



Conference Report

**The Gulf Crisis and
Geopolitical Tensions
in the Gulf Region**

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The Gulf Crisis and Geopolitical Tensions in the Gulf Region

This is a report of a closed session titled 'The Gulf Crisis and Geopolitical Tensions in the Gulf Region', held as part of the TRT World Forum 2017. Being an off the record session, it allowed speakers and participants to freely use the information received. However, neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speakers, nor that of any other participant, was to be revealed. The views, themes and discussion points expressed in this conference report are those of participants and speakers present at the TRT World Forum 2017, and do not reflect the official view of TRT World Research Centre.

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Summary

The Gulf Crisis and Geopolitical Tensions in the Gulf Region On Monday, 5 June 2017, three GCC countries (Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain) and Egypt cut their diplomatic relationships with Doha. This unprecedented crisis in the history of inter-Gulf relations has created a state of mistrust, not only among the governments of the Gulf states, but also among the citizens of those countries. This session discussed the reasons of the Gulf crisis, its impact on the relationship between the member states of the GCC as well as the wider security in the region. The speakers tried to draw the scenarios that could be expected to resolve this crisis.

During the session, the two speakers shared their analyses on the Gulf crisis with the other experts. The first speaker focused on the root causes of the current Gulf-Qatar crisis, which dates back to 1995 when Qatar left the umbrella of Saudi Arabia to adopt an independent and open foreign policy. He explained that despite Qatar not giving in to the demands of the four countries that cut their ties with Doha, it is not likely that this crisis will cause a breakdown, at least in the short term, of the Gulf Cooperation Council. The second speaker described the strong relationship between Qatar and Turkey, as well as Turkey's ties with the rest of the Gulf states. He explained that Qatar and Turkey have the same view regarding almost all issues

in the region, particularly since the Arab uprisings started in 2010.

After the presentations of the senior experts of the Gulf, discussion was opened to the floor and distinguished participants shared their analyses. One of the participants argued that the crisis was implemented after getting the green light from the White House following Donald Trump's historic visit to Riyadh in May 2017. According to him, the most important cause of the current Gulf crisis is the divergence of opinions between Qatar and the states that are party to the crisis regarding the best way to manage regional issues. The second speaker's analysis supported the idea that assumes the creation of a new alliance in the region, which could contain Turkey, Iran and Qatar. Another participant in the session found that the main reason of the Gulf crisis is the role of the media in different Gulf countries, especially the role that Al Jazeera Media Network played in the last two decades to change the mentality in the Arab world by supporting the people.

Finally, the participants in this session concluded that the solution to the Gulf crisis should be resolved through dialogue among all concerned parties. Three main themes have been discussed during this session:

1. The real reasons of the Qatar-Gulf crisis;
2. The impact of this unprecedented crisis on the security of the region;
3. And the scenarios expected to resolve the crisis.

Introduction

On Monday, 5 June 2017, three GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) countries (Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain) as well as Egypt cut its diplomatic ties with Qatar. This unprecedented crisis in the history of inter-Gulf relations has created a state of mistrust, not only among the governments of the Gulf States, but also among the citizens of those countries.

TRT World Forum organised a closed session on October 19, 2017, on the Gulf Crisis to discuss the reasons behind this unprecedented event in the region, its impact on the relationship between the member states of the GCC as well as on the security of the MENA region. The participants at the panel attempted to describe, analyse and present the outcomes of their in-depth research to suggest solutions and offer scenarios that could be expected to resolve this crisis.

They were focused on the roots of the current Gulf-Qatar crisis that dates back to 1995, when Qatar decided to leave the umbrella of Saudi Arabia to adopt an independent and open foreign policy. One of the speakers explained that despite Qatar not accepting the terms imposed on it, it is highly unlikely that this crisis will cause a breakdown of the Gulf Corporation Council (GCC), in the short term at least.

They also described the strong relationship between Qatar and Turkey, and the ties that Ankara has with the rest of the Gulf capitals. One of the points highlighted that Qatar and Turkey have the same view regarding almost all issues in the region, particularly since the start of the Arab uprisings in 2011.

Origin of the Crisis

Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt severed diplomatic ties with Qatar as they claimed its regional policies fuelled terrorism and extremism according to the official statement diffused by the blockade countries. However, there is no longer any doubt that the diplomatic crisis was pre-planned and implemented after getting the green light from the White House following Donald Trump's historic visit to the Saudi capital in May 2017.

