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To cite this article: Alabi, Jude Bamidele and Hüseyin Işıksal (2024) “The Code of 2017 Qatar-GCC Diplomatic Crisis: The Trial of the Status Quo with Change”, New Middle Eastern Studies 12 (1), pp. 80-96.

Online Publication Date: 9 August 2024

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The Code of 2017 Qatar-GCC Diplomatic Crisis: The Trial of the Status Quo with Change

Jude Bamidele Alabi* and Hüseyin Işıksal**

Abstract

This article aims to provide a synopsis of the geopolitical framework that emerged from the Gulf crisis, which began with the dispute between Qatar and other GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) countries but spread beyond the area. On June 5, 2017, the Arab Quartet—consisting of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt—suddenly cut off all economic and diplomatic ties with Qatar and instituted a land and air embargo, accusing the country of being too close to Iran and providing material and moral support to terrorist groups. This move stunned the international community. Demands were set for Qatar to fulfill in full within a few days following the embargo. With time new alliances emerged, as the Gulf states are looking beyond the GCC as their principal regional partner. Given the intricacy of the regional conflicts, the new regional alignments seem expected to be more indicative of evolving coalitions based on issues than static alliances. This article examines the GCC crisis through the lens of the neorealist balance of power theory, which seeks to explain and understand the issue via the transformation of regional power dynamics. Knowing full well that the Gulf States are somewhat divided and distrustful of one another, this will undoubtedly persist in regional politics for some time. The region is already struggling with many uprisings, rising tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran, happening around the same time just makes matters worse. This paper examines the background of the conflict and offers some suggestions as to why Qatar decided to move alliances.

Keywords: Foreign Policy; Diplomatic Conflict; Saudi Arabia; Qatar; Balance of Power

Introduction

On 5th June 2017, after the diplomatic breakup with the small rich Gulf state of Qatar; the quartet of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, and Bahrain launched a ground, water, and air embargo on Qatar. This was in response to an article on the website of the Qatari News Agency (QNA) that allegedly claimed Qatari Amir, Sheik Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, as endorsing Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Muslim Brotherhood although the QNA claimed to have been hacked (Pinnell 2018). In the following days, the...
world watched the bitter feud and verbal tussle between Qatar and the blockading countries. The most severe impact of the blockade was the expulsion of Qatar nationals from the blockading nations and requesting their citizens to leave Qatar. In consequence, the forced redirection of flight routes by Qatar Airways, lead to Qatar’s high reliance on Turkey and Iran for imports of food and medical commodities (Jones 2017: 6-8). The diplomatic crisis which was expected to be resolved within weeks lasted for almost four years until January 2021, when a deal was brokered by the countries involved to reach an end to the crisis. This resolution was well hailed by the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Antonio Gutierrez and the embargoes were lifted (UN News, 2021).

In this article, we analyse the 2017 Qatar- Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) diplomatic crisis. Arguably, this crisis was a very significant case in terms of providing an example of a tidal wave as a challenge to the established status quo in the Middle East. As a theoretical tool, we use the Neo-Realist balance of power theory in order to illuminate the causal connection of Qatar’s behaviour in the Middle East over the past decades particularly as steps have been taken by Qatar’s strides towards balancing the power of Saudi Arabia in the Gulf Region. Another approach used in this article is Snyder et al.’s “Decision-Making as an Approach to the Study of International Politics” in terms of analysing how the modes of decision-making show the roles of those involved, and how they understand a situation and the different factors involved to opt for a particular course of action. Simply stating, “competence” is a key reason that shapes decision-maker’s actions, their level, and sphere of authority. Moreover, their “attitude” toward the subject matter is likely to affect their choices, their level of interest impacts, and if it is within the decision-making structure, then “knowledge” is also a factor that can affect the mind-set of the decision-makers (Synder et al. 2002: 23-52). In this connection, this approach is beneficial in understanding Qatari and Saudi Arabian policymakers’ beliefs, ideas, as well as their surrounding conditions, attitudes, choices, and motives on this crisis.

