

QATAR CRISIS ENTERS THIRD YEAR: DIM PROSPECTS FOR DISPUTE RESOLUTION



GIORGIO CAFIERO





Copyright

Ankara - TURKEY ORSAM © 2019

Content of this publication is copyrighted to ORSAM. Except reasonable and partial quotation and use under the Act No. 5846, Law on Intellectual and Artistic Works, via proper citation, the content may not be used or re-published without prior permission by ORSAM. The views expressed in this publication reflect only the opinions of its authors and do not represent the institutional opinion of ORSAM.

Center for Middle Eastern Studies

Adress : Mustafa Kemal Mah. 2128 Sok. No: 3 Çankaya, ANKARA

Phone: +90 (312) 430 26 09 Faks: +90 (312) 430 39 48

Email: info@orsam.org.tr

Photos: Anadolu Images

Qatar Crisis Enters Third Year: Dim Prospects for Dispute Resolution

About the Author

Giorgio Cafiero

Giorgio Cafiero is the CEO and founder of Gulf State Analytics, a geopolitical risk consultancy based in Washington, DC. His research interests include geopolitical and security trends in the Arabian Peninsula and the broader Middle East. Mr. Cafiero is a regular contributor to several publications including *Al Monitor*, *The National Interest*, and *LobeLog*. From 2014-2015, he was an analyst at Kroll, an investigative due diligence consultancy. He received an M.A. in International Relations from the University of San Diego.

May 2019

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) crisis that erupted in May/June 2017 is about to enter its third year. Realistically, an end to this emotional dispute appears nowhere in sight. There are no signs that the parties are anywhere closer to resolving their differences than they were when this crisis broke out two years ago. Qatar and the blockading states—Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), collectively known as the Anti-Terror Quartet (ATQ)—seem to have adjusted to new dynamics in the Persian Gulf region defined by the institutionalization of the GCC's Qatar rift.

Both Doha and the blockading states clearly believe that the costs of capitulating to the other side would outweigh the benefits. This crisis is also highly personalized, which further dims the prospects for reconciliation given the role that egos of leaders in power play in this dispute. Thus, unless there is a change in leadership in either Qatar or the ATQ countries—or serious pressure from Washington, which has been absent since the dispute broke out—imagining any rapprochement between the two sides is extremely difficult.

For the ATQ states' leaders, giving in to Qatar and lifting and/or easing the blockade without Doha meeting any of blockading countries' demands would be humiliating. At a time in which Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS), Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed (MbZ), and Egypt's President Abdel Fatah el-Sisi are seeking to push back against Muslim Brotherhood-linked Islamist groups in the region, targeting Qatar has been a pillar of their foreign policy agendas. To end the siege of Doha without achieving their objectives that drove the ATQ to implement the blockade would signal weakness at a time in which Riyadh and Abu Dhabi are determined to become regional hegemonic powers.

Likewise, Qatar's Emir Tamim has successfully united the ruling Al Thani and

the Qatari population (natives and expatriates) behind his rule largely because of how the country has stood strong against the ATQ's pressure since May/June 2017.¹ At this juncture, the Qatari emir caving in to the will of the blockading states would cost him his legitimacy in the emirate. There is really no segment of the Qatari population that does not support the government in Doha's action to circumvent the blockade and protect Qatar's independence. In Qatar there is a consensus that capitulating to the Saudi/Emirati-led bloc would transform the emirate into a client, or vassal, state of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, essentially costing Qatar its sovereignty. In Doha the prevailing view is that such a surrender to the ATQ would make Qatar "another Bahrain".

Doubtless, the two-year siege has inflicted damage on Qatar's economy. The real estate and tourism sectors took the biggest hit. Nonetheless, Qatar has utilized its alliances and partnerships in the region and across the world in order to weather the negative economic impact of the siege. In order to maintain economic stability in the emirate, officials in Doha had to spend tens of billions of dollars to circumvent an economic crisis created by the row. Most importantly, China, Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey's roles in helping Doha establish alternative trade routes to avoid the blockading states were pivotal, particularly in the area of food security and the natural gas trade.² Kuwait and Oman too contributed significantly to Doha's ability to stand strong enough economically to avoid the need to capitulate to the ATQ's demands for reconciliation.

