

# A Saudi-Qatari Rapprochement?

## Changing Realities, Shifting Priorities

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(Saudi Kingdom Council - Anadolu Agency)

**After more than three years, what are the motivating factors behind the current reconciliation efforts between Saudi Arabia and Qatar? What is the likelihood that such efforts will succeed and what would the consequences be should the two Gulf states re-establish ties? This policy outlook explores recent developments in the Saudi-UAE-led blockade on Qatar and argues that, although there is hope that a deal can be reached this time around, there remain deep divisions on key issues within the GCC that present a formidable challenge to overcome.**

## Introduction

Following an almost four-year dispute, Saudi Arabia and Qatar are reportedly in reach of a deal to end the saga that has been the Gulf Crisis. After US President Donald Trump's Middle East envoy Jared Kushner paid a [visit](#) to Gulf kingdoms this month and Kuwait-led mediation efforts, Doha and Riyadh have reportedly indicated their willingness to resolve the dispute.

In the wake of this development, Oman, Kuwait, Turkey and Iran also expressed optimism that a resolution could be reached. Trump also expressed his hope during a December 17<sup>th</sup> phone call with Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz that the crisis would soon come to end. As Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan [stated](#), a final agreement is expected soon. Qatar also [said](#) that some progress had been achieved to resolve the Gulf crisis but cautioned that it would not be immediately resolved. Nevertheless, the upcoming GCC summit on 5 January in Riyadh, may witness the announcement of an agreement.

This recent diplomatic initiative is somewhat similar to the attempts that were made in previous [years](#). After more than three years, what are the motivating factors behind the current reconciliation efforts between Saudi Arabia and Qatar? What is the likelihood that such efforts will succeed and what would the consequences be should the two Gulf states re-establish ties?

This policy outlook explores recent developments in the Saudi-UAE-led blockade on Qatar and argues that, although there is hope that a deal can be reached this time around, there remain deep divisions on key issues within the GCC that present a formidable challenge to overcome.

## Background

On 5 June 2017, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt severed their diplomatic relations with Qatar. They imposed a land, air and sea blockade against the country, along with a list of 13 [demands](#), including shutting down Al Jazeera, significantly reducing relations with Iran, cutting support for the Muslim Brotherhood and closing the Turkish military base. Qatar has denied the allegations levelled against it and said that the boycott aims to undermine its sovereignty.

This is not the first time that an intra-GCC crisis has been witnessed. In March 2014, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain withdrew their ambassadors from Qatar. The crisis endured for a relatively short period and a reconciliation agreement was [signed](#) in November 2014 thanks to Kuwait's mediation efforts. However, this development also prepared the grounds for the crisis three years later.

Despite the blockade, it seems that the Arab Quartet failed to achieve what they hoped to over the last three years. It could even be argued that in addition to failing to isolate Qatar in the region, the blockade period has witnessed the extension of Qatar's influence beyond the Gulf, as in the case of Libya conflict. Moreover, developments in the region have led Saudi Arabia, the most powerful among the blockading camp, to re-evaluate its policies.

Although it incurred a financial loss of around \$43 [billion](#), Qatar largely managed to mitigate the effects of the crisis. Following the imposition of the blockade, the country [re-corded](#) a 1.7% expansion of GDP in 2017, roughly equal to the previous year's growth. Furthermore, a fiscal reform



President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan (R) and Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani (L) pose for a photo ahead of the 6th meeting of "Turkey-Qatar Supreme Strategic Committee" at the Presidential Complex in Ankara, Turkey on November 26, 2020. (Emin Sansar - Anadolu Agency)

## POLICY OUTLOOK

policy for improving public finances and diversifying the economy in non-hydrocarbons [sectors](#), helped the country to manage the economic damage.

Relations between Ankara and Doha were also consolidated. Starting with Turkey's political and economic support to Qatar in the first days of the crisis, relations between the two states evolved into a military alliance in Libya. The two states played a pivotal role in supporting the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) against the failed offensive by Khalifa Haftar's forces, which was supported by Egypt, the UAE, France and Russia. Regarding the level of economic relations, the trade volume between two states have also increased by 57 % compared to 2017 and reached a level of \$1.4 billion at the end of 2018.

For its part, Saudi Arabia has faced several challenges in this period, which forced the kingdom to step back on its hawkish policy in the region. Its involvement in Yemen has increasingly turned sour and there is currently no viable [solution](#) in sight. The country is also in an economic [downturn](#) with plummeting oil prices, lack of diversification and the growing unemployment rate. Among these challenges, one of the most salient has been the deterioration of Saudi Arabia's political image following the brutal murder of Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul.

