



مركز الجزيرة للدراسات  
ALJAZEERA CENTRE FOR STUDIES

# Policy Brief

## Effects-Gulf-Crisis-Regional-Balances

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Turkeys President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, right, shakes hands with Qatars Emir Sheikh Tamim bin

## Introduction

As noted above, there crisis was somewhat underestimated. It was widely viewed as a passing dispute. There was a precedent that favoured this viewpoint. Three years earlier, the Emir of Kuwait, Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, played a primary role in resolving the dispute between Qatar, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain in 2013-2014. His mediation in the current conflict raised high hopes for resolving the conflict between Qatar and the three Gulf States involved in the boycott and blockade imposed in June 2017.

Despite the efforts of the Emir of Kuwait, the US Secretary of State, Rex W. Tillerson, and the President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the crisis has not yet ended. Rather, after a lapse of nearly four months, the situation in the Arab part of the Gulf region is rapidly changing into what looks like "the new norms" in regional relations. More importantly, the crisis has not only affected the Gulf States, but also its influence is growing wider to encompass the entire region and reshape regional relations. These are initial observations of the most significant regional changes associated, directly or indirectly, totally or partially, with the Gulf crisis.

## GCC Changes

In May 1981, the GCC was founded with KSA, Oman, Kuwait, UAE, Qatar and Bahrain as member states. It was no secret then while the Iraqi-Iranian war was at a peak that the

founding of the GCC aimed at forming a regional alliance to protect its members from the threats associated with the Iranian Revolution.

The formation of the GCC, notwithstanding the growing sense of danger, was not sufficient to overcome disparities between the Gulf States, whether related to border issues or those related to questions of sovereignty. Consequently, building an effective Gulf countries' alliance was a slow business, which did not prevent disputes. The GCC could not prevent the outbreaks of bilateral crises at times, for instance.

Despite all these problems, the GCC has provided a minimal security framework or 'conflict management' at least, among its member states. Its main objective was to preserve a reasonable level of stability in the Gulf region. This succeeded in the GCC countries' joint effort during the invasion of Kuwait as well as against the Iranian threats, especially after the Khomeini Revolution. The GCC has also helped open the way for the movement of people, funds, goods and commodities between member states.

Today, the aspirations pinned to the GCC seem to have come to an end, or grown rather modest. The crux of the crisis lies in the unprecedented measures taken so far among the Gulf States. These measures have not escaped the attention of Kuwait and Oman. Both countries hold steadfastly to a pro-Qatar position. Such aggravation of the crisis could not be foreseen before its outbreak. Measures are not confined to an economic and political blockade of Qatar. A total boycott is underway of Qatar's population, which is bound by strong family ties to the populations of the neighboring Gulf States.

Moreover, the crisis is made worse by UAE and Saudi plans of military interference in Qatar and control of its internal affairs. Given that Kuwait and Oman are keen on maintaining varying levels of independence regarding their foreign policies, the serious precedent of the anti-Qatar blockade has raised obvious apprehensions, in Kuwait and Muscat.

Kuwaiti and Omani apprehensions have been clearly reflected in the stand demonstrated by each towards the crisis. Public opinion in both countries has swung towards support of the Qatari side. Both states have shown sympathy towards Doha and worked to alleviate the severity of the blockade. The Omani Foreign Minister, Yusuf bin Alawi bin Abdullah, has paid a visit to Doha as a gesture of solidarity. Oman has also made its ports available for Qatar cargo ships, before the latter's inauguration of Hamad Port, when huge ships could not land at Qatari ports, thus replacing the Jebel Ali Port in UAE. Besides the doubling of aircraft navigation between Qatar and Oman, Kuwaiti and Omani tourist movements to Qatar have witnessed a considerable increase. The blockade imposed by KSA, UAE and Bahrain banned the three countries' nationals to visit Qatar.