The Qatar crisis has turned into a frivolous standoff with destabilizing effects throughout the greater Arab/Islamic world. This dispute between Doha and the ATQ has been felt in the Horn of Africa, Maghreb, Levant, and other regions too. Global powers such as the United States, Russia, and China, which have

all lent support to Kuwaiti efforts to broker a diplomatic settlement, have found the dispute to be a setback to their interests in the Persian Gulf. Washington, Moscow, and Beijing all have stakes in stability in this resource-rich body of water and see an effectual and healthy GCC as in the best interest of regional peace, stability, and prosperity.

The Trump Presidency

The President Donald Trump variable in the equation cannot be ignored. It is evident that the Trump presidency was a factor which emboldened the ATQ states to feel confident that they could blockade Qatar with the US administration's support. The anti-Islamist/anti-Muslim Brotherhood positions embraced by key figures of Trump's inner circle contributed to a perception on Riyadh and Abu Dhabi's part that the US, with Trump at the helm, would be sympathetic to an anti-Qatar narrative within the framework of counter-terrorism and counter-extremism efforts.³ Unquestionably, the timing of Trump's historic visit to Riyadh in May 2017 and the siege on Qatar that the ATQ implemented on June 5, 2017 were connected.⁴

Even though Trump's initial Twitter response to the blockade signaled the American president's support for the siege, the major institutions of the US government (the Pentagon, the Department of State, etc.) did not back the campaign against Qatar. Also, Trump himself quickly changed his tone on Qatar and began hailing Qatar as a valuable ally in the struggle against terrorism later that month. That the US and Qatar have strengthened their alliance since the GCC crisis broke out speaks to the extent to which the ATQ failed to bring Washington to its side against Doha.⁵ The lesson learned for the leaders in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi is that US foreign policy is heavily shaped by the "Deep State" and the president's attitudes

and allegiances do not always drive America's agenda in the Middle East, or any other region of the world. Put simply, the ATQ states' bet too much of what Trump could (or even would) do to change Washington's relationship with Doha.

Without any doubt, the continuation of the Gulf dispute has been a major headache for both the Trump administration and lawmakers in Washington. With the White House determined to strengthen US cooperation with Arab allies in grander efforts aimed at pushing back against Iran's regional conduct, the GCC's dysfunctional state of affairs has undermined such aims. The extent to which Qatar has had to turn to Iran for cooperation across a host of sectors, and brought Doha and Tehran closer together diplomatically, highlights how the GCC crisis has challenged Washington's ability to unite the Arab Persian Gulf monarchies against the Islamic Republic. Qatar's gratitude to Iran for its support throughout the blockade has served to boost to Iran's soft-power influence in the emirate while creating ever greater distance between Doha and Washington's divergent perceptions of the "Iranian threat".

Within this context, the Trump administration's vision for an Arab NATO that includes all six GCC member-states is increasingly unrealistic. Given that Qatar perceives a greater threat from Saudi Arabia than from Iran, it is too difficult to entertain the idea of Doha joining an anti-Iranian alliance that includes the countries blockading Qatar. Thus, Washington must contend with regional dynamics that will require the US to work with GCC states more on a bilateral (as opposed to multilateral) basis when it comes to counter-terrorism initiatives and campaigns. The US military identifies this crisis in the GCC as an extremely sensitive and difficult dilemma that has no easy answers.

Nonetheless, the Trump administration has shown no signs of putting pressure (beyond rhetoric) on the ATQ to ease/lift the blockade. As Trump remains extremely vested in Washington's close alliances with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, he has been keen to avoid challenging them on major issues. The US administration has seemingly concluded that despite the GCC dispute harming Washington's interests, the crisis is one that the US can navigate and, ultimately, accept. Without doubt, the news on April 30, 2019 that the Trump administration is pushing for the US government to officially designate the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization is yet another sign of the White House's commitment to bolstering ties with the Saudi/UAE-led bloc of anti-Islamist states.⁶

A Democratic Win in 2020?