To sum up, Qatar’s and Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy decisions are examined in relation to both its internal and external factors at the time of the crisis. It is worth stressing that both Qatar and Saudi Arabia were under strong international and internal pressures on their foreign policy during the time of the crisis. Moreover, both Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia and Emir Tamim of Qatar epitomize the younger breed leadership in the Gulf, both are working for their political interests and protecting their family objectives, with attention to the historic factors which their royal families face. These conditions grant impetus to expand on their foreign policies. Deriving from these points, the code of the 2017 Qatar-GCC diplomatic crisis is examined in three parts. The article starts with a brief analysis of the background of the crisis. In the second part the underlying factors of the diplomatic crisis are elucidated under four categories namely; the Arab Spring and the effects of the Syrian Crisis, the role of Al Jazeera and the Muslim Brotherhood, the Iranian factor, and the role of alliance with Turkey. In the final section, the balance of power theory is presented as the theoretical instrument to explain the crisis. The article ends with the concluding remarks in which the main arguments are summarized and important findings of the research are represented.
Background of the Crisis

Following the annexation of al-Hasa oasis by King Abdul Aziz in 1913, there has been a complicated and shaky relationship between the Qataris and the Saudis ever since. Qatar understands that it is a small state that needs to keep a positive relationship with the bigger state of Saudi Arabia (Zahlan 1979: 46-58). There are six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) of which Saudi Arabia and Qatar are both members. The organization is a multilateral economic and political association of the six Persian Gulf monarchies that was created during the peak of the Iran-Iraq War. The main objective is to contend with the Iranian resurgence through its revolutionary monarchy to face the Iranian push-down that rose strongly in opposition to the existing order of Sunni monarchies around the region (Bianco and Stansfield 2018: 622-623). The organization is also suited well with the understanding of “discovering” of their differences from the rest of the Arab world for the rich Arab states as advanced in Hazem Beblawi and Giacomo Luciani’s edited volume The Rentier State (1987). These factors hindered the coming crisis within the organization for some time.

However, having said these, the issue of Qatar’s foreign policy independence from Saudi influence and activism has been more prominent since the era of Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani. During this era, the Saudis regularly were getting annoyed at the Qataris for taking deviations from the GCC pathway (Bianco and Stansfield 2018: 628). As the Arab Spring escalated in 2013 and 2014, Qatari officials were pressured into signing the Riyadh agreement to side with monarchies and not interfere with activities within affected countries in the region. This was because the Qatari Emirate was perceived to be supporting the Muslim Brotherhood and pro-democracy clamours during those turbulent times. Thus, the new Qatari Amir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, adopted policies that Saudi, the UAE, and Bahrain opposed (Bianco and Stansfield 2018: 620). This led a couple of GCC states to withdraw their ambassadors from Qatar.

That was almost as much to the surprise of Qatar as it was to the world that the 2017 events had developed into an interesting direction. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt presented Qatar with thirteen conditions that the country needed to meet for the removal of the economic blockade and restoration of diplomatic ties. Notable changes included the downgrading of diplomatic ties with Iran, cutting off all links to perceived terrorist organizations, closing down Al Jazeera, and curtailing military cooperation with Turkey. These terms were in correlation with the previous Riyadh agreement (Al Jazeera 2018). The full list of the conditions included:

1. To restrain diplomatic ties with Iran and close its diplomatic missions there. Expel members of Iran’s Revolutionary Guards and cut off any joint military cooperation with Iran. Only trade and commerce with Iran that complies with the United States (US) and international sanctions will be permitted.
2. Sever all ties to terrorist organizations, specifically the Muslim Brotherhood, Islamic State, al-Qaida, and Lebanon’s Hezbollah. Formally declare those entities as terrorist groups.
4. Shut down news outlets that Qatar funds, directly and indirectly, including Arabi21, Rassd, Al Arabiya Al-Jadeed, and Middle East Eye.
5. Immediately terminate the Turkish military presence currently in Qatar and end any joint military cooperation with Turkey inside of Qatar.
6. Stop all means of funding for individuals, groups, or organizations that have been designated as terrorists by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, Bahrain, the United States, and other countries.
7. Hand over terrorist figures and wanted individuals from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain to their countries of origin. Freeze their assets, and provide any desired information about their residency, movements, and finances.
8. End interference in sovereign countries’ internal affairs. Stop granting citizenship to wanted nationals from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain. Revoke Qatari citizenship for existing nationals where such citizenship violates those countries’ laws.
9. Stop all contacts with the political opposition in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain. Hand over all files detailing Qatar’s prior contacts with and support for those opposition groups.
10. Pay reparations and compensation for loss of life and other, financial losses caused by Qatar’s policies in recent years. The sum will be determined in coordination with Qatar.
11. Align itself with the other Persian Gulf and Arab countries militarily, politically, socially, and economically, as well as on economic matters, in line with an agreement reached with Saudi Arabia in 2014.
12. Agree to all the demands within 10 days of it being submitted to Qatar, or the list becomes invalid. The document does not specify what the countries will do if Qatar refuses to comply.
13. Consent to monthly audits for the first year after agreeing to the demands, then once per quarter during the second year. For the following 10 years, Qatar would be monitored annually for compliance.”