More than three months after the outbreak of the crisis, , in his press conference on September 7, 2017 with the US President Donald Trump in Washington, , the Emir of Kuwait made no secret of his views at the sudden row against Qatar. The crisis was provoked by KSA and its two Gulf allies with the demands, according to Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, declared by the boycotting parties targeted state sovereignty. He also praised the rationality of the Qatari stand.

Thus, it seems that the GCC is undergoing a division, even though unofficially, into two blocs:

- the first including the KSA-UAE-Bahrain boycotting alliance,
- the second including Qatar, Kuwait and Oman.

Until the crisis is over, the GCC cannot perform any effective or influential role or even take a single additional step towards fostering coordination and solidarity among its member states. Even should the crisis be resolved, which is not to be hoped soon, it is quite doubtful that Qatar will soon forget the measures taken against it by the boycotting states. Nor are Kuwait and Oman likely to disregard the severity of the stand taken by the three states against a Gulf sister state.

## **Transformations of the Saudi Regional Policy**

The Gulf crisis has not only driven wedges in intra-Gulf relations, but has also influenced, directly or indirectly, a number of Saudi rapprochements in the region.

The crisis erupted at a time when Saudi Arabia started to realize the difficulty of its war in Yemen, which is now in its third year. This drove KSA to reduce tension with Iran, especially after the latter has demonstrated influence on Saudi internal affairs. An example of this are the confrontations between the Saudi authorities and the radical, Iran-affiliated Shiite elements in eastern KSA. Saudi rapprochement with Iran obviously manifested itself in the recent pilgrimage season, when Saudi officials paid a warm welcome to Iranian pilgrims. This comes after Iran had formerly banned its nationals from performing pilgrimage in 2016. Iranian officials have stated that authorities have already issued visas for an official Saudi delegation to visit Tehran to pave the way for reopening the Saudi Embassy, which was closed after attacks by Iranian protesters in January 2016.

Seemingly, this rapprochement with Iran aims, as one of its objectives, at seeking a solution to the stalemate in Yemen. The war in Yemen, according to an Iranian official speaking on September 14, was the subject of earlier Saudi contacts with Tehran at the peak of the conflict. The other objective, undoubtedly, has to do with the Saudi stand against Qatar. Saudi officials believe that they may be capable of influencing Iran to stop

its support for Qatar and hold the facilities it has provided to Doha in terms of air navigation and trade movements. Despite the change in the Saudi-Iranian ties as a result of the recent rapprochement, it is very doubtful that any short-term progress could be achieved on the level of bilateral relations between the two states due to the long history of distrust between them.

The Saudi efforts to establish firm ties with Iraq, where the Iranian influence is soaring, have grown quite obvious. However, the Saudi aspirations seem rather overrated in this realm too. In December 2015, Saudi Arabia reopened its embassy in Baghdad, ending a 25-year severance of ties between the two nations. That Saudi step was understood to be a response to the US calls for all Arab states, especially the GCC, to revive their relations with Baghdad in order to counterbalance the Iranian influence in Iraq. In 2015 and 2016, KSA advocated the Turkish efforts, and even partook, with Turkey, in forming an alliance with Sunni Arab figures and powers in Iraq. It is clear that the Saudi rapprochement with Iraq has moved to a higher level following the outbreak of the Gulf crisis. On June 19, King Salman received the Iraqi Prime Minister, Haider Al-Abadi, with expressive hospitality. Later on, Shiite leader Muqtada Al-Sadr responded to an official invitation to visit Saudi Arabia, on July 30<sup>th</sup>, where he met with the Saudi Crown Prince, Mohamed bin Salman. Al-Abadi, however, clearly declared, before and after his visit to KSA that Iraq would in no way partake in the blockade of Qatar. Al-Sadr, likewise, abstained from making any statements against Qatar, despite the exceptionally warm welcome in which he was received and the Saudi compliance to most of his demands, including opening a Saudi consulate in Najaf. Disappointment of winning Baghdad to join the boycotting side against Qatar, though, did not prevent Saudi officials from showing great confidence in holding back the Iranian influence in Iraq.

