

# THE GCC CRISIS: REGIONAL REALIGNMENT OR PARALYSIS?

*The rupturing of diplomatic relations between Qatar and four regional states – Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – in June 2017 brought to a head a long-simmering dispute about Qatar’s distinctive approach to regional affairs. Six months into the crisis, it remains unclear what the Saudi and Emirati endgame is and what, if any, concessions Qatar could make that would be enough for policymakers in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. In this article, the author argues that the lack of US support for overt sanctions on Qatar makes it likely that the anti-Qatar bloc will continue to pressure the country through informal measures. This includes meddling in tribal and ruling family politics, designed to apply indirect pressure on the Qatari government, in ways that threaten to do lasting damage to the social fabric and ties of trust in the Gulf.*

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**T**he current crisis in the Gulf began on 23 May 2017, when the *Qatar News Agency* was hacked – allegedly orchestrated by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) using hackers based in Russia – and a news story was posted that cited comments purported to have been made by Qatar’s Emir Tamim that caused outrage in neighboring Gulf capitals. A 10-day media onslaught followed, as dozens of articles in Saudi and Emirati-owned outlets linked Qatar to all manners of destabilizing state and non-state actors, and portrayed the country as a threat to regional security. One article in *Al Arabiya* even suggested that the emir’s palace was being guarded by members of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The media campaign was the prelude to the cutting of diplomatic relations and the imposition of economic measures on Qatar – unprecedented in the 36-year history of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Whereas Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE similarly cut ties in March 2014 and withdrew their ambassadors from Doha for nine months, this latest standoff went far further as it included an economic and trade embargo against Qatar and its people.

The eruption of anger toward Qatar took many by surprise, as much of the fallout from the 2014 spat involving Qatar and other GCC states appeared to have been resolved. The Emir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani’s father, Emir Hamad, had pursued an autonomous foreign policy that put Qatar frequently at odds with other GCC neighbors in the 1990s and 2000s – particularly with Saudi Arabia and the UAE – through its support for Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood before, during, and after the Arab Spring. In November 2013, five months after Emir Hamad abdicated and handed power to Tamim, the US media reported that Egyptian members of the Muslim Brotherhood were regrouping in Doha, following the toppling of President Mohamed Morsi and the reinstatement of military rule in Egypt.<sup>1</sup> Tamim was summoned to Riyadh by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia and was presented with an ultimatum to “change Qatar’s ways and bring the country in line with the rest of the GCC with regards to regional issues.” Tamim also was told to sign an additional security agreement – the Riyadh Agreement – that stipulated “non-interference” in the “internal affairs of any of the other GCC countries,” and sign a pledge of compliance.<sup>2</sup>

Tensions peaked in March 2014 when Saudi Arabia and the UAE judged that Qatar was not in full compliance with the agreement signed by Tamim in Riyadh, and, together with Bahrain, withdrew their ambassadors from Doha. For the UAE – whose leadership was engaged in hunting down the Muslim Brotherhood both domestically

<sup>1</sup> Abigail Hauslohner, “Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood Finds Havens Abroad,” *Washington Post*, 6 November 2013, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/egypts-muslim-brotherhood-finds-havens-abroad/2013/11/05/438f2dfe-463a-11e3-95a9-3f15b5618ba8\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.c19c022c7ce6](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/egypts-muslim-brotherhood-finds-havens-abroad/2013/11/05/438f2dfe-463a-11e3-95a9-3f15b5618ba8_story.html?utm_term=.c19c022c7ce6)

<sup>2</sup> Simeon Kerr, “Diplomatic Crisis as Gulf States Withdraw Ambassadors from Qatar,” *Financial Times*, 5 March 2014, <https://www.ft.com/content/5e8103c4-a45b-11e3-9cb0-00144feab7de>

and regionally – a particular flashpoint was the revelation that several Emirati members of *Al-Islah*, the UAE-affiliated branch of the Brotherhood, had been given refuge in Doha after escaping arrest and fleeing the UAE in 2012. Months of acrimony followed with periodic attempts at negotiated mediation by Kuwait, whose emir, Sheikh Sabah, has reportedly struck up a close relationship with Emir Tamim. However, the dispute ended in November 2014 after a series of Qatari concessions including relocating Muslim Brotherhood figures hitherto resident in Doha to Turkey; ordering the Emirati dissidents to leave Qatar; closing the Egyptian branch of *Al Jazeera*; enforcing the GCC Internal Security Pact; and cooperating closely with GCC partners on matters of intelligence and policing.

