

An Alliance that Never Was: Saudi Arabia and Qatar

Several analyses of current tensions between the Saudi-led Anti-Terror Quartet and Qatar, consider the ongoing diplomatic rift between the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to be *only* the result of recent discord over Doha's foreign policy. Events such as the 1992 Saudi-Qatari armed skirmishes, the 2002 and 2014 breakdown in relations and, indeed, the 2017 boycott should however be examined by taking full-account of historic legacies and the long-term foreign policy visions of Riyadh and Doha. The aforementioned events offer some empirical demonstrations of the deeply incompatible foreign policy trajectories of Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which the GCC has, to date, not managed to mediate.

The Coup: The Start of Intra-Alliance Competition

Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani Emir of Qatar, (1995-2013), is certainly the most important political figure to consider in order to understand the ongoing foreign policy opposition dividing Riyadh and Doha. Hamad's ambitious personality led him to organise the 1995 bloodless coup in which he seized power from his father Khalifa. Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani was responsible for directing state investments for the creation of a pan-Arab information satellite network, Al-Jazeera. It acted to generate negative narratives of Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies and was willing to forge and enhance political and economic links with Iran. As early as 2014 prominent GCC members severed relations with Qatar accusing both Al-Jazeera and Doha of promoting and supporting an Islamist, Muslim Brotherhood agenda—the latter promotes regime change in a number of Arab states including in Riyadh and the other GCC members. Hamad bin Khalifa's son, and current Emir, Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, pledged his country's renewed allegiance and commitment to the GCC. However, the rebellion of a section of the Shiite population in Bahrain—promoted by Ayatollah Isa Qassim—and the coup in Yemen, by Iranian-backed Houthi militias, forced Saudi Arabia to require a strong unified response against Tehran by all its GCC allies; a response to which the Al-Thani family committed in a formal and not substantive way. With regard to the Palestinian issue, Qatar has long been the staunchest supporter of Hamas, opposing the Saudi-backed Fatah. In the context of the Arab uprisings, Doha developed a parallel foreign policy to the rest of the GCC states to increase its regional influence. This is most evident in Syria, where Saudi Arabia and Qatar supported rival militias with Doha supporting the Riyadh-hostile Muslim Brotherhood affiliated elements and the Al-Qaeda linked Al-Nusra front.

Incompatible Foreign Policy Structures

Historical opposition between Riyadh and Doha and the regional ambitions of post-1995 Qatari leaders are not sufficient to fully understand the significance of the ongoing intra-GCC crisis. The structures of the two countries are contributing to generate foreign policy objectives which are incompatible and hostile to one another. Saudi Arabia fears the disengagement of its main ally, the United States, from the Gulf Region and is addressing this fear by promoting a more proactive regional role itself. In order for such role to be successful, the Saudis are pushing to transform the GCC into an Arab union, a confederated system based on the European Union's project in which Riyadh is prepared to play a strong leadership role due to its economic size. This would result in an ever-more integrated organisation, guided by Saudi Arabia and by the need of containing Iran's regional influence.

Saudi Arabia's renewed assertiveness—a response to the regional threat posed by Iran—collides with Doha's strategic flexibility that allows it to influence regional affairs through its heavy purses. Raymond Hinnebusch argues that small sized countries, with very limited populations, are able to pursue an ambitious foreign policy, and face the potential risks related to such strategy, only if they possess extraordinary economic prosperity and good relations with all the main regional contending powers. Such a strategy allows Qatar to lean towards a different regional power when at odds with other regional leaders. This is reflected in Qatar's recent move to restore diplomatic relations with Iran and the rapid increase in trade volume, between Doha and Tehran. Dangerously, Doha's moves could signal regional strategic realignment rather than being a reflection of tactical need. At the same time, Qatar bases its security on remaining indispensable for American military operations in the region through the Al Udeid Air Base near Doha, and on maintaining and increasing the solid commercial and diplomatic and military relations it already enjoys with Turkey.

We at the Euro-Gulf Information Centre will continue to monitor the ongoing intra-GCC crisis paying particular attention to the strengthening of relation between Doha-Ankara-Tehran and the consequences for the entire Middle East. It is worth signalling that renewed harmony between Riyadh and Doha would serve regional stability as it would pose a greater bulwark against Tehran's foreign policy objectives.

By: Antonino Occhiuto

Date: 18 December 2018