



# Balance of Interests

## The UAE - Qatar Competition

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### UAE vs Qatar

Most analysts examining the ongoing intra-Gulf crisis have, so far, mainly focused on the motivations connected to Qatar's foreign policy orientation. Some explanations suggest that the crisis began out of the impetus given to the fight against jihadi terrorism in the Arab world in the wake of US President Donald Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia. Others consider such tensions as part of Gulf realignments caused by the unfolding regional Cold War between Iran and Saudi Arabia. However, such interpretations omit the historical legacies which shed light on how the crisis is, in fact, a UAE-spearheaded diplomatic offensive—supported by its allies—versus its long shadow rival, Qatar. The pronounced UAE-Qatar friction is largely due to Doha's support for the radical Islamist organisation denominated as the Muslim Brotherhood, which constitutes an existential threat to Abu Dhabi both in terms of domestic affairs and foreign policy.

### The Muslim Brotherhood at Home...

Since 1995, Qatar has supported Al-Islah, the radical Islamist organisation, which settled in the UAE in the 1960s when Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood members travelled to the Arab Gulf to escape Gamal Abdul Nasser's crackdowns. The movement effectively turned into the UAE branch of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood of which it was ideologically in sync. In the 1970s, Al-Islah began to oppose the UAE's government for the country's religious tolerance and protection of minorities and women's rights. Tolerance has been a key feature of the UAE even before the formation of the Federation. Al-Islah's strategic objective is to seize power and establish a religious government, thus directly challenging the position of the Abu Dhabi emirate as protector and leader of the UAE federal state and threatening the very existence of the Emirati Federation. Abu Dhabi's response is embodied by the UAE's Crown Prince and Defence Minister, Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan whose focus on military security and secularism has so far represented the main opposing force to the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliated groups both domestically and in the wider region.

Enter Qatar.

Since seizing power from his father in a bloodless coup in 1995, Qatar's former Emir and current Father Emir, Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, sought to increase Doha's international relevance. According to Roberts (2017), Doha's ruler, fully aware of the country's limited human resources, compared to the vast revenues derived from the energy sector, considered political and financial support across the Middle East for transnational and influential Islamist political groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, as the most viable way of achieving an important international status. Additionally, Qatar's minute population (2.8 million residents of which only 320,000 are citizens) makes it easy for Doha to provide a strong welfare state which shields the Al-Thani family from internal dissent and allows Qatar's rulers to focus on foreign policy without much risk of domestic collateral effects.

### **...and Abroad**

Abu Dhabi-Doha tension, in terms of both the structure and foreign policy drivers, were further exacerbated since the outbreak of the 2011 uprisings across the region which generated support for the rise of Islamist and Muslim Brotherhood affiliated groups. For instance, UAE-Qatar competition is evident in Yemen in which the UAE military is a key component of the Arab coalition fighting the Iran-backed Houthis, while Doha launched a media campaign against Saudi and Emirati involvement in the country. However, it is in the countries of North Africa, namely Egypt and Libya, that the rivalry between Qatar and the UAE exploded. Following the end of the Mubarak regime in Egypt, Qatar actively supported Mohammed Morsi (Muslim Brotherhood) after he became Egypt's President. In contrast, the UAE remained hostile to Egypt's new Islamist government until Egypt's military, led by General Abdul Fattah Al-Sisi, assumed power in Cairo. Abu Dhabi is currently Al-Sisi's closest ally. In Libya, Qatar and the UAE stand on opposing sides in the ongoing civil war. While the Emirati Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, decided to support, including with the use of air power, the Islamist-hostile Libyan National Army (LNA), under the command of General Khalifa Haftar, Doha supports *all* LNA rivals, ranging from the Tripoli based government to Muslim Brotherhood affiliated militias.

### **What is Next?**

As wars and international tensions continue to tear the region apart, we at the Euro-Gulf Information Centre will continue to monitor the ongoing intra-GCC crisis paying particular attention to further developments in the UAE-Qatar competition. Particularly relevant to Euro-Gulf relations are the investments and lobbying efforts by Gulf states in Europe as means to gain crucial support from European powers in the context of the regional rivalries. For instance, Qatar is currently on a charm offensive in Italy, a major EU country in which the UAE has heavily invested. Doha's use of Qatar Airways to save the Italian carrier Meridiana, later renamed Air Italy, from bankruptcy and the airline's sponsorship of the capital's football team A.S.

Roma along with the 2018 surge in naval arms procurement purchased from Qatar from Italy's Finacantieri are key events signalling Doha's willingness to challenge Abu Dhabi's privileged status in Italy. Despite the massive arms procurement of both Qatar and the UAE might suggest otherwise to the occasional reader of Arab Gulf affairs, the foreseeable future of Abu Dhabi-Doha competition will likely be characterised by an escalation in lobbying efforts targeting Western and regional countries aimed at forcing the respective rival to abandon its power aspirations.