The crisis in the Gulf has equally reflected in the Saudi policies towards Egypt's El-Sisi regime, as well as the Syrian crisis. Despite the recent decline in relationships between Riyadh and Cairo, following the latter's refusal to actively participate in the Yemen war and the former's breach of its financial assistance promises, Saudi Arabia has grown ever keener on winning Egypt to the anti-Qatar alliance. It has displayed greater commitment to the survival of the Egyptian regime.

As for Syria, there are increasing indicators that Riyadh is preparing for a swift withdrawal from advocating the Syrian opposition against Al-Assad regime. The causes behind this Saudi stand vary. Firstly, there is an attempt to relieve the Saudi burdens created by the Gulf crisis. Secondly, there is also a desire to send positive messages to Iran, or an estimation of its defeat in the battle of Syria.

Recently, Saudi Arabia has demanded the Riyadh-based High Negotiations Committee (HNC), an umbrella body representing the Syrian opposition, to expand the scope of its

powers to include even suspicious opposition groups that received support from Russia and Egypt, and to prepare a new negotiating position in line with the new shifts in the balance of power in Syria.

The most crucial change in Riyadh's foreign policy, however, has to do with the emergence of proofs that Saudi-Israeli relations are coming into existence. In fact, there have been indicators of a Saudi rapprochement with Israel since the commencement of King Salman's reign. This included the public meetings between Prince Turki Al Faisal, the former head of the Saudi Intelligence Department, and a number of Israeli officials in conferences in Europe and US. Another proof is the visit paid by retired Saudi General, Anwar Eshki, and a number of unnoted Saudi figures to Israel. It is certain enough that neither Turki Al Faisal nor Anwar Eshki could have taken such steps without receiving the green light from Riyadh. Reports were published in 2015 and 2016 on indirect Saudi-Israeli contacts regarding the Egyptian islands of Tiran and Sanafir, which were claimed by KSA. Contacts have already ended in Egypt's waiver of ownership to the two islands to KSA, upon Israel's approval.

Those instances gave the impression that KSA wanted to send tokens of harmony to the Hebrew state to confirm the mutual stand of both sides regarding the Iranian maritime navigation and nuclear program, and facilitating the transformation of sovereignty over Tiran and Sanafir. Both islands are associated with the maritime navigation across the Straits of Tiran, as well as the Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel. It has been reported during the first two weeks of September that a Saudi prince has paid a visit to Israel. Even though the stated prince is quite unlikely to have been Mohamed bin Salman, as was circulated then, such a visit represented a serious precedent in the history of the Saudi stand towards Israel. On its part, the Israeli government did not deny the visit, and this supports the reports. Moreover, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu did not hesitate to state that Israeli's relations with the Arabs have reached an unprecedented level, in an underlying comment on claims of a Saudi visit.

In short, there are some in Riyadh who cherish the belief that building relations with Israel will be useful in the confrontation with Iran, in the event of attempts to resolve uncertainties relating to the Saudi-Iranian relations become unsuccessful. It is also believed that the Israeli support of the anti-Qatar blockade, especially in the US arena, will enhance the Saudi situation in the Gulf crisis.

## **Turkish, Iranian and GCC Interactions**

The Gulf crisis did not only cast heavy burden on the Saudi rapprochement with Iran, but also on the whole GCC relations with Tehran. It has also significantly changed the role of Turkey and its relations with the different parties involved in the Gulf crisis.

It has been very clear, from the outset of the crisis, that Tehran has adopted a pro-Qatar stand and opposed the blockade, even though Doha's policies have been opposed to those of Iran with regards to Syria. Doha has formerly withdrawn its ambassador from Tehran in a gesture of solidarity with KSA, when the latter severed its ties with Iran early in 2016. Undoubtedly, Iran's support of the Qatari side stems from its normal confrontation with Saudi Arabia. It is also driven by Iran's concerns over KSA's domination of the Gulf region in case that Riyadh manages to impose its conditions on Doha.

