

COMMENTARY

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Qatar Crisis Sharpens Regional fault lines

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The news that Saudi Arabia along with UAE, Bahrain and Egypt have severed diplomatic ties with Qatar over the latter's alleged support for Islamist groups and sympathetic attitude towards Iran and its proxies may have come as a surprise. But the crisis has been in the making for long. UAE and Qatar have been on a collision course for a long time over Qatar's patronization of the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates. For its part, Egypt under Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has resented Qatar's support for former President Mohammed Morsi. Cairo and Doha had a serious spat in 2014 over what Egyptian authorities termed as incitement of unrest in Egypt by Qatari backed media, especially the Al-Jazeera network. The crisis had led to the three GCC countries—Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain—and Egypt recalling their ambassadors from Doha in March 2014. The matter could be resolved only through Omani and Kuwaiti mediation and persistent Saudi pressure leading to the closure of Al-Jazeera's Arabic language Egyptian broadcast Mubasher Misr in December 2014.

Saudi Arabia's problem with Qatar is more layered and complex, and involves three major contentious issues. Firstly, Saudi Arabia resents Qatar's sympathetic attitude towards Iran and its regional ambitions and Iranian proxies especially Hezbollah. The Kingdom sees the Islamic Republic as the primary force behind regional instability and internal tensions in many countries including Bahrain, Yemen and in its own Eastern Province. Riyadh has on several occasions accused Tehran of meddling in internal affairs of regional countries and provoking sectarian strife in the region. This was most recently visible during President Donald Trump's Riyadh visit when he singled out Iran as the regional rogue state behind the widespread turmoil in the Middle East.

Though Qatar has significant economic contacts with Iran – they share the Pars gas field, which Qatar resumed developing in April 2017 – it has taken a neutral stance on Saudi-Iran tensions. Riyadh interprets this stance as an indication of Doha’s soft-corner for Tehran. The disclosure of the alleged remarks made by Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani on May 25 during an address to a military graduation ceremony sympathizing with Iran and terming it as a legitimate regional player only confirmed this for Riyadh.

Secondly, Saudi Arabia, especially under King Salman, has despised Qatari support for the Muslim Brotherhood and other ‘moderate’ Islamist groups. Saudi-Brotherhood relations had worsened in the late 1990s, with Riyadh beginning to see the Brotherhood’s brand of Islam as dangerous and akin to questioning the monarchical system. Earlier, the Kingdom had shared good relations with the Brotherhood for a long time and had provided safe haven for exiled Egyptian Brothers. But because of growing internal criticism from the Sahwa (awakening) movement—a Brotherhood-inspired Saudi Islamist group—and others, Saudi authorities began a crackdown on the Sahwis and most members were either incarcerated or had to go into exile.

After this, Doha remained the only Arab Gulf capital to continue patronizing the Muslim Brotherhood. Though King Abdullah, after assuming power in 2005, had tried to accommodate some of the remnants of the Brotherhood inspired groups, the wave of Arab uprisings in 2011, popularly termed as Arab Spring, changed the dynamics and led to the Kingdom’s adoption of a zero-tolerance attitude towards the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates or inspired groups including the Palestinian resistance movement Hamas.

Thirdly, Saudi Arabia sees Qatar’s independent foreign policy as problematic. Qatar wishes to play a larger regional role and has carved out an independent foreign policy through mediation in regional conflicts, especially in extending support to the Islamist faction in the Palestinian national movement, that is, Hamas. It also took a pro-Morsi stance during the 2013 crisis in Egypt which was at odds with the Saudi and Emirati support for the removal of Morsi. Even in Syria, Doha had adopted an independent policy of supporting the ‘moderate Islamist’ groups along with Ankara when Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries were supporting the ‘secular’ opposition. For Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, Doha following an independent and parallel foreign policy weakens the Arab Gulf position in regional politics and strengthens the Iranian position.

In addition, the Qatari use of the Al-Jazeera network to criticize regional governments is seen as undermining the legitimacy and authority of the Gulf monarchies. This had created problems between Riyadh and Doha in the past. For example, in 2002, Saudi Arabia had recalled its ambassador from Doha after overt criticism of the Abdullah Peace Plan offering Arab normalization of ties with Israel in exchange for peace with Palestine. At the same time, Doha not following a coordinated foreign policy stance becomes a prestige issue for Riyadh. Qatar

wishes to emerge from the shadows of its larger neighbour and a resentful Saudi Arabia views it as an undermining of its own regional standing.

Even the current crisis emanates from the complex relations shared by Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar. The Saudi Press Agency statement of June 5 declaring the severing of diplomatic ties and closure of all land, sea and air transit to and from Qatar made it clear that the decision was taken as a result of Doha's persistent overt and covert support for the Muslim Brotherhood and Iranian proxies as well as for using the media to instigate internal strife in neighbouring countries. Hence, the collective move is aimed at putting pressure on Doha to abandon its support for the Muslim Brotherhood, scale down the media criticism of internal matters of neighbouring countries and end the sympathetic approach towards Iran.

Though Doha's early reaction has been measured, it has rejected claims made by Riyadh and others as "allegations" and the move as "unjustified." A Qatari cabinet statement termed the severing of ties as pressure tactics on "Qatar to abandon its national decision-making and sovereignty." A statement from the Qatari foreign ministry termed the "allegations" against Doha as without any basis. In a media interaction, Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani raised questions about the future of the Gulf Cooperation Council, showing that Doha might not be cowed down by pressure.

Qatar has received support from Tehran and Ankara which latter have urged the parties involved to resolve the crisis through dialogue and in a peaceful manner instead of resorting to punitive measures. Nevertheless, Doha will find it difficult to endure the isolation because of its possible economic cost and adverse impacts on its gas exports and foreign trade. The move to isolate Qatar, the largest exporter of natural gas and an important OPEC member, might also have ramifications for the international energy market.

The timing of the move is significant as it comes two weeks after Trump's Riyadh visit. Trump has tweeted his support for the move to isolate Qatar underlining that the US was in the know of the plans. The decision to target Qatar clearly indicates that the region is now divided into two camps and that the Arab Gulf countries are in no mood to accept neutral players.

Kuwaiti efforts to mediate have proved futile so far and indicates that the escalation was orchestrated with a plan to not leave any room for Qatar to manoeuvre without conceding to the demands. The crisis can lead to Doha either substantially curtailing its foreign policy activism, thus aligning with the Arab Gulf, or it can be the beginning of the disintegration of the GCC. The problem is reflective of a larger regional crisis facing the Middle East and indicates a further sharpening of regional fault lines.

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