

Regional Implications of the Qatar Crisis: Increasing Vulnerabilities

TALHA KÖSE & UFAK ULUTAŞ

- **Why will the Qatar crisis make the region more vulnerable to security issues?**
 - **What are the main problems of isolation of Qatar?**
 - **How would the ongoing crisis affect regional conflicts?**

WHY WILL THE ONGOING CRISIS MAKE THE REGION MORE VULNERABLE TO SECURITY ISSUES?

The crisis which was triggered by a set of sanctions imposed by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt followed by several Arab states to isolate Qatar has strong regional implications beyond the Gulf. The pressure that has been exerted on Qatar is not an isolated effort; it is a part of a larger scale planning to shape the future order of the region. It is not a new effort either, as Qatar was targeted with sanctions by the Gulf countries before, lately in 2014. An ardent supporter of the anti-status quo movements during the so-called Arab Spring, Qatar drew the ire of some Arab states who have high stakes in the preservation of the regional status quo.

Qatar, a small peninsula-state with rich gas and oil resources, pursued a somewhat independent and consistent policy of supporting anti-status quo movements starting from the Tunisian revolution to Libya, Egypt, Yemen, and Syria. In addition to supporting these movements, the Al-Jazeera Network - the effective tool of the Qatari soft power - played a crucial role in opening up the media to the voice of the opposition across the region and in internationalizing the locals' aspirations. The Muslim Brotherhood and its regional offshoots have not been the sole actors of change in the region; but they remained at the epicenter of the anti-status quo demonstrations and revolutions. Qatar supported non-Brotherhood groups as well. Yet, Qatar came to be identified with the Brotherhood and other Islamist political movements. The declared

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reasons for the current crisis fall short in establishing a strong case against Qatar in terms of its alleged support of terror and ties with Iran, both of which are seemingly being used as a front to garner regional and international support for the sanctions. Rather, one could rightfully argue, the current crisis is driven mostly by the Qatari support for anti-status quo movements in general and the Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoots in particular, and is aimed at curbing Qatar's regional policies ranging from Libya to Syria.

The Qatar crisis is a political maneuver whose longer-term consequences have not been calculated skillfully. If the crisis continues and deepens, it will make the region and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members much weaker and fragmented against imminent security challenges in the region including Iranian expansionism, extremism, and terrorism. The crisis furthers the polarization in the region, forcing regional countries to choose between the two poles, and thereby creating a bipolar regional system. This bipolarity is rejected by many regional actors, including, among others, Turkey, Kuwait, and Oman.

In the initial stage of the isolation campaign, the anti-Qatar coalition may use this push as leverage in their regional policies, but the lack of international support for the sanctions and half-hearted support by some regional countries will undermine the sustainability of the sanctions, making it quite difficult for the anti-Qatar coalition to remain united. There are already differences of opinion among the coalition members with regard to the extent of the sanctions and their effectiveness in bringing about change in Qatar's engagements in foreign policy. The disparities among the coalition members coupled with an increasing international pressure to resolve the crisis will likely pave the way for the creation of a middle ground. Yet, the underlying causes of the crisis and the regional polarization created by the crisis will remain intact and keep creating tension in the Gulf and beyond. Meanwhile, a question on two dif-

ferent levels deserves an answer: Does this polarization make the region safer? More specifically, does this polarization make the Gulf monarchies who are part of the anti-Qatar coalition safer?

WHAT ARE THE MAIN PROBLEMS OF ISOLATION?

The Middle East is much more fragile than it was six years ago, and further polarization is not an antidote to this unstable environment. Failed states, sectarian conflict, unmet social and political expectations, rise of violent non-state actors and great powers that are less interested in the region are the developments that need to be taken into account when making wholesale plans about the region. More than six years after the Syrian Civil War began and with the ongoing civil wars in Yemen, Libya and Iraq and the political instability in Lebanon, the region's future abounds with uncertainties.

What is certain is that it will take time to rebuild state structures, failed states will remain a region-wide phenomenon, violent non-state actors will maintain their influence, and it will be a Herculean task to uproot communal and sectarian strife even in the post-conflict Middle East. This fragility does not create suitable grounds for a sustainable regional order and stability any time soon. None of the regional powers or the great powers can design a sustainable order in the region without taking other actors into consideration, although some countries such as Iran highly benefit from the capabilities of its regional proxies and the realities on the ground. Israel, likewise, will keep creating its own ground-level realities at the expense of the Palestinians and the Arab world in general. This is a lesson regional countries should have learned from the experiences of the Syrian Civil War and the ongoing civil wars in Iraq and Yemen.

