

The Long Bahrain-Qatar Crisis

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With the international community seemingly bouncing from crisis-to-crisis there is a growing tendency to gloss-over complex causes and defer to simple explanations. In the context of the 2017 ‘Qatar Crisis,’ this is apparent in the manner it is said to have been triggered. For instance, there is widespread belief that US President, Donald Trump, initiated the crisis while on his visitation to Saudi Arabia and site the timing of the crisis as evidence, while others suggest that the crisis is the outcome deliberate ‘fake news.’ The reality is that the ‘Qatar Crisis’ was a long time coming and is the result of a clash of interests between the wider Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Egypt and Libya, on one side, and Qatar on the other. But even in this configuration, it is important to understand the specific dyadic dynamics between each set of states. This *information sheet* outlines the long history of crises between Bahrain and Qatar.

A Long History of Crises

The Bahrain-Qatar relationship — like all international exchanges — has seen periods of engagement and disengagement, peace and stability and also crisis and conflict. Bahrain’s decision to join Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Libya in suspending relations to Qatar is a reflection of the growing rift between Manama and Doha based on the latter’s foreign policy ambitions that have directly impacted and undermined Bahrain. Whether referring to Qatar’s strategic repositioning and alignment to Iran, its facilitating of Turkish military forces in the Arab Gulf region, its open support for the Muslim Brotherhood (and affiliated terrorist groups, re: Al-Nusra Front in Syria) or the hand it played in stoking violence in Bahrain in 2011, there is certainly much to discuss in terms of the Bahrain-Qatar conflict of interests. Yet these are only the most recent in a string of disputes that can be traced to the 19th century.

At the time of its modern founding, in 1783, Bahrain was considerably larger than its present form—the Al-Khalifa leadership ruled the Bahraini archipelago (including the Hawar islands) and the entire Qatar peninsula. In fact, the Al-Khalifa family originates from the eastern (now Qatari) city of Zubarah. In 1870, the Ottoman conquest of the Arabian Peninsula, including Qatar, reduced Bahrain’s size as many took to the islands for defensive reasons and Ottoman

forces established a military presence on the ground. But no sooner had the Ottoman's settled were they faced by insurgency from the tribes of the Arabian hinterlands. Instead of relying on large, colonial forces in Qatar, the Ottomans decided to elect a clan to govern on their behalf. Istanbul chose Jassim Al-Thani — leader of a prominent merchant clan from Doha and former subjects of the Bahrain — to govern Ottoman-occupied Qatar given his ability to repress the other Qatari tribes and therefore deny the opening of another front in the growing Arabian insurgency while consolidating their position in order to prevent British encroachments into its newly acquired territories. From its inception, Qatar had worked with anti-Bahrain regional actors.

Into the 20th century and relations remained frayed. Treaties that were meant to establish peaceful relations produce the opposite. For instance, the 1913 Anglo-Ottoman Convention (signed but not ratified), enflamed relations because it formally established two separate territorial entities — while Bahrain continued to seek the return of its lost territories of Qatar — without specifying where those states would start and end. In other words, there were no clear demarkations between Bahrain and Qatar; including over the city of Zubarah. This was to be an enduring point of contention since Qatar, with Ottoman support, sought to fully expel Bahrain from its Arabian Peninsula lands despite that many of the tribes of Qatar continued to pledge allegiance to their Al-Khalifa leaders and did not recognise either Ottoman or Al-Thani dominance. Even with the end of the Ottoman Empire, Qatar-Bahrain relations were not reconciled and in 1937, Qatar's Emir, Abdullah bin Jassim al-Thani, deployed military force to crush the Naim tribe from Zubarah as they continued to regard themselves as subjects of Bahrain. They were slaughtered and the survivors fled to the Bahrain archipelago—where they remain.

In addition to the Qatar peninsula, another important territorial dispute between Bahrain and Qatar is in relation to sovereignty over the Hawar Islands, because the 1913 Anglo-Ottoman Convention did not specify what was included in Qatar. In 1971, Qatar challenged Bahrain over the Hawar Islands—already assigned to Bahrain. Qatar has not reconciled itself with the reality of Bahrain's sovereignty over the Hawar Islands and pitched sea battles have — periodically — erupted (re: 1986). Ultimately, Qatar's claims to Hawar was rejected by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in a 2001 verdict.

No Mediation, No Conciliation

It is striking that, throughout all the territorial disputes with Bahrain, Qatar consistently refused mediation efforts by the other Arab Gulf states (Saudi Arabia and the UAE) and showed a readiness to challenge the status quo even if it implied developing a foreign policy hostile to other GCC members.

In contrast, Bahrain anchors its security in maintaining unity among the Arab states in the Gulf as the main bulwark against territorial expansionism by Iran (Shah's and Ayatollah's) — among others — over the Bahraini archipelago. Bahrain is traditionally averse to attempts at

challenging the delicate regional status quo and its leaders consider their national security as dependent on the stability of the entire Gulf region. This foreign policy inclination explains why Bahrain is among the most proactive members of the GCC and why Bahraini authorities have long supported Saudi Arabia's effort in creating an ever more integrated GCC—to deter Iranian interference. Qatar's foreign policy has transformed and now actively works against Bahraini and GCC interests. Therefore, it is unsurprising that Bahrain is among the most outspoken critics of Doha's rapprochement with Teheran and its support for opposition-cum-terrorist groups in the region; a point underscored by the recent revelations by Bahrain's upper chamber of parliament (Shura Council) that Qatar actively sought and supported the 2011 unrest in Bahrain.

Afterthought

The Bahrain-Qatar relationship will continue to be defined by recent events yet remains under the shadow of times past. Qatar needs to unilaterally make concessions and end its support to the very groups that undermine regional and international stability. History need not repeat itself. Qatar need not be out of sync with the rest of the Gulf—it belongs in the Arab world and in the GCC. But Qatar must not ignore the past but accept it, reconcile with it and move forward from it. In this dyad, Bahrain accepts Qatar as a member of the community of Gulf States and it is time for Qatar to do the same and, as a reflection, develop policies that shore-up, not undermine, its Bahraini neighbour.