

## Written evidence submitted by Steven Merley

### About the Author

Steven Merley is an investigator and intelligence specialist who since 1992 has specialised in the investigation of political extremism and is currently the Editor of the Global Muslim Brotherhood Daily Watch, a daily intelligence digest covering the activities of the Global Muslim Brotherhood. He has worked closely with the Wall Street Journal and the Times of London on articles about the Muslim Brotherhood and a variety of news publications have published his commentary on the Brotherhood. Mr. Merley has given evidence to a number of inquiries by UK Select Committees, delivered presentations at the UK Houses of Parliament, Harvard University in the US, at McGill University in Canada and addressed events sponsored by the US State Department, the European Parliament, and the Belgian Parliament.

### Summary:

The ongoing diplomatic crisis between Qatar and its Gulf neighbours, which centres mainly on the country's alleged support for terrorism, represents one of the biggest challenges to the UK's foreign policy to the Middle East since the Arab Spring. Qatar has been accused by its neighbours of supporting terrorism and there is substantial evidence that the country has long been supporting the Al Nusra Front, designated by the US in 2012 as a foreign terrorist organization and the Al Qaeda branch in Syria. The support has included coordination between Al Nusra commanders and senior Qatari military officials and financiers, financial assistance, and help in creating a new opposition coalition in which Al Nusra was a leading member. Qatar has also found other means to support Al Nusra in the face of the US designation including the facilitation or direct payment of ransom to the group for the released of kidnapped victims and the toleration of private, designated terrorist financiers within the country. The most significant of these financiers is an individual described by the US as a Qatar-based terrorist financier and facilitator who is also the President of an anti-Western political coalition comprised of prominent Salafi and Global Muslim Brotherhood leaders. This coalition includes at least seven leading figures and/or their organizations designated as terrorists by the United States, the EU, and/or the United Nations for their support of Al-Qaeda and related groups. Some of these figures and/or the organization itself have suggested direct attacks on the US and the UK military and the Qatari GAAC President himself has bragged about the close cooperation between GAAC and the violent Iraqi "resistance" against coalition forces.

### Qatari Support for Al Qaeda in Syria

1. During the period 2012-2015, multiple sources reported that Qatar was supporting the Al Nusra Front, designated by the US in 2012 as a foreign terrorist organization and the Al Qaeda branch in Syria.<sup>1</sup>

2. For example, the Wall Street Journal reported that Al Nusra commanders began visiting Doha in 2012 for meetings with senior Qatari military officials and financiers while in 2013, the New York Times reported that Obama, during a private meeting in Washington, warned Qatari Sheik Hamad about the dangers of arming Islamic radicals in Syria.<sup>2 3</sup>

3. By 2015, the US State Department 2015 Country Reports on Terrorism stated:

...entities and individuals within Qatar continue to serve as a source of financial support for terrorist and violent extremist groups, particularly regional al-Qaeda affiliates such as the Nusrah Front."<sup>4</sup>

Also in 2015, the Washington Post reported that Qatar had helped to create a new opposition coalition known as the "Army of Conquest" in which Al Nusra was a leading member.<sup>5</sup>

4. Although Al Nusra attempted to “rebrand” itself in 2016, declaring its independence from Al Qaeda, the US State Department responded by amending its designation to say, “Whether it calls itself Jabhat Fath al Sham or al-Nusra Front, the group remains al-Qaeda’s affiliate in Syria.”<sup>6</sup>

5. Nevertheless, Reuters had reported in 2015 that Qatar had been working to find ways to support the Al Nusra rebranding and the Financial Times reported that shortly after Al Nusra’s name change, Syrian rebels believed Qatar and other countries had provided cash and supplies for an Aleppo military campaign led and organized by the rebranded Al Nusra.<sup>7 8</sup>

6. There is also evidence to suggest that Qatar has found additional means to continue its support of Al Nusra despite the US designation.

