

What's at Stake for the United States in the GCC Crisis?

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The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is facing its foremost existential crisis since its inception in 1981. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Bahrain teamed up on June 5, 2017, to sever diplomatic ties and impose an embargo on Qatar, while Kuwait and Oman remained neutral. It is true the crisis has been long in the making, however, key factors allowed it to dramatically evolve. The coming days and weeks may decide whether this rift will be internationalized or rather contained within the GCC: Kuwait is leading the mediation efforts, Turkey has announced its intention to deploy troops in Qatar, Israel endorsed the Saudi view, Iran has weighed in to fill the vacuum, and US policy has been ambivalent to say the least. A lot is at stake for US national security, including the scenario of living with a divided GCC, the potential expansion of Iranian influence, and questions regarding the future of al-Udeid Air Base.

The Tipping Point

In the past century, Saudi Arabia and Qatar had decades of difficult relations over border demarcation, an issue that was mostly resolved in the July 2008 border agreement. Riyadh withdrew its ambassador twice from Doha, in 2002 and 2014, and both countries reached a loose "Riyadh agreement" in 2013 to ease political tensions, as neither side was willing to concede. The major shift came in 2011 when Saudi Arabia and Qatar stood on the opposing sides of the "Arab Spring." The clash over developments in Egypt was perhaps the most potent one, a battle Riyadh won in 2013 by

driving the Muslim Brotherhood out of power. In March 2014, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain suspended ties with Qatar over breaching the 2013 agreement. The main recurring contentious issues have been the Al Jazeera Arabic broadcast, support for the Muslim Brotherhood, interference in the affairs of GCC countries, and opening to Iran.

The root of all these contentious issues has been the Saudi willingness since 1995 to accept having Qatar, the tiny neighbor to the east, lead an independent or rather antithetical policy to Riyadh while enjoying self-sustainability. Qatar's ability to balance mixed and often contradictory policies helped the country survive and defined its regional role. Doha managed to balance having relations with both Hamas and Israel, sharing a gas field with Iran, and hosting a US military base, as well as embracing both Islamists and Arab nationalists. A US official acknowledged a "certain utility" for that role and added that "there's got to be a place for us to meet the Taliban. The Hamas (folks) have to have a place to go where they can be simultaneously isolated and talked to." With all its benefits and flaws, these policies became part of an emerging Qatari identity that is increasingly difficult to reign in.

What remains unclear though is what exactly caused the full-court Saudi diplomatic offensive. UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash spoke about irritants in the past several months: the accusation that Qatar undermined the Saudi-led campaign in Yemen and Qatar's handling of a hostage crisis

in Iraq last April, paying ransom to Iranian-backed militias and al-Qaeda to release detained members of the Qatari ruling elite. While Doha miscalculated handling the hostage crisis, all GCC allies do not see eye-to-eye regarding Yemen, including Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

The direct irritant was the alleged speech last month that was attributed to the Emir of Qatar Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) suspects that Russian hackers breached Qatar's state news agency and planted the fake news report that triggered this crisis. However, US officials are unsure about the motive behind the Saudi move; some argue that Trump's call in the recent Riyadh summit to "drive extremists out" might have been interpreted as a green light to act. To be sure, Trump's tweets on June 6 did not help to play down that argument. Furthermore, it is not clear what exact provisions were breached in the 2013 "Riyadh Agreement", since no official reference document was published to that effect, which eventually led to the current crisis.

However, three main reasons seem to have paved the way for the recent developments:

- 1) The lack of trust between Saudi Arabia and Qatar has been building up for a while. Qatar thinks Saudi Arabia seeks to control its sovereign decisions, and Saudi Arabia believes Qatar is out to harm its interests. While the elderly rulers in both countries managed these mistrusts, the new generation is more willing to be

confrontational. The ambiguous 2013 "Riyadh Agreement" did not help to find a mechanism that resolves the contentious issues. Building trust is the only way out of this two-decade-old rift.

- 2) President Donald Trump's recent embrace of Saudi Arabia was interpreted as unconditional support for Riyadh to reassert its regional influence. Saudi Arabia is perceived in Washington as "the deep state"—whether by the Defense or State Departments—and US officials have been cautious not to over-promise Arab allies more than the US can deliver, whether in Syria or Yemen, and most importantly now in Qatar. Trump's lack of leadership and mixed signals might have caused this crisis to materialize.
- 3) Qatar's decision to open to Iran last April might have been the tipping point for Riyadh. Restarting the development of the North Field, the world's biggest gas field that Qatar shares with Iran, after a 12-year self-imposed freeze is a regional game changer. The North Field accounts for nearly all of Qatar's gas production and around 60 percent of its export revenue with a capacity of 2 billion cubic feet per day. Once ready for production in five to seven years, this gas field will give Qatar a competitive edge in global natural gas production and help Iran deal with its severe domestic gas shortages. Last month, the Emir of Qatar called Iranian President Hassan Rouhani to congratulate him on his election

victory and suggested that cooperation, and not confrontation, among Arab countries and Iran is the way to go. That phone call came hours after Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said that Saudi leadership faced a "certain downfall" for aligning with the United States.

