

GCC Disputes

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The relations between Saudi Arabia and Qatar back to a long history of disputes. The two states are the most prominent actors within the GCC, and their disputes are likely to cause other fault lines within the region to widen quite rapidly.

Although the current Saudi Arabia- Qatar dispute stems from different positions the two states have taken in relation to opposition groups throughout the region in the context of the Arab uprisings, tensions between them date back to 1913, when King Abdul Aziz Al Saud (Ibn Saud), the founder of the Saudi Kingdom, occupied then annexed Qatar. It was only under British pressure that Saudi Arabia recognized Qatar's borders. These tensions have not faded since this historical dispute. A remark made by Prince Bandar bin Sultan former Saudi ambassador to the USA and head of Saudi General Intelligence agency that Qatar is not a proper country, and is 'nothing but 300 people and a TV channel'.¹

Another clash between Saudi Arabia and Qatar date back to 1992 when border clashes left two dead, and in 2002, the kingdom withdrew its ambassador to Doha over content aired on Al Jazeera. Several years took to normalize the relations between the two states.

Saudi Arabia has doubts that Qatar might harbor plans to split the Kingdom by revealing a leaked phone conversation that allegedly took place in January 2011 between Qatar's then foreign and prime minister, Hammad bin Jassim, and former Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi. Jassim claimed that Saudi Arabia would unravel at his hands, and, after the Saudi King's death, would be partitioned, with Qatar seizing the "Shia'a " and rich in oil eastern province of Qatif. For Qatar, perhaps Saudi Arabia rather than Iran or the Muslim Brotherhood is the real threat². The Qatari government alleged that Saudi Arabia tried to undermine (Former Prince of Qatar) Sheikh Hamad ibn Khalifa al-Thani by supporting deposed members of his family to regain power after the 1995 coup. For Qatar, perhaps Saudi Arabia rather than Iran or the Muslim Brotherhood is the real threat. Serious economic disputes arose in 2006 when Saudi Arabia objected to the UAE-Qatari Dolphin Undersea Natural Gas Pipeline project. Relations with Qatar improved in 2007, but suspicion persisted between the two countries. Tribal connections on the border between the two countries remain open for manipulation on both sides. It is this context of mutual hostility that provides a backdrop to their more recent disagreements.³

Oil- and gas-rich Qatar has been an increasingly vocal diplomatic player. It strongly supported

Egypt's now-ousted Islamist President Mohammed Morsi and is a key backer of Islamist rebel groups in Syria. Qatar is home to the influential al-Jazeera news network, which broadcasts across the world and has been critical of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. Anti-Saudi programs broadcasted by al-Jazeera were thought to have been a major reason for Riyadh's decision to withdraw its ambassador to Qatar from 2002 until 2008. Qatar is also seen as a major financial and diplomatic supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist movement which is labeled as "terrorist groups" in Saudi Arabia and the UAE.⁴

What lies behind this is a growing conviction felt in Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Bahrain that Qatar is unwilling to end its alleged support for Islamist and extremist groups in the region.

The Saudis believe Qatar is arming the al-Nusra Front in Syria, a jihadist rebel group linked to al-Qaeda. Qatar is also accused of supporting Houthi rebels in Yemen and the now-banned Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Qatar nearly derailed January's 2014 Syrian peace conference in Geneva, with members of the opposition considered close to Doha and the Brotherhood walking out of internal deliberations as an act of protest against their leadership. Furthermore, Doha has played host to Egypt's Islamist activists in exile, even using Al Jazeera's resources to put them up in hotels and broadcast them on TV. Qatar showed a large influence on the Muslim Brotherhood in their mediation role between Hamas and Israel during Gaza war this year. The Israeli aggression in Gaza has made very clear that Qatar's inclination to Muslim Brotherhood ideology is still strong and this has harmed the serious efforts to find a ceasefire (Hamas rejecting the Egypt ceasefire plan) in coordination with Turkey showed the strong influence of the Muslim Brotherhood on Qatar's policy.⁵

Tensions have increased between Qatar on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on the other. In the latest dispute, which began on 5 March 2014, the three states recalled their ambassadors from Qatar, demanding that Qatar ends its support for the Muslim Brotherhood, and that it stops interfering in their internal affairs.⁶

In a joint statement, the three nations said GCC members had signed a security agreement on 2012 not to back "anyone threatening the security and stability of the GCC whether as groups or individuals via direct security work or through political influence, and not to support hostile media" and "with the greatest regret Qatar had failed to comply" and the recall of the ambassadors from Doha was therefore necessary to ensure "security and stability".