## Objectives

As it currently stands, Saudi Arabia appears serious about the rapprochement process. On November 20<sup>th</sup>, Saudi Arabia's King Salman held a phone call with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as part of what observers have pointed to as an effort to cool disputes ahead of the incoming Biden administration. The divide between Turkey and Saudi Arabia emerged largely at the direction of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman and was particularly exacerbated after the notorious Khashoggi murder. Given Qatar's strong alliance with Turkey, this step can be seen as a manifestation of Saudi Arabia's desire to seek improvement in relations not only with Qatar but also in its strained relations with the Turkey-Qatar axis more generally.

As mentioned, these steps by Saudi Arabia come in the wake of Joe Biden's victory in the US presidential elections. Biden has reservations about US-Saudi relations and has been critical of the Trump administration's issuing what he called "a dangerous blank check" that MbS exploited to pursue reckless policies at home and abroad. Both the military campaign that the Crown prince launched in Yemen and his involvement in the Khashoggi affair, reportedly infuriated Biden and underlie his campaign pledge to reassess ties with the kingdom, even [threatening](#) to stop arms sales. These steps by Saudi Arabia can be regarded as a sign of showing good intentions towards Washington DC, which is expected to depart from a hawkish Iran pol-



Turkish Foreign Affairs Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu (L) meets with Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan bin Abdullah Al Saud (R) within the 47th session of Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Council of Foreign Ministers, in Niamey, Niger on November 27, 2020. (Fatih Aktaş - Anadolu Agency)

icy under Trump administration and rather adopt a more pro-negotiation approach.

On the other side, Qatar seems to be taking the initiative more seriously than previous attempts to solve the crisis. However, it has taken a cautious stance towards the negotiations and expects to see confidence-building measures in advance of any final deal. These include the lifting of the air embargo, reopening of the land border and free movement of Qatari citizens to the blockading.

Underlying Saudi Arabia's recent moves is also arguably an effort to shore up regional ties in its effort to contain Iranian influence, particularly in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. The kingdom requires having a certain level of diplomatic relations with Qatar in order to effectively counter Iran's influence across the region. Riyadh's previous attempt at reconciliation in December last year came right after Iran's alleged [attack](#) on Saudi oil facilities.

Nevertheless, for Qatar, preserving its neutrality in the Saudi-Iran rivalry will be one of the priorities of the country, regardless of how much the cooperation with Saudi Arabia grows in the event of the removal of the blockade. Over the last couple of decades, the country diligently crafted a proactive [mediation](#) policy. It successfully positioned itself as a broker in regional conflicts such as in Sudan, Lebanon and Yemen in the 2000s. It would be naïve to expect that Qatar would put this neutrality policy aside in a rivalry between the two regional powers.

Moreover, the Saudis will also need Qatar's financial capabilities in easing the burden of its likely role in the reconstruction process in Syria, as vaguely [demanded](#) by President Trump in 2018 following the international outcry over the disappearance of Khashoggi. Financial assistance in reconstructing Syria will also help the Saudis contain Iranian influence in Syria. Both Qatar and Saudi Arabia [oppose](#) Syria's tentative return to the Arab League, and this common stance could motivate two countries further to cultivate an agreement.

With its strengthened position in the region, as well as its close alliance with Turkey, Qatar has more leverage than in previous attempts to end the blockade. As a result, Qatar can be more demanding in negotiations, particularly in checking the UAE's isolation strategy in the region. Relations between Qatar and the UAE are even more strained than those with Saudi Arabia. Disagreements between the two neighbours include Syria and Libya. While Qatar backed the Turkey-led axis that supported UN-recognised the Government of National Accord (GNA), the UAE has been the main supporter of, Khalifa Haftar-led forces. In Syria, though it currently pursues a lower profile in the conflict, Qatar has supported various Syrian opposition groups since the beginning of the civil war. For its part, the UAE [withdrew](#) its support for the Syrian opposition following the Russian intervention and [restored](#) its ties with the regime by [reopening](#) its Damascus embassy in December 2018, after a six-year hiatus. It has also been reported that the UAE [pushed](#) Assad to break the ceasefire agreement in Idlib in an effort to undermine Turkish-backed groups in the area.

