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Report

Making Sense of Turkey's Strategy towards the new Gulf Crisis

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Introduction

Only two days after Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain broke their diplomatic ties with Qatar for its alleged support for terrorism, the Turkish parliament ratified military deals allowing its troops to be deployed to a Turkish military base in Qatar in order to train the country's security forces.⁽¹⁾ Although, the parliamentary motion that allows the deployment of Turkish military troops outside the country was based on a deal signed between Turkey and Qatar in 2015,⁽²⁾ the timing of this deployment has raised a controversy about whether Turkey is taking sides in the Gulf crisis. More importantly, the timing of the Turkish parliament's ratification and President Erdoğan's quick approval has prompted many questions regarding the real motivations behind Turkey's involvement in the crisis.

At the first glance, from the official perspective, sending Turkish soldiers to Qatar is aiming to improve the country's army, boost military cooperation and, more importantly, in Erdoğan's words, "is contributing to the security of the entire Arab Gulf region, and is not aimed at any specific Gulf state."⁽³⁾ As a matter of fact, Turkey's reaction to the Saudi-Emirati self-constructed Gulf crisis was quite moderate as Turkey is trying to establish a more balanced and realist foreign policy towards the region. During the crisis, Turkey has tried to play the role of mediator to overcome the current diplomatic rift among the Gulf countries without jeopardising its strong relations with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. By doing so, Turkish policy makers thought that Ankara would recalibrate its foreign policy and play its pre-Arab spring role in the region. Taking a second look, however, Turkey's decision to send its troops and establish its first extra-territorial military base after the ratification of the parliament should be understood from a multi-dimensional perspective and strongly relies on Turkey's new strategic vision of

regional politics which is based on realist reformulation of the national interest. The decision of the Turkish parliament and the way that Turkey perceives the Qatar crisis will probably reshape regional politics.

Therefore, the strategic rationality behind Turkey's decision to send its military troops to Qatar in the middle of the crisis and the foreign policy that Ankara is trying to follow during the crisis cannot be understood by only focusing on the current diplomatic calamity between Qatar and Saudi Arabia. As President Erdoğan claims, the crisis is not merely about how Qatar is framed as a threat for regional security, especially at a time when there is a collective fight against radical extremism and hyper-localised terrorism at the regional level. It is strongly about the post-Arab Spring reformulation of the regional order in which Turkey sees itself as one of the players in the process of remapping Middle East geopolitics.⁽⁴⁾ The first reaction of the Turkish president to the crisis therefore directly refers to the second one and Turkish priorities are shaped by the new regional dynamics that have emerged beyond the Qatar crisis.

The mutual strategic priorities of Turkey and Qatar

This strategic move of Turkey first and foremost is an integral part of Turkey's changing strategic framing of its power projection tools in the Middle East region. It is also about fundamental challenges that have been negatively influencing Turkey's national and regional security priorities since the fall of Syria and Iraq into civil war. To put the matter bluntly, as a consequence of the experience, over a long time, that diplomacy and so-called Turkish soft power are not enough alone to deliver Turkish national interests in the region. Ankara has changed its course of action with regards to the regional crisis by gradually taking the military dimension into consideration in order to effectively tackle the many security threats it is facing. Therefore, the Turkish way of seeing the new Gulf crisis is heavily shaped by its experience of the Arab Spring in which the balance between diplomatic and military means are vital and inseparable. This does not necessarily mean that Turkey perceives the Qatar crisis from a purely militaristic perspective; rather, it locates the crisis as the continuation of the new regional struggle among the major regional powers.⁽⁵⁾ This is the main reason why Turkey's current strategic move is not necessarily a political and strategic reaction against the anti-Muslim Brotherhood (MB) status quo wing led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in the region; rather it is a continuation of Turkey's new vision for regional politics within the context of the new regional geopolitical realities.

In fact, Turkey has been trying to recalibrate its hard power since the AK Party came to power in 2002. From a wider perspective, Turkey has a presence in Afghanistan, Kosovo, Bosnia and Iraq with humanitarian, educational, construction and peacekeeping missions. The case of Operation Euphrates Shield against the Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Turkey's military presence in Iraq in the fight against terrorism are two exceptional

examples demonstrating the level of change in terms of the balancing between militarised foreign policy and diplomacy in the post-Arab spring era. Although the military and defence deal between Qatar and Turkey is directly related to Turkey's desire to operationalize its hard power capacities in the Gulf region, it is also an integral part of Turkey's changing security paradigm. However, the rationality behind the Turkish-Qatari strategic partnership is more than that. The new geopolitical realities and the new antagonistic regional fragmentation are largely shaping the real motivation behind the increasing partnership between Qatar and Turkey. There are many reasons for both sides to deepen their strategic relationship.

Firstly, both countries share similar views regarding the Arab Spring. Within the context of the normative and political commitments to the democratic popular public-civilian mobilisation across the region, Turkey and Qatar support the foundational values of the Arab Spring. While Turkey and Qatar are promoting moderate change in the region, it is not wrong to say that many of the remaining countries in the region are working to maintain the status quo in regional politics. The divergent perspective over the role of political movements such as MB and Hamas became one of the main aspects of confrontation between Turkey and Qatar on the one hand and the other regional powers on the other. As is well known, while Saudi Arabia led the way against the MB, Turkey and Qatar see the latter as a normal political actor. The Egyptian military coup against Morsi in 2013 was a striking example showing how Turkey and Qatar supported a side different from that of those who backed General el-Sisi. The normative example is not limited to Egypt; the two countries' views of Libya, Syria and Tunisia also represent their differences from the other major Gulf countries though they are geopolitically in the same camp, especially against Iran in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. More importantly, Qatar's support for Turkey during the 15 July 2016 military coup attempt also represents the normative commonality between Ankara and Doha.

