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The Long Reach of the Gulf Crisis

→ Sokrat Al-Alou
The current escalation of Gulf states against Qatar, including the siege and the unprecedented media coverage compared to previous sub-regional conflicts, seems a prelude to the return of regional strife. Yet should this happen, the outstanding issues in the region – Syria, Libya, and Yemen – in which the two groupings are directly involved, will only become more complicated. Such a situation would allow Iran greater room to manoeuvre and reduce the impact of a US-Saudi rapprochement with regard to Iran and its regional proxies. Delineating the phases of the inter-Gulf conflict leading to the 2015 reconciliation, as well as examining the possible political and military implications of continued escalation of the current Gulf crisis on the outstanding regional issues, is useful to outline the features of the new regional alliances.

The Gulf and Qatar: A Chronic Crisis

The Gulf dispute with Qatar is by no means a recent one. It dates back to Hamad bin Khalifa's ascension to power in 1995, when Qatar began to think beyond the Gulf by enacting a policy of “promiscuous diplomatic flirting,” namely by acting as a third-party mediator to a host of international tensions, including Hamas and Israel, the United States and the Taliban, as well as Russia and its Islamist dissidents. These external actions not only rendered Qatari policy more difficult to pinpoint but also obfuscated its alliances. In addition, Qatar's media arm, Al-Jazeera, caused discomfort among Arab regimes, particularly in the Gulf, due to the new free style of media it promoted. Qatar also became a haven for the Islamist movements and nationalist Arab intellectuals that the Gulf states traditionally oppose. The interaction of these factors created a constrained crisis between the Gulf states and Qatar, which manifested itself in landmark events that divided the Gulf into two regional groupings. The July 2006 war in southern Lebanon and Operation Cast Lead in the Gaza Strip were two instances where open differences emerged between Qatar and the other Gulf states. The Arab position was generally divided between the "axis of resistance," which included Qatar, Syria, Turkey, Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas, and the axis of Saudi Arabia, encompassing the rest of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Egypt, and Jordan.

The 2011 Arab Spring marked a new phase in Qatar's relationship with the Gulf
region. Qatar supported the revolutions and backed the Turkish and American vision of the Muslim Brotherhood rising to power. This created fear among the Gulf states, believing that a new wave of Arab Spring revolutions could reach their shores. Those concerns pushed them to "a stage of deflation and self-defence, trying to bend to the storm until it calmed down."3 In 2013, Gulf differences reached their peak when the entire region was divided into two conflicting sides: those supporting revolution (Turkey, Qatar, and the Islamists) and those wielding influence for the sake of counter-revolution (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the feloul, the remnants of the Mubarak regime in Egypt). However, there was also a third axis – Iran – which manipulated the differences between the two blocs. This complicated setting served as an important setback for the course of the Arab Spring and hindered its progress in various countries.

Putting the Brakes on the Arab Spring

The most significant outcome of the conflict between these two blocs in 2013-2014 was the undermining of the achievements of the Arab Spring revolutions, turning them into crises, most notably in Syria, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya.

In the case of Syria, the inter-Gulf conflict in 2013 had a negative impact on revolution, both politically and militarily. At the political level, this conflict produced a “crisis of leadership” within the ranks of the Syrian opposition, particularly the new opposition framework of the Syrian National Coalition, who already faced difficulty stemming from internal disputes as well as personal and factional interests. The opposition was attempting to obtain external legitimacy and foreign support at the expense of local legitimacy and internal achievements.4 As a result, the leadership structures of the Syrian opposition weakened, dependency on foreign supporters increased, and the Syrian interim government experiment failed. At the military level, competition between the divided regional backers of the revolution caused the Free Syrian Army (FSA) to lose support as an institution in favour of the Islamic groups, which began to expand significantly at the expense of FSA.5 As expected, this allowed the regime and the Iranian militias to advance their initiatives on the ground. In addition, the expansion of the Islamic State (ISIS) into Syrian territory and the proclamation of the Caliphate on 29 June 2014 turned the Syrian revolution into a regional and international crisis revolving...
around terrorism and refugees.

