

Absent Rationality in the GCC Crisis

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Rational decision-making normally begins with accurate information that supports policy choices. After careful consideration of costs and benefits, policymakers arrive at a decision that best reflects reality and establishes and safeguards interests. Political actors usually seek decisions that are nearly guaranteed to assure a good return on their policy orientation, keeping in mind that competitors' preferences—by applying the same model—are either fully or partially satisfied when they make corresponding decisions. In other words, a rational actor makes demands that are expected to cajole, or even force, policy changes without appearing to blatantly disregard the basics of reciprocal behavior of counterparts equally invested in the issue at stake.

Thus, everything being equal, objectives and preferred outcomes are carefully calibrated to achieve optimal results in both directions; the initiator of policy choices should not expect to fully succeed, nor should the opponent be made to completely succumb. Indeed, the initiator never assumes full success, especially if the responder acts rationally and exploits resources and powers optimally. Without a balance between policy demands and the realities of their implementation, the initiator is faced with potentially unpleasant alternatives: an accusation of irrationality; a likelihood of escalation that may not lead anywhere; or backing down and abandoning objectives—all unwelcome outcomes risking loss of prestige and credibility.

In the present Gulf crisis, developments since last May have shown a careless disregard on the part of the Saudi Arabia-United Arab Emirates-Bahrain entente of the basic tenets of rational decision-making and brinkmanship. Their expectations of a Qatari change in policy and behavior—buttressed by a list of ill-considered demands on Doha—are not rational or even achievable without the complete subjugation of the small peninsular nation to its neighbors. Qatar has been asked to shed whatever independence, sovereignty, and freedom of action it has secured over decades in return for nothing but a dependent relationship that places its domestic and foreign policies under the control of its larger neighbors.

Recklessness Begets Dangers

Absolute and unchecked political power underlies this anti-Qatar approach, resulting in a series of reckless actions that defy rational explanations. According to the list of demands Kuwait submitted on behalf of the anti-Qatar coalition, Doha, among other things, must sever all diplomatic relations with Iran, suspend all military agreements with Turkey, and shutter a Turkish base on Qatari soil. It is also expected to cease any relations with the Muslim Brotherhood and violent extremist groups (all lumped together), expel individuals who are unacceptable to the complainants, and hand over “fugitives” it “harbors” to Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. In a direct attack on freedom of speech and the press, it must also shut down the pan-Arab Al Jazeera television station and some news outlets it sponsors and

funds. Finally, Doha is supposed to accept an inspection and verification plan that would allow the complainants to supervise, monthly, its adherence to their demands, as if Qatar were a rogue state unworthy of trust.

Any examination of the demands and their language points to at least two important flaws. The first is the fact that they were not made to satisfy known international norms of behavior but merely to mollify US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's insistence that the anti-Qatar coalition make "reasonable and actionable" demands. The second is that the demands appear so extreme that no state, no matter how "guilty" or weak, would agree to accept them. Indeed, the nature of the demands and the imprudent insistence on their implementation in toto expose the initiators as uninterested in a reasonable, rational, and acceptable resolution of the crisis—i.e., they made their demands in a way that would assure their rejection. More poignantly, Saudi Arabia's insistence that the demands are "non-negotiable" further complicates the issue and places the Gulf on a course of progressively more tension and the possibility of armed conflict.

So far, this reckless anti-Qatar approach has not produced the presupposed response from Qatar. Nor is it expected to do so. In fact, Doha has shown caution, poise, adroitness, and a continuing readiness to negotiate all the issues that purportedly led to the current dispute. Most importantly, and cognizant of the dangers of retaliation, Qatar has so far avoided the pitfalls of reacting angrily to accusations levied

against it, in the process showing an uncanny diplomatic skill and maneuverability that have earned it broad esteem.

These pages have previously dealt with the issue of the Muslim Brotherhood at the heart of the anti-Qatar coalition's grievance with Doha. Further analyses have looked at other developments. The present investigation will focus on two irrational demands that have far-reaching regional impacts: those dealing with severing relations with Iran and with ending Qatar's military relations with Turkey.

The Question of Iran

Qatar is asked to sever all diplomatic relations with Iran and expel supposedly resident members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) from its capital. Believers in Qatari malfeasance go back in history to when the former ruler, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, visited Beirut following the brutal 2006 Israeli war on Lebanon to announce Qatar's intention to help rebuild the country. Pictures of the emir with captions of "Thank you Qatar" adorned Hezbollah areas in Lebanon for years afterward. Sheikh Hamad also invited former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad—never trusted by Gulf leaders—to attend the GCC's 28th Summit in 2007 in Doha. In addition, Qatar remained committed to an open relationship with Iran—a relationship that, for instance, facilitated the end of Lebanon's political crisis in 2008.

