: 114). Taken together, he argues, 'these dynamics have positioned large Gulf agribusiness firms at the core of the entire agricultural value chain in the GCC' (Hanieh, 2018: 115). Hanieh does not dismiss the significance of securitized discourses about food, however. Rather, he underscores the importance of these discourses in buttressing Gulf elites' efforts to justify huge state investments and other policy prescriptions that benefit specific actors in the dominant agricultural commodity chains. That is, the food security discourse 'has validated state-led support of the largest capital groups involved in agribusiness activities, helping gird their internationalisation through regional and international agro-circuits, and simultaneously reinforcing their control over domestic agricultural production and distribution' (Hanieh, 2018: 118).

As he and others have shown, after 2008, Gulf governments and companies began to undertake serious investments abroad, including buying land, entire farm operations, and more (though it is outside the scope of this article, see especially Allan, 2013; Harrigan, 2014b; Keulertz and Woertz, 2015a, 2015b; Sassen, 2013; Woertz, 2013c, 2013d; Woertz and Keulertz, 2015). Among the key actors in has been Hassad Food, the agriculture-focused subsidiary of the the Qatar Investment Authority (QIA), which has invested heavily in Australia. But what Hanieh shows, and what the Qatari consumers knew well when they flocked to the grocery stores in early June 2017, is that Saudi and Emirati companies had managed to completely monopolize regional agro-commodity and logistics networks – especially the two large dairy companies turned agribusiness conglomerates, Almarai and Al Dahra. Through their aggressive acquisition of subsidiaries abroad over the past decade, and other state infrastructural partnerships, these companies are now major logistics firms. Al Dahra subsidiaries, for example, are now the largest forage exporters in the United States, Italy, and Spain, while Almarai has controlling stakes in a vast array of food and logistics operations around the Middle East, Latin America, and the US, and is a major investor in Saudi Arabia's new King Abdullah Port in King Abdullah Economic City north of Jeddah (Hanieh, 2018: 124-128; Fabbe et al., 2018).[4] Meanwhile, by the time the embargo began in 2017, the Emirati port south of Dubai, Jebel Ali, had firmly established its place as the largest and most significant port for regional distribution networks. While Qatar's leaders were able to rapidly establish new food supply networks, it previously received almost all of its dairy products from the UAE and Saudi Arabia – a factor that led to a special place for this industry in how the rift has been experienced and narrated in Qatar.

Food nationalism and myths of independence in an interconnected world

Skirting the flying ban from the UAE in February 2019, I traveled from Abu Dhabi to Doha via Muscat, Oman. This was the first trip I had made to Qatar since before the rift began. Almost immediately friends, colleagues, and new acquaintances – expats and citizen-nationals alike – started telling me that I *must* visit Baladna Farm if I wanted to see one of the best examples of how Qatar was had overcome challenges posed by the embargo. People spoke of it with reverence, holding it up as an exemplar of national perseverance in the face of Qatar's diplomatic woes and the leaders' sheer determination to provide for the most basic needs of the country's residents. I listened to the Energy Minister speak about the company's impressive ability to suddenly introduce a dairy industry where none had previously – noted as a remarkable feat of spirit, determination, and innovation. I began to notice advertisements and references to the company all over the city, which prominently proclaimed its dual message of 'Made in Qatar' and 'Made by Nature.' Conforming with a more global grammar of 'food nationalism,' which scholars have explored elsewhere

(e.g. Caldwell, 2002; Foster, 2002; Ichijo and Ranta, 2016; Klumbytė, 2010), Baladna was being held up as a nationalist icon in a way that few other companies were.

Figure 1. Baladna Farm facility with visitor center at center. March 2019. Source: Author.

Figure 2. Baladna Farm milking operation from viewing platform in the visitor center. March 2019. Source: Author.

Figure 3. Baladna Farm display case in the visitor center. March 2019. Source: Author.