The roots of the Gulf crisis go much deeper, specifically to 1995 when Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, the former Emir of Qatar, took power on 27 June 1995. His arrival to power, was not well received by Qatar's neighbours such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE in particular. Sheikh Hamad quickly understood that he needed to build a brand image for his country, based on several leverages such as education, diplomacy, sport, media, culture and mediation to safeguard the legitimacy of his monarchical rule.

Qatar's new foreign policy is characterised by two main factors: its independence and openness. At the same time, its foreign policy is based on two strategies: its relationship with its neighbours in the region like Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran, and the alliance with the strong powers and actors in the world such as France, UK and the United States of America respectively.

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Reinforcing the image of Qatar

The Qatari leaders are aware that their country is a very small state in the region, with respect to its geographical area, its military forces and its population size. However, Qatar possesses a lot of natural energy resources, gas in particular. Hence, Qatar had to rely on building its knowledge capital to create its own brand image. Aljazeera Media Network, Western-based

universities such as the Northwestern University and Georgetown University in Education city (Qatar's education hub), and even the use of sport all sought to create a significant brand image of Qatar that was progressive and capable of development, despite its challenges as a small state.

Qatar's Foreign Policy

Relationship with countries and actors in the region is one of the most important drivers for Qatar's foreign policy. Qatar has strengthened its relations and worked on building strong diplomatic ties - since Shaikh Hamad bin Khalifa al Thani came to power in 1995 - with states such as Iran, Israel and Turkey. On the other hand, Qatar built strong relations with non-state actors in the region like Hamas in Palestine and Hezbollah in Lebanon. In fact, there was a Commercial Israeli bureau office in Doha from 1996 to 2009, despite Qatar having close relations with Hamas and Hezbollah during that same period.

Qatar is also well aware of its geopolitical position, being located between powerful neighbours such as Saudi Arabia and Iran. It is quite important for Qatar to be able to maintain the balance of power in the region. This is why Doha signed a number of agreements with great powers including the US, UK and France so that it could become a more important geopolitical actor in the Gulf.

It is important to note that Qatar hosts the largest American military base in the Middle East and North Africa, which includes more than 11,000 US troops. A new Turkish military base has been established in Doha last June, few days after the Gulf crisis started.

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Crisis as a Result of Qatar's Influence in the Region

The Gulf-Qatar crisis that emerged on the 5th of June in 2017 must be seen as an accumulation of factors leading to the Gulf powers' severing of ties with Qatar. It is Qatar's adoption of an open and independent foreign policy, dating back to 1995, that put Qatar in an untenable position with respect to the geopolitical dominion that the other Gulf powers sought to carve.

According to one of the participants, Qatar decided to pull itself out of the Gulf umbrella headed by Saudi Arabia and draw its own path, while respecting its relationship with its neighbours. Iran is especially an obstacle issue with respect to Qatar's relations with the other countries in the Gulf. In September 2014 for example, Shaikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani, the Emir of the State of Qatar called from the platform of the United Nations General Assembly the Arab States,

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in particular to have a direct dialogue with Iran to improve diplomatic relations and solve the regional conflicts through dialogue. He even offered to host this dialogue in Doha. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia identifies the dispute with Iran as one of an ideological struggle for geopolitical supremacy. After the last crisis in the Gulf region, it is clear that the GCC states are no longer as a homogenous an entity however. The Gulf can further be divided into two blocks. The Gulf trio of Saudi-UAE-Bahrain strongly oppose any dialogue or engagement with Iran at the moment at least. The second block of Qatar, Kuwait and Oman are ready to have a dialogue with Iran, especially since these countries already maintain good relationship with Iran in the economic and political spheres.

The Arab Spring as a Backdrop to the Current Crisis

For over two decades Qatar has been accused of overstepping boundaries in the Gulf by pursuing an independent foreign policy that is often incompatible with the foreign policies of its Gulf neighbours. It is accused of relying on the 'paper of the Arab peoples', until it became an influential player in the region. On the other hand, other Gulf countries have relied on 'building an internal, national orientation' that has strengthened their capability to adopt an approach that enables them to form political alliances, which contribute to regional and international influence - even to the point of foreign military intervention.

For the past decade and a half (1995-2010), Qatar's foreign policy has been neutral, with a focus on resolving conflicts as a key principle, enforcing Article 7 of the Qatari constitution which stipulates that 'the foreign policy of the State shall be based on the principle of the consolidation of international peace and security by promoting peaceful settlement of international disputes.'

When the so-called 'Arab Spring' broke out in 2010, Qatar shunned the impartiality that had previously characterised it based on one of its constitution's articles which stipulates: 'supporting the peoples' right to self-determination'. Therefore, Doha adopted a position in favor of Arabs standing up to their tyrannical rulers, and in support of these peoples' demands for freedom and dignity.

