

THE DIPLOMATIC CRISIS IN THE PERSIAN GULF AS A SYMPTOM OF THE SHIFT IN REGIONAL POWER DYNAMICS

By Eliska Puckova

The diplomatic crisis in the Persian Gulf, initiated by the severance of diplomatic and economic relations with Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain and Egypt, has rapidly escalated into **the most serious rift among the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) since its creation in 1981**. While marking the culmination of long-standing tensions between Qatar and its GCC neighbors over security and energy matters, the diplomatic crisis underscored the Iranian-Saudi rivalry in the region and highlighted the Iranian-Turkish role in the **upcoming shift in power dynamics in the Gulf**.

On June 5, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt announced having cut diplomatic ties with Qatar. Qatari diplomats were given 48 hours to leave the countries and Qatari visitors and residents were asked to depart within 2 weeks. The 4 states also withdrew their diplomats from Qatar and banned their citizens from traveling to the country. Simultaneously, Qatari forces were suspended from their participation in the Saudi-led military coalition which has been fighting over the past 2 years to dislodge the Iran-backed Houthi (Zaidi) rebels from Sana'a (to remind: Qatar had deployed 1,000 troops in support of the anti-Houthi campaign). Qatari troops in the Bahrain-headquartered U.S. Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT) were also ordered by the Bahraini government to leave the country. Moreover, the 4 countries have announced the closure of borders with Qatar, which resulted in several major air companies cancelling all their flights to Qatar and the effective isolation of the latter.

The 4 countries justified this abrupt chain of events with accusations of the Qatari government destabilizing the region and supporting Iran, along with terrorist groups including Al-Qaeda, Islamic State and Muslim Brotherhood. Later on June 5 the Yemeni internationally recognized government also announced the severance of diplomatic ties with Qatar and accused the latter of providing support to Houthi insurgents.

The Qatari government denied all the accusations and labeled the severance of diplomatic ties as a foreign attempt to “impose guardianship on the state” that therefore represents the “violation of Qatari sovereignty.” In the meantime, Abdullah

al-Thinni, the Prime Minister of the **Libyan government in Tobruk, also announced having cut ties with Qatar**, while the Libyan diplomat Abdul Basit al-Badri exacerbated the tensions by accusing Qatar of assassination attempts against the leader of the Libyan National Army Khalifa Haftar, as well as of an alleged plot to blow up the Council of Representatives in Tobruk to impede Libyan political agreements.

Moreover, from June 5 to June 15, the Philippines temporarily suspended deployment of Filipino workers to Qatar, citing the concerns over their security as the reason for this decision, which was not inconsequential: the economy of the natural gas-rich rental state of Qatar relies heavily on migrant workers mostly from Philippines and India, especially when thousands of them have been hired to build facilities for the Qatar football World Cup due in 2022. Subsequently, **Maldives, Mauritania, Comoros, Senegal and Eritrea also severed ties with Qatar, while Jordan, Niger, Chad and Djibouti announced the downgrade of their diplomatic representations in the country**. In response to Eritrea and Djibouti statements, on June 14 Qatar pulled its troops from the Djibouti/Eritrea border, after mediating the territorial dispute between the two countries since 2010 and using the area as a springboard for the deployment in the Yemeni war. Finally, also on June 14, the websites of the Doha-based international Al-Jazeera network were blocked in Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt.

To remind, the seemingly unforeseen Saudi-initiated **crisis has been escalating since May 23, when the website of the Qatari state-run news agency QNA was hacked** by unknown attackers, and series of comments falsely attributed to the Qatari emir Sheikh Tamim were broadcasted, including his alleged support for Iran, Hamas, Hezbollah and Israel. Despite the Qatari announcement of the cyber-attack, several regional media outlets kept running the emir's apparent statements. Immediately after the Qatari announcement of the attack, FBI stated that it would help Qatar to investigate the origin of the incident, while on June 7, the CNN published an investigative article, according to which the FBI officials accused Russia of having conducted the cyber-attack in order to cause split among the U.S. and its allies. On one hand, it must be strongly emphasized that no official sources including FBI or CIA confirmed the CNN story and that Moscow resolutely denied these allegations. On the other hand, Qatari attorney general later claimed that "certain iPhones originating from countries laying siege to Qatar were used in the hack," although he has not provided any further details. The origin of the cyber-attack therefore remains unclear.