In Egypt, the failed transition process and evolving political crisis represents one of the most critical moments of the intra-Gulf conflict. The Gulf media machine, in cooperation with the feloul and the Egyptian military, played a major role in inciting average Egyptians to protest against the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood. This atmosphere of deep political polarization paved the way for the coup led by Defence Minister Abdul Fattah al-Sisi against the elected president Mohammed Morsi. The coup not only undermined the Egyptian revolution’s achievements, it also created a major rift in Egyptian society between the Muslim Brotherhood and those opposing them. Government repression has also fuelled the growth of terrorism in the country. Economically exhausted by the coup, Egypt was removed from the circle of Arab decision-makers, transforming the Sisi regime, still searching for legitimacy, into a subordinate of its backers: Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

By contrast, in Yemen, the UAE, supported by Saudi Arabia and driven by “Muslim Brotherhood phobia”, made two critical errors: ousted president Ali Abdullah Saleh was permitted to return to Yemen in February 2012, and the Houthis tacitly allowed to expand, believing them to be a useful counterweight to the Yemeni Islah Rally, affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. These disastrous strategic calculations led to the formation of an alliance between the Houthis, on the one hand, and the former president and his supporters in the General People’s Congress and the army, on the other. As a direct result of this alliance, the capital city of Sanaa fell into the hands of the Houthis on 21 September 2014. While the GCC did issue a strongly worded statement condemning the Houthis and stressing that Yemen is essential to the security situation in the Gulf, it was already too late.

Likewise, Libya did not escape the chaos and was also affected by the regional conflict between the two Gulf axes. Following the success of the "counter-revolutionary" movement in Egypt that reinstated military rule, General Khalifa Hafter replicated this scenario with his own coup on 14 February 2014 with the support of Saudi Arabia and Egypt against the General National Congress government, affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. The coup was responsible for the outbreak of civil war in Libya, transforming the country into a hub for
terrorism in North Africa and a real threat to stability in Europe.

2015 Reconciliation: Moving Toward a Solution

In 2015, a radical shift took place in Saudi Arabia’s policy towards settling Gulf differences and reaching a rapprochement with Turkey to form a regional Sunni axis that would fill the vacuum created by the US withdrawal and curb the expansion of Iran and radical Islamic groups. Although this failed to produce great results, it was nonetheless an improvement over previous policy. This strategic shift identified a possible political solution under international auspices, and designed a direct Gulf military action to confront Iran. This included the launching of Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen (Asifat al-Hazm) on 25 March 2015 under Saudi command, with Gulf-Islamist support, and with the participation of the Qatari armed forces; and the forming of Jaysh Al-Fateh (Al-Fateh Army) in Northern Syria on 24 March 2014, as a result of the Saudi-Turkish coordination in Syria. Jaysh Al-Fateh was meant to confront the advance of the regime and Iranian militias, which had benefited from the conflict between the three major regional actors. Ironically, the main force in Jaysh Al-Fateh was Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham (al-Nusra Front,) which Qatar is now accused of supporting.

Yet perhaps the most significant result of this rapprochement was the expanded Vienna conference on 30 October 2015, which included all of the forces engaged in conflicts in the region (Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, Egypt, Qatar, and the UAE), as well as the EU and the UN. The conference led to agreements that paved the way for political solutions, including meetings in Switzerland between the Houthis and the legitimate Yemeni government on 15 December 2015, the signing the Skhirat agreement between the parties of the Libyan conflict, allowing the formation of the National Accord Government on 17 December 2015, and enhancements to the outcomes of the Vienna conference regarding Syria with UN Security Council Resolution 2245 on 18 December 2015.

Potential Repercussions of a Return to...
Regional Axes

In reality, the reconciliation of 2015 was not fruitful. It proved to be a mere distraction as the Gulf states awaited the new US administration and any policy shift towards the region. The deep divisions and conflicting agendas among the Gulf states themselves and the entire region makes a “win-win” settlement impossible. Saudi Arabia is sensitive to Turkey’s role in the Sunni world, which prohibits the formation of a Sunni coalition in the region from confronting Iran. The UAE and Egypt share a fear of Turkish-Qatari support for the Muslim Brotherhood, which undermines any efforts to resolve conflicts in the region. As such, the renewal of the conflict between the two sides is not surprising, especially following Trump’s visit to Saudi Arabia. In Riyadh, Trump announced his full support for the Saudi Arabia-UAE axis, encouraging the two to reposition themselves on internal Gulf issues. Trump hardly concealed his role in instigating the crisis with Qatar, instead preferring to flaunt it as one of the outcomes of his visit. Despite this misplaced sense of achievement, the current Gulf crisis has serious repercussions.