Even though Riyadh and Abu Dhabi enjoy special relations, particular since the ascent of MbS and MbZ, some differences have become more apparent in certain instances, particular concerning normalisation of relations with Israel. Saudi Arabia still prefers to have tacit relations with Israel for a very significant reason. Saudi Arabia has cultivated the image of being the religious leader of the Muslim world as the 'Custodian of Two Holy Mosques'. Normalising relations with Israel would undoubtedly negatively impact this image. In the case of Yemen, the UAE also parted ways with the kingdom. For instance, the UAE established a working relationship with Israel to establish a spy base on the Yemeni island of Socotra as part of a plan to expand the reach of the Emirati influence in the Horn of Africa. The UAE-Israel alignment [follows](#) an active foreign policy agenda in Africa and while the former has taken on the bulk of the economic burden, the latter contributes primarily to the realm of security cooperation.

Regarding Qatar-Saudi reconciliation efforts, the UAE sent positive signals last week, [praising](#) Saudi Arabia's efforts in the process and [indicating](#) that there are seeds of progress in ending the dispute. However, the UAE's reservations are still visible considering the absence of Qatar's name in the message of the Emirati Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Gargash's [statements](#). Furthermore, there remains the distinct possibility that other parties to the blockade may seek to derail the process should it be seen to be developing in a way counter to their wishes. Recent provocative violations of Qatari airspace by Bahraini fighter jets is a case in point.

These considerations give some indication of what the likely outcome of this reconciliation process could be. For Saudi Arabia, reaching a détente situation and keeping dialogue channels open with Qatar would be beneficial, however, they are seeking to do so without jeopardising the alliance with other members of the quartet. For Qatar,

removing the blockade and gaining more room for manoeuvring against the UAE is the main objective without conceding its interests and sovereign decisions.

In spite of what appears to be genuine progress in resolving the nearly four-year-long dispute, there remains the distinct possibility that core issues between GCC members will remain and may even be exacerbated. First, the main points of the disagreement between Qatar and the Saudi-Emirati-Bahraini axis remain with no immediate solution in sight. Most of these are rooted in strategic and ideological issues such as those related to supporting/countering pro-Arab Spring forces, most notably Qatar's active support for Islamist groups, namely the Muslim Brotherhood. Qatar has also gradually [fortified](#) its military position and started to invest more on its hard power capabilities. Though the Saudis are seeking a détente with Qatar and the Emiratis are theoretically on board, the dispute between Qatar and the UAE will likely continue due to the reasons mentioned above. Last but not least, normalisation with Israel, which the Biden administration also supports, can be a source of disagreement. Unlike the UAE and Bahrain, other members of the GCC like Kuwait and Qatar still oppose open normalisation with Israel. Moreover, the Emiratis have ramped up their efforts to build a regional alliance against Qatari and Turkish influence in the region.

## The Biden Administration

The incoming Biden administration arguably accounts for a large part of the motivation Saudi Arabia had to launch this reconciliation process now. Although the Trump administration, as part of its 'maximum pressure' campaign against Iran, gave unfettered support to the Kingdom in its efforts to counter Iran, its refusal to take decisive action following the attack on the ARAMCO facilities at Abqaiq consequentially [pushed](#) both Saudi Arabia and the UAE to seek de-escalation. In addition to potentially having to face a renewed effort on the part of the US to engage with Iran, Saudi Arabia, and MbS in particular, will be deprived of the personal networks developed during the Trump administration. This will increase the push to reconcile with Qatar and other regional actors, including Turkey.

Even though the Trump legacy will not be erased overnight and the long-term strategic alliance will still be [preserved](#), Biden's [statements](#) seem to indicate his willingness to implement a new foreign policy agenda in the Middle East. This policy will likely bear strong similarities to the one implemented by his former partner in the White House, Barack Obama. Accordingly, this creates challenges for Riyadh, particularly in three matters.

First, the possibility of US's returning to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and re-launching of negotiations, will compel Saudi Arabia to re-evaluate its hawk-



(Samuel Corum - Anadolu Agency)

ish efforts to isolate Iran. Biden will likely follow Obama's footsteps in his Iran agenda and is expected to implement tough solutions if needed. This will be a clear shift from the Trump administration's policy. Saudi Arabia's recent efforts, in this regard, can be perceived not only an attempt to refresh its image against potential discontent from the White House, but also as a shield against the possibility of re-launching the nuclear negotiations with Iran.

Second, contrary to Trump's "economic relations first" approach, Biden will likely convey rhetoric that is more attuned to concerns over human rights and democratic values. Given the Khashoggi murder and continuing humanitarian crisis in Yemen, Washington could follow a carrot-and-stick approach with Riyadh, seeking concrete reforms in exchange for keeping relations safe. As the Arab Spring unfolded, and Hosni Mubarak, a long time US ally, was overthrown, the Saudi leadership felt that it too could ultimately be abandoned in the face of domestic pressure. This served to erode the level of trust in the alliance and bilateral relations took a significant hit. In the event of an internal dispute, the future of the Saudi throne is arguably dependent on US protection and support, which will play a significant role in the Kingdom's decision to compromise on possible US demands.