Qatar’s reaction to the above-mentioned conditions was unambiguous. Qatar was so determined to not break the laws of their country or their ideals on sovereignty. In order to provide peace-building measures for the problem, the international community was urged to address the conflict between the parties and to provide diplomatic resources (Falk 2018). Moreover, Turkey and Iran stepped in to provide a counter-blockade fated umbrella for Qatar’s sovereignty as Qatar vehemently rejected the demands of the blockading countries to foster the country’s self-sustainability (Waldman et al. 2017: 36-37).

The Arab Spring and the Effects of the Syrian Crisis

The “Arab Spring” can basically be defined as demonstrations and rebellions of Arab people against their autocratic leaders’ rule, corruption, human rights violations, and poor economic performance (Işıksal 2018: 17). The events in Tunisia were the starting point of the Arab
Spring uprisings. These revolutions commenced in the year 2010, and then civil disturbances and uprisings quickly spread throughout the Arab countries. Increasing unemployment among the youths also spurred the unrest. People who have been lost their jobs or no longer able to find work and others who cannot afford to meet their basic needs and the ones who are finding food prohibitively expensive played a major role in the Arab Spring uprisings (Qadir Mushtaq & Afzal 2017: 47). The world also witnessed the eruption of Muslim Brotherhood as one of the leading political groups of the uprisings. During this period, several monarchies in the region began the process of reform requirements as requested by their citizens in order to not be destabilized by these uprisings due to unsustainable and ambiguous outcomes of the overthrowing of dictatorships in Libya and Egypt, and Tunisia.

Throughout the uprisings, Qatar was not among the nations directly affected by the events in the Middle East (Bank et al. 2014: 163). This tranquillity could be understood primarily by the internal politics of Qatar. The approximate number of Qatari citizens compared to immigrant workers is about 15% of the total population. Qatar is a very prosperous country that looks after the well-being of its citizens. It is the richest nation in the world calculating per capita GDP. By the year 2008, the per capita GDP (the amount of economic activity per citizen) was calculated to be around an astounding $448,246 (Ulrichsen 2012). Qatar is an oil-rich country and controls the world’s third-largest gas reserves. The citizenry of Qatar enjoys education and government hand-outs as well as much of all of their daily necessities being completely free; including having nonstop access to healthcare and electricity (Bank et al 2014: 163-179). At this point, it should be underlined that residents and immigrants do not participate in those benefits and would not receive such economic and social incentives. The willingness of the government to ensure citizens partaking of the country’s riches and spending it wisely on welfare programs has prevented increasing dissatisfaction among the populace and revolt against the government.

Additionally, Asda’s Burson-Marsteller’s Annual Youth Survey research in 2010 revealed that only around 33% (a third) of Qatari youth agreed with the idea of a democracy. During the period in which the research was done, however, citizens of the UAR on the other hand for instance as a comparison, presented approximately 75% in favour of democracy (Ulrichsen 2012). Last but not least it is worth mentioning that the ruling of the country, the Al Thani family is comprised of a significant percentage of Qatari nationals, who benefit from Qatari legislation that is specifically tailored to the advantage of the elite.

In the past, the international community tended to view Qatar as a conciliator in regional politics. Qatar’s administration elected to go from that point of view and reformed its foreign policy to be based on interventionism in response to the regional unrests. Many other Persian Gulf states found themselves caught up in the middle of the turmoil when the Arab uprisings have started and relied on their domestic developments to stabilize their state before thinking of foreign engagements. Qatar, however, took advantage of its role as a well-established government and enjoyed participating in the revolutionary atmosphere of the Arab Spring. Using its standing as a rich, stable, and reputable Gulf state, the country largely supported Muslim Brotherhood along with the other Islamist and other political revolutionary groups throughout the Middle East including Egypt, Libya, and Syria. The country also placed itself as a counterweight to the crisis in North Africa and supported Tunisia and Egypt by contributing financially during the aftermath of the uprisings (Ulrichsen 2014).
Qatar was supportive of the upheaval and regime change in neighbouring countries except for Bahrain. The realization that the Saudis played an overwhelming role in influencing the neighbour states like Bahrain or Yemen, Qatar did not take an active role in the uprisings in these countries. Instead, Qatar positioned itself with Saudi Arabia and kept a good relationship with the other GCC monarchies. It could be put forward that in terms of foreign policy on regional issues in the period of Arab Spring, Qatar mostly complied with the lead of the Saudis similar to the other GCC countries but with regards to immediate problems, Qatar and the monarchies of the GCC depended on their policies (Ulrichsen 2014).

