The Gulf Crisis: Roots and Implications

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On May 24, 2017, UAE and Saudi media published statements attributed to the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani, indicating a major break with GCC policies. It emerged that hackers had seized the website of the Qatar News Agency (QANA) and planted the misattributed statements, purportedly delivered by Sheikh Tamim during a national service graduation ceremony the previous day. These allegations triggered a two-week long frenzied media campaign against Qatar. The crisis escalated afterwards wherein Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt announced on June 5 that they have decided to sever their diplomatic ties with Qatar. The four countries also imposed a full blockade on Qatar, covering its (single) land border with Saudi Arabia as well as the country’s air and seaports. This extended to transit travel across the region, with all planes travelling to and from Qatar prevented from landing in Saudi, Emirati or Egyptian airports. Qatari diplomats were given 48 hours to leave the blockading countries while other Qatari nationals were allowed two weeks to leave.

Roots of the Crisis

Since the ascendance of former Emir, Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani, father of the current ruler, to power in 1995, Qatar’s regional role has fundamentally transformed. Its dynamic and flexible foreign policy approach allowed Doha to balance relations with major powers in the region and across the globe. Qatar was able to build robust relationship with the United States—hosting the largest U.S. military bases outside U.S. territories at Al-Udeid Air Base, south of the country—while simultaneously establishing strong ties with some of the U.S.’s traditional foes; including Iran. Al Jazeera network was also established. The broadcaster addressed some of the most pressing, often ignored, topics in the Arab Middle East. It screened Arab intellectuals and political activists from a wide array of political trends. These changes, brought about by Qatar, became a source of irritation for its neighbors – Saudi Arabia in particular—providing for periodic crises between the two GCC nations.

Instead of initiating a serious debate about the political and economic conditions; which have led to the breakout of the 2011 Arab revoluti-
ons, conservative Arab governments blamed Al Jazeera coverage for most of the chaos which engulfed the region ever since. Peaceful protests by young Arabs won admiration worldwide, leading western governments, the U.S. in particular, to consider abandoning traditional allies; such as Hosni Mubarak of Egypt. While most Arab governments were on the back foot, waiting to react to events on the ground, Doha and the Al Jazeera network were in their prime, playing a vibrant role across the region. A reversal of fortunes was quick in the making, however.

A watershed moment for both the Arab Spring and for Qatari foreign policy came in 2013. At that point, revolutionary momentum began to fade. Islamists in power could not manage the transition to democracy in Egypt. The army could not also resist the temptation to seize power. Qatar’s position became untenable when the Junta, supported by Saudi Arabia and the UAE; took over power, reversing the gains of the January 25, 2011 revolution. The June 30, 2013 coup, which removed Egypt’s first democratically president exposed the rift between these two Gulf countries, together with Bahrain, and Qatar. The governments of those three countries withdrew their ambassadors from Doha by the beginning of 2014, marking the crescendo of a crisis, which lasted for nine months.

Unfinished Business

The prevailing circumstances at that time prevented Saudi Arabia and the UAE from achieving a final and complete resolution to the 2014 crisis. The latest escalation against Doha, surfacing in mid-May 2017, allowed for the resumption of the conflict. The election of U.S. president Donald Trump emboldened voices antagonistic to Qatar in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. The Trump administration seems to have created the right environment for an alliance between the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia to finish some unfinished business with Qatar. This came into focus with the American-Arab-Islamic summit in Riyadh, which brought the U.S. president together with more than 50 leaders from around the Arab and the Islamic world.

The latest attack on Qatar has undertaken at its core a number of accusations regarding Qatari foreign policy which have no basis in reality, and which vanish entirely when brought under the slightest scrutiny. Chief among these are the suggestions that Qatar is a state sponsor of terrorism, that it is building a closer ties with Iran, and that it destabilizes its neighbors and allies in the Gulf Cooperation Council. These accusations are discredited by the fact that none other than U.S. President Donald Trump, when meeting Sheikh Tamim at the Riyadh Summit, praised Qatar for its role in the war against terrorism. As far as the allegation that Doha supports the Muslim Brotherhood, Qatar has repeatedly stated that it has never been a sponsor of the Brotherhood, an organization with which it has its differences. Nonetheless, Doha refuses to brand the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization, a move that it sees as both inaccurate and counterproductive in the war against terror.

Today, accusations that Qatar supports terrorism can only be used to mean one thing, namely that the country should no longer host Hamas.

In terms of a Qatari relationship with Iran, the fact is that Doha has paid a higher price than any other Gulf country for the breakdown of its relations with Tehran. This includes not only the ransoms paid to free Qatari citizens who were
captured in Iraq by pro-Iran militias, but also the massive political capital it lost by cutting ties with Iran. Meanwhile, the UAE was busy expanding its economic ties to Tehran, with 80% of Iranian trade passing through the Emirates, which have long provided a vital transit port for goods bound for Iran.

**Turkey’s Position**

From the onset of the crisis, and in its capacity as the chairperson of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) Turkey attempted to play the role of a mediator. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, held telephone talks with the Emir of Qatar, the Saudi monarch and the Emir of Kuwait, in which he offered to mediate between the different parties. He also dispatched his foreign minister, Mr. Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, to Doha; Riyadh and Kuwait in an effort to ease tension between the Arab Gulf states. The countries leading the blockade on Doha simply paid no heed to Turkish overtures, however. This led Ankara to beef up its backing to its Qatari ally by accelerating the ratification of previous military agreements between Qatar and Turkey. With legislative approval on June 7, 2017, Turkey will now be able to expedite the establishment of a military base in Qatar.

In addition, Turkey was quick to supply Qatar with basic Turkish food commodities and products, especially dairy products. Turkey’s support for Qatar was an important balancing factor in the crisis, although Erdogan described the decision to establish a military base in Qatar as protection for Gulf security in general, not directed against any Gulf state.

**Conclusion**

Whatever surreptitious motives are declared, the aim of the UAE and Saudi Arabia is to bring Qatar into line on their foreign policy agenda. This is particularly true with regards to the relationship with the present regime in Egypt, which is seen in both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi as a floodgate against the winds of change sweeping through the region. One final salient point is the support of the Israeli lobby in Washington. The extent of coordination with the Israelis has been brought to light by newly released correspondence between Yousef Al Otaiba, UAE’s Ambassador to Washington, and members of known pro-Israeli groups, who appear to share the goal of demonizing Qatar.

Qatar cannot be expected to surrender its foreign policy in the midst of such a threatening environment. Any exit from the crisis requires a dialogue between the two sides, in which a mutual understanding is achieved not by way of threats and capitulations. Indeed, the outcome of this attack on Qatar will ultimately rely on the position of the Trump administration; itself very divided over the issue; with president Trump taking a more sympathetic position towards the blocking countries; whereas the State Department and the Pentagon are leaning towards a more diplomatic approach to solve the crisis. Amongst the regional powers, however, Turkey’s position will prove to be key in defining how this crisis evolves in the coming weeks and months. Turkey’s decision to build a military base in Qatar and dispatch Turkish troops to be stationed there has already affected the course of the crisis with analysts and commentators describing it as a checkmate move. It may have deterred Saudi Arabia and the UAE from opting for a more aggressive approach in trying to force Qatar to surrender to their demands.
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