These nationalist narratives are vividly illustrated at the farm itself, a 45-minute drive north of Doha, where visitors can view the company's high-tech milking machines and peruse a museum-like space (see Figures 1-3). A special theater-like section is set aside for visitors to watch a short film playing on loop, narrated in Arabic and subtitled in English:

> ***[Male news announcer]:*** Four countries in the GCC area along with Egypt decided to break off all diplomatic and commercial relations with the state of Qatar.
>
> ***[Female news announcer]:*** They also blocked all land, sea, and air borders.
>
> ***[Narrator]:*** When hardships test determination and will power, there must be a beacon that guides the ship to safely land on our glorious shore. When horizons widen a clearer vision emerges which sets us on the right path. Only then the story begins… With strong determination, we strive for a brighter future. And the achievement of higher goals makes us all stronger. On two million, four hundred thousand square meters of land we started our plans to make our products available all over the world. To move from self-sufficiency to later proudly exporting Made in Qatar dairy products. With unlimited ambitions, and because our country 'Baladna' is our most valuable treasure, we traveled thousands of miles to get the best from around the world. On this land, we accommodated thousands of dairy cows in the best possible conditions and using the most advanced technology available in the world today. All this is to give goodness and the highest quality. Our

> vision is to become a pillar of national self-sufficiency to support building an independent nation – a nation where its goodness comes from its own produce. For 'Made in Qatar' to be universally recognized for quality products.
>
> ***[Male voice]:*** 'This crisis had let the Qatari Society not only realize their human values as I mentioned earlier…but also discovering their strength through their determination and unity.' - HRH Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, the Emir of Qatar.
>
> ***[Narrator]:*** Baladna. Investing for today. Investing for our future.

The 4:45-minute video includes dramatic music set alongside stunning images of the Qatar's natural environment, its people, various aspects of Qatari culture and heritage, and numerous images of the farm's high-tech facilities, the milk cows, and a few glimpses of them in transit.[5] As noted above, Baladna received an 'airlift,' courtesy of Qatar Airways, of nearly 5000 Holstein cows from Europe and North America, shortly after the embargo began. As one of the signs in the visitor center explained:

> All the cows in the Baladna Farm are Holstein cows, a breed that originated in the Friesland province of Northern Holland and Germany. Holstein cows are famous for being the highest producing diary animals in the world. They are easily recognized by their patchy black and white colors and are thinner than most other types of cattle. An adult cow will weigh between 400-500 kg, and produces 30-40 litres of milk per day. Due to their high production quality of milk, they are shipped to many different places in the world. The Holstein cows at Baladna Farm come from herds in Europe and the United States. There will be approximately 14,000 Holsein cows at Baladna Farm. Adult cows will weight [sic] over 600 kg and milk 60 liters a day at peak.

The focus on Baladna's technological is part of the broader grammar of nationalism in Qatar, which I have explored elsewhere (Koch, 2014, 2018). While the spectacle of the farm is partly tied to the visually shocking image of thousands of cows being unloaded from Qatar Airways jumbo-jets, in joining the contemporary narratives about Qatari national identity as being ultra-modern with ideas of food security, the farm's high-tech approach adds a special sheen to a project that might otherwise seem mundane. It is notable here that these narratives emphasize Qatar's *international* engagement and its leaders' ability to carefully curate the best technology and products from *elsewhere* – the technology and the cows are foreign but their very presence on Qatari soil, in the service of a Qatari-owned business, serving the Qatari population makes this a decidedly *nationalist* spectacle.

This complicated relationship of inside and outside, which all nationalisms narrate in their own way, is similarly configured in the Qatar National Food Security Programme (QNFSP). Under the Office of the Heir Apparent (then Sheikh Tamim, the country's current Emir), the QNFSP was established as a taskforce in response to the 2008 global food crisis, and subsequently aimed to develop a more coherent governmental approach to (potential) supply disruptions (Al-Ameri, 2012; Siegel, 2013).[6] The strategic planning of this group dovetailed with the Qatari government's emphasis on high-tech solutions, which have long been preferred in the country's policy approaches to food and agriculture. A *Gulf Times* article, for example, profiles a Qatari 'agriculturist,' Nasser Ahmed al-Khalaf, who started an agricultural development company, Agrico, in 2011. With the stated aim of 'helping the country achieve food security' through ag-tech advances, he explains: 'We have modified technology developed in the Western World, and adapted it even further to have a very unique system anywhere in the world,' he explains in the article (quoted in Aguilar, 2018; see also England, 2010; Iqbal, 2018). Here, as with the language used about Baladna, we see the idea of taking the best from the world *outside* for use *inside* to further the nationalist cause.