But reviewing history selectively can be both regressive and misguided. Qatar's relationship with Iran ran aground long ago, after the start of Syria's civil war in 2011. Doha supported the anti-Asad coalition of Syrian forces committed to regime change in Damascus--a policy that remains in overall accord with at least Bahraini and Saudi Arabian orientations and anathema to Iranian preferences. Since the ascension of the current ruler, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, in 2013, Qatar has been well in line with Saudi preferences in Syria regarding a political transition, except for its support of some elements of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood who also worked for Syria's deliverance from Asad's rule, but who remain unwelcome by some Gulf countries. It is noteworthy that according to Hezbollah, all GCC states--Qatar included--are now equally guilty of "fomenting terrorism" in Syria; indeed, "Thank you Qatar" banners have long ago disappeared from Beirut streets.

Moreover, when Iranian mobs attacked the Saudi Arabian diplomatic missions in Iran in 2016, Qatar withdrew its diplomatic mission from Tehran in protest. During the Iranian nuclear crisis, Qatar joined the GCC states in proposing a negotiated settlement and supported the GCC position that endorsed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. Qatar also twice participated in GCC summit meetings with former American President Barack Obama to conduct negotiations within the US-GCC strategic dialogue. In other words, Qatar has adhered to general GCC principles and policy orientations. It has also remained keen to apply

a principle of strategic hedging that allows it, as a small state, to chart a semi-independent foreign policy.

It is indeed hard to see rationality in the anti-Qatar coalition's demands regarding Iran. If the GCC is committed to a peaceful, albeit cool, relationship with Iran--and it is--why is Qatar singled out for using a conciliatory tone with the Islamic Republic, with which it shares the South Pars/North Dome field, the largest natural gas reservoir in the world? Iran doubtless represents a challenge to all GCC states, including Qatar; but doesn't blockading Qatar and severing all relations with the state risk pushing it into a better association with Iran? Why should Qatar sever its economic relations with Iran, which are minimal, while the UAE benefits from the bulk of the \$37 billion of imports Iran gets from and through the GCC? Dubai--a constituent UAE emirate--is Iran's major trading partner in the Gulf and hosts tens of thousands of expatriate Iranians; yet, no mention is made of suspending any relations between the glitzy emirate and the mullahs' capital.

Militarily speaking, it is difficult to see the rationality of the anti-Qatar stance by Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Qatar represents a critical node of GCC security and, in addition to hosting the American al-Udeid Air Base, possesses the US-made Patriot PAC-3 air defense system that is crucial for defending Qatari and GCC territories against Iranian missiles. How and why can Saudi Arabia, for instance, be assured of fully

defending its eastern flank against such missiles if Qatar's military establishment believes that Riyadh brooks ill will toward its leaders? By the same token, is Abu Dhabi any safer now, when Doha may not perceive that it is in its own interest to prevent Iran from targeting Emirati oil platforms in Gulf waters? If GCC military coordination, cooperation, and interoperability were problematic in the past, how may they be served now that Qatar's armed forces have severed operations with the GCC's Peninsula Shield Command? Finally, what is the rationality of the calculation that Qatar would abandon its independent foreign policy toward Iran while it is subjected to a blockade by its Arab sisters in the GCC, one that deprives it of foodstuffs and necessities for the wellbeing of its citizens and millions of expatriate workers?

The Question of the Relationship with Turkey

Political rationality is also under assault in the demand regarding Qatar's relations with Turkey. Although close Qatari-Turkish relations may have never appealed to the anti-Qatar coalition, it remains surprising that the alliance would fathom pushing Doha to end its military cooperation with Ankara and shut down the Turkish base being built on Qatari soil. The fact that Qatar and Turkey have similar views of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), coupled with Qatar's ability to use strategic hedging to protect itself as a small state, have raised alarms in the coalition's capitals that Doha may have secured too much independence for itself vis-à-vis other more powerful states in the GCC.