Questions about US foreign policy vis-à-vis the Qatar crisis in the post-Trump era are worth raising. If a Democratic candidate defeats Trump in the 2020 presidential election,

there could be a new administration in the US that takes a far different line toward Saudi Arabia than the current White House. With Democratic presidential hopefuls such as Senator Bernie Sanders and Representative Tulsi Gabbard espousing staunchly anti-Saudi rhetoric, the Washington-Riyadh alliance could fundamentally change if one of these candidates wins next year's election.

America's next president (depending on who he/she is) may begin applying pressure on Riyadh that could entail demands across a host of issues, most notably the Yemen war. Perhaps the Qatar crisis would be an issue that the next US administration may push on. With the US' largest airbase in the Middle East located in Qatar, this crisis in Qatar's relationship with Riyadh has been a major headache for the Pentagon. MbS has demonstrated no signs of concern with respect to the US military's discomfort with the continuation of this impasse between Doha and the ATQ while resisting all calls for striking a deal and compromising with Qatar.⁷ Such a position that MbS takes on Qatar



can certainly contribute to the further erosion of his reputation among the establishment in Washington against the backdrop of the Khashoggi affair, disastrous war in Yemen, and cases of activists being detained in the Kingdom, which have all severely damaged his image in the eyes of the DC elite.

Nonetheless, it is not clear if, let alone how, a Democratic administration beginning January 2021 would guide US foreign policy vis-à-vis the Qatar crisis differently than the Trump administration. The Democratic presidential hopefuls are criticizing Saudi Arabia's leadership, specifically MbS, in different areas, not the blockade of Qatar. Thus far, the Qatar crisis has not been a campaign issue focused on by any of the candidates. Additionally, even if a future US administration would press Riyadh and Abu Dhabi to ease or lift the blockade, it would be misguided to assume that such pressure alone could resolve the GCC crisis.

While Washington maintains high levels of influence over the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, such monarchies cannot be viewed as America's puppet states, or merely "banana republics" in the traditional manner that certain Latin American states were often seen in the 20th century. In an increasingly multipolar world, all GCC member-states have diversified their global alliances, partnerships, and friendships to become more autonomy from Washington and other Western capitals. Thus, even with new leadership in the White House, there are major doubts about what the US could or would do vis-à-vis the blockading states to prompt them into ending their feud with Doha.

Social Factors Impeding Rapprochement

Even if the states involved in this dispute resolve their problems and restore diplomatic and economic ties, the social impacts of the

GCC crisis are set to last longer than the political ones, ultimately contributing to the prolongation of this dispute. This diplomatic row has required nearly all citizens of involved countries to take sides, making it very personal to many GCC nationals. In contrast to previous clashes among GCC member-states in which the different monarchies' familial, religious, tribal, and historical links enabled these states to remain relatively unified, during the past two years of conflict within the GCC nationalism has served to divide the sub-regional institution with differences along national lines coming to the fore.⁸

The state-owned media outlets of countries involved in the Qatar crisis have also contributed to the current dynamics in the Gulf which makes the idea of GCC re-unity seem elusive. Media platforms in the blockading states, where displays of sympathy for Qatar are illegal, have made outlandish allegations about Doha, and even called for regime change in Doha. Ultimately, such vitriolic attacks in the Gulf's media environment along with the weaponization of "fake news" have further damaged trust between the Qataris and the government officials and citizenry of Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Additionally, the role that lobbyists and foreign public relations firms operating in Washington and London have played in the GCC crisis has served to further dim the prospects for resolving the dispute.⁹

