



Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS)

Forum for National Security Studies (FNSS)

54/17

THE QATAR CRISIS: POLITICS OF COERCION

Anu Sharma

Research Associate, CAPS

West Asia is witnessing a major crisis as a result of Saudi Arabia joining hands with other Arab States (Bahrain, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, Jordan and Libya's internal government), Maldives and Islamic Republic of Mauritania, to officially sever diplomatic ties with Qatar for its continued support to Islamic extremist organisations such as the Muslim brotherhood including certain groups deemed as terrorist entities. Qatar's continued engagements with Iran too could be another reason for this drastic diplomatic move. The situation became serious with the boycotting nations giving an ultimatum of two weeks for the Qatari nationals to leave their country while allowing Qatari diplomats only 48 hours to do so.

This development has worsened the geopolitical and geostrategic situation of West Asia. Qatar has been barred from using the airspace of Egypt and Saudi Arabia. This immediately and severely affected the air traffic on June 06, 2017. UAE suspended the services of its three carriers; Etihad Airways, Emirates, and Fly Dubai, to Qatar. As Qatar is highly dependent

on import of food materials, this blockade created a situation of panic for a while in Qatar with its citizens indulging in excess purchase of food supplies. This is because of the fears that the blockade might stall the food supplies and other provisions coming into Qatar by road, air, and sea, which first has to pass through countries like Saudi Arabia. Meanwhile, the government of the UAE also announced that if any of its citizens were found sympathising with Qatar, a federal prosecution would be initiated against them, with a jail term of up to fifteen years.¹

The current crisis has put two of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, namely Oman and Kuwait, both allies of Qatar in the region, in a fix. Both these nations are exerting whatever limited clout they have to defuse the situation, and are pushing for a compromise between the Arab States and Qatar. Russia and India too have asked the Arab States to resolve their differences with Qatar. However, the situation has worsened with US President Donald Trump supporting the Saudi decision. It is still unclear whether it was a mere coincidence that

this step was undertaken by the Arab States following President Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia and Israel recently, where he called on the Arab and Muslim worlds to unite against the threat from terrorism.² On June 9, 2017, President Trump accused Qatar of being a "funder of terror at a very high level" and demanded that the energy-rich nation cut off that money flow to re-join the fraternity of responsible nations. This statement by the President ran contrary to the one made by his Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who earlier that day had called for a "calm and thoughtful dialogue" to resolve the deepening dispute among Sunni Muslim States in the Persian Gulf.³

It can be said that the current scenario could be traced to last month when Qatar's state-run news agency published an article in which the ruling Emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, was quoted as praising Israel and Iran—Saudi Arabia's biggest enemies in the region. Qatar swiftly disavowed the article as fake news manufactured by hackers, but Saudi Arabia and its allies remained unconvinced.⁴ This instance could be the triggering point for the current state of affairs in the Persian Gulf region. The following sub-sections explore other possible reasons that may have led to the current point of conflict.

Qatar's geopolitics and regional interests

Qatar is the smallest Arab state with an area of 12,000 square kilometres. It has an ethnically and religiously homogenous native population of

under a quarter of a million. It is the richest country in the world in terms of GDP per capita, and one of the leading exporters of Liquefied Natural gas (LNG). The last two decades have witnessed Qatar rising and becoming a leading regional actor in West Asia being praised for its mediation skills to resolve various conflicts in West Asia.⁵ Before the Arab Spring, Qatar's most active foreign policy role was that of a negotiator on a number of regional issues. In a way, Qatar developed its foreign policy on the concept of "niche diplomacy".⁶ However, many were of the opinion that Qatar's foreign policy lacked a coherent political strategy. According to scholar Mehran Kamrava, "the primary motivation for Qatari mediation activities is a combination of small states survival strategies and the desire for international prestige."⁷ This becomes evident when we look at Qatar's involvement in Yemen and its entanglement with Iran and Saudi Arabia.⁸

However, the perceived lack of coherence in its foreign policy has resulted in the discrepancy between Qatar's image and its actions in the region. Furthermore, Qatar follows Wahhabi branch of Islamism as Saudi Arabia, although its interpretation and application of Wahhabism are more moderate than its neighbour's. Qatar has also been engaged in a degree of liberalisation not seen in the Saudi kingdom, for example regarding women's rights.⁹ This liberal commitment to the ideology of Wahhabism by Qatar has always faced the

criticism of the Arab states. This led to Qatar being isolated by the rest of the Arab states for the neutrality it maintained in its foreign policy while dealing with the issues between the Shia-Sunni Muslim States.