First, the current context of heightened regional tension has opened the door for a return of the policy of axes. This would have a profoundly negative effect on the Gulf states themselves, both economically and politically. The complex regional issues that would emerge from such a policy would allow for greater interventions by regional and international parties in the affairs of the Arab world. As a result, Saudi Arabia’s desire to play the leading role in the Middle East would be challenged, while Iran, on the other hand, would have greater leverage over the divisions in the Gulf, providing the Persian state with the enhanced ability to disrupt potential measures stemming from the Saudi-American rapprochement against it.

Should the conflict deepen, both Saudi Arabia and Qatar will be in dire need of alliance with major powers, which will provide many international, regional, and local actors with the opportunity to manipulate the GCC countries, particularly Saudi Arabic and Qatar, in a way that could harm their national interests. This can already be seen in the position of the international powers vis-à-vis the current crisis. Behind a façade of attempts to contain the crisis and limit its regional
impact, the international powers actually desire to prolong it and promote their own political agendas. The convoluted American position on events in the Gulf is the result of the conflict between the White House and other US government institutions. The US Secretary of Defence signed a $12 billion deal to sell Qatar F-15 fighter jets despite President Trump’s criticism of Qatar as a supporter of terrorism. The US Armed Forces also performed military exercises with the participation of nine American and Qatari military units in Qatar’s territorial waters. This divergence between the US government institutions could be a reflection of the conflict between Gulf lobbyist groups within the US administration. These internal divisions could hinder the new administration’s efforts to curb the influence of Iran and resolve outstanding issues, should the Gulf crisis endure.

Likewise, Russia, Iran, and Turkey can each benefit from a prolonging of the current crisis. Though Russia has thus far officially remained neutral, Moscow has nonetheless taken advantage of the conflict as an opportunity for political investment and to bolster its military presence in the region through strengthening ties with the Turkey-Qatar bloc. Russia also disregarded sanctions against Qatar and supplied the country with food. Iran, for its part, has used the Gulf dispute as a political opportunity to buy time and position itself to confront any possible changes in US policy. Additionally, Iran is exploiting Qatar’s lack of allies to bring Qatar closer to its sphere of influence, or, at the very least, render it neutral. Economically, this is an opportunity for Iran to increase trade with Qatar, which currently does not exceed $300 million. Meanwhile, Turkey is using the crisis as an opportunity to establish a military presence in the Gulf that would challenge Saudi Arabia, its major rival for leadership in the Sunni world. Turkey’s efforts in this regard would, of course, be opposed by both Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Additionally, the Gulf crisis has economically benefited Ankara. Turkey provided Qatar with Turkish goods and food products, causing trade between the two countries to increase from $700 million in 2016 to $5 billion following the crisis.

Second, if it persists, the current Gulf conflict may cause the collapse of the political tracks that were put into place during the 2015 reconciliation, and could undermine the international efforts to support these measures in Syria, Libya, and Yemen. A prolonging of the crisis would once again turn these countries into...
battlefields for the rival blocs, as was seen in 2013. In Syria, the continuation of the Gulf conflict would undoubtedly have a significant political and military impact. The renewed policy of axes would create political divisions within the Syrian opposition, which would be most apparent in widening divisions between the Syrian National Coalition and the High Negotiating Commission (HNC). Such discord could affect the future Geneva negotiations, the participants present at these negotiations, as well as regional diplomatic support for this process. In addition, if the conflict continues to single out Qatar, Turkey will inevitably become a target in order to break their alliance. Saudi Arabia and the UAE maintain relations with the Democratic Unionist Party in Syria (PYD) and the Kurdistan Region in Iraq and could isolate Turkey through supporting a Kurdish region in Syria, which would be biased in favour of Saudi Arabia and the UAE and would support the secession of Iraqi Kurdistan. On the other hand, any rapprochement between Qatar, Turkey, Iran, and Russia in response to the escalation of the crisis by the Saudi bloc will favour the interest of Russia and Iran in Syria.

