

MYSTERY TRIAL: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON THE CASE OF THE FORMER INDIAN NAVY PERSONNEL IN QATAR

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The [death sentence handed down by a Qatari court](#) on Thursday to eight Indians reportedly accused of espionage is indeed “deeply shocking”, as the Ministry of External Affairs described in a statement, and the situation is now [a major test of the Narendra Modi government's diplomatic skills](#). The trial was shrouded in secrecy, with scant information on the charges and evidence against the former Indian Navy servicemen, arrested in August 2022. Despite pleas from their families and Indian diplomats in Doha, Qatar has not explained why it has not divulged details of the case. Even the judgment has yet to be shared with New Delhi. Leaked reports suggest that the men have been accused of sharing secret information pertaining to the stealth submarine programme they worked on, with a third country, a charge their families have denied. Visits by Indian officials to Qatar to plead for leniency and transparency have been of no avail. While this case has some parallels to the case of former Naval Commander Jadhav, who is on death row too in Pakistan, the difference is that India's ties with Qatar have been relatively better. Apart from strategic and defence cooperation agreements, India sources 40% of its LNG needs from Qatar. India is also Qatar's third biggest source of imports, particularly raw materials for construction and fresh food items. Pertinently, these supplies continued despite the Gulf blockade against Qatar in 2017, which should have counted for some goodwill towards India. In addition, 7,00,000 Indian expatriates are an integral part of Qatar's institutions, industry and workforce. A rift in ties, which a sentence like this is bound to engender, will be to the detriment of both countries, and India must make this clear to Qatar.

The government must waste no time in charting the next steps to ensure the Indians are given the best possible support in an appeal. Apart from the legal appeals process and diplomatic legwork, channels to the Qatari leadership should be activated at the highest levels, including the Prime Minister if necessary. A case must be made for clemency and commuting the sentences to jail terms that could even be served out in India if the men are indeed found guilty in the appeals process. Notwithstanding reports that seek to tie the verdict to more geopolitical considerations, including perceived Qatari differences with India over its policy on Israel and Palestine in the current conflict, the government must demonstrate that the lives of the men are indeed a priority for their country and for a government that claims a policy of “no Indian left behind”.

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