The second important lesson that the region learned in the last several years is that the regional interests of the great powers such as the U.S., Russia and the EU countries are, at most, partial. In other

words, they are not interested in negotiating a holistic order for the region, but are satisfied with their zones of influence in the fragmented states. The great powers are not willing to challenge the status quo, and they do not want to risk further tensions with other great powers for the purpose of expanding their zones of influence. Unless the proxy terrorist organizations target their interests or target them directly, they will not risk their political standing to formulate a holistic order that would encompass the entire region. It is, therefore, of utmost importance for the region's countries to come together for reaching a mutually acceptable and sustainable order for the region, instead of banking on the great powers' favorable interferences.

Building a polarizing and aggressive foreign policy depending solely on U.S. support will prove to be counterproductive for the anti-Qatar coalition. One should be reminded that the Obama administration's policy towards the Middle East, which paved the way for Iranian expansionism and the proliferation of violent non-state actors, left behind a very negative legacy in terms of regional security. For example, Saudi Arabia has dire security vulnerabilities which will not evaporate abruptly even with the Trump administration. As a reaction to Obama's regional policy, Saudis tried to diversify their foreign and security policy options and pursued the formation of new alliances. Diversifications of security options in the wake of state and non-state threats and reaching a regional consensus against these threats are necessary to encounter the risks in the medium to long term. Therefore, it would prove to be risky for KSA to return to a security policy which is detached from regional consensus and dependent completely on the Trump administration.

Furthermore, every time regional actors such as KSA and Iran raise the bar by making agreements with great powers, they force their opponents to engage in an effort to balance their moves. At the end of this never-ending security dilemma none of the actors feel more secure; however, the

great powers and the local militias and terrorist organizations prevail and benefit from the ongoing and gradually escalating tensions. The situation mostly strengthens the positions of extra-regional powers. Terrorist groups that are sponsored during this proxy struggle are also the short-term beneficiaries of the security dilemma. However, in the long run, as was the case in the Afghan War, sponsoring violent non-state actors with terror links is counterproductive, at best, and, sooner rather than later, backfires.

To be more specific, the current move against Qatar is not based on an insightful perspective that would enable sustainable security in the region. It is rather a backward-looking maneuver that aims to punish the actors that inspired and facilitated the "Arab Spring." Silencing moderate Islamist voices that find space to express themselves in Qatar will only move them underground – it will not change their status as a political and sociological reality in Arab societies. More importantly, the struggle against the more extremist and pro-violence terrorist groups will be more difficult if the legitimate political channels are closed to moderate Islamic voices. Consequently, under the new conditions the regional actors' priority should not be to punish the conditions that enabled the "Arab Spring."

The anti-Qatar coalition's preoccupation with the "Arab Spring" leads them to misread the region's new security environment. The most effective way to maintain both the regime security and the regional security would be to unite their ranks by expanding the coalition against actors of regional instability and growing terrorist threats and to de-escalate sectarian tensions rather than fueling them. Further polarization throughout the region and a Middle East cold war with a potential to cause more escalation is a lose-lose situation for the region with the exception of certain states which have shown their ability to increase their influence during times of instability and chaos, such as Israel, Iran and the UAE.

HOW WOULD THE QATAR CRISIS AFFECT REGIONAL CONFLICTS?

The current crisis is not solely an intra-Gulf rift; it is about a larger political conflict in the MENA region. It is more about Qatar's regional policies than the state's intra-Gulf policies. It will therefore have a strong impact on a number of regional conflicts in which Qatar and the anti-Qatar coalition have stakes and are competing for influence, including but not limited to Libya, Syria, and Palestine. In all these conflict zones, geopolitical considerations are surely at play; however, ideological struggle has also been instrumentalized in these conflicts, further complicating the efforts to resolve them. Struggle for power accentuated by ideological struggle turned into a destructive regional phenomenon, paving way for regional escalations. One could argue that the aforementioned conflicts deteriorate the intra-Gulf rivalries; while the securitization of these conflicts in the lines of intra-Gulf ideological struggle is in turn sharpening the positions of the conflicting sides, thereby deepening these conflicts. The Qatar crisis both stems from and feeds the ongoing conflicts.