Nearly everyone in Qatar recognizes that the country cannot become self-sufficient for its food production. Not only would this be impossibly expensive, the country's natural resources present particular

limits. Nonetheless, the spectacular nature of these high-tech agriculture initiatives – whether they are gleaming new hydroponic facilities or automated milking machines for carefully air-conditioned cows – the very images they conjure strategically direct attention to something positive and impressive. Yet as I have argued elsewhere, the very function of spectacle is 'strategically directing the gaze toward the spectacular center, […] while diverting attention from the prevailing realities beyond the center' (Koch, 2018: 45). That is, these more flashy and positive interventions can work to direct attention away from what is an otherwise impossible situation to fundamentally alter: that countries simply cannot thrive outside of the deeply connected political economic order. Yet nationalist narratives are nonetheless incredibly powerful because they draw on *aspirations* of independence, which can then be mobilized to justify certain policies – such as those that have helped Baladna Farm skyrocket to controlling nearly all of Qatar's dairy market and now even exporting its goods regionally (*Peninsula*, 2019).

Subverting the 'food weapon' in the Qatar-Gulf rift

The irony of the Baladna story is that the Saudi and Emirati embargo has created an opening for a new competitor to their countries' own dairy companies, which have dominated Middle East markets in the last decade. This is a situation that leaders in Qatar would look on with great pleasure, and which ordinary residents are well aware of as a key thread running silently through the embargo's drama: that their antagonists sought to use their dairy monopoly against Qatar, but their rapid maneuvering allowed them to subvert the weapon against them. This symbolic re-appropriation of the 'food weapon' is, of course, exactly that: symbolic. As detailed above, the idea of food as a weapon is an imaginary rooted in essentialist thinking about geography, which ignores the global connectedness of food supplies and supply chains, as well as the technical and political lengths to which individual actors may go when the status quo has been altered. Indeed, thanks to Qatar's deep government coffers, Hanieh (2018: 145) rightly observes, 'The reality is that the Gulf remains by far the most food-secure zone of all Arab countries.' [7]

Instead, the story of food geopolitics is perhaps more telling for the questions it raises about the long-term implications of the Qatar-Gulf rift for the region's geopolitical reconfiguration. As Lambert and Bin Hashim (2017: 277) suggest, Qatar's newly configured supply chains represent 'a complete revolution in its food geopolitics,' shifting the country closer to allies in Turkey and Iran. Now several years on, the agribusiness ties most visibly strengthened after the embargo continue to be with Turkey and Iran, as well as Jordan (see Wellesley, 2019). When the embargo began, Turkey was one of the first countries to offer support for Qatar – militarily, diplomatically, and in terms of the initial food supply problem. This led to a flurry of positive press hailing Turkish support, such as an *Al-Jazeera* (2017) article headlined, 'How Turkey stood by Qatar amid the Gulf crisis.' Although ties between Qatar and Turkey continue to be much stronger than before the embargo began, the early sense of gratitude toward Turkey for its food support has largely subsided, as Qatar's food nationalism has since focused on domestic advances in addressing its food supply challenges. Indeed, in my discussions with Qatar's residents about Baladna, many explained that the farm was needed because the Turkish milk supplies they were receiving were frequently rotten or of poor quality. When I noted that Qatari supermarkets had stocked Turkish dairy products long before the embargo, and such issues were never a problem before, none of my interlocutors could explain what led to the quality problem. Truth or fiction, these anecdotes reaffirmed the dominant nationalist narrative that Turkish food support was a kind gesture, but not a sustainable solution to 'proper' Qatar food independence represented by Baladna-as-icon.

Yet far visible in recent analyses of Qatar's reconfigured food supply network has been how the embargo has deepened its ties with a much more diverse set of countries across Eurasia, such as Germany, India, China, Kazakhstan (*Qatar Tribune,* 2019; Shalal and Alkousaa, 2018; Shoeb, 2017). In the latter case, for example, Qatar Airways announced a new cargo route from Doha to Almaty, where Qatar is said to be 'interested in importing food products from Kazakhstan, in particular flour, grain, meat, etc.' (*AzerNews*, 2019). This reflects a renewed effort to diversify supply routes, but not all changes in this direction were a direct consequence of the 2017 rift. Some had already been underway for some time. For example, Qatar's new $7.4 billion deep-water Hamad Port opened only 3 months after the embargo began, in September 2017. The new port allows the country to accept larger cargo boats coming from China and

India, whereas good previously had to be first received at Dubai's Jebel Ali Port and then re-exported on smaller ships (Smith, 2019; for more on port infrastructures in the Gulf, see Akhavan 2017, 2019; Kamrava, 2016; Ziadah, 2017, 2018). But construction had begun already in 2010 and was designed to accommodate livestock and bulk grain imports, as well as grain storage. On the port's official website, these elements are said to reflect the strategic goals of the Qatar National Vision 2030, the government's primary planning framework, but also they also reflect the Food Security program's objectives of diversifying supply routes and increasing strategic reserves (Al-Ameri, 2012; *Construction Week*, 2015).

