



مركز الجزيرة للدراسات  
ALJAZEERA CENTRE FOR STUDIES

## Report

### **Qatar and its blockading nations articulate a different foreign policy at the 72nd UN General Assembly**

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**The inclusion of non-Qataris in the emir's speech to the UNGA has enhanced his popularity across country and abroad [Reuters]**

## Introduction

The first United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) was held in 1946. It is one of the six main organs of the United Nations (UN). The UNGA consists of 193 member states with equal representation in the assembly. The objectives of the UNGA remain noble; however, over the years, the gathering has become an expensive international talk show that has failed to effect serious political changes in the world. There has been continual global political mayhem, environmental degradations, racial intolerance, wars and the rise of dictatorships on the watch of the UNGA. Notwithstanding its failures, the UNGA remains an important platform in terms of facilitating the annual articulation of member states' foreign policy positions. The speech of the president of the United States (US) was probably the most anticipated this year.

Equally anticipated by some were speeches from the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) given the ongoing crisis in that region. On 5 June 2017, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain and Egypt led a land, air and sea blockade against the state of Qatar. The blockade was triggered by a fake news report published by Qatar News Agency (QNA) which attributed certain political statements to the Emir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani. According to an official statement issued by the state of Qatar, "Qatar was the victim of 'fake news', and we have been working hard since the hacking incident to set the record straight." The statement continues to say, "We have been especially troubled by the fact that various news organisations chose to reprint the bogus quotes even after the authenticity of those remarks had been categorically denied by our government."<sup>(1)</sup>.

The speeches of the blockading countries at the UNGA included slurs against the state of

Qatar and pushed for escalation instead of peaceful resolution. "Nothing new and another opportunity was lost, as Qatar waded between claims of oppression and haughtiness", Anwar Gargash, the Emirati State Minister for Foreign Affairs, posted on his Twitter account.<sup>(2)</sup> This was an indication that the Gulf is still far away from reaching a solution to the current impasse.

The purpose of this report is to assess the speeches made by the three blockading countries of the Gulf region, namely Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE. It will try to assess from the tone and content of the speeches future prospects of the crisis. It will also look at the shift in Qatar's foreign policy vis-a-vis that of the rest of the GCC particularly regarding Iran and the wars in Yemen and Syria.

### **What was in the speeches of the blockading countries and Qatar at the 72nd United Nations General Assembly?**

The most important part of the Emir of Qatar's speech at the UNGA was the last line: "Qatar will remain as is always the case a safe haven for the oppressed." It was a clear message to the blockading nations that indeed Qatar will never change its position on hosting various regional factions in the country.

There are number of political factions who have taken refuge in Qatar, and their stay is funded by the state. Most of them are from Syria, Egypt, Sudan and Palestine amongst others. One of the demands of the blockading countries is for Qatar to expel the members of said factions or hand them over to their countries. The most vocal amongst these countries is Egypt. Qatar has made it very clear that it would not succumb to those demands. According to the statement issued by its foreign ministry, "our position on countering terrorism is stronger than many of the signatories of the joint statement."<sup>(3)</sup> Indirectly, this statement could be referring to countries like Saudi Arabia which is accused by many countries of exporting extremism.

The emir was the only head of the state from the GCC to address the UNGA. The Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs, Adel al-Jubeir, represented Saudi Arabia; Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the Emirati Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation represented the UAE; and Bahrain was represented by its Minister of Foreign Affairs, Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa. Normally, most heads of states attend and address the UNGA; it is only the usual suspects – Syria and North Korea, for example - that are not guaranteed to have representations by their heads of state. This year, the de facto leader of Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi, joined Syria and North Korea. However, could it be possible that the rulers of the blockading countries were also shunning away from the criticism and the embarrassment that the blockade has created, or was their absence was due to ill health as per usual?

Over the years, the list of absent heads of state from the Gulf and the Middle East has been on the increase. Some skeptics argue that the inauguration of Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani as the Emir of Qatar has notably seen an increase in absenteeism on the part of Gulf heads of state. The emir is young and articulate. In a competitive region like the Gulf, and with his stature, it makes sense for him to attend and address such an important gathering. This raises an important question about the impact of his age and dynamism on the political attitude of the deep state in the Gulf, particularly for those waiting on the wings of leadership in Saudi Arabia and in the UAE.

The megaphone tit-for-tat reactions by the blockading countries towards Qatar and the penalties imposed on any of their citizens that supporting Qatar depict an unusual disdain of a sovereign state by another. It is a harsh unprecedented political action against a sovereign state. Trump's earlier utterances when the crisis ensued have not made things easier. He did not once mention the Gulf crisis even during his presentation at the UNGA, which suggests that the White House has not prioritised the Gulf crisis. When Trump met the emir along the sidelines of the UNGA, he only passingly mentioned the Gulf crisis. "We are right now in a situation where we're trying to solve a problem in the Middle East. And I think we'll get it solved, I have a very strong feeling that it will be solved pretty quickly", he said(4).