The opposition’s effort aimed to topple Syrian President Assad reached its peak in 2011 and remained resolute in the following years. The result of this was that Qatar and Saudi Arabia, which had previously backed rebels and extremist groups opposed to Assad, decided to align themselves with the opposition and with the Syrian revolutionaries. The civil war in Syria is seen as primarily an internal war between the Sunni population and the Shiites, however, due to the GCC and Iranian involvement, it is seen as a regional conflict as well (Khatib 2017: 386-388). The strong participation of GCC states during the Syrian unrest was due to the fear of instability to be caused by the Muslim Brotherhood and other Muslim fundamentalist groups like the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS). Also, they were concerned about the spreading of Iranian influence in Syria (Khatib 2017: 385). Thus, these factors emboldened the GCC countries to sponsor opposition groups with both military and economic assistance.

Part of the reason for the growing sectarian strife in the GCC has been the recent conflict in Syria between Saudi Arabia with the support of the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar that undergoes its agenda in Syria. In other words, the two Middle Eastern countries that pursued distinct courses of action inevitably found themselves at odds with each other (Hokayem 2014). Sheikh Tamim aims to increase Qatar’s role in vital international affairs, including the Syrian crisis. Qatar sided with one camp of Assad’s opponents and Saudi Arabia picked sides with rebels but other factions. They were considered to be adversaries of Assad’s but went about things differently (Hokayem 2014). With the words of Hokayem, “Saudi Arabia’s broad range of contacts in Syria comprised liberals, bureaucrats, businessmen and tribal chiefs with traditional ties in the Arabian Peninsula, as well as Muslim clerics of various persuasions, including Salafists” (Hokayem 2014: 59-62). From the allies in the area, Saudi Arabia was able to enlist the UAE and Jordan to join their cause.

On the other hand, Qatar's list of contacts was shorter, comprising secularists, businessmen, and, most importantly, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and its associates (Hokayem 2014: 63-64). Turkey joined Qatar, after being persuaded by Qatar's increasing role as a regional power and determination to pursue a new foreign policy. Syria’s rebels were estimated to have been getting assistance worth 1 billion dollars from Qatar because of their increased regional position as an influential state and as a top source for weapons supplies to the Syrian rebels (Khatib 2017: 394-396).

In consequence, there soon developed tensions between Qatar and Saudi Arabia over the control of Syrian rebel groups, whom they were believed to be provided with funds to, and contentions over deliberate attempts to help insurgent Islamist groups (Hokayem 2014: 62-63). Several of these supported rebel groups were viewed as a challenge in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which is known to work against the monarchy, particularly the Muslim
Brotherhood that is seen as a danger to the regimes. In 2013, Qatar handed the seat of Syria’s government to Assad’s opponents at the Arab League Summit and granted permission for their embassy to be opened in Doha. These actions have worried the GCC States (Hokayem 2014: 72-76). The crisis reached the level that both countries were involved in a proxy war in Syria where Syrian rebel group Al-Rahman Legion that is supported by Qatar has been fighting the Saudi Arabian-backed Jaysh al-Islam coalition since 2017 (Reuters 2018.)

Several scholars have suggested that the reason for the creation of terrorist groups such as ISIS is linked to the clash between Saudi Arabia and Qatar’s coalitions in the crisis (Hokayem 2014: 64-70; Khatib 2017: 396-400). A more prominent reason to maintain a military presence in the focus on fighting ISIS was instilled over Syria than trying to defeat Assad and radical Islamists’ plan to influence world politics. This played into Syria’s destabilizing civil war insecurities, to the extent that the United States (US) and other Western states' interests in Syria were increased to battling Assad and opponents who are seen as radical Islamists. It is the rivalry between Qatar and Saudi Arabia that has contributed to the unstable relationship between them. To better place itself in the international region, Qatar allied with Turkey and that was able to weaken the influence of Saudi Arabia both in Syria and in the region.

