

# Behind the Saudi Troublemaking

Saudi Arabia's monarchy is bombing Yemen, locking up domestic rivals and stirring up trouble in Lebanon, while a slow-burning confrontation continues against Qatar which could split the Gulf Cooperation Council, says Paul Cochrane.

By Paul Cochrane

Five months after the diplomatic spat between the so-called Anti-Terror Quartet and Qatar kicked off, the ante is being upped. Bahrain – one of the quartet alongside Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt – has called for Qatar to be frozen out of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). As the council starts to unravel, what will this mean for Qatar and the wider Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region?

The Bahraini proposal, which would have been coordinated with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, to lock Qatar out of the GCC is a logical move in the nearly six-month-long siege, with the next potential step the removal of Qatar from the Council altogether.

This unprecedented inter-GCC crisis has led to the biggest divisions within the Council – which consists of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE, Kuwait, Qatar and Oman – since it was formed in 1981.

Qatar leaving the Gulf monarchical club would seriously loosen the threads that bind the GCC together, as the original idea of the Council was proposed by Saudi Arabia as a security pact to make sure any challenges to their respective thrones were quashed. Ironically it was the threat of Islamic extremism that prompted the creation of the GCC, and it is the Anti-Terror Quarter (ATQ) accusing Qatar of funding terrorist groups that is driving the GCC apart.

The spur to form the GCC was the siege of Mecca by radical Saudi Islamists in November 1979. It shook the kingdom to its core for two weeks and nearly lost the Saudis the much coveted, and much abused, title of the “Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques.” To deal with the domestic threat, Riyadh encouraged Islamists to go and fight with the Afghan mujahedeen following the Soviet invasion in December 1979. We all know how that ended: Al Qaeda and its offshoots, 9/11, and blowback for the Middle East and much of the world.

Internal power jockeying among royal family members aside (for instance the Qatari Emir's father, Hamad, deposed his father, as did Oman's Sultan Qaboos), the only time the GCC has acted in each other's defense was not the Iraqi

invasion of Kuwait in 1991, but the Bahraini uprising in 2011.

Bahrain's rulers, the Khalifas, might have been dethroned by the mass unrest – the royal family is Sunni, which accounts for around 20 percent of the population, the remainder Shia – without GCC military intervention.

It was a brutal and blatant example of how far the GCC will go to ensure its self-preservation. At the same time it brought Bahrain even more into the Saudi camp amid the inter-GCC rivalry to be the leader of the Council.

Traditionally it has been Abu Dhabi and Riyadh jockeying for top position, evidenced in neither capital willing to capitulate to the other over the proposed location of a GCC Central Bank when a Gulf Common Market (GCM) was being mooted in 2008.

But the Arab Spring brought the two closer together in the face of a common enemy: populist uprisings. The relationship has been further cemented by the close ties of the young bucks Mohammad bin Salman (MbS), the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, and the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammad bin Zayed (MbZ).

Qatar however did not follow the GCC line, reflecting its assertive foreign policy over the previous decade to steer its own course. This culminated in the UAE, Saudi and Bahrain recalling their ambassadors from Qatar in March 2014 (they did not return until November 2014).

### **Simmering Tensions**

Tensions were ironed out yet not fully resolved, which pointed out some crucial problems within the GCC itself: no framework governing relationships between members, no mechanisms to resolve member disputes, and no GCC court or framework to follow up and back GCC resolutions.

In addition to the lack of such frameworks, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi lacked any leverage over Qatar. With Qatar having a small populace of 350,000 and one of the highest GDPs per capita in the world, Riyadh cannot use checkbook diplomacy as it did with the UAE's Sharjah in the 1970s, when the penniless emirate was bailed out by Riyadh in return for greater say in Sharjah's internal policies, which extended to banning alcohol.

Neither is an uprising in Qatar likely due to its citizens' wealth, but also the lack of different sects with any grievances that could be externally exploited – the majority are Sunni, of the Wahhabi school, the same as Saudi Arabia – although Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have tried to capitalize this year on tribal divisions to overthrow the Emir. Saudi and the Emirates instead had to resort to info-wars to try and bring Qatar to heel.

The Gulf crisis was sparked in May (2017) by the UAE government hacking Qatari government news and social media sites to plant false statements by the Qatari Emir, Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani. The most damning false statement was that the Emir respected the Iranian government – the arch nemesis of the Sunni Gulf monarchies, especially Riyadh. After all, a second core reason for the GCC's creation was the Iranian revolution, and the start of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980.

News of the UAE's hack only came out in July, weeks after the ATQ had cut diplomatic, transport and trade ties with Qatar. The ATQ's top accusation? Qatar was financing terrorism, sailing too close to the wind with Iran, and pursuing too independent a foreign policy for the ATQ's liking.