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In the three years that followed the 2014 Riyadh Agreement, Emir Tamim and Abu Dhabi’s influential Crown Prince, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, exchanged frequent visits, and Qatar’s decision to deploy 1,000 soldiers to Yemen in September 2015 seemed to indicate that the 2014 upheaval was a thing of the past. What, then, changed in the spring of 2017, and why did a seemingly dormant dispute suddenly flare up again and in such a visceral and destabilizing manner?

### ***Winning Hearts and Minds***

Rather than one single explanation or trigger point, a convergence of factors appears to have shifted the geopolitical landscape in the Persian Gulf. From the moment Donald J. Trump took office in January 2017, the Trump administration signaled its intent to follow a set of regional policies that aligned far closer to those of Abu Dhabi and Riyadh than Doha. Both Abu Dhabi’s Mohammed bin Zayed and Saudi Arabia’s then-Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman were high-profile visitors to Washington in the run-up to the lavish Riyadh Summit that took place on 20-21 May 2017 with Arab and Islamic leaders, including Tamim. Furthermore, the policy inexperience of many within President Trump’s inner circle presented an opportunity for both the Saudis and the Emiratis to try and shape the administration’s thinking on critical regional issues such as Iran and Islamism, both of which were evident before and during the Riyadh visit.

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Whereas the Obama administration sought to enhance US engagement with the GCC as a bloc, the Trump presidency has focused instead on Saudi Arabia and the UAE as the “twin pillars” of its regional approach. Strong bonds were reportedly formed between President Trump’s close advisor and trusted son-in-law Jared Kushner and Mohammed bin Salman in Saudi Arabia,

as well as Yusuf al-Otaiba, the influential UAE Ambassador in Washington, D.C.. Key actors in the Trump administration, such as Secretary of Defense James Mattis and CIA Director Mike Pompeo, held views on Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood virtually indistinguishable from those in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. Saudi Arabia and the UAE quickly emerged as the two spearheads around which US regional policies realigned, with a joint raid conducted by US and UAE Special Forces in Yemen in the very first week of Trump’s presidency in January 2017 a harbinger of things to come.

Therefore, from the beginning, a key objective of the campaign against Qatar was to win the battle of hearts and minds in Washington, D.C. and, particularly, within a White House deemed sympathetic to the Saudi and Emirati approach to regional affairs. The slew of articles associating Qatar with Iran, Al Qaeda, and Islamist groups of varying extremity appeared designed to resonate with Trump administration officials who had their own hawkish views on the regional threats posed by Iran and Islamist extremists. The fact that the media campaign against Qatar began two days after President Trump’s visit to Riyadh likely reflected a hope in regional capitals that the White House would take sides in the dispute. Although President Trump initially did just that with a series of inflammatory tweets on 6 June 2017 that praised the action against Qatar, the White House subsequently encountered stiff pushback from the State Department and the Pentagon. This took the Saudis and Emiratis largely by surprise, prevented any further escalation of the initial measures against Qatar, and provided time and space for Kuwait’s Emir Sabah to try and mediate between the disputant parties.

### ***Long-Rooted Tensions***

Nearly every “crisis” in the six-member GCC over the past quarter-century has involved Qatar in some way, and the Saudi, Bahraini, and Emirati willingness to tolerate Doha’s sometimes maverick regional policies appeared finally to have snapped with the window of opportunity that opened up with President Trump’s unexpected

election victory. Qatari friction had long persisted with Bahrain (whose own Al Khalifa ruling family had based themselves on the Qatari peninsula before conquering Bahrain in 1783) over the disputed Hawar Islands, which both claimed as their own, and with Saudi Arabia, whose rulers periodically claimed Qatar as part of their traditional tribal territory. Bahrain and Qatar came to the brink of conflict over the islands in 1986, and the two countries only established full diplomatic relations in 1997, a whole 26 years after they became sovereign states.