Iran has made its airspace available to Qatar. It also contributed to supply of food products in the Qatari market as a result of KSA's closure of Qatar's only land border. It has agreed to sign a pact for providing a land trade route for Turkish exports to Qatar. On its part, Doha has expressed its appreciation of the Iranian stand by declaring the return of the Qatari ambassador to Tehran and participating in the Astana Summit initiated by Russia to reach a gradual solution to the Syrian conflict. During the recent meeting of the Arab League foreign ministers on September 12<sup>th</sup>, the representative of Qatar, made no effort to hide the change in the Qatari stand towards Iran when he referred to the latter as an "honorable state".

Turkey, not Iran, has demonstrated the most active role in the crisis, being the most influential in the Gulf region. It has made early attempts at mediation between the parties involved in the crisis when the Turkish President sent his Minister of Transport, Berat Albayrak, and his Press Secretary, Ibrahim Kalin, in early June to meet with Saudi and Qatari officials. However, that attempt did not succeed. Ankara was soon taken by surprise at the blockade declared against Qatar on June 5<sup>th</sup>. This led the Turkish government, which signed a strategic cooperation agreement with Qatar in 2014, to request its Parliament to pass a swift approval of the agreement. The measure was needed to start operating the Turkish military base in Qatar. There is no doubt that the deployment of Turkish troops in Qatar has significantly thwarted the military plans of both Saudi Arabia and UAE. Ankara has meanwhile launched a large-scale air transport operation to provide food for the Qatari market to make up for the shortage caused by the blockade.

Ankara, which maintained firm ties with Riyadh since the beginning of King Salman's reign, has been keen on adopting an unbiased approach towards the parties of the crisis, and has made early attempts to resolve the dispute and reach conciliation. However, stubborn positions by the boycotting states drove Turkey to enact its strategic cooperation agreement with Qatar. The boycotting states, in turn, demanded the closure of the Turkish military base in Qatar as one of their 13-point list demands declared one month after the crisis. Qatar rejected the demands, and Turkey asserted that the mutual agreement with Qatar is an act of a purely sovereign nature, with which no other parties have any right to interfere. Despite the second attempt at mediation by President Erdogan during the last



week of July, which included a visit to Kuwait, KSA and Qatar, Turkey has become, either willingly or unwillingly, a key actor in the crisis.

The role that Turkey played in the crisis has yielded a number of outcomes. On one hand, the Qatari-Turkish relations have reached a higher level of friendship and alliance. By the commencement of operation of the its military base in Qatar, Turkey has grown directly influential in the strategic balances in the Gulf region. On the other hand, coldness has once again struck the relations between Turkey and UAE, only months after their attempts to normalize relations between them. It is noticeable that the UAE has been absent from the meeting of the Iraqi Sunni figures and powers, which was held in Ankara last August under Turkish patronage. Representatives of KSA, Jordan and Qatar were present in the meeting. Despite the profundity of understanding and cooperation between KSA and UAE, it is evident that the Saudi administration is still keen to maintain ties with Turkey at normal levels. It is certain that Riyadh is not satisfied with the Turkish stand towards the crisis. Yet the Saudi political arena has grown quite rife with crises, so it is not useful for Riyadh to destabilize the Saudi-Turkish relations at this stage.

Moreover, the crisis, along with the swift response of Turkey to fulfill its obligations towards Qatar, all encouraged Kuwait to firm up its relations with Turkey. It is beyond doubt that Kuwait has started adopting new policies for its security, bearing in mind the new threats posed against Qatar by its Gulf sister states and the probability of the collapse of the GCC or loss of its influence, at least. It is obvious Kuwait is well aware of the necessity of forming a number of alternative allies to maintain its regional security. Such have been the reasons behind Kuwait's attempts to foster security and military relations with Turkey and sign a number of cooperation agreements in both fields during the visit of the Kuwaiti Prime Minister to Ankara in mid-September.