To Qatar, this demand naturally amounts to an insult to its sovereignty and independent decision-making. Not only is it being asked to relinquish its ability to decide freely in matters pertaining to hosting MB leaders, for instance, and allowing Al Jazeera to broadcast uncensored, but it is also being blackmailed to give up its internationally recognized right to associate with states or governments of its own choosing. This, like other demands, is the most unlikely one to be realized. In fact, and despite its desire to keep its relations intact with the anti-Qatar entente in the GCC, Turkey has announced its commitment to Qatar's security and has dispatched military forces to the nation after the Turkish parliament allowed their deployment in a vote on June 8.

In essence, if the anti-Qatar alliance insists on its demand in this regard, it will be hard-pressed to find an acceptable course of action. Its choice arguably oscillates between two equally difficult and dangerous alternatives. The first could be to threaten sanctions on Turkey as a negative inducement, in the hope that Ankara would be more cautious in throwing its lot behind Doha. The other is to declare all-out war on Qatar, a choice that would be utter folly considering the Saudi-led coalition's prolonged involvement in Yemen and international, especially American, responses. Needless to say, neither of these is desirable or indeed achievable, given the damage they would conceivably cause to GCC security opposite a strident Iran.

To Turkey, this demand represents a direct assault on its intention to be a necessary ally for the countries of its “near abroad.” As Turkey sees its options shrinking in Syria with Iran’s prospects improving daily, it is likely to double down on aiding Qatar as a willing partner. Furthermore, Ankara understands the GCC’s security qualms and knows that whatever the anti-Qatar alliance may threaten is arguably a bluff, given the Iranian challenge. While lack of rational calculations may blind Saudi Arabia and its allies to the dangers attendant in the demand presented to Qatar, Turkey will always count on itself as a good guarantee against the Iranian danger, one that the GCC countries cannot ignore.

To both Qatar and Turkey, the demand to sever their military ties is disingenuous since every GCC country hosts foreign soldiers, especially American troops. Indeed, the UAE hosts contingents from the United States, France, and South Korea that maintain bases on its shores. It has Colombian mercenaries whom it is accused of deploying in Yemen since the start of the Saudi-led coalition’s intervention to defeat the Houthi-Saleh alliance against Yemen’s legitimate authorities. Bahrain hosts the American Fifth Fleet; Kuwait has at least three US bases; Oman allows US aircraft access to its bases; and Saudi Arabia permits secret drone bases for operations against al-Qaeda in Yemen. Qatar hosts more than 10,000 US soldiers at Al-Udeid Air Base and regards Turkish troops as fellow Muslims whose government has sent them to help secure a fellow Sunni Muslim nation.

The Folly of Not Looking in the Mirror

At least in geostrategic terms, what has so far transpired of ill-advised, short-sighted, and unreasonable policy prescriptions and demands by the anti-Qatar alliance points to an unfortunate paucity of rational thinking that compares costs and benefits and weighs alternatives. What makes this increasingly dangerous is the logical conclusion that, unable to back down and therefore lose credibility, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE may see escalation as a necessary way out of the crisis. Doing so, however, is only postponing the reckoning that the threesome must face: to lift the blockade on Qatar, refrain from interfering in its affairs, and accept negotiations with an open mind to reaffirm GCC unity. The alternative is to allow brinkmanship to continue to undo decades of progress during which the GCC became the most cohesive Arab alliance.

Indeed, it behooves all members of the anti-Qatar entente to have an honest look in the mirror, one that is likely to be instructive in the following ways. First, rational actors cannot demand policy changes from others which they themselves would reject; otherwise, they risk being accused of being irrational, having to escalate the situation, or backing down. Second, responsible policymakers should not take a sister country’s population hostage and impose a siege to force its leadership into submission. Third, strategic thinkers would do well to remember to hold on to like-minded allies--as Qatar has been, as an active member of the GCC--when challenges abound and dangers

threaten everyone. Fourth, continuing on the same path that has so far led to nothing but more tension and the possibility of armed conflict is exactly what the feared Islamic Republic of Iran wants and desires.

Finally, it would indeed be instructive for the anti-Qatar coalition's leaders to critically ask themselves a rather basic question: what happened in the interregnum between the visit of Saudi Arabia's King Salman bin Abdulaziz to Doha in December 2016 and now that made the

current crisis necessary? He was well received by adoring crowds and even danced the traditional Qatari *ardha*, as if he had no concerns about Doha's policies and behavior. The answer to such a question is pivotal now that the original contentions about Qatar's collusion with Iran, support of Hamas as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, extolling of Hezbollah, and disparaging GCC rulers have all been proven to be unsupported and ill-advised.

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