Nonetheless, **the crisis was fully launched when Qatar was accused** – initially by Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain – **of harboring "a multitude of terrorist and sectarian groups** that aim to create instability in the region." As per evidence to support these assertions, on June 8, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt issued a joint statement including a list of terrorists and terrorist groups allegedly supported by Qatar. According to this statement, the **59 individuals and 12 organizations on this list** are "serving the suspicious political program of Qatar," while Qatar immediately rejected these "unjustified accusations."

Kuwait and Oman have therefore remained the only GCC members who have not cut the diplomatic ties with Qatar. Oman – despite its traditional role of the regional conflict mediator – has not issued any comments on the crisis. Kuwaiti emir Sheikh Sabah took initiative to mediate the crisis, although on June 27, Kuwaiti authorities prohibited the alleged 59 Qatari-backed terrorists from entering Kuwait “in order to avoid diplomatic conflicts with Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt.”

Qatar has been indeed known – similarly to Saudi Arabia – for having maintained complex links to several armed groups operating in the region.

In 2014, 2 blacklisted Al-Qaeda “senior financiers” identified as Khalifa Muhammad Turki al-Subaiy and Abd al-Rahman bin Umayr al-Nuaymi, were reported to be living freely in Doha, despite the country’s pledge to fight against jihadist movements. Additionally, it is worth mentioning that **Al-Qaeda was quick to express its support to Qatar** facing the diplomatic crisis. On June 13, the former mufti of Al-Qaeda Mahfouz Ould Al-Walid, also known as Abu Hafs al-Mauritani announced on Twitter his support for Qatar while denouncing the Saudi stance. To remind, Al-Walid had acted as a senior leader of Al-Qaeda under the direction of Osama bin Laden; after the 9/11, he fled together with several other Al-Qaeda commanders to Iran, before being extradited to Mauritania in 2012. Furthermore, in a video titled “The masks are falling off” issued on June 15 by the Al-Qaeda media branch Al-Malahem, a senior leader of **AQAP** (Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula) Khalid Bin Umar Batarfi **denounced the boycott of Qatar** and labeled the list of 59 terrorists as “a form of war against Islam and Muslims.” Batarfi also urged ulemas, students and jihadist movements to wage jihad against the GCC countries boycotting Qatar and stated that “any forms of negotiations with these countries today are useless.”

Previously, in March 2015, the sources linked to the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Al-Nusra Front disclosed that the group considered cutting its ties with Al Qaeda and create an independent entity to fight President Bashar Al-Assad and the Islamic State. In this context, **Qatar had been accused of having offered financial support to Al-Nusra in exchange for breaking its alliance with Al-Qaeda.** It was hypothesized that Al-Nusra as a purely Syrian-based insurgency would represent a strategic asset on the battlefield for Qatar, whose goal was to remove President Bashar al-Assad from power while defeating the Islamic State. This attempt to legitimize a terrorist group was eventually unsuccessful in case of Al-Nusra, but accomplished in case of **Hamas whose leaders have been regularly hosted by Qatari officials in Doha over the past several years.** On May 1, Khaled Mashaal, the Hamas leader in exile, publicly launched Hamas new political program at a news conference organized in Doha, while more recently, on June 11, the Qatari Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman reiterated the official Qatari support for the group by claiming that Hamas is a “legitimate resistance movement.”

Moreover, following the GCC accusations of Qatari state-sponsored terrorism, on June 5 the Financial Times published an investigative report, quoting “Syrian rebels and diplomats,” according to which **at least \$700 million were paid to Iran and**

Shiite militias in order to facilitate the liberation of 26 members of the Qatari royal family kidnapped in December 2015 from a hunting trip near Bassora, in southern Iraq, by the paramilitary group Kata'ib Hezbollah (“Brigades of the Party of God”) known to be financially supported by Iranian government and backed by the Lebanon-based Hezbollah. The Qatari evacuation agreement was allegedly also linked to a separate agreement, signed in March 2017, which aimed to facilitate the evacuation of 4 besieged towns in Syria (2 surrounded by jihadist and 2 besieged by Shiite militias). As such, **at least \$200 million within the aforementioned sum allegedly went to Islamist groups in Syria**, notably Hayat Tahrir al-Sham coalition dominated by the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (former Al-Nusra Front). Qatar officially rejected this investigative report, while on June 11, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi issued a statement claiming that the alleged ransom money has been deposited in the Iraqi central bank, but never cashed out, without providing further details.