Secondly, the two countries have almost the same perspective regarding security issues in the region. During the recent visit of Erdoğan, he emphasised the importance of Turkey-Qatar relations by saying that "Qatar has always been, especially in recent difficult times, a strong friend of Turkey. With Qatar, we look at all regional problems from the same window."⁽⁶⁾ This same perspective is especially important in the case of deterring Iranian geopolitical expansion towards the Arabian heartland in the Middle East. The Gulf, Iraq and Syria are seen by Turkey and Qatar from the same angle together with other regional actors including Saudi Arabia. At this point, it is useful to consider the question of how the Gulf countries perceive Turkey and Iran. The Gulf countries perceive Iran as one of the important destabilising powers in the wider region. On the other hand, the same countries evaluate Turkey's policy towards the Gulf with reference to the concepts of "influence" and "pro-activism" rather than "domination". The main goal of Iran, on the other side, is to show the incompatibility of the Gulf

countries' agenda vis-à-vis the regional issues and, at the same time, show that the GCC does not have a common agenda regarding anti-Tehran discourses.⁽⁷⁾ Therefore, the Qatar crisis is undermining the common agenda to discourage Iranian influence in the region.

Thirdly, Turkey is aware that Qatar, in addition to its traditional allies like the United States, is interested in diversifying its defence and security procurement. Turkey and Qatar have opted for closer relations in defence and security because they face similar security dilemmas. Therefore, the military-industrial complex through which both countries want to improve their capacity represents the strategic aspect of this relationship.

Against this background, Turkey's decision to send troops and the setting up of a military base in Qatar, have become even more important. Although Ankara maintains a balanced view towards the crisis, its position has been shaped by two important variables. The first one is that Ankara sent out a very strong message that Qatar was not alone in the ideological and geopolitical struggle amongst the Arab countries, especially within the context of the intra-GCC struggle. At the same time, it showed that Ankara could play the role of an external balancer in de-escalating the crisis. In the case of the possibility of militarisation of the crisis, Ankara has also shown that it can take military action alongside Qatar. Thus, Turkey hopes that it will consolidate and operationalize its position during the crisis in favour of Qatar. On the other hand, it has not opted to take a position against Saudi Arabia. In fact, Ankara took a great risk with this move. Although it is not yet clear how the leading figure within the power structure of Saudi Arabia will respond to Turkey's action, it is possible to say that Saudi Arabia will not want to lose Turkey in a period when the Iranian threat is so serious. At the end of the day, the Gulf crisis has shown that both Turkey and Qatar should reconsider their strategies under the circumstances of radical external pressure.

Implications for regional politics

The Gulf crisis articulating around competing narratives of the major regional actors on the post-Arab Spring regional order has reproved the fragility of the regional security architecture particularly in the Gulf sub-region. For Qatar, the crisis has shown the limits of autonomy and strategic fragility of a small country in a very hostile geopolitical environment. It has also shown that the strategy of diversification in international affairs is vital in balancing external political pressure. For Turkey, on the other hand, the regional geopolitical picture in the post-Arab spring era is very dynamic and unstable and cannot be handled by simply maintaining a one-dimensional foreign and security policy. The conventional ally system does not mean that all countries have the same strategic vision in deterring threats. At this stage, if the new Gulf crisis turns out to be a struggle between Turkey and Qatar on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia and the United

Arab Emirates on the other, then the regional geopolitics will be more fragmented in the near future. More importantly, the Gulf crisis will influence the future of the GCC, at least in the short and medium term, and raise the question about the capacity and credibility of the council vis-à-vis the Iranian penetration into the region.

More importantly, the Qatar crisis is the latest chapter of a political and ideological struggle that has been intense since the beginning of the Arab Spring. The entire region is experiencing a regional "cold war" in which the conflicting sides have been mobilising all of their military, financial and diplomatic tools to compete for power and influence in the post-Arab Spring regional order. The ideological struggle between the pro-change and pro-status quo camps has been one of the major dynamics of the current conflicts in the Middle East. The struggle has been shaping the regional conflicts while being by shaped them.

Meanwhile, the geopolitical rivalry between Iran and the Gulf is deepening. In this sense, the Gulf countries are involved in two simultaneous rivalries: an intra-Gulf rivalry with strong ideological undertones, and a geopolitical rivalry with Iran in which sectarianism is instrumentalised. The intra-Gulf rivalry, lately exemplified by the Qatar crisis, is creating further vulnerabilities for the Gulf, shifting its focus away from an actual threat coming from Iran and regional proxies.⁽⁸⁾ In other words, the intra-Gulf competition is dividing the ranks of the GCC, paralysing the council's abilities to face imminent security challenges in the region including Iranian expansionism, extremism and terrorism. To this end, it would be better for the Gulf countries to focus more on the real security challenges by uniting ranks and resolving on-going regional conflicts.

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