While these measures to increase Qatar's import options were built into the project from the start, as the port enters its next phase, it is increasingly being defined by the new reality that China has become Qatar's top trading partner since the embargo began in 2017 (previously, it was third after the UAE and Saudi Arabia) (Ataullah, 2018; SESRI, 2019). The new port and increasingly diverse supply chains will in fact allow for smoother and less expensive food imports. It is notable, however, that these issues all revolve around how Qatar is connected with the outside world. As opposed to inward-looking nationalist imaginaries, the nationalist aspiration of food security or independence is actually one of external connectedness. Finding new trade links and political partnerships has been the defining feature of the government's response to the embargo and the securitization of food since 2017. In their effort to subvert the 'food weapon' that Saudi Arabian and Emirati leaders sought to deploy against the government, Qatar's leaders responded exactly as Wallensteen (1976: 281-282) anticipated in writing on this concept over 40 years ago: turning to the world market to find new supplies.

For outside observers, the Qatari response should come as no surprise. Rather, what *is* surprising is the fact that the Gulf countries participating in the embargo would actually see the utility of such a weapon to be wielded against Qatar's leadership. Yet, as I have argued, the 'food weapon' concept is underpinned by an essentialist understanding of geography stripped of politics, technological innovation, and human ingenuity – it is built on countless myths of independence in an interconnected world. These are nationalist myths. And nationalism, as Michael Billig (1995: 80) has observed, is built on precisely this contradiction: 'Nationalists live in an international world, and their ideology is itself an international ideology. Without constant observation of the world of other nations, nationalists would be unable to claim that their nations meet the universal codes of nationhood.' These 'universal codes' are not static, however, and nationalisms are in constant flux. As with the shifting history of how food has been securitized in the region, the way nationalist ideals and aspirations are being articulated in the Arabian Peninsula in the wake of the 2017 Qatar-Gulf rift are shifting too. For Qatar, this new nationalism is not just inward-looking, but rather inward- and outward-looking in a new way, with new partners – and with a new dairy farm to show for it. This case thus illustrates how food geopolitics are not just played out over some abstract geographic territory, responding to prevailing geopolitics, but that geopolitics is actively constituted *through* food and its supply – just as much in the Gulf as globally.

Notes

[1] A comprehensive analysis of the crisis is outside the scope of this paper, but for a recent overview, see Bianco and Stansfield, 2018. The embargo was initially justified by an orchestrated hack of Qatari government sites to plant inflammatory material (including quotes denied by the Qataris, in which the Emir allegedly expressed support for Iran and Hamas), but as Bianco and Stansfield detail, relations in the Gulf neighborhood have been unsteady for several years. The embargo was initiated shortly after President Donald Trump's fawning visit to Saudi Arabia, during which regional fissures quickly bubbled to the surface, largely around Qatari support for groups that the new leaders in Saudi Arabia and the UAE saw as opposed to their own agendas. See also, Allagui and Akdenizli, 2019; Alkaabi and Soliman, 2017; Miller, 2018.

[2] For Hassad Food's narration of this process, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oTtbE8VjphE&feature=youtu.be (accessed 20 February 2020)

[3] For additional examples of such realist approaches to food and waer in the Middle East, see Al-Ansari, 2018; Al-Saidi and Saliba, 2019; Amery, 2015, 2019; Conversi, 2016; Elmi, 2017; Gilmont, 2015; Gross and Feldman, 2015; Harrigan, 2014a; Mahmoud, 2016; Zawahri, 2019. For counter-examples, which adopt a critical stance, see especially Henderson, 2017, 2019; Woertz 2013a, 2013b, 2014a, 2014b.
[4] For the port's official account, see: https://www.kingabdullahport.com.sa/about-the-port/the-story-of-king-abdullah-port/ (accessed 20 February 2020)
[5] The full video clip is available at the author's website with the password 'national' at: http://nataliekoch.com/gndp/
[6] Although the QNFSP and its official website are now defunct, and former employees are barred from speaking because of non-disclosure agreements, the organization's Facebook page is still accessible at: https://www.facebook.com/QNFSPQatar/ (accessed 20 February 2020)
[7] The argument that the Gulf states are food secure naturally obscures local inequalities (spatial and social) with respect to access to nutritious food – or what Hwalla et al. (2016) refer to as 'nutrition security.' The sociology of this kind of household-scale food security is outside the scope of this article, but see also Seyfert et al., 2014.

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