The UAE and Egypt, key actors of the Qatar crisis, have also been key actors in the Libya conflict. Egyptian military intelligence has been supporting the Tobruk authority led by General Hafter militarily and logistically; while the UAE bankrolled the coup and has since helped Hafter financially, politically, and militarily. Libya is arguably the first step of the Gulf effort to combat the anti-status quo forces of the Arab Spring. The UAE and Egypt do not recognize the internationally recognized government of Tripoli, and have long invested in Libya to shape the politics of the war-torn state. With the current crisis, the UAE and Egypt are directly targeting Qatar's policy in Libya and trying to delegitimize Qatar's partners in Libya in a bid to strengthen the Libyan House of Representatives at the expense of the General National Congress to enable Hafter's domination of the Government of National Accord, the legitimate government of Libya. Therefore, if Qatar caves in to the

pressure in Libya, the UAE and Egypt will delegitimize all groups rejecting Hafter's domination, some of whom have recently been designated as terrorists by the anti-Qatar coalition. It is completely improbable that the Emirati and Egyptian reshaping of Libyan politics will bring stability; to the contrary, it will deepen the tensions, escalate the armed conflict, and ensure the failure of political negotiations.

Although Qatar and anti-Qatar coalitions are not in direct confrontation in Syria, they differ in their vision for Syria. As a matter of fact, the anti-Qatar coalition have their own differences too. Saudis used to be more active in Syria and still see no place for Assad in the future of the country; while the UAE and Egypt have been dealing with the Syrian regime, prioritize the fight against Islamic movements over the Iranian threat and Assad's crimes, and are willing to accept Assad staying in power. The UAE and Egypt created their own "opposition" (Syria's Tomorrow Movement) led by the former head of the Syrian National Coalition and established *Quwwat al-Nukhbat* (Elite Forces), which has been fighting alongside the Syrian Democratic Forces in Eastern Syria. Qatar's proxies are located mostly in the northern and northwestern parts of the country. Yet, the UAE and Egypt extend the competition and animosity towards Qatar to Syria by accusing Qatar of supporting terror in Syria.

Restraining Qatari support for Syrian opposition groups would have strong humanitarian implications as Qatari foundations, some of which have been recently designated as terrorists have been quite active and doing humanitarian work inside Syria and helping refugees outside the country. Furthermore, Qatari-backed groups have been instrumental in keeping the Iranian-backed militias in Syria in check; in this sense, Qatar, unlike any of the Gulf countries, has taken action to counterbalance Iran in Syria. Without the Qatari-backed groups, the Syrian regime forces and the Iranian influence would strengthen, raising the security vulnerabilities in the Gulf region and beyond.

Palestine is at the epicenter of the current crisis. The UAE and Egyptian approach - which is similar to that of Israel - is shaping the anti-Qatar coalition's stance regarding Palestine. Emirati foreign policy reads Palestine through the lens of its proxy, Muhammad Dahlan, former security chief in Gaza, whom the UAE wants to replace Abbas. Qatar has been home to several Hamas leaders since they left Damascus at the beginning of the Syrian crisis after refusing to support a pro-Assad line. The current crisis targets Hamas, and aims to force Qatar to cease its support of the Hamas movement. King Salman of Saudi Arabia met the leaders of Hamas in 2015 in a bid to rally the Arab world against Iran. Hamas has been at odds with Iran since 2011, refusing later Iranian attempts to patronize the movement. Iran's attempts aimed at repairing its image in the Sunni world, an image that has been in ruins as a result of the Iranian involvement in the Syrian war.

Hamas has its own financial and political problems, and recently changed its leader and declared a political vision in which the movement denied organic ties to the Muslim Brotherhood. The UAE and Egypt as well as certain cliques within the Saudi establishment discredited Hamas's new vision, and asked Qatar to cut its ties to the Palestinian movement. The regional isolation of Hamas would not end its sociological and political reality in Palestine; nor would it deescalate the rift between Palestinian factions. This will in turn embolden Israel and strengthen its bargaining hand vis-à-vis the Palestinians. The Arab world's interests lie in the unity of the Palestinians, and further polarization and divisions within the Palestinian ranks benefit nobody apart from Israel.

HOW CAN THE SECURITY DILEMMA BE OVERCOME?