The restriction of travel within the GCC has also made this dispute increasingly personalized for many citizens of the countries involved in the standoff. In the Gulf, where tribal connections transit international boundaries, many GCC citizens belong to tribes and families whose members are in different sheikdoms. The blockade has made it increasingly difficult for families to travel across borders for visits, often requiring much travel via Kuwait and Oman when moving between Doha and the blockading

states. Two weeks after the blockade began in mid-2017, the ATQ governments forced Qatari citizens to leave their countries, while also denying Qatari nationals entry since the day that the siege of Doha began. For the thousands of families in the Gulf whose members live in both Qatar and at least one of the blockading states, the GCC crisis has come with a major emotional tolls that will remain relevant even if the Gulf states reconcile their differences on a government-to-government level.¹⁰

The Gulf's Future Balance of Power

As the GCC dispute remains unresolved with seemingly no end in sight, it is important to ask what the risks for the region and global powers of this crisis continuing. Could tensions between Qatar and the ATQ heat up and escalate into a military confrontation? Although such a scenario cannot be ruled out, it seems unlikely. The security alliances which Qatar formed prior to the blockade, and has strengthened since the siege began, have, at least thus far, established deterrence over the Saudi/UAE-led bloc. Ultimately, officials in Doha have effectively leveraged the interests of external actors to ensure protection of Qatar's sovereignty and security.

Throughout the first two years of the GCC crisis, Qatar has depended heavily on its two security guarantors—the US and Turkey—for defense in the face of the threat of the ATQ bloc staging a military invasion, occupation, and/or annexation of the emirate. The specter of a Saudi/Emirati-led invasion of Doha was enough that the US military sent a drone to the Qatari-Saudi border after the blockade went into effect in order to monitor the mobilization and movement of Saudi forces near the transnational boundary on the Kingdom's side.¹¹ With the world's only official superpower remaining

committed to the defense of all six GCC states, including Qatar, the Doha-Washington cooperation remains crucial to Qatari security.

Yet although America continues playing the role of security guarantor for all six GCC states that Washington first accepted in the Gulf War of 1990/1991, Trump's initial reaction to the blockade called this commitment of the US into question. The American president tweeted in support of the siege of Qatar, in which he argued that the GCC crisis proved that his historic visit to Riyadh in May 2017 was already paying off in terms of Arab/Muslim states addressing the threat of global terrorism more seriously.¹² Although Trump later switched his stance, and the American establishment (State Department, Pentagon, majority of lawmakers, etc.) never embraced his initial position, the tweets alone damaged not only Qatar's confidence in the US' commitment to each GCC member-states' security, but also the confidence of the Council's other five members. Officials in Kuwait and Oman, which have also had concerns about receiving the "Qatar treatment" from the ATQ, wondered if their countries would receive such a response from Trump if a scenario unfolded involving the severance or diplomatic and/or economic ties from their GCC neighbors.

Likewise, even the blockading states observed Trump's initial response to the GCC crisis and naturally welcomed it as it seemed to have signaled Washington's backing for the siege of Doha, yet also were compelled to question whether Trump would "turn" on them too. After all, the allegations made against Qatar, such as being too loose regarding anti-terrorism finance laws had also been made against others in the GCC such as Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, while Oman too has received criticism for being too close to Iran, which was a grievance that the ATQ has

articulated regarding Qatar. Given that Trump was, and remains, a consistently unpredictable leader with an incoherent foreign policy, all Arab Gulf monarchies have constantly feared a negative turn in relations with America's 46th president.

Within this context of confusion regarding Washington's commitment to the security GCC member-states, the Arab Gulf littoral states have started hedging in their foreign policies. For small and wealthy emirates, especially Qatar, giving an increasingly diverse group of larger and more militarily powerful states vested interests in their independence and security. It was Qatar's experience during the first GCC crisis (March-November 2014) that resulted in Doha turning more to Turkey for a stronger defense partnership.¹³ Yet undoubtedly after the ongoing Gulf dispute erupted in 2017, the Qatari-Turkish defense relationship grew stronger with the blockaded emirate placing much more value on the military support that the Turks were providing.¹⁴ Whether Turkey's military presence on the ground in Qatar was enough to defeat the ATQ in any scenario involving kinetic confrontation is not necessarily the point. Arguably, what made the difference for the blockading states were the perceived political risks of waging a military operation that could result in their forces potentially clashing with those of NATO's second most powerful member.