### **Kidnapping & Ransom**

7. Qatar has had a history of either paying or helping facilitate ransom payments to Al Nusra with at least one source stating that “Kidnappings of civilians and, on some occasions, military personnel for ransom have been a significant source of income” for Al Nusra.<sup>9</sup>

8. For example, the Wall Street Journal reported that Qatar reportedly paid a \$16 million ransom in March 2014 for 13 Syrian nuns and three others held by Al Nusra and various media reported also in 2014 that as much as \$4 million was paid to Nusra for the release of 13 Greek Orthodox nuns held for four months.<sup>10 11</sup>

9. As recently as April 2017 Qatar reportedly paid a ransom of as much as \$1bn to Al Nusra as well as to Iranian security officials as part of a deal that resulted in the release of 26 royal family members.<sup>12</sup>

### **Terrorist Financiers**

10. Qatar also appears to tolerate the presence of “private” terrorist financiers in the country, despite their designation as such by the US, EU, and/or the UN. UK media reported in 2014 that according to a Western diplomat in Doha there were eight to 12 key figures in Qatar, most of them raising millions of pounds for the “jihadis” in Syria, most of whom were funding Al-Nusra.<sup>13</sup>

11. While the US State Department 2016 Country Report said that “In 2015 and 2016, Qatar “prosecuted and convicted Qatari terrorist financiers for the first time”, a then acting US Treasury Secretary noted that despite showing willingness to take enforcement action against terrorist financiers, Qatar had “a way to go” and lacked “the necessary political will and capacity to effectively enforce their counter-terrorism finance laws against all terrorist financing threats”.<sup>14 15</sup> In line with the US Treasury Secretary’s statement, the evidence suggests that the most significant terrorist financiers remain at large in Qatar.

12. For example, in 2015 the US designated “Qatari al-Qaida facilitator” Abd al-Latif Bin 'Abdallah Salih Muhammad al-Kawari who was said to have collected financial support for al-Qaida and served as an al-Qaida security official.<sup>16</sup> The US also said that in early 2012, al-Kawari worked with al-Qaida facilitators to coordinate the delivery of funding from Qatari financiers intended to support al-Qaida and to deliver receipts confirming that al-Qaida received foreign donor funding from Qatar-based extremists. Finally, the US reported that he had also facilitated the international travel of a courier who was carrying tens of thousands of dollars earmarked for al-Qaida.

13. At the same time, the US designated Sa'd bin Sa'd Muhammad Shariyan Al Ka'bi who reportedly set up donation campaigns in Qatar to aid with fundraising in response to a request from an Al Nusra associate for money to purchase both weapons and food.<sup>17</sup> The US also said that in same time period, an Al Nusra official requested that al-Ka'bi act as an intermediary for collecting a ransom for a hostage being held by the group, and al-Ka'bi worked to facilitate a ransom payment in exchange for the release of a hostage held by Al Nusra.

14. However, perhaps the most egregious example of Qatar’s tolerance for terrorist financiers is that of Abdul Rahman Bin Umair Al-Nuaimi, designated by the US in December 2013 and described as “among

the most prominent Qatar-based supporters of Iraqi Sunni extremists.” The US further described Nu'aymi as a Qatar-based terrorist financier and facilitator who has provided money and material support and conveyed communications to al-Qaeda and its affiliates in Syria, Iraq, Somalia and Yemen for more than a decade.

15. Al-Nuaimi is also a former Qatari history professor at the University of Doha, a former president of the Qatar Football Association, and has also served as an adviser to the Qatari government.<sup>18</sup> He was also a founding member of the prominent Qatari charity Sheikh Eid Bin Mohammad Al Thani Charitable Foundation, named after a member of the country's ruling family.

### **The Global Anti-Aggression Campaign**

16. What generally has not been known or reported is Al-Nuaimi's role as the President of the Global Anti-Aggression Campaign (GAAC) founded in April 2003, shortly after the outbreak of the second Gulf War in Iraq and initiated to counter what was described as a “vicious aggression by Zionists and the American administration” directed at the Muslim nation [umma]. GAAC was re-launched in February 2005 during a conference in Doha.<sup>19</sup>

17. In total, at least seven leading GAAC figures and/or their organizations have been designated as terrorists by the United States, the EU, and/or the United Nations for their support of Al-Qaeda and related groups – with some of these leaders known to have been close to Osama Bin Laden himself. Arabic news reports also identify at least three GAAC figures as funders of the so-called Islamic State off Iraq and the Levant (ISIS). In 2010, Al-Nuaimi himself bragged about the close cooperation between GAAC and the violent Iraqi “resistance” against coalition forces.

18. The GAAC founders included at least 495 individuals, among them Salafi, Salafi-Jihadi, Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas leaders including Global Muslim Brotherhood leader Youssef Qaradawi, long based in Qatar. Other prominent founders included UK former Hamas commander Mohammad Sawalha, one of the co-founders of the British Muslim Initiative along with UK Muslim Brotherhood leader Anas Al-Tikriti, and a group of Kuwaiti Salafists including an individual designated by the US in July 2006 for providing financial support to Al-Qaeda affiliated groups. Also among the founders was another individual who has proposed an anthrax attack on the US that was “guaranteed to kill 330,000 Americans within a single hour.”