The Role of Al Jazeera and the Muslim Brotherhood

One of the most widely watched satellite TV stations in the Middle East is Al Jazeera that is Qatari government-funded international Arabic news channel founded in 1996. Before the Arab Spring, Al Jazeera and its outlets were known for showing current events in unbiased reporting while concentrating on Middle East politics. Al Jazeera has been scrutinized for its support of the US policies when the US wider audiences see it as “liberal”, however, in reality, Al Jazeera English offers a more progressive perspective because it extends to the freedom of the press to people accustomed to the West. As an influential media source, Al Jazeera had a significant impact on the Arab Spring uprisings because it offered people a place to debate and gain information about the countries that were affected by the uprisings and compare their circumstances with the neighbouring Arab countries. There have been several Middle Eastern countries that have limited international media to decrease political discontent and protest movements due to bans. Nevertheless, having said this, Arab masses find several ways to find a way to communicate and organize, including Facebook, Twitter, and text messages as well as Al Jazeera, thus giving Al Jazeera a wider audience (Tétreault 2011: 44).

The governments of the Gulf States ended up using Al Jazeera as a justification for more repressive media laws as the region evolved into the more closed system as it is today. Al Jazeera was seen as a point of liberalization in the 20th century, however, since the early 2000s, it became visible that Al Jazeera was leaning more towards Islamist content that made it popular among some segments as the new age media (Maziad 2018: 33-38). In the course of the uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, and Yemen, Al Jazeera displayed the events but avoiding pictures of violence in Bahrain, which targeted Shiites. Also, Al Jazeera showed footage of areas where the unrest was quelled and had calm like the capital city Manama, and
the TV network did not show the heat of the action. The reason why Qatar had not intervened in the issue at this point was because of the regional policies and this was not good for the channel or the nation (Tétreault 2011: 629-633). When, for example, Al Jazeera criticized the Saudi King in its news coverage in 2002, the Kingdom severed diplomatic ties with Doha for several years.

During the Arab uprisings, however, much to the annoyance of the Saudis and the United Arab Emirates, the criticism was particularly directed at the Saudi royal family and emirates on TV. Furthermore, the Egyptian government was also unimpressed with Al Jazeera's Arab and Islamic political leanings, and its sentiments for the Muslim Brotherhood. In consequence, it was not a surprise that Al Jazeera’s elimination was mandated in the 13-point agreement of 2017 agreed upon between the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt, which demanded the immediate shutdown of the network. Public diplomacy is often referred to as actions taken by the government of a state to have an impact on the public or elite sentiment in another state. In practice, it is the efforts towards transforming the second nation's foreign policy for its benefits (Maziad 2018: 55-56). It is believed that “international and regional broadcasting has long been a means through which governments implement their public diplomacy strategies” (Samuel-Azran 2013: 76). In this connection, Al Jazeera has become Qatar's primary means of public diplomacy, and an asset to the nation as a state-owned and state-sponsored channel. Al Jazeera has implemented its hybrid approach to public diplomacy, in which state-run television channels have credibility in the journalism community (Samuel-Azran 2013: 76-81). During the uprisings, Qatar used live television channels and Al Jazeera, in particular, to successfully manipulate public opinion. For instance, everyone could see on their screens how the Gulf countries moved in motion concerning protests and demonstrations by how well-developed Qatar's broadcasting capabilities were.

The activities of Al Jazeera also played a key role in promoting the Muslim Brotherhood and the negative opinions of the Mubarak regime. The movement of support for Morsi was very noticeable in Qatari foreign policy, even at times when the status quo was most strongly challenged. Qatar heavily invested in loans and aid to Egypt during the Muslim Brotherhood’s government (Ulrichsen, 2013). Also, Al Jazeera started a new office during the Egyptian revolution but was cut off because of its position which favoured the Muslim Brotherhood and its’ standing against the Egyptian government (Maziad 2018: 38). This happened right after Morsi was ousted from the presidency and the reign of Sisi began. Since 2011, members of the brotherhood have worked for the Al Jazeera TV network (Ibid). Muslim Brotherhood membership heightened the challenge and the status of interlocutor publicity of the news network, putting it in a complicated position. In consequence, the Sisi Administration attempted to force Al Jazeera, to fully end its operation. Monarchical governments which provided economic and diplomatic support for Sisi’s Egypt like Saudi Arabia and the UAE were also frustrated with Al Jazeera's activities and also sought its effective shut down (Mazaid 2018: 42-27). The Arab Spring uprisings demonstrated that Qatar will engage in Al Jazeera-like actions against these regimes in the future.