Militarily, the Gulf conflict would also have unavoidable ramifications for the factions fighting on the ground. This would particularly affect the Islamist groups with close ties to Turkey and Qatar as well as the factions affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, and could also disrupt the Astana process. In fact, the Astana round, which was scheduled for 12-13 June 2017, which is perhaps an already visible result of each party applying pressure to their various affiliated factions.

With regard to Libya, interference in the Gulf crisis came when Colonel Ahmed al-Mismari, the spokesperson of Haftar’s forces, made statements attacking Qatar. Libya’s involvement in the Gulf crisis would fuel internal discord in the country and undermine the Skhirat process as well as the progress made during the al-Sarraj-Hafter meeting that was held in Abu Dhabi in early May 2017. Haftar is supported by both the UAE and Egypt and, despite the efforts to reach a political solution with the National Accord Government, Haftar continues to strive for a military victory for his party. The continued conflict in Libya and its involvement in the Gulf crisis could transform the country into another battlefield between regional blocs and further divide the Libyan actors and the battalions in the north and west of Libya. One possible solution to the Libyan conflict could be federalism. Some
regional actors in the Libyan struggle are already pushing for this solution, as they view it as the only resolution for a conflict that is threatening not only Libya’s neighbours but also Europe.

As for Yemen, the current Gulf crisis could destroy the modest achievements of military intervention. Saudi, Emirati, and Qatari forces are the backbone of the military campaign in Yemen; however, if Saudi Arabia and the UAE renounce Qatari involvement in military operations or replace them with another party, this could further complicate the situation and allow the Houthis to regain control of the country. An increase in Saudi-Emirati intervention could lead to an escalation in the already appalling humanitarian crisis in Yemen. The UAE would prefer to stall military operations and negotiate with the Houthis in Oman to prevent Sanaa from falling into the hands of the Yemeni Popular Resistance, a party affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. Much to Saudi Arabia’s disapproval, the Emiratis also support the separatist Southern Movement. These disagreements between Saudi Arabia and the UAE could cause a regression in the fragile progress made in Yemen.

Conclusion

Due to the critical circumstances engulfing the entire region, the effective management of this crisis by Gulf rivals is essential. If the current confrontation moves beyond the political and economic spheres of boycotts and sieges to involve hotbeds of conflict in the Arab world, the national security of the Gulf will be directly threatened. Previous conflicts between regional blocs have already proven that obtaining the support of the United States is no longer sufficient to achieve victory. Each side of the bloc has its own capacities and strategies that could draw the entire region into conflicts with catastrophic consequences. The persistence of the Gulf crisis will result in a severe regional schism and the Gulf will be directly impacted by its consequences.
Endnotes


3. Ibid.


6. In Tunisia, similar attempts were made to recreate the Egyptian revolution in order to oust the Muslim Brotherhood from power. These efforts, however, were not successful due to the Nahda Movement, which seems to have understood the nature of the Gulf conflict. Al-Nahda chose to spare Tunisia the Egyptian experience and, eventually, a technocratic government headed by Mehdi Juma was formed in January 2014. See “Ennahda Movement”, Al-Jazeera, 6 November 2014, available in Arabic at: https://goo.gl/MzbJNs


10. For more about the UAE in Libya and its support to Hafter, see the annual report of the UN Libya Sanctions Committee, available in Arabic at: https://goo.gl/roHl69


12. See “Trump considers boycotting Qatar an outcome of his visit to Saudi Arabia, Al-Khaleej Al-Jadeed, 6 June 2017, available in Arabic at: https://goo.gl/enKksGj


15. “Iran allocates Bushehr port for economic exchange with Qatar”, Tasnim News Agency, 10 June 2017, available in Arabic at: https://goo.gl/SJ5Qjd


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[arab-reform.net](http://arab-reform.net)  [contact@arab-reform.net](mailto:contact@arab-reform.net)

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