There is a clear mutual misunderstanding and lack of empathy among major actors in the region. One group of actors does not understand the concerns about regime security (or concerns about maintain-

ing the monarchies), while the other camp does not necessarily appreciate the concerns about national security. It is therefore necessary to ensure that all actors understand the others' concerns and limitations, and respect the others' major security concerns. For the time being, it is virtually impossible to institutionalize a collective security infrastructure that would defeat sectarianism and violent extremism in the region.

The region-wide "cold war" with strong ideological undertones, which seems to be the main motive of the coalition that is trying to isolate Qatar, should be undesirable for the countries in the region. An attrition war through proxies may be the order of such a "cold war." This would further fuel the region's tensions. The option which seems more feasible in this moment is to form a strategy of balance of powers in the region. Respecting the autonomies and zones of influence of major actors and even partial alliances may be possible under such a system. A mutually agreed process of abandoning violent proxies should be one of the preconditions of such a balance.

While a regional "cold war" is being created, actors like Qatar and Turkey are pressurized to pick sides in this vicious circle of avoidable conflict. Meanwhile, Iran is benefitting from such a polarization by mobilizing its sectarian militias and consolidating its power at home and in the region. When it comes to sectarian mobilization, Iran's capabilities are unmatched in the region. The experiences in Yemen, Lebanon, Iraq and most strikingly Syria have demonstrated the Iranian capabilities in sectarian mobilization; capabilities that have proven detrimental to the Gulf states' interests in the region. The recent support given by the Trump administration was the development that encouraged the KSA- and UAE-led coalition.

The Gulf states, after the difficult relations with the Obama administration especially for the last couple of years, considered the election of Donald Trump as U.S. president as a golden opportunity to

change the course of relations with the U.S. Trump has a different and more pragmatic view of the order in the region. The lavish arms deal of Saudi leaders may probably have changed Trump's view but it is not clear whether the military and bureaucratic establishment will completely embrace Trump's new "friendship." It is clear that Trump's recent Saudi Arabia visit and the diplomatic contacts between the younger generation Gulf leaders Muhammad bin Salman, the deputy crown prince of Saudi Arabia, Muhammed bin Zayed, the crown prince of the UAE, and Donald Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner played an important role in the planning of the current sanctions against Qatar. Trump himself reiterated his support for the isolation of Qatar, while the Pentagon stated that Qatar is one of the U.S.A.'s closest allies in the fight against terror.

The Gulf countries need to take into consideration that the Trump administration is not giving them a carte blanche. They may eventually find themselves against a more aggressive Iran but this time without diminishing regional and more importantly U.S. backing. It is far too risky to put all one's eggs in one basket, namely that of the U.S. The overuse of economic resources such as security and diplomatic tools may also backfire. The countries that are threatened economically may eventually overcome their economic losses but they may not forget the hostilities they experienced.

CONCLUSION

The Qatar crisis is the latest episode of a political and ideological struggle that has been raging since the

beginning of the popular protests in the Arab world in 2011. The so-called Arab Spring created a regional cold war in which the conflicting sides have been mobilizing all of their military, financial and diplomatic tools to compete for power and influence in the post-Arab Spring order. The ideological struggle between the pro-change and pro-status quo poles has been one of the major dynamics in the current conflicts in the Middle East. The struggle has been shaping regional conflicts while also being shaped by them. Meanwhile, the geopolitical rivalry between Iran and the Gulf deepens. In this sense, the Gulf countries are involved in two simultaneous rivalries: an intra-Gulf rivalry with strong ideological undertones, and a geopolitical rivalry with Iran in which sectarianism is instrumentalized.

The intra-Gulf rivalry lately exemplified by the Qatar crisis is creating further vulnerabilities for the Gulf, shifting its focus away from the actual threat coming from Iran and regional proxies. In other words, the intra-Gulf rivalry is dividing the ranks of the GCC and paralyzing the Council's abilities to face the imminent security challenges in the region including Iranian expansionism, extremism, and terrorism. Overreliance on U.S. support, dividing the Arab world along ideological lines, pursuing proxy wars against fellow Arab states, and the marginalization of strong political and social currents in the region are not serving the best interest of the Gulf, in particular, and the Middle East, in general. To this end, it would be wiser for the Gulf countries to focus more on the imminent security challenges by uniting ranks and resolving the ongoing regional conflicts.



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