In September 1992, a skirmish on the Saudi-Qatari border left three people dead and illustrated the pitfalls of the long-standing failure to properly demarcate Qatar's only land boundary. The two countries had signed a border agreement in 1965, but it was never properly ratified and was canceled by Qatar after the border clash. Qatar and Saudi Arabia supported different sides in the brief Yemeni civil war of 1994, and Qatar also objected vociferously to the proposed appointment of a Saudi, Jamil al-Hujailan, as Secretary-General of the GCC, in 1995. This led to stormy scenes at the annual GCC summit in the Omani capital, Muscat, in December 1995. The Qatari delegation walked out of the closing session and declared their intent to boycott all future meetings attended by al-Hujailan, and even considered canceling their membership of the GCC altogether.

Much of the anger that has defined the relationship between Qatar and its neighbors since 2011 originated in the policies pursued by Qatar's new emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, after he seized power from his father in a bloodless palace coup in June 1995 (although he had been responsible for most day-to-day policy-making since 1989). Together with his foreign minister, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani, Emir Hamad was the architect of Qatar's rise to global prominence in the 1990s and 2000s as he accelerated the development of Qatar's liquefied natural gas (LNG) infrastructure and forged long-term energy agreements with industrialized and emerging economies worldwide. However, Emir Hamad's accession was not welcomed in neighboring Gulf capitals, and Saudi Arabia was implicated in a counter-coup attempt in February 1996, designed to reinstall the ousted Sheikh Khalifa as emir. Following a second attempted counter-coup, also believed in Qatar to be instigated by Saudi Arabia, in 2005 the Qatari government stripped up to 5,000 members of the Bani Murra tribe of their citizenship in retaliation for the involvement of some of their members in both affairs.

A key preoccupation of Qatar's post-1995 leadership was to pursue a set of autonomous regional policies designed to take the country out of the Saudi shadow and create durable international linkages (through the supply of LNG) that increased the range of stakeholders with a direct stake in Qatari stability. Qatar's support for

regional Islamists, notably – but not only – the Muslim Brotherhood, and the provision of Doha-based *Al Jazeera* as a platform for groups criticizing regional states caused periods of intense friction. Saudi Arabia withdrew its ambassador from Doha in 2002 in fury at *Al Jazeera*'s coverage of domestic affairs within the Kingdom, and it took five years for the issue to be resolved and the ambassador to return. Tensions then peaked after Qatar's backing of Islamist movements across the region before, during, and after the 2011 Arab Spring, as Qatar and the UAE pursued diametrically opposed policies toward the Muslim Brotherhood. Egypt and Libya became battlegrounds for regional influence as Doha and Abu Dhabi backed different sides, politically and financially.

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by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia and was presented with an ultimatum to “change Qatar’s ways and bring the country in line with the rest of the GCC with regards to regional issues.”<sup>3</sup> Tamim was also told to sign a security agreement that stipulated “non-interference” in the “internal affairs of any of the other GCC countries” and sign a pledge of compliance. It is the terms of that 2013 Riyadh Agreement – and an additional set of commitments made in November 2014 that ended the nine-month diplomatic spat – that Saudi and Emirati leaders now accuse Qatar of flouting.

At the time of the handover of power from Emir Hamad to his 33-year old son, Emir Tamim, in June 2013, hopes were high in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi that the young new emir would recalibrate Qatar’s approach to regional affairs. However, in November 2013, five months into Tamim’s rule, Saudi and Emirati leaders reacted viscerally to reports in US media outlets that members of the Muslim Brotherhood were regrouping in Doha following the toppling of President Mohamed Morsi and the reinstatement of military rule in Egypt.

Emir Tamim was summoned to Riyadh

### *Implications for the GCC and the International Community*

The GCC is neither a political nor a military alliance, and it lacks an integrative supra-national decision-making institution for the sharing of sovereignty, akin to the European Commission. It has no explicit treaty-based foreign policy-making power

<sup>3</sup> Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, “Qatar and the Arab Spring: Policy Drivers and Regional Implications,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Paper 224* (2014), p. 22

and its member governments retain responsibility for almost all aspects of political and economic policy, and resist measures that could limit or pool their sovereignty. The GCC was established at great speed in 1981 in reaction to the profound regional uncertainty in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution and the start of the Iran-Iraq War, and these issues of institutional design were left unaddressed then and since.