While the accusations of financing terrorist groups were used by Saudi alliance as the main pretext to isolate Qatar, the Saudi Foreign Affairs Minister’s appeal on Qatar to “sever ties with Hamas and its historic parent, the pan-Arab Muslim Brotherhood” reminds us that the **anti-Qatari initiative partly originates in the GCC countries displeasure with Qatari policies towards the 2011 Arab Spring.**

In fact, through its international Al-Jazeera network, Qatar had attempted to influence the Arab Spring political turmoil by offering extensive and rather positive media coverage to anti-governmental Islamist actors like Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, opposition groups in Syria and Libya, or the Ennahda party in Tunisia. As such, **the Egyptian Arab Spring had clearly illustrated this rivalry between Qatar and Saudi Arabia** (with UAE and Bahrain following the latter), in view of the opposition between Saudi-backed Al-Sissi – openly disputing Al-Jazeera coverage of the 2010-2011 Arab Spring in Egypt by referring to the network as “hostile media” – versus the Qatari-backed **Muslim Brotherhood, whom Saudi Arabia qualified as a terrorist group and whom it considers a major competitor for the dominant position within the Sunni world.** As a result, between March and November 2014, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain had temporarily suspended ties with Qatar over its support for the Muslim Brotherhood movement.

Nevertheless, over the past years the major source of discord between Qatar and Saudi Arabia have been Qatari relations with Iran, repeatedly qualified by Saudi leaders as “very ambiguous.”

It is crucial to remember that Qatar and Iran share the ownership and exploration rights of the world's largest natural gas field, known as “South Pars / North Dome field,” which holds at least 50 trillion cubic meters of gas reserves and which is situated in the territorial waters of both countries. Although Qatar joined the GCC, whose traditional approach is to isolate or confront Iran, **a stable relation with Iran has been, in fact, vital for securing the Qatari key source of wealth and development.** As such, it is also worth mentioning that Qatar

represents the single biggest natural gas powerhouse in the Gulf region, exporting 80 million tons of liquefied natural gas (LNG) supplies per year mainly to Europe, India, Japan and South Korea. Qatari exports of gas and oil have not been affected by the diplomatic crisis so far, as the main export routes of Qatari LNG vessels via Iranian and Omani waters remain accessible. Furthermore, on June 18, the CEO of the state-owned Qatar Petroleum emphasized that for now Qatar will not cut gas supply to the UAE, pumped via the so called “Dolphin pipeline,” as it would “do a great harm to the people of the UAE, who are considered like brothers.” Nonetheless, in case of the intensification of the crisis, **it cannot be excluded that Qatar uses the dependency of its GCC neighbors on Qatari gas as political leverage** and suspends the gas supply deals with them as a retaliatory measure. In this context, this political leverage, as well as the aforementioned stable relations with Iran, remain also relevant for Qatar in view of **the growing regional economic rivalry with the oil giant Saudi Arabia – in addition to the potential territorial ambitions of the latter**, as illustrated by the Saudi statement on June 5 describing Qatar as the “extension of Saudi brethren in the Kingdom.”

The ongoing Qatari crisis – currently serving as yet another area for the manifestation of the above described Iranian-Saudi antagonism – can therefore ultimately result in substantial shift in power dynamics in the Gulf.

Firstly, we can hypothesize that in the upcoming months **the Qatari crisis may reflect the rivalry between the United States and Russia fighting for the dominant position in the region, especially in view of the finalization of the anti-IS campaign in Iraq and Syria.**

The United States was among the countries which offered to mediate the Qatari crisis (alongside Kuwait, Iran, Morocco, France, Pakistan and Turkey). The U.S. motivation to appease the regional tensions has clearly been partly motivated by the fact that **Qatar hosts one of the largest US military bases in the area**, known as “Al-Udeid,” in which over 10,000 U.S. troops are stationed and which allows the U.S. army to conduct air and drone operations especially in Syria. The U.S. President Donald Trump sided with Saudi Arabia in the dispute by praising on Twitter the severance of diplomatic relations as a part of the fight against terrorism: however, on the same day, Pentagon has issued a statement claiming that the U.S. military is “grateful for Qatar’s support of U.S. army presence in the country and enduring commitment to regional security,” and later called on Saudi Arabia, Egypt and UAE to ease the Qatari blockade, as it is “hindering” the ability to plan for long-term anti-IS military operations.