It was typical exaggerated cliché Trump commentary. His comments came after contradicting his Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, on the same subject earlier this year. At the beginning of the crisis, Trump was unrelenting and had laid the blame squarely on Qatar. It took Rex Tillerson to calm things down after his several visits to the region, giving certain reassurances to Qatar.

The speeches by the blockading countries at the United Nations General Assembly indicated not an imminent breakthrough in the ongoing crisis, but a digging in of heels. They all insisted that Qatar adhere to the 2013 and 2014 agreements it signed with its Gulf neighbours. CNN released the agreements to the public in July 2017. Part of the agreement is

No interference in the internal affairs of the council's states, whether directly or indirectly. Not to give asylum/refuge or give nationality to any citizen of the council's states that has an activity that opposes his country's regime except with the approval of his country; no support to deviant groups that oppose their states; and no support for antagonistic media.(5)

They were all unyielding to those demands. They also insisted that Qatar stop sponsoring terror, an accusation that Qatar rejects.

Qatar, on the other hand, seem to have clearly shifted its position, as its articulation at the UNGA places it totally outside of the GCC. Whilst Bahrain, UAE and Saudi Arabia continue to battle the Houthis and the troops loyal to former Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh in effort to restore a legitimate government and bring Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi back into power, Qatar has been reconciliatory. Addressing the UNGA, the emir of Qatar called on Yemen to promote unity, adopt national reconciliation and support the UN's efforts – the total opposite of the GCC's rhetoric. Qatar also withdrew its troops from Yemen after the crisis erupted.

Regarding Iran, the blockading countries were in unison in condemning the activities of Iran in the region and insistent on isolation it. They continue to accuse Iran of creating instability in the region. Meanwhile, grocery stores in Qatar are being stocked with fresh produce from Iran, indicating an improved and growing relationship between it and Qatar. The emir's discourse at the UNGA was more reconciliatory towards Iran, which makes it unimaginable for Qatar to embrace a hard position towards Iran in future.

Finally, the emir paid tribute to the people of Qatar including the multinational expatriates residing in the country, a departure from the norm in the Middle East. His statement created a huge amount of pride among the expatriates. Following the blockade on 5 June 2017, the "Tamim Al Majd" image embellished most cars, apparel and buildings in the country. The image whose name translates to "Tamim is glory" is a portrait of the emir by the Qatari artist, Ahmed bin Majed al-Maadheed, which went viral after the blockade began. The inclusion of non-Qataris in the emir's speech to the UNGA has enhanced his popularity across country and abroad.

Earlier in the year, Qatar announced it plans to give citizenship to certain non-Qataris. It has also decided to issue visas upon arrival to citizens of a number of nations, a major step by Gulf standards. A draft law approved at a cabinet meeting will grant permanent residence to the children of Qatari women married to non-Qatari men as well as expatriates who provide outstanding services to the country.<sup>(6)</sup>

## **Conclusion**

There are a certain number of important factors that must be considered to evaluate the policy of the blockading countries towards Qatar after this year's UNGA. Qatar has certainly gained confidence over the past few months since the blockade, and has embraced a stand-alone foreign policy. It can, therefore, be concluded that the blockade has emboldened and freed it from the yolk of the dictate of Gulf Cooperation Council. Qatar can now act independently on various political fronts, including its foreign policy which has always solicited GCC endorsement.

In addition, Qatar continues to reject the demands made by the blockading countries, and will not compromise its sovereignty. It will also continue to provide a safe haven for the oppressed people of the region. This, by implication, means that it will continue to work with opposition factions fighting despotism in the Middle East, which certainly is not good news for the dictators in the region. It also seems to have embraced a different approach towards Iran, encouraging dialogue instead of continuing isolation. There is a semblance of improved relations between the two countries in terms of both trade and political engagement.

Furthermore, its positions on Syria and indeed Yemen has become definitely out of sync with the rest of the countries in the region. The mention of non-Qataris in the emir's speech is very significant and has broadened his stature both at home and abroad. It was the first speech by a current head of state from the region in the United Nations General Assembly to extend that far. The Gulf crisis is in for a very long haul, as both Qatar and the blockading countries seem resolute.

Finally, the egoistical competition between the younger leaders in the region adds an interesting dimension to the crisis that cannot be discounted. Crown princes Mohammad bin Salman and Mohammad bin Zayed of Saudi Arabia and the UAE respectively see themselves as rivals of Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani.

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