A Qatar cabinet statement expressed disappointment at the decision but said that it would not withdraw its ambassadors in response. And the emirate would remain committed to "preserve and protect the security and stability" of the GCC. Qatar insisted also that the disagreement had to do with concerns in countries outside (GCC) and a difference in positions on issues out of the GCC seeking to challenge the view that sponsoring the Brotherhood poses a threat to the other GCC members. On 23 November 2013, Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani visited Saudi King Abdullah in Riyadh for a tense summit mediated by Amir Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah of Kuwait. While there, Shaikh Tamim reportedly signed an agreement to terminate any policies or proxy relationships injurious to the other GCC states. This commitment i.e. "Riyadh agreement" was endorsed by all GCC leaders a month later at their annual summit in Kuwait.⁷

"Riyadh agreement" states three requirements that Qatar has to abide with: put restraints on Media namely Al Jazeera, end the refuge for the exiled Muslim Brotherhood leaders accused of planning sabotage in the Gulf, and not to take positions contrary to the interests of the GCC members. Qatar Failure to comply with these requirements has led, on 4 March 2014 GCC foreign ministers to develop a mechanism to monitor the implementation of the "Riyadh agreement". A fourth point was added which is to support Egypt politically, economically and via Media. Qatar rejected their vision for such a mechanism. It may be that the trigger for this rupture, however, was an inflammatory speech by Qatar's cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi, an Egyptian spiritual leader for the Brotherhood residing in Qatar.⁸

In a Friday sermons speech late February 2014, Qaradawi attacked "the scandals and injustices" of those "rulers who have paid billions of dollars to get President Mohammad Mursi out of power." Referring to Gulf leaders mainly Saudi's. The withdrawal of ambassadors from Qatar was one of "several possible immediate and eventual measures" under consideration following Qaradawi's speech. The withdrawal of ambassadors from Doha could pose a grave challenge to the leadership of Shaikh Tamim, who is only just consolidating his authority as Qatar's new emir. The pressure on Qatar, led by Saudi Arabia, intensified. Since news of the diplomatic stalemate broke, reports have emerged that Saudi Arabia may escalate the situation to force Qatar to change its policies by cutting off Qatar's only land border, imposing sanctions and closing Saudi airspace to Qatari planes. Qatar is the world's biggest exporter of liquefied natural gas, and has strong trade ties with the Far East and the US. These commercial links can buffer

much of the damage potentially caused by such a blockade, but Qatar's massive dependence on food from Saudi Arabia and the UAE leaves it vulnerable. Saudi Arabia also demanded that Qatar shuts down the Al Jazeera network and two prominent research centers in Doha i.e. Middle-Eastern Strategic Studies and Brookings Doha Center. Saudi foreign affairs minister, Prince Saud Al Faisal said that the only way to resolve the dispute is for Qatar to amend its policies. On the 16th of November 2014, GCC leaders agreed on revising the Riyadh agreement with Qatar consent, and also added a new forth requirement that Qatar has to abide with: To support Egypt politically, economically, and via media. The Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim Al Thani, had promised to change his country's foreign policies to align more closely with its neighbors. On same date the Saudi ambassador has resumed work in Doha putting an end to Saudi-Qatari diplomatic rift. The relations were improved in the GCC summit meeting in Doha where Qatar agreed on the final statement of the meeting which supported the Egyptian president program in Egypt.⁹

In my opinion, Qatar is trying to take a double stance concerning their relations with KSA and the gulf countries. They want to secure the unity of the GCC and to maintain a diplomatic relations with KSA, but at the same time leave some space to maneuver in their foreign policy and differentiate themselves from KSA. The Saudi Arabia will not allow Qatar to form a threat on their Kingdom security especially concerning the rise of the Islamist power in the region and their role in KSA. Saudi Arabia is also trying to build a strategic alliance in the Middle East to face double threats from the Sunni Jihadi Islamists and from the Iranian Shiite axis in the region. This alliance mainly consists of Egypt, Jordan, UAE ,and Saudi Arabia. KSA role in the reconciliation between Qatar and Egypt is one of the main elements to reinforce this alliance in strengthening President Sisi and diminishing the Brotherhood power. The latter visit by a Qatari special envoy to Egypt and the Qatar shutdown of Jazeera Egypt are two evidences of the Saudi foreign policy in the region.

(1)Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC)

- Established in 1981.
- Made up of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman.
- Countries co-operate on trade, security and diplomacy.
- Together accounts for more than a third of the world's proven oil reserves.

References

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³ Middle East Online

⁴ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26447914>

⁵ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/qatar/10678644/Saudis-UAE-Bahrain-withdraw-envoys-from-Qatar-in-security-dispute.html>

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