Along the same lines of thinking and strategizing behind an agenda of diversifying alliances, Kuwait too has embraced this hedging foreign policy. Today, the UK is considering building a naval base in Kuwait, which would help the country become increasingly autonomous from the US. Kuwait has also signed a military accord with Turkey in 2018 that prompted scores of analysts to conclude that Kuwait's look to Ankara paralleled Qatar's turn to Turkey for support in the face of the threat posed by its immediate neighbors.¹⁵

Looking ahead, it appears that the GCC crisis will continue for the foreseeable future. There are two main factors that severely dim the prospects for restoration of diplomatic and economic relations between Qatar and the ATQ. First, the blockading states and Qatar have drawn their lines in ways that would make compromise on either side humiliating. Thus, for countless political reasons the costs of concession are too high to accept and will likely remain so for the foreseeable future, save a circumstance in which substantial US pressure comes later. Second, Doha's resilience and proven capacity to not only survive, but also thrive, under the current conditions strongly suggest that the GCC's rift will continue institutionalizing and become a long-lasting reality in the Arabian Peninsula's geopolitical order.

Endnotes

- 1 <http://arabcenterdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/The-GCC-Crisis-at-One-Year-Stalemate-Becomes-New-Reality.pdf>
- 2 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2018-06-11/how-qatar-weathered-gulf-crisis>
- 3 <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/iw/originals/2017/01/trump-muslim-brotherhood-ban-inner-circle-qatar.amp.html>
- 4 <https://www.albawaba.com/loop/original-bannon-trump-saudi-qatar-crisis-1038614>
- 5 <https://www.gulf-times.com/story/619120/2nd-Qatar-US-dialogue-underlines-keenness-to-enhance>
- 6 <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-04-30/trump-preparing-to-designate-muslim-brotherhood-as-terrorists>
- 7 <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/profile-prince-promise-and-peril-mohammed-bin-salmans-vision-2030>
- 8 <https://intpolicydigest.org/2017/10/13/social-effects-qatar-crisis/>
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/04/09/a-saudi-princes-quest-to-remake-the-middle-east>
- 12 <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/06/world/middleeast/trump-qatar-saudi-arabia.html>
- 13 <https://www.mei.edu/publications/turkey-and-qatars-burgeoning-strategic-alliance>
- 14 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2019/01/erdogan-vows-strengthen-cooperation-qatar-190113132119164.html>
- 15 <https://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2018/10/12/turkey-kuwait-sign-military-cooperation-agreement-for-2019>

[illegible]



Ortadoęu Arařtırmaları Merkezi

مرکز دراسات الشرق الأوسط

Center for Middle Eastern Studies

ORSAM Publishes

Middle East Analysis and Middle Eastern Studies as periodical journals. Middle East Analysis, which is published bimonthly in Turkish, covers the expert opinions on contemporary developments in the Middle East. Middle Eastern Studies is a semi-annual journal on international relations. As a scholarly and refereed journal, published in both Turkish and English, Middle Eastern Studies is composed of the contributions of academics who are experts in their field. Middle Eastern Studies, where respectable, national and international level academics publishes their papers, is indexed by Applied Social Sciences and Abstracts (ASSIA), EBSCO Host, Index Islamicus, International Bibliography of Social Sciences (IBBS), Worldwide Political Science Abstracts (WPSA).



ORTADOĞU ARAŞTIRMALARI MERKEZİ

Adresi : Mustafa Kemal Mah. 2128 Sk. No: 3 Çankaya, ANKARA
Telefon: +90 (312) 430 26 09 Faks: +90 (312) 430 39 48
Email: orsam@orsam.org.tr