This shift in the course of Qatar's foreign policy—from neutrality to influence—resulted in Doha playing a leading role in the changes and transformations witnessed in the region at the time. They filled the void created by the absence of conventional regional powers like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria and Iraq.

The events of the Arab Spring on the one hand, and the preoccupation of some regional powers with domestic concerns on the other hand, opened the door for Doha to enter the fray in an attempt to take over leadership of the region in that period.

New Features for Saudi Arabia

King Salman's ascension to the top of the power structure in Saudi Arabia in January 2015, and the arrival of the descendants of the founding King Abdulaziz Al Saud to the top ranks in the Kingdom's leadership—through the appointment of emirs Muhammad bin Nayef as Crown Prince, and Muhammad bin Salman as Deputy Crown Prince—changed the equation and shifted balance in the region.

This shift became even clearer following the formation of the Riyadh-led Arab coalition in March 2015, and the declaration of war in Yemen against the loyalists of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh and the allied Houthi group supported by Iran. The war in Yemen is often viewed as simply a 'proxy war' between two regional rivals—Iran and Saudi Arabia—for leadership in the region.

New Team in the White House

Donald Trump became President of the United States of America in the end of 2016, and built an affinity with Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman (MBS), who is mainly a businessman by background like Trump. It seems that the two leaders agreed closely on the geopolitical threat Iran posed in the region, and that countries close to Iran such as Qatar had to be dealt with severely. It was soon after Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia on 20-21 May 2017 that the three Gulf States (Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain) plus Egypt unanimously decided to cut ties with Qatar.

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Turkish Position on the Gulf Crisis

Since the beginning of the crisis in the Gulf region last June, Turkey called to solve the conflict between the blockade countries and Qatar through dialogue and negotiation. The President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar in July 2017, and offered his mediation as well as his support to the Kuwaiti mediation led by Shaikh Sabah Al Ahmad Al Jaber Al Sabah, Emir of Kuwait. According to one of the participant, it seems that some parties in this crisis, such as Egypt and the UAE, do not want Ankara to play the role of a mediator and prefer that the solution come from within the GCC community.

Ankara offered its strong support to Doha since day one of the crisis, since Turkey perceives Qatar as one of its key allies. Qatar and Turkey share the same vision on many issues in the region, particularly with regard to events in the Arab spring countries. In less than 48 hours of the blockade, Turkey sent cargo

ships and hundreds of planes loaded with food and medical equipment's to avoid potential food shortages. In addition to this, Turkish exports to Qatar increased by 90 percent since the blockade started, according to statistics released by Turkey's Aegean Exporters' Association.

Turkey has a military base in Qatar since last July, and deployed more troops after the crisis erupted. In fact, in an extraordinary session on June 7, two days after the start of the Gulf crisis, Turkey's parliament ratified two earlier agreements allowing Turkish troops to be deployed in Qatar and another approving an accord between the two countries on military training cooperation. The closure of the Turkish military base was one of 13 demands presented to Qatar by the Saudi-led coalition of countries in order to lift their embargo on Doha.

Conclusion

The blockade countries have presented to Qatar a list of 13 demands, including shutting down Al Jazeera Media Network 'one of the most important soft powers of Qatar' based in Doha, reducing their relationship with Iran and closing the Turkish military base established last July in Doha. Beyond that, a possible scenario in this crisis would be for the four countries to engage Qatar at the negotiating table. This scenario has so far proven to be improbable. What is more likely though is that Saudi Arabia and the other three parties will continue their embargo on Qatar until Qatar accommodates their thirteen demands, but it seems that Qatar will not accept this list of demands as it affects its sovereignty as an independent state.

Although it is unlikely that Qatar will be expelled from the GCC since this expulsion will need an approval from Kuwait and Oman, the two member countries

in the GCC that are not part of this crisis. Kuwait itself, offered to play the role of mediator in this crisis, but the interests of the bigger powers in bringing Qatar to task, limits its role. Turkey similarly has its role of mediator restricted as it is challenged by states such as Egypt and the UAE who do not wish to see Turkish influence in the region.

Finally, we can conclude that the United States of America remains the single party capable of influencing all parties in this crisis, as it has strong relationships with the GCC countries. It is in America's interest to find a solution to the Gulf- Qatar crisis as soon as possible. The Gulf region contains more than 60% of the energy reserves of the world, and any attempt to destabilize this region will have a negative impact on global security and economy.

