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The main event this month in the Gulf has happened on March 5, when Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Bahrain withdrew their ambassadors from Qatar. The decision, unprecedented in the history of the GCC, has been taken, allegedly, in reaction to Doha's violation of the GCC charter clause that bans interference in the domestic affairs of fellow GCC members. However, the dispute between GCC members, that had been simmering for a while, might have originated from regional issues, mainly how to deal with Al Qaeda's and the Muslim Brotherhood's resurgence.

Already in December, during a GCC Summit in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the UAE had been close to singling out Qatar for its alleged financing of al Qaeda-affiliated groups in Syria and elsewhere. As a result of that, Doha reduced its involvement in the Syrian conflict while massively engaging the Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoots in the region, including Hamas. In doing so, Qatar seemed to re-align with the Iranian interests in the region, to the extent of even testing the waters with Hezbollah. No wonder, then, that the Bahrainis, Emiratis, and Saudis soon accused Qatar of trying to undermine the GCC and recalled their ambassadors. Should Qatar become friendlier with Iran and therefore with Oman, that is essentially in the GCC doghouse for refusing to adopt the group's standard line against Iran, it would signal the biggest defeat of the GCC and also severely complicate U.S. plans in the Middle East, bound to deal with this rift at a strategic level.

In the meanwhile, officials in Abu Dhabi, Riyadh and Manama, who take a very similar line on a number of security issues, most notably Iran, Egypt, Yemen, and to some extent Syria, are already reacting by becoming increasingly more hostile to the Brotherhood. As a matter of fact, Saudi Arabia, who is trying to pave the way to presidency for Egypt's military chief, Field Marshal Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, on March 9 labeled the Brotherhood as a terrorist group, and is encouraging the fellow GCC states to act accordingly.

In Kuwait and Bahrain, where MB's offshoots operate openly as registered political and social groups, such pressure has put Islamists on the defensive. Kuwait's government, despite being unwilling to disregard Saudi concerns, has called Saudi Arabia's labeling of the group an "internal affair". Still, popular pressure, regional norms and increased security warning levels could squeeze MB-affiliated social group Al Eslah as well as the group's political wing, the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM). However in Kuwait, the threatening potential of the Muslim Brotherhood has been neutralized: the Brotherhood is integrated into parts of the state, including the Parliament where, having never reached a majority or even a plurality, it has been pragmatic about working with other political groups.

For this reason, Kuwait might find itself in the position of having to mediate among its fellow GCC states, a position that the emirate has held previously. Indeed in November Kuwait worked to avoid the first Saudi-Qatari rift and meanwhile, for the past months, the Emir has been lobbying to end the stalemate between Cairo and Doha following the latter's backing of ousted Egyptian President Mohammad Morsi. But Kuwait's foreign policy in the wake of the Arab Spring hasn't just been about rapprochement and bringing sides together: the emirate is placing its longstanding neutrality on the line with regards to Egypt and Syria. In Egypt, following the ouster of Egypt's Mohammed Morsi, Kuwait quickly fell in line behind Saudi Arabia and pledged \$4 billion in aid to the military-backed interim government. Regarding Syria, Kuwait's official stance has remained relatively neutral, and the emirate was among the first Arab nations to condemn the violence and call for a political solution. However, unofficially Kuwait has become a hub for financing the war, with donations from individuals and charities acting like lifelines to rebel groups. These donations can be considered untied to the central government: in fact they have worked to fuel the war in Syria, while Kuwait would rather see a renewed stability in Syria, especially in Iraq, that is do greatly affected by developments in Damascus.

Indeed, the Syrian conflict is playing a very significant role in exacerbating sectarian tensions in Iraq, only worsened by the prospect of elections in April. It is worth mentioning that if the level of violence remains steady, and attacks keep happening in the current numbers, while there are big Sunni areas outside government control, the ability to stage meaningful national elections is open to question. Prospects for Iraq's security, stability and integrity in the short and medium term appear, to say the least, gloomy and a divided and weakened GCC cannot but push Nuri al Maliki's government closer to Iran, a close ally of the Iraqi administration and able to provide the security guarantees it needs against qaidist forces in the central area of the country.

This rift that occurred within the GCC might have positive fallouts for Iran and deleterious effects on the GCC as a unitary political and security actor. Attempts to integrate the six countries further would be set back years, and, even if some sort of political settlement is reached, questions over cooperation on Syria, missile defence integration, joint information sharing over suspected individuals with terrorist links are all areas for major concern.

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