To sum up, the fear of the Muslim Brotherhood and its influence on the wealth and power in Saudi Arabia and the UAE was the main driving factor behind the problem between Qatar and blockading countries (Freer 2018: 118-119). All the countries that imposed the
embargo wanted Qatar to classify the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization. Particularly Saudi Arabia is worried about the spread of the Muslim Brotherhood presence in the region. There are opinions of the members of the Saudi aristocracy who hold the claim that the family will deal with the Brotherhood because the movement is considered the most menacing threat to the dynasty’s life although the Shia demographics do not reach even a third of the total population (Khatib 2017:19-22).

Additionally, the Brotherhood’s power in Egypt has caused extra concerns. Mohamed Morsi as the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood became the first democratically elected President of Egypt after the Arab Spring Uprisings. While President Morsi was deposed by the Egyptian forces led by Sisi, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE continued to provide financial aid to this effect (Ulrichsen 2014: 88-90). This is the second time Qatar has found itself caught in the middle of a diplomatic dispute with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the UAR, and Bahrain over the Muslim Brotherhood after 2014 when these monarchies had broken connections with Qatar diplomatically (Roberts 2014b: 24-26). Saudi Arabia declared the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist group and threatened other countries who support the organization in any way of what would happen to them including the consequences that may include them being a target of Saudi-led coalition airstrikes. The GCC dispute was settled overtime when the Qatari government stated the deportation of people supposedly linked to the Muslim Brotherhood (Ulrichsen 2014: 91-93). In the 2017 crisis, once again this issue was brought to the fore where Qatar was accused of harbouring members of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Iranian Factor

With over 82 million people, Iran has more population than all the GCC countries put together. Iranian policies have long been perceived as a threat to the GCC nations and for their internal and external stability (Vakil 2018: 6-15). As has stated above, one of the demanded from Qatar for the removal of the economic blockade and restoration of diplomatic ties was “Qatar must shut down diplomatic posts in Iran, expel any members of Iran’s Revolutionary Guard, and only conduct trade and commerce with Iran that complies with US sanctions”. Concerns have been raised in the GCC states due to the growing relations between Qatar and Iran. Precisely, Saudi Arabia, which is constantly involved in competition with Iran to be influential in the region, has been apprehensive about this new bond. It was also evident that US President Trump was also involved in the crisis after he was elected as the president and supported Saudi Arabia and UAE at the expense of Qatar that was seen as an adversary due to its ties with Iran (Ulrichsen 2017a: 6-8).

Since the Syria issue, the increasing regional involvement of Iran has amplified even more of the Saudi Kingdom’s suspicions of Qatari-Iran ties, and the recent cooperative connection between the two has agitated the Kingdom even more (Ulrichsen 2017a: 8). On the other hand, Qatar has been compelled by the influence of Saudi Arabia to conform to the anti-Iranian policies. Through all of this, Qatar has preserved its sovereignty and safeguarded its relationship with Iran. The bulk of Qatar’s relationship with Iran is mainly due to financial incentives. Both countries share the world’s largest gas field, called North Field, which extends thousands of miles. Also, both countries have many economic and military
cooperation agreements. The warmth in the relationship between Qatar and Iran occurred during the 1990s. Qatar has voted in favour of Iran as the concerned nation of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1969 in the arms embargo and nuclear weapons program, at the United Nations meeting in 2006 (Vakil 2018). Although Qatar later came around to agree with the majority view that more sanctions should be implemented against Iran, the two countries continued in good relations.

In 2010, a security agreement was signed between the two countries that fostered Qatar’s claims to stand on its own as a country (Vakil 2018: 11-14). Contrary to Saudi Arabia, the Qatar government was satisfied with the Iran nuclear deal and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) reached in Vienna on 14 July 2015, between Iran and the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (China, France, Russia, United Kingdom, United States) plus Germany and the European Union. Consequently, Qatar has pursed agreements like this one, forayed their relationship with agreement on free-trade zones in Iranian ports of Bushehr and Doha, and Al Ruwais. It was evident that Saudi Arabia was strongly against the expanded ties (Vakil 2018: 16).