Meanwhile, effects of the Gulf crisis has extended to the Turkish-Iranian relations, especially that both states have adopted a pro-Qatar stand that has been considered to principally reflect keenness on the security and stability of Qatar. The Iranian Foreign Minister has paid a quick visit to Ankara at the outset of the crisis to exchange views and harmonize stands with the Turkish side. On August 15<sup>th</sup>, Ankara welcomed the Iranian Army Chief of Staff, in an unprecedented visit, where the latter met with his Turkish counterpart, Hulusi Akar, and President Erdogan. It is evident that the Turkish-Iranian relations were not unsatisfactory before the crisis. Despite the considerable disparities between the two countries regarding Syria and Iraq, both have maintained normal relations during the few past years and sought to promote their mutual economic and security interests. It may be suggested that conformity between the Iranian and Turkish stands regarding the Gulf crisis has come in line with other conformities relevant to the mutual apprehensions of Ankara and Tehran. In particular, such conformities include growing desires for separation by Iraqi Kurdistan, the US policy advocating Syrian Kurds,



the increasing Kurd activities against Iran, as well as the Iranian apprehensions regarding the intention of Trump's administration to adopt anti-Iran policies.

## **New Axes or Limited Changes?**

Has the crisis resulted in 'new axes' or limited changes? May be neither. However, there are important trends that cannot be ignored.

The Qatari-Turkish relations, for example, have been stable for years before the outbreak of the crisis. Yet the current situation has served a great purpose promoting these relations on the political, military and economic levels. The crisis has also established Turkey as a key actor in the strategic map of the Gulf region. It is quite unrealistic, though, to talk about Turkish-Iranian or Qatari-Iranian alliances. Disagreements between Ankara and Tehran, regarding the future of Syria and the nature of the rule in Iraq, are still fundamental, and cannot be disregarded. Besides, neither Ankara nor Doha would want greater Iranian influence in the Gulf region and Arabian Peninsula.

Irrespective of the aspirations of the Saudi policy makers regarding their relations with Iraq and Iran, they will soon realize that it is not an easy business to enter into rivalry with Iran in Iraq. They will soon come to understand that ending or even undermining the Iranian influence in Iraq would require a war, not merely a wholehearted welcome of Iraqi Shiite leaders in KSA or any financial temptations. Furthermore, normalization of Saudi-Iranian relations is hardly possible without offering sizeable compromises on the Saudi part in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon; namely, the entire northern borderline of KSA. Even though some hopes are pinned on the US role in this regard, such hopes must not be too great. This is not only because Trump's administration is not in its best form, but also, and more importantly, the US administration would not in the least wish to provoke Iran into war.

It is rather uncertain that the boycotting parties will manage to maintain their semi-alliance for long. Saudi Crown Prince, Mohamed bin Salman, will sooner or later succeed his father. No one can form speculations as to the policies that Bin Salman will adopt, as a King, regarding KSA-UAE relations. Bahrain has for long accepted the role of a Saudi protectorate, and El-Sisi's Egypt is more a burden to KSA and the Gulf states than an effective partner in shouldering their problems.

At the GCC level, there is no doubt that the crisis has resulted in a mighty upheaval in the intra-Gulf relations. The repercussions of such an upheaval will be difficult to overcome even if the GCC states manage to find a way out in the months to come.

The Gulf States seem to move from the stage of cooperation under the banner of the GCC to confront foreign threats to another stage where all countries will seek their own security and protection against one another.

Qatar will not abandon its close relations and agreements with Turkey, nor will it return to its maneuvering with Iran in order to please Saudi Arabia. Oman, on another level, will be ever keen to foster its relations with Iran, while Kuwait has already started to rethink its security options.