The split between Qatar and the rest of the Arab world became visible when Qatar started supporting Muslim Brotherhood after the fall of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt in 2011. There was a diplomatic rift in 2014 between Qatar and the other Gulf countries. Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain pulled out their diplomats claiming that Qatar supported armed groups. However, the border remained open and Qataris were not expelled.¹⁰

Qatar in the midst of the Saudi-Iran Conflict

Qatar has historical relations with Saudi Arabia while also engaging with Iran economically. For instance, it enjoys shared ownership in Iran's offshore natural gas field which is the world's largest. The current move by the Arab states is aimed at putting pressure on Doha to abandon support for the Muslim Brotherhood, scale down the criticism by its media of internal matters of neighbouring countries, and to end the sympathetic approach towards Iran.¹¹

This new diplomatic crisis has also put the focus back onto the prevailing feud between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The majority of Arab governments have long viewed Iran as an adversary and in 2016, Doha recalled its

ambassador to Iran following a major rift between Riyadh and Tehran. However, recent months have seen Qatari Emir Al-Thani go against Riyadh's wishes by warming up to Tehran.¹²

This persisting conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran has compelled Qatar to look towards the US as its main security guarantor—as it attempts to balance its relations with the region's two major players. This arrangement provided by Qatar has suited the US military which has used the largest al-Udeid Air Base outside Doha for conducting its operations against Iraq and Afghanistan. From the US point of view, Qatar's money power and hydrocarbon wealth, along with its accessible military facilities grant it a major geostrategic location for its continued military operations in West Asia. This also enables the US to keep an oversight on Qatar's possible support to various radical and extremist Islamic organisations.¹³

However, President Trump's recent tweets indicate his support for Qatar's isolation by the major Gulf nations. But he is overlooking the fact that the current crisis—if it further escalates—could become a concern for the US as well. Given that Qatar provides logistic support for the largest US military base in the region in the US led war against terror, the current crisis persisting over a longer duration can have major implications for the US.

Iran's stand!

Iran, at odds with Saudi Arabia for long, has however called for both the feuding parties to amicably resolve their dispute citing the reason that continued tensions would only threaten the interests of everyone in the region.¹⁴ However, at the same time, scholars of Iranian foreign policy think that a rift in the GCC can be beneficial to Iran. Iran and Turkey are looking to filling the void in Qatar with Iranian and Turkish food products and supplies.¹⁵

Iran's attempting to aid Qatar in this period is mainly towards achieving economic gains. Since Iran has failed to develop its natural gas reserves in South Pars¹⁶ and with Qatar being a leading exporter of LNG, Iran sees this current diplomatic standoff as an opportunity to increase its clout with Qatar. The heightening tension between Qatar and other regional Arab States also gives it a chance to weaken the GCC and the U.S.-Arab alliance created during Trump's last trip to Riyadh to fight terrorism (and counter Iran and its proxies) in the region.¹⁷

Re-alignment in West Asia

The isolation of Qatar is widely being taken as a clear message from Saudi Arabia that in the new order, no softness on Iran or support to radical extremist/terrorist organisations would be tolerated. This act also projects the self-assuredness of the Trump administration on its policies and stance against Iran—by punishing

those who may seem sympathetic to Iran. Thus, the question which emerges is whether Qatar is being punished by the Arab states for remaining neutral on the entire Iran issue and continuing to engage with Tehran, against the wishes of the Saudis. This diplomatic standoff also provides an opportunity to countries like Egypt to mend its ties with Saudi Arabia, which would help reinforce its ties with the Emiratis and play a more assertive role in Libya.¹⁸ If the conflict persists and gets more complicated, one could witness the *near*-crumbling of the GCC, as well as the region, more along the regional fault lines which first erupted with Qatari support to Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt after the fall of Hosni Mubarak in 2011. At the same time, there are chances that Qatar, in the aftermath of this diplomatic standoff, could move closer to Turkey and Iran, which could reshape the entire geopolitical map of West Asia. The West Asian chequerboard is seemingly, yet again, in the midst of new alignments.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹Katie Hunt, "Middle East freezes out Qatar: What you need to know", *CNN*, June 07, 2017, <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/06/06/middleeast/qatar-middle-east-diplomatic-freeze/index.html>. Accessed on June 08, 2017.