Qatar was once again the centre of attention in April 2017 when it granted 700 million dollars to Kata’ib al-Hezbollah, a Shia terrorist organization linked to Iran to free some members of the Qatari royal family who had been kept hostage in Iraq (Gordon, Yadlin & Heistein 2017: para 6). However, this argument has been refuted by the Qatar government that claims that the money was provided to Iraqi officials in the form of cash donations and nothing else. This charge resulted in Saudi Arabia, UAR, and Egypt, as well as Bahrain pointing the finger at Qatar as a supporter of terrorism. After the hostages were freed on May 23, Qatar news agency QNA published a statement from the Qatari Emir, or head of state, Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, highlighting Iran’s position in the Muslim world and affirming relations with Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas. The following day, officials reported that the website has been hacked. Although the hacker allegations may be right, the investigation has not uncovered any definitive evidence (Jones 2017: 8-10).

As sanctions were initially set to stifle, Qatar has drawn closer to Iran as well as with the sultanate of Oman and the emirate of Kuwait (Lynch 2017: 15-18). Soon after the blockade was implemented on Qatar, Iran hurried to give its support by facilitating the shipment of food and free transit for Qatar Airways with no restrictions. The export of Iranian goods to Qatar rose 100 percent since the embargo was put in place (Vakil 2018: 11-12). Mutual Iran-Qatar trade and travel route expanded and oil shipping traffic pass through created a less secure situation for countries like Saudi Arabia who believed that this would exacerbate the unrest in the area (Asisian 2018: 8-11).

The Role of Alliance with Turkey

Qatar and Turkey have a long-term relationship, dating back to the Ottoman Empire when they were either fighting each other or conspiring together. Qatar and Turkey signed a military cooperation agreement in December 2014 to promote cooperation in military training and the defence industry that also enables for the deployment of the Turkish Armed Forces to Qatar and the creation of a Turkish military base in Qatar (The Peninsula 2015). This is
followed by several Cooperative agreements in education, maritime transport, and correspondence pacts between intelligence agencies in 2015 (Ibid).

Similar views and concerns on Middle East politics are currently held by Qatar and Turkey, which include their involvement in the ongoing dispute in Palestine and Syria have been developed into an alliance in the Persian Gulf region (Aras & Akpinar 2017: 3-4). The GCC list of 13 points to Qatar included the requirement for Turkey to pull out its troops from Qatar’s soil where they are presently stationed (Falk 2018). It is the first Turkish Middle East military base that hosts over 100 soldiers (Aras & Akpinar 2017: 4). There have been speculations about the motives for Turkey’s choice for the base in Qatar. As a response, Turkish President Erdogan argues that the motive is not to antagonize the Gulf States, but to broaden cooperative relations with its partner. One of Qatar’s main reasons for hosting a military base is to weaken Saudi dominance in the Middle East and having an alliance with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member, Turkey ensures the help of other member states if it is confronted with opposition from another country (Asisian 2018 8-10).

In the years of the Arab Spring uprisings, Turkey and Qatar found themselves on the same page with regard to ideology and purpose. Saudi Arabia and the UAR as two member states of the GCC were in opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood while Qatar and Turkey allegedly supported the movement. Turkey and Qatar viewed the Muslim Brotherhood as useful in stabilizing the situation during the revolutionary times, the two countries were convinced that Muslim Brotherhood could help them maintain power and influence in the Middle East by recognizing and working with them. In this regard, it is worth stressing that both countries being portrayed as influential mediators endorsed by the West and the Arab Spring uprisings gave them more room for manoeuvring in regional politics.

Similarly, by rendering support for Hamas in Palestine, both countries made themselves seem moderate and helping fellow Muslims in the Middle East which also plays into their narrative of acting as figures committed to bringing about democracy and change (Pala & Aras 2015). Also, both Qatar and Turkey turned on their longstanding ally Assad in Syria who was said to have dismissed all previous advice provided by Qatar and Turkey, to ensure that reforms were made in Syria (Pala & Aras, 2015: 287-291). Consequently, Qatar and Turkey soon took part in the resistance to Assad and his supporters. Therefore, despite the opposition of the other GCC countries, Turkey and Qatar continued to support the Syrian opposition that has negative implications for both Turkey and Qatar.  

Balance of Power Theory as the Theoretical Instrument to Explain the GCC Crisis

Since the post-Cold War period, small states have captured International Relations (IR) specialists’ attention. Especially, small states have become a subject among academics, specifically in the issue of balance of power analyses. While small states have historically been seen as impotent and vulnerable, their role and political influence initiated to rise particularly by using the legitimate measures for expansion of national rights through international organizations, agreements, and building alliances.