As for the Russian involvement, on June 10, the Russian Foreign Affairs Minister Sergey Lavrov met with his Qatari counterpart in Moscow and called on the peaceful solution to the Gulf crisis, but the Russian President Vladimir Putin has not taken any official stance towards the Qatari crisis. As such, although the previously problematic relations between Doha and Moscow have thawed over the past several years, **it is highly unlikely that Qatar will benefit from open political support of**

Russia. The latter can now take advantage of the Qatari political isolation to put pressure on the latter **within their competition in supplying energy to Europe.** To remind, in addition to important natural gas reserves, Qatari gas has one of the lowest extraction costs in the world which consequently makes its prices competitive: for now, Russia's Gazprom is one of the few able to compete with Qatar's influence in LNG exports in Europe. This fierce competition had been previously illustrated by the Qatari proposal of Qatar-Turkey gas pipeline, which would connect "South Pars / North Dome field" with Turkey, where it would subsequently connect with the Nabucco pipeline to supply Turkey and Europe. The pipeline was due to be conducted via Saudi Arabia and Syria, but the Syrian president Assad allegedly refused the project to protect its Russian ally's Gazprom supply monopoly. The Qatar-Turkey pipeline issue therefore supports the hypothesis of Qatar having backed the Syrian insurgent groups with the ultimate goal to replace the Syrian pro-Assad government with a Qatari-supported regime – although it must be emphasized that this hypothesis could not have been verified by independent sources so far.

Secondly, as the Qatari borders shutdown resulted in economic siege, in which the food shipments imported via Saudi Arabia have been blocked at the Qatari border (over 40% of Qatari food imports rely on the land transport via Saudi Arabia), **Iran and Turkey immediately stepped in to openly support the Qatari stance.** Since June 8 Iran has been sending 1,100 tons of food and water supplies to Qatar daily, while on June 25, the Iranian President Hassan Rouhani stressed out that Tehran would stand by Qatar, labeled as a "friendly nation." Simultaneously, on June 7, Turkish parliament approved a draft bill to **deploy its troops to a Turkish military base in Qatar,** which passed with 240 votes in favor with strong support from the ruling Justice and Development Party. On the same day, the Turkish Foreign Ministry announced that the Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif would visit Turkey in order to "discuss bilateral and regional matters" and to "coordinate a response."

Meanwhile, on June 21, the Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud deposed his nephew Mohammad bin Nayef bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud from the position of the Saudi Arabia Crown prince, to which he then designated his son Mohammad bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud. Qatari Emir has congratulated Mohammed bin Salman, who also acts as the Saudi Defense Minister, on his appointment and claimed that it will contribute to "more progress for brotherly relations between the two brotherly countries." However, **the new Saudi Crown prince will hardly undertake any change of the current Saudi policy towards Qatar:** quite the contrary, since 2 days after Mohammed bin Salman's appointment, the Saudi-led alliance boycotting Qatar issued a **13-point list of non-negotiable demands, which included the shutdown of all media outlets funded by Qatar, the severance of relations with Iran and with terrorist groups, the closure of the Turkish military base in Qatar,** and the regular compliance audits conducted in Qatar by other GCC countries. Qatar was given 10 days to comply, although the Saudi alliance has not indicated the course of action taken in case of Qatari refusal. In response, on June 28, Qatar officially condemned Saudi Arabia's refusal to negotiate these demands: the situation has therefore reached a stalemate.

While the diplomatic crisis has highlighted the disagreements among the GCC countries and isolated Qatar on the regional political scene, it also demonstrated the extent to which the accusations of terrorism support represent an efficient diplomatic tool to discredit a country. Thus, further escalation of the crisis will highly likely lead not only to **the security destabilization of the Persian Gulf, but also to the regional empowerment of Iran and Turkey in opposition to the rising ambitions of Saudi Arabia.**

END.

Copyright© ESISC 2017