Evolution of the US position: The al-Udeid Factor

The 2014 crisis between Saudi Arabia and Qatar was similar in context yet softer in rhetoric. It came a day after Oman invited the Iranian president to Muscat and ahead of former President Barack Obama's visit to Riyadh. At that time, Washington was swift in containing the fallout, unlike now when there is a schism between the White House and the rest of the administration. US Ambassador to Qatar Dana Shell Smith was left with no guidance, confined to retweeting past positions. After astonishingly taking credit for the long-coming Gulf spat, Trump came around and offered mediation in the crisis and even willingness to host a reconciliation meeting in Washington, which is unlikely to happen.

At the core of the US policy concern about the current crisis is obviously the al-Udeid Air Base in Abu Nakhlah Airport, located 20 miles southwest of Doha and currently home to more than 10,000 US military personnel. On that base, the United States has the longest runways in the region in a facility that accommodates up to 120 aircraft. The US Air Force calls al-Udeid the

"nerve center" where B-52 are launched to target the Islamic State targets in Iraq and Syria. Around the clock and approximately every 10 minutes, an aircraft takes off and lands in a strategic facility that the United States uses free of charge. Qatar reportedly spent \$1 billion in the 1990s to construct the air base, which was kept secretive until March 2002 when former Vice President Dick Cheney visited the facility.

The State and Defense Departments scrambled to signal the importance of al-Udeid for US operations. Pentagon spokesperson Navy Captain Jeff Davis said in a news briefing on June 6 that the United States has no plans "to change our posture in Qatar." Secretary of State Rex Tillerson did not believe the Gulf crisis would have an impact on the war against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Defense Secretary James Mattis said he was "positive there will be no implications." Now that the Raqqa offensive has been launched, the al-Udeid Air Base will be more crucial than ever for US operations against ISIL in Syria.

Where Do We Go from Here?

The UAE noted on June 7 that the measures against Qatar are not "about regime change, this is about change of policy"; however, the tensions are rising. The Turkish parliament fast-tracked a bill giving Ankara the mandate to deploy troops in Qatar. Doha is in talks with both Ankara and Tehran to secure food and water supplies to address possible shortages. Iran now has claimed that Saudi Arabia was behind the June 7 attack on the Iranian

parliament, which will only fuel the Gulf spat. The deteriorating crisis in the coming weeks will give both Iran and Turkey a foothold and bring trouble to the Saudi backyard. It could evolve and take a similar path to Yemen, where Houthis were forced to cement their alliance with Iran and where the Saudi leadership is still looking for a way out of its intervention.

In a nutshell, the GCC spat goes against US interests and most importantly Trump's "America First" mantra. Washington has long hoped to strengthen the GCC and hand over some of the security burden to its members. The prospect of relocating 11,000 US military personnel out of Qatar at this point is a logistical nightmare for the Pentagon while it is in the middle of the battle against ISIL; indeed, no free-of-charge alternative base can be ready imminently in the region to host such a high-scale US operation. Discord in the GCC is the last thing any US administration wants, even an unconventional one led by Trump. It is safe to say that any talk now about an "Arab NATO" is on hold, if not indefinitely postponed.

Beyond the Saudi-Qatari rift, Oman has its own concerns and has threatened numerous times to exit the GCC amid discord about its institutional framework and its own distinctive

policies. Muscat played a key role in opening channels between the Obama Administration and the Rouhani government, and the United States has suspected numerous times that arms flowing to the Houthis were going through the Yemeni-Omani border. The current crisis raises questions about the viability of the GCC as an institution.

To resolve the GCC rift is to acknowledge that there are different reasons for different countries to compel Qatar to "change its behavior," Egypt and the UAE are mostly concerned with the Muslim Brotherhood, the Saudi objection is about having a Qatari rapprochement with Iran, and Israel's focus is on Doha hosting Hamas. On the other side, Washington wants to retain its free-of-charge operation in Qatar while at the same time have GCC allies coordinate together to make room for US military activity focused on the last stretch of defeating ISIL. While further escalation might not and should not be expected, the diplomatic stalemate can last (it lasted for eight months in 2014) and could potentially lead to a realignment of alliances in the Middle East. The search for a way out of the crisis has begun and will bear fruit if cool heads prevail.

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