International relations scholars do not generally agree on a single conceptual definition with regards to “small states” so the various small states can interpret their foreign policies.
from several theories to serve the different interests. Neo-realism, particularly with its understanding of anarchy is prevalent in explaining small states’ behaviour, simply argues that the anarchic system determines the small state’s position in the international system (Waltz 1979).

To explain the conditions with regards to the Qatar Crisis, arguably, Neo-realists balance of power theory could serve as the theoretical instrument to explain the incident. The theory simply suggests that countries gravitate toward alliances or balance their relationships based on strategies of balancing or bandwagoning. Following the lead of a state, such as the first jumping on the bandwagon with the smaller one or fearing the most powerful state, banding together is defined as bandwagoning. Balancing arises when a smaller state joins a larger state to oppose a greater state or threatening force. States are known to follow a principle of collective protection when they are weak. This particularity affects small states, because their capacities are restricted, and they will tend to fall behind the stronger side in a power struggle (Walt 1985: 7-11). When confronted with great influence, small states will tend to become even more fascinated by the faction and jumping on a bandwagon. Especially in cases of proximity, states are susceptible to faction-following. However, balancing occurs when smaller states band together to prevent larger ones from dominating the system. These coalitions may aggregate to form a system of balance for powerful states (Walt 1985: 32-36). By engaging in this tactic, the smaller state could gain leverage over its less powerful partners.

In this context, one of the top exporters of LNG, Qatar has seen itself develop over the past decades gradually growing from a tiny fishing village to become a major oil-rich force (Regan 2017). In recent times, Qatar has been a notable player in foreign policy, trying to mediate regions while wielding a public voice (Ulrichsen 2017c: 23). The Qatari Emir emerged as a new powerful force for economic and political reasons during the Arab Spring but was also able to give the country increased stability in the important region due to the country’s wealth and political security. Despite Qatar’s increased participation internationally and exponential growth, it continues to possess only modest military capabilities. In this regard to include a Turkish military base in Qatar as a way of balancing Saudi efforts to influence the region was a very successful diplomatic effort made in this direction (Asisian 2018: 2).

Conclusion

This article maintains that Qatar’s altered foreign policy prompted neighbouring countries to declare sanctions against the country on June 5, 2017. While Qatar had previously positioned itself as a mediator, the Arab Spring forced the country to redefine its role as an interventionist. Analysing Qatar’s relationship with Saudi Arabia, Walt’s theory of alliance-building lends support to the hypotheses of this study because it can be demonstrated how Qatar’s balancing behaviour has replaced bandwagoning. These measures have placed Saudi supremacy in jeopardy in the region, and as a result, the Saudi-led coalition is attempted to balance Qatar’s strength by placing a total economic embargo on the country. On the other hand, the Muslim Brotherhood poses a challenge to many authoritarian authorities in the
Qatar, unlike Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt has not designated the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist group, and it has sheltered Muslim Brotherhood members for decades that perceived as a danger to the opposing parties. Before the uprisings in Syria, Saudi Arabia allowed Qatar’s close ties to the Muslim Brotherhood. Nevertheless, as both countries drifted toward supporting opponents and rebels, they became adversaries by supporting opposing and opposing parties inter alia Qatar’s support to the Muslim Brotherhood.

The 2017 diplomatic conflict could be also attributed to the past confrontations and Qatar’s measures to maintain their status as a bit of a balance of power to Saudi Arabia in the Gulf region. Rather than choosing to ride on the bandwagon with Saudi Arabia, Qatar opted for alliances with those it regards as more valuable and that is not causing its losses by weakening its sovereignty, such as Iran, Muslim Brotherhood, and Turkey. Qatar has discovered that it is no longer a small state, but it views its strength as rising concerning both economic, cultural growth, and soft power (Ulrichsen 2014). As per Walt’s theory, “bandwagoning strategy” is essential for smaller and weaker states facing immediate issues and lacks its allies close to them to withstand the danger close to their borders (Walt 1985: 38-41). The 13 demands given to Qatar by the blockading countries were rejected strongly and the crisis continued until early 2021 when a resolution was reached by the concerned countries to solve the problem. Arguably, this was a successful trial of the status quo with the change in favour of Qatar.

Notes


References


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