



Background and Scenarios to the Crisis in the Arab Gulf

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On 05 June, crisis reemerged between four Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain — together with Egypt — imposed an assortment of sanctions and severed diplomatic relations with Qatar. Ambassadors have been withdrawn, airspaces and borders have been closed, economic activities have been suspended. With Kuwait opting to play a negotiating role, and Oman steering altogether clear, this crisis is both the most pronounced and grave in the 36 year old history of the alliance. But — in contrast to popular belief — this is only the latest in a string of crises involving Qatar.

To understand the unfolding dynamics in the GCC, **it is important to contextualise them and that requires a historic account**—one that begins in 1995 when the (former) Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani (father of the current Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani), initiated a bloodless coup against his father, Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad al-Thani, who had enjoyed strong relations with the other GCC members, and Saudi Arabia in particular. Saudi Arabia and the UAE were adamant — at the time — that Sheikh Khalifa be returned to his position. The Saudi-Emirati plan failed and Sheikh Hamad wasted no time in consolidating his position and devoted his energies to prying Qatar from Saudi influence under which the Emirate had grown during the first two decades of its existence.

Shiekh Hamad, similar to others in the region, sought to secure Qatar’s policy freedom, enhance its security and regional posture, through its international engagements. For instance, in 2003, when Saudi Arabia denied the US permission to use the Prince Sultan Air Base in its invasion of Iraq, Qatar extended an invitation for the US airforce to utilise their newly-built colossal, the Al Udeid Air Base. **At the same time, Sheikh Hamad reconstructed Doha as a diplomatic capital with direct channels of communication and working relations with regional non-state actors considered pariah, or even designated as terrorist organisations, by other international and regional powers.** The intention was to build a

unique international profile for Qatar through mediation and the country engaged in intense *riyal diplomacy* to influence Afghani Taliban, Yemeni Houthis and Hezbollah (among others).

The crown jewel of Qatar's network, however, remained the Muslim Brotherhood. When the Arab Spring erupted and Muslim Brotherhood groups began to emerge, challenging and obtaining power, Sheikh Hamad saw an opportunity to leverage Qatar's long-standing relations with Brotherhood figures inside Doha's bureaucracy to expand the country's influence from Tunisia to Egypt, Libya, Syria and beyond. **From 2011 onwards Qatar provided financial and logistical support to Brotherhood-affiliated factions, airtime space on Al Jazeera and political and diplomatic support at the international level.** On all these fronts, the other GCC countries — particularly Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain — were, in contrast, adamantly supporting anti-Muslim Brotherhood factions who are perceived as destabilising forces that aim to undermine the regional *status quo*.

Intra-GCC tension mounted until the tail of 2013 (and into 2014) when it peaked and resulted in an open diplomatic crisis. Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Manama withdrew their ambassadors from Doha and for 8 months Qatar's relations to the GCC went into suspended animation. The normalisation of relations occurred only after Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, who received the throne after the abdication of his father Sheikh Hamad, signed **the Riyadh Agreements in which Qatar explicitly vowed to end all support (political and financial) to non-state actors in the region.** This included the Muslim Brotherhood and all of its affiliates. Also, Qatar pledged to stop naturalising Bahraini citizens accused of terrorism at home and to extradite them. Relations with Iran were meant to follow the guidelines and interests of all the GCC members.

The commitments signed — but not implemented — by Sheikh Tamim in the Riyadh Agreements form the root of the recriminations that Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE have expressed during the current intra-GCC crisis. **This time, however, the approach taken by the three GCC countries has been markedly different.** In 2014, the crisis was kept within the framework of the GCC and was discussed and mediated away from the media. Currently, the media is used as a policy projector rendering the crisis international. This has meant that both sides in the crisis have been diplomatically assertive in consolidating their alliances: regionally and internationally. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain remain firm in their policy of isolating Qatar on its peninsula. Sheikh Tamim responded with defiance, firmly supported by Turkey and re-routing key imports, such as food, and the strategic energy exports, via Iran.

All this begs the question of how this situation is likely to end? Two of the most drastic scenarios are worth considering.

Internal Regime Change—Many are concerned that the personal relations among the GCC rulers may be irreparably damaged. There is the belief that Sheikh Tamim is not really Qatar's ruler, that his abdicated father, Sheikh Hamad, continues to govern and, as a result, Qatar continues to follow his old policies. This, it is argued, is why Qatar remains confrontational despite formidable pressure from its GCC peers. At the same time, not everyone in the wider al-Thani family supports Hamad and Tamim's position. Many have important economic interests in other GCC countries and firmly believe that Qatar's destiny is in its geography and it needs the GCC umbrella to be shielded from Iranian influence. One of the members of the extended al-Thani family may be tempted to carry out a coup to replace the current leadership and initiate a different interaction with Qatar's GCC neighbours. One interesting figure is Hamad bin Ali al-Thani who has two al-Thanis as parents, while Hamad's mother was from the al-Attiyah tribe and the mother of Tamim comes from the al-Missned tribe. And, Hamad bin Ali has strong relations with the royal families throughout the Arabian Peninsula and is maintaining those ties in open defiance to both Sheikh Hamad and Sheikh Tamim. Clearly, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain would surely welcome a less problematic al-Thani as Emir.

Regional Escalation—Other regional powers — re: Turkey and Iran — may be getting increasingly involved. Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan threw his lot in with Qatar. Turkey's Parliament in a symbolic rather than practical step, approved the deployment of hundreds of Turkish troops to Doha claiming to defend the country from invasion and the Emir from a coup. Erdoğan's commitment to Qatar goes beyond the substantial economic interests linking the two countries. Erdoğan's party, the AKP, is (loosely) affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood and has been engaged, together with Qatar, in supporting Islamists throughout the region. Erdoğan believes that this crisis is part of a larger conspiracy against political Islam—his ideological anchor. Erdoğan has suggested that the 2016 coup attempt against him was a UAE plot mixed with Gulenism. If the crisis will escalate to the military level, Turkish troops will likely be involved.

At the same time, Iran has entered the fray and provides an air bridge to supply Qatar with essential goods. The Islamic Republic also allows Qatar to transit its territorial waters—providing a lifeline to Doha's gas exports. At the beginning of the crisis, Iranian officials were cautious; they reiterated calls for dialogue and negotiations and played the wait-and-see game of brinkmanship. Tehran's policy shifted following Mohammad bin Salman's appointment to the position of Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince (22 June 2017). As Mohammad bin Salman is known to be hostile to the Iranian regime, Iranian officials began to use this



crisis to weaken him as a leader and drive wedges in the GCC more comprehensively. For instance, in a very calculated move, Iran's President, Hassan Rouhani, telephoned Sheikh Tamim to express Iran's support and the desire to strengthen bilateral relations and then publicly condemned the 'siege against Qatar.' Still, while getting closer to Iran might seem an effective provocation to the rest of the GCC, this might be a dangerous game. For Saudi Arabia, this might be the *casus belli* to ultimately claim Iran's predatory intentions in the Gulf and Qatar's growing conspiracy with the common enemy.

Whatever scenario emerges, it is clear that events have unfolded in ways that defy the historic playbook. International powers have positioned themselves in a contradictory and confusing manner. The media have been turned into battlegrounds with comments and opinions spiralling out of control. While there is no crystal ball to determine the future, geography is, certainly, unescapable. Qatar's people, history, culture share Arab Gulf heritage and share the bonds that can resist pressures and tensions if given the right political climate to flourish. Crisis is not beneficial for anyone.