The approach to regional issues of the incoming Biden administration may also enable Qatar to increase its influence, potentially playing the role as an arbitrator in any possible restart of nuclear negotiations between Iran and the P5+1. Unlike the other members of the GCC, Doha has maintained a good relationship with Tehran. The fact that it is also mediating between the US and Taliban in Afghanistan increases the likelihood that the Biden administration may look to the Qataris to play a similar role vis-à-vis Iran.

## Israel and the Gulf States

It should be underlined that the current reconciliation efforts and the recent Arab-Israeli normalisation are linked to the same underlying causes. As indicated previously, the demonstrated limits of Washington's support to Arab states even compelled them to take action designed to decrease the dependency on US involvement and adopt more regionally based solutions.

Moreover, since both processes were mediated and led by the Trump administration, it is plausible to think that the two have converged to a certain extent. First, Jared Kushner has been the main actor in launching both processes. It is not a coincidence that Kushner's [visit](#) to Qatar, which commenced the current round of reconciliation efforts, came right after his Saudi Arabia trip where he met Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and MbS. In addition, American officials also [say](#) that finding a solution to the Gulf crisis will inevitably pave the way for more Arab countries to open diplomatic relations with Israel, and hope that these developments will help build a coalition to counter Iran. Considering that the Biden administration positive view of normalisation between Israel and Arab states, this approach will almost certainly continue under Biden. There is, however, a difference in the motivations between the two administrations. Trump pushed normalisation based on transactional politics, such as the recognition of Morocco's sovereignty in Western Sahara, selling F-35 jets to the UAE or removal of Sudan from the list of state-sponsors of terrorism. Biden's approach will undoubtedly be different and is likely to seek to leverage these developments to push for regional stability and a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Arab-Israeli normalisation will also have an impact on Qatar's positioning in the Israel/Palestine conflict. Prior to the Arab Spring, Qatar had a volatile but tacit relationship with Israel. Relations between both parties deteriorated, as Israel's antagonism towards Qatar was fuelled by Doha's support to Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood. On the other



(Kobi Gideon / GPO / Handout - Anadolu Agency)



People hold placards during a protest against the Saudi-UAE led blockade on Qatar in a protest called by the international campaign for Justice & Peace outside the United Arab Emirates Embassy in London, United Kingdom on June 17, 2017. (Isabel Infantes - Anadolu Agency)

hand, Qatar's constructive engagement in Gaza still matters for Israel. The Biden administration can encourage the two states to improve their relations by reducing the tensions without any formalisation of ties. While such a step can be helpful for Qatar's ties with the US and would insulate Doha from the adventurism of Abu Dhabi, Israel would also benefit from Qatar's financial capabilities to tackle the difficult post-pandemic situation of the Palestinians.

## Conclusion

Three years after the anti-Qatar blockade, this undertaking seems to have reached a dead end. Along with the factors mentioned above, the change in the White House has accelerated momentum towards a potential resolution. The Saudis are now seriously envisaging a reconciliation with Qatar, however, doubts remain regarding whether the other parties to the blockade, namely the UAE, will accept any deal that would not effectively pull the rug out from under Qatari sovereignty and its independent foreign policy.

Tensions between Doha and Abu Dhabi will continue, which will also have repercussions on Saudi-Emirati relations.

Even in the event the blockade is removed, Saudi-Qatari relations will not immediately return to pre-blockade levels. Ideological fault lines will not disappear, even though they remain at manageable levels. Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia may seek some sort of solution short of keeping the blockade in place should no final resolution be reached. The likelihood of this increases given the kingdom's wariness of the Biden administration, in stark contrast to the state of affairs with the Trump administration.

Whether Qatar will take any significant steps towards any of the key demands of the blockading countries remains as a known unknown. During a similar crisis in 2014, several leading figures of the Muslim Brotherhood were expelled from Qatar. However, conditions for both the emergence and ending the rift are much different from the previous crisis six years ago.

Finally, it has become apparent - for reasons discussed above including US inaction following the attack on AR-AMCO's facilities at Abqaiq - that a no compromise approach to Iran may not be in Saudi's best interest. Given both the UAE's and the Saudi's deconfliction efforts, the realisation that regional solutions are required that involve all key regional actors may help to nudge the GCC towards a reconciliation of sorts.