For years, the GCC has struggled to move forward on “big ticket” issues ranging from a monetary union and the move to a single currency, to agreeing upon the degree and pace of closer political integration. The Gulf Dinar set for 2010 has been on hold indefinitely since 2009 when the UAE suddenly withdrew from the monetary union project in anger over a decision to locate the planned GCC Central Bank in Riyadh, rather than Abu Dhabi. In the wake of the regional upheaval unleashed by the Arab Spring, Saudi proposals in 2012 and 2013 to transform the Cooperation Council into a political union also failed to make headway with the smaller states, apart from Bahrain, which remained wary of the potential for a Gulf Union to be too Saudi top-heavy.

While the GCC weathered the 2014 diplomatic spat between three of its members and Qatar, it will be far harder this time for the GCC to repair internal fractures. This is because the current confrontation greatly exceeds 2014 in scale and because none of the economic sanctions that have been imposed on Qatar appear to have involved in any way the GCC Secretariat. As three members of the GCC have again turned on a fourth, the Secretary General has remained silent as measures such as the restriction of movement on Qatari nationals have been announced unilaterally by the individual member states. Lists of grievances and demands for Qatar to change course have come from the capitals concerned rather than through the Secretariat, and attempts at mediation have been undertaken by the Kuwaiti emir and not the Secretary General.

The longer the crisis continues, the more Qataris may begin to question the utility of belonging to an organization that appears powerless to prevent or control the bilateral application of pressure among its members. US adversaries such as Russia and Iran may try to widen the cracks that have appeared within the GCC and make inroads into the hitherto-impenetrable network of security partnerships that have bound the Gulf States under the Western security umbrella for decades. Turkey already has inserted itself into the security landscape in Qatar as defense relations between Ankara and Doha expanded rapidly after the crisis broke out in May, and Iranian officials have announced plans to deepen their economic and political relationship with Oman.

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The Qatar standoff is likely to realign the GCC around a hawkish inner core of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain. With or without Qatar, a more assertive GCC is likely to reduce the space accorded to Oman and Kuwait to pursue distinct approaches toward Iran and regional security issues. The concentration of power in Crown Princes

Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia and Mohammed bin Zayed of Abu Dhabi represents a central policymaking spine that is likely to bypass and weaken GCC-wide institutions. Moreover, looming succession uncertainties render both Oman and Kuwait vulnerable to the kind of pressure applied on Qatar to hew closer to Saudi- and Emirati-led policies, particularly toward Iran (an additional concern for Oman is the tense relationship with ideologues within the Trump administration, who associate the Sultanate with the Iran nuclear deal and its proximity to the Obama presidency, and whose access to the president means he has failed to reach out to arguably the most pro-Western state in the GCC.) Within the UAE itself, it is by no means assured that Abu Dhabi's decision to tie itself so closely to Saudi Arabia is welcomed by the other six emirates, including Dubai, whose reputation as a safe place to do business unencumbered by political considerations is now at risk.

Whether the GCC remains intact with all six members or with five (should Qatar go its separate way), or whether it lapses into a state of semi-permanent suspension and exists largely on paper only, policymakers will find it very difficult to repair the ties of mutual trust that have been so damaged by the current standoff. Officials in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi argue that Qatar's perceived failure to abide by the terms of agreements made in 2013 and 2014 mean that they have little faith in any prospect of mediation – whether by Kuwait or by the US or other international partners – this time around. Their counterparts in Doha reply that Qatar now has faced a barrage of accusations from its three Gulf neighbors for the second time in three years and that the thirteen conditions announced on 23 June (subsequently whittled down to six demands under US pressure) would, if agreed, reduce Qatar to little more than a vassal state of Saudi Arabia. The apparent Saudi and Emirati support for dissident members of the Qatari ruling family sets a dangerous precedent that could yet come back to haunt ruling circles in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi who themselves must balance factional interests within their own extended families. Finally, the crisis constitutes a needless distraction from the key issues that really do matter in the Middle East. The conflicts in Syria, Yemen, and Libya, continue to destabilize the region and the



task of rebuilding political and economic institutions shaken by seven years of upheaval is as fragile as ever, calling into question the credibility of the Gulf states as reliable political and security partners.