The ATQ, which includes GCC-outsider Egypt, has used all the means at its disposal bar military action to try to isolate Qatar. Kuwait has been acting as a moderator between the two sides, while the Sultanate of Oman is trying to sit on the fence. The Sultanate however is on good terms with Tehran, and has allowed Qatari planes and ships through its territories to circumnavigate the UAE's blockade of its territorial waters and airspace. Muscat is effectively distancing itself from the Saudi-UAE dominated GCC.

The split has pushed Qatar further into the arms of the Turks, with whom they have a military pact, and the Iranians; both countries are now major providers of food and other goods to Qatar. Turkey is a crucial ally as it is pro-Muslim Brotherhood, a pan-Arab moderate Islamic party; Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's AKP party has championed the Brotherhood while Qatar has allowed both the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliate, Palestine's Hamas, to operate out of Doha, much to the ATQ's chagrin.

The Gulf monarchies have long opposed populist Islamic parties – if the monarchies could not have some sway over them – fearing any threat to autocratic rule by organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood that have broad appeal with moderate and middle-class Muslims.

Hence Saudi Arabia and the UAE opposed the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood when it came to power in the wake of the 2011 uprising in Egypt, and supported the 2013 coup by the Egyptian military, which has banned the Muslim Brotherhood, locked up some 60,000 political prisoners, and imprisoned the former president, Mohamed Morsi.

The ATQ has followed Cairo's lead by designating the Brotherhood a terrorist organization. It has not stopped there. The UAE has listed 82 organizations it deems terrorists, while the ATQ has published a list of 30 organizations it wants Qatar to expel and stop funding.

## A Divergent Approach

With Qatar being a host for Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood and, for a spell, the Taliban, they have joined as an outlying member the “Axis of Resistance,” a term spawned following George W. Bush’s “Axis of Evil” speech in 2002, to denote the anti-Israeli and anti-U.S. alliance between Iran, Syria and Lebanon’s Hezbollah.

The analogy is not quite right though in that Qatar opposed the Syrian regime, gets on with Washington, and is not ideologically nor theologically on the side of Shia Iran or Hezbollah. Instead we have a new, loosely linked axis comprised of Qatar, Iran and Turkey that opposes the Saudi-UAE-led GCC. It is no longer an ascendant “Shia Crescent” pitted against the Sunni Arab states as Jordan’s King Abdullah warned of back in 2004, but a more diverse bloc.

What is clear is that a major cleavage has occurred in the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) region, and that there is no turning back by the ATQ or Qatar to resolve the GCC crisis; there has been too much water under the proverbial bridge between the two camps, and the info-war has been both harsh and personal.

The ATQ’s blockade strategy has not worked, as following the 2014 diplomatic spat Qatar prepared contingency plans to weather a potential siege, which the ATQ was seemingly unaware of. The crisis has also caused the Qataris to rally around the flag.

The ATQ is now trying to strip Qatar of the 2022 FIFA World Cup, and has compiled dossiers about Doha’s terrorist financing, although it has not released its “black book” over fears Doha will expose the ATQ’s, especially Saudi Arabia’s, involvement with questionable groups (a case of the kettle calling the pot black) despite Mohammad bin Salman’s public statements to “return Saudi Arabia to moderate Islam.”

At present, the ATQ is running out of other options other than a complete divorce if the crisis continues. The step after a Qatar GCC exit, a ‘Qatexit’? Saudi intervention according to analysts, especially if Mohammad bin Salman’s reform plans and Vision 2030 to diversify the economy away from hydrocarbons does not pan out, and the kingdom becomes increasingly cash-strapped due to low oil prices.

Theodore Karasik, a senior adviser at Washington D.C.-based consultancy Gulf State Analytics, posits that Qatar could be brought under Saudi Arabia’s umbrella by force to seize the country’s huge gas reserves, the third largest in the world.

Who knows, black swan events do occur, and the global powers would vocally oppose such a move but likely not exercise military intervention a la 1991 when

Iraq invaded Kuwait. The U.S. troops based in Qatar would just stay in their base; the Trump administration has signaled it has sided with Riyadh, even though the State Department has been more nuanced towards Doha. As for the Turks and the Iranians, they would not want to be brought into a conflagration with Riyadh and the ATQ. That really would tear the MENA apart.

Ultimately, there's not much to stop a Saudi gas grab. There's not much desire internationally for yet another Middle Eastern military "adventure" following the debacles in Iraq and Libya, while nobody's lifted a finger against Saudi Arabia for its war against Yemen. As long as Qatari gas exports remain uninterrupted, the global powers might readily accept a change of management.

That said, such a Saudi move may be far-fetched, but a new GCC without Qatar seems increasingly likely.

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