²Karen DeYoung, Kareem Fahim and SudarsanRaghavan, "Trump jumps into worsening dispute between Qatar and powerful Arab bloc", *Washington Post*, June 06, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/turkey-and-kuwait-move-to-mediate-middle-east-rift-over->

qatar/2017/06/06/3fc3b070-4a8a-11e7-a186-60c031eab644_story.html. Accessed on June 07, 2017.

³ Mark Landler and Gardiner Harris, "Trump Team's Shift Jolt Some Allies and Soothe Others", *The New York Times*, June 9, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/09/world/middleeast/rex-tillerson-calls-for-calm-in-middle-east-standoff-with-qatar.html?WT.nav=top-news&action=click&clickSource=story-heading&emc=edit_nn_20170611&hp=&module=first-column-region&nl=morning-briefing&nliid=71919082&pgtype=Homepage®ion=top-news&te=1&r=0, accessed on June 12, 2017.

⁴ Zeeshan Aleem, "Saudi Arabia's diplomatic war with Qatar, explained", June 06, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/6/6/15739606/saudi-arabia-ties-qatar-trump>. Accessed on June 07, 2017.

⁵ Stig Jarle Hansen (ed.), "Religion, prestige and windows of opportunity?

(Qatari peace making and foreign policy engagement)", *Noragric Working Paper No. 48*,

October 2013, http://www.umb.no/statisk/noragric/publications/working_papers/working_paper_no_48.pdf. Accessed on June 09, 2017.

⁶ Niche Diplomacy—the style of diplomacy used by the middle powers has been labelled as niche diplomacy because of the limited foreign policy objective as a result of their power capabilities, which are lower than those of great powers or superpowers. However, middle powers do not challenge the status quo in the international system. Read more: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/middle-power#ref1231331>; <https://publicandculturaldiplomacy1.wordpress.com/2012/03/22/niche-diplomacy-a-key-for-smaller-states-to-become-visible/>. Accessed on June 07, 2017.

⁷ Mehran Kamrava, "Mediation and Qatari foreign policy", *Middle East Journal*, vol. 65, n. 4, Autumn, 2011. P. 539-556.

⁸ "Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, Bahrain cut ties to Qatar", *al Jazeera*, June 05, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/06/saudi-arabia-uae-egypt-bahrain-cut-ties-qatar-170605031700062.html>. Accessed on June 07, 2017.

⁹ Lina Khatib, "Qatar's foreign policy: the limits of pragmatism" *International Affairs*, vol. 89, no. 2, 2013. P. 417-431.

¹⁰ "Qatar-Gulf crisis: Your questions answered", *al Jazeera*, June 07, 2017,

<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/06/qatar-gulf-crisis-questions-answered-170606103033599.html>. Accessed on June 11, 2017.

¹¹ Md. Mudassir Quamar, "Qatar Crisis Sharpens Regional Fault Lines", *IDSAC Comment*, June 08, 2017, http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/qatar-crisis-sharpens-regional-faultlines_mmquamar_080617. Accessed on June 08, 2017.

¹² Nyshka Chandran, "Middle East rift could push Qatar closer to Turkey, Iran", *CNBC*, June 05, 2017, <http://www.cnb.com/2017/06/05/gulf-crisis-qatar-may-move-closer-to-turkey-iran.html>. Accessed on June 10, 2017.

¹³ Simon Henderson, "Uneven Diplomacy: The U.S.-Qatar Relationship", *The Washington Institute*, February 23, 2015, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/uneven-diplomacy-the-u.s.-qatar-relationship>. Accessed on June 08, 2017.

¹⁴ Ted Regencia, "Qatar-Gulf rift: the Iran factor?", *al Jazeera*, June 06, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/06/qatar-gulf-rift-iran-factor-170605102522955.html>. Accessed on June 10, 2017.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Post the Iranian nuclear deal, Qatar signed an agreement in 2014 to help Tehran develop its South Pars field.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Anne Barnard and David D. Kirkpatrick, "5 Arab Nations Move to Isolate Qatar, Putting the U.S. in a Bind", *The New York Times*, June 05, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/05/world/middleeast/qatar-saudi-arabia-egypt-bahrain-united-arab-emirates.html?mcubz=0&r=0>. Accessed on June 08, 2017.