19. The main public activities of the GAAC have been sponsoring and/or participating in a series of international conferences centered on Iraq, Palestine, and the 'Arab Spring.' These conferences were attended by a wide variety of Global Muslim Brotherhood and Salafist leaders, including at times UK Muslim Brotherhood leader Anas Al-Tikriti. These conferences have included calls for violence in the form of supporting the Iraqi “resistance” against Western forces, opening a “third Jihadist” front directed at Israel, called for a declaration of war should Western warships enter “Muslim Waters”, and called on Sunni Muslims to support the Syrian rebels “through every kind of jihad.” Abdul Rahman Bin Umair Al-Nuaimi once told a GAAC conference that the third World War was not military but rather “a religious war, hostile to our deeply entrenched values and morals in all Muslim lands”<sup>20</sup>

20. The 2009 statement about “Muslim Waters” drew significant public attention in the UK due to the signature of Daud Abdullah, then Deputy Secretary-General of the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) who was accused of advocating attacks on the Royal Navy if it tried to stop arms for Hamas being smuggled into Gaza. The incident resulted in the severing of relations between the UK government and the MCB.

21. In June 2013, GAAC held a “Syrian Scholars Conference” in Cairo sponsored by a group that included a foundation associated with Abdul Rahman Bin Umair Al-Nuaimi. Also participating was Youssef Qaradawi, an Egyptian cleric banned from the UK and France for glorifying terrorist violence, and a variety of other Salafist and Global Muslim Brotherhood figures. The conference participants called on Sunni Muslims to support the Syrian rebels “through every kind of jihad, including armed military jihad, financial jihad, and any other kind of assistance that can save them from the deadly and criminal fist of

the sectarian regime.” The clerics also called on Sunni Muslims worldwide to embark on Jihad for the sake of the Syrian people.

## Conclusion

The Inquiry asks whether Islamist Terrorism is an existential threat to the UK, and to what extent it is dependent on state sponsorship. Qatar’s role in supporting Al Qaeda affiliates in Syria, as well as the presence of important terrorist financiers within the country, should greatly concern the UK and the international community at time when it is seeking to lead a united effort, alongside its Middle East partners, to combat the scourge of global Islamist terror. Also concerning is the GAAC, an organization that features prominent UK Islamists, both Salafi and Muslim Brotherhood, together with designated terrorists. In light of the present Inquiry, it should be noted that the GAAC and its support for terrorism was directed at Western countries and GAAC and/or its members have called for direct attacks on the US and the UK military. The UK should exert maximum pressure on the Qatari government to cease any support to Islamist terror.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/12/201759.htm>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/articles/qatars-ties-to-militants-strain-alliance-1424748601?alg=y> (paid article)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/30/world/middleeast/sending-missiles-to-syrian-rebels-qatar-muscles-in.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/258249.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/assads-regime-at-increasing-risk-amid-a-surge-of-rebel-advances/2015/04/26/c2742e22-ec32-11e4-8050-839e9234b303\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.3efe858eec02](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/assads-regime-at-increasing-risk-amid-a-surge-of-rebel-advances/2015/04/26/c2742e22-ec32-11e4-8050-839e9234b303_story.html?utm_term=.3efe858eec02)

<sup>6</sup> <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/11/264230.htm>

<sup>7</sup> <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-nusra-insight/insight-syrias-nusra-front-may-leave-qaeda-to-form-new-entity-idUKKBN0M00G620150304>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/da076830-5d77-11e6-a72a-bd4bf1198c63>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.hate-speech.org/jabhat-fateh-al-shams-income-and-resources-an-open-source-investigation/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/articles/ransom-fills-terrorist-coffers-1406637010>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4497257,00.html>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/dd033082-49e9-11e7-a3f4-c742b9791d43>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/qatar/11125897/The-Club-Med-for-terrorists.html>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2016/272232.htm>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40246734>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl0143.aspx>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl0143.aspx>

<sup>18</sup> [https://www.globalmbresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Global\\_Anti-Aggression\\_Campaign\\_2003-2016.pdf](https://www.globalmbresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Global_Anti-Aggression_Campaign_2003-2016.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> [https://www.globalmbresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Global\\_Anti-Aggression\\_Campaign\\_2003-2016.pdf](https://www.globalmbresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Global_Anti-Aggression_Campaign_2003-2016.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> <http://gulfnnews.com/news/uae/general/doha-meet-agrees-on-panel-to-counter-aggression-against-islamic-world-1.278948>