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*How have the GCC countries changed
their geopolitical self-perception in the last five years?*

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The Gulf Cooperation Council, or GCC, has been a relatively stable economic and political union – consisting of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, the UAE and Qatar – since its establishment in 1981. The aim of its members to enhance regional stability endured a heavy setback when, in June of 2017, various members of the group accused Qatar of financing terrorism and severed all diplomatic ties with the country.¹

Those that initiated the blockade – Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt – conjured a list of thirteen demands, amongst others the call to scale down Qatar’s relation with Iran, the closure of a Turkish military base and, most important, the cessation of terrorism funding – which Qatar has denied doing in the first place.² These accusations were made after it was alleged that Qatari emir Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad al-Thani made a controversial statement on a state-run news organisations, reiterating Qatar’s prosperous relations with Iran, Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood.³ Qatar denied the emir’s role and argued it was part of a cyberattack on its media outlet.⁴

All members of the GCC have played a role in the crisis that lasted until January of 2021, when Kuwait and the United States brokered a deal that saw diplomatic relations between Qatar and the other GCC – and Egypt – members restored at Al-Ula.⁵ But what are the domestic and external repercussions of this five-year long crisis for members of the GCC and how has this shaped their geopolitical self-perception?

The conflict has been analysed from various angles, one being a religious one. Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are all Sunni majority countries but, according to some scholars, take on different stances on foreign policy issues, such as how to handle Iran and other regional issues.⁶ Whereas Qatar seeks to empower like-minded groups like the Muslim Brotherhood around the region to enhance its “populist Sunni Islamist stance”, Saudi Arabia favours top-down Wahabi political Islam

¹ Mohammed Ahmad Naheem, ‘The Dramatic Rift and Crisis between Qatar and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) of June 2017’, *International Journal of Disclosure and Governance* 14, nr. 4 (1 November 2017): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41310-017-0025-8>.

² Naheem, ‘The Dramatic Rift and Crisis between Qatar and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) of June 2017’.

³ Marc Jones, ‘Hacking, bots and information wars in the Qatar spat’, *The Qatar Crisis*, POMEPS Briefings, 2017, 1.

⁴ Jones, 1.

⁵ ‘Gulf Rivals Reconcile at Saudi Summit’, Daily News, consulted on 20 May 2021, <http://www.dailynews.lk/2021/01/07/world/238076/gulf-rivals-reconcile-saudi-summit>.

⁶ Stephanie Dahle e.a., ‘The Qatar Crisis: POMEPS Brief 31’, *Project on Middle East Political Science* (blog), 12 October 2017, 10, <https://pomeps.org/the-qatar-crisis-pomeps-brief-31>.

in its way of governing and aims to spread this around the Muslim world, unlike the UAE, who do not have this ambition.⁷

Especially worrisome to the Saudi's and the UAE has been Qatar's interaction with Islamist movements in the region and their ties to Iran.⁸ Although Saudi Arabia has in turn been accused of this divergence in conformity to a shared geopolitical goal, this is partly due to fears that the other might be a potential threat to one's own domestic stability.⁹ The UAE, for example, is anxious of Qatar's support of the Muslim Brotherhood, who they see rivalling its own ideology.¹⁰ Bahrain has also accused Qatar of meddling in its domestic affairs, incriminating two of Bahrain's main opposition parties and arguing they secretly met Qatari-affiliated agents of Hezbollah in order to perform "hostile acts in Bahrain."¹¹

Another crucial aspect of this conflict was its exportation to the wider region and Africa, where rivalling parties in Syria, Libya, Sudan, Somalia and others were supported by Qatar and the other GCC members.¹²

The protagonists in the Qatar-crisis have supported opposite factions in Libya since 2014 and as the conflict escalated in 2019 when Khalifa Haftar – supported by the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt – assaulted Tripoli, who in turn found its forces aided by Qatar.¹³

In nearby Sudan, the UAE and Saudi Arabia sought to persuade Sudan's new leadership to seek their support instead of Qatar's as they grew suspicious of Bashir's connection with the Muslim Brotherhood.¹⁴ After Bashir's ousting, Saudi Arabia and the UAE enhanced their efforts to steer Sudan in their direction.¹⁵

Crucial in this conflict is Qatar's ambition to become a regional power and the efforts made by Saudi Arabia and the UAE to show their dominance in the GCC and the wider Arab Middle East during

⁷ Dahle e.a., 10.

⁸ Michael Stephens, 'Why key Arab countries have cut ties with Qatar—and what Trump had to do with it', *POMEPS Brief* 31 (2017): 12.

⁹ F. Gregory Gause III, 'What the Qatar crisis shows about the Middle East', *POMEPS Brief* 31 (2017): 11.

¹⁰ Elham Fakhro, 'Resolving the Gulf Crisis Outside the Gulf', Crisis Group, 26 January 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/resolving-gulf-crisis-outside-gulf>.

¹¹ Reuters, 'Bahrain Accuses Opposition Leaders of Spying for Qatar', *Reuters*, 1 November 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bahrain-security-arrests-idUSKBN1D14YX>.

¹² Fakhro, 'Resolving the Gulf Crisis Outside the Gulf'.

¹³ Fakhro.

¹⁴ Fakhro.

¹⁵ Fakhro.

this crisis.¹⁶ Instead of this, the existing differences and continuing disputes have been highlighted.¹⁷ Moreover, since Qatar hosts the Al-Udeid military base, it is less sensitive to military threats.¹⁸ Additionally, the fact that Kuwait and Oman, fearing entanglement in the conflict, attempted to conclude the crisis and stayed mostly neutral, indicates the divisions inside the GGC.¹⁹ Furthermore, and indicative of the counterproductive efforts of Saudi Arabia and the UAE in this crisis, Iran has sought to improve its relations not only with Qatar, but also with Oman and Kuwait.²⁰

Domestically, the extensive air, sea and land blockade imposed on Qatar had serious economic consequences for the country.²¹ Nevertheless, such economic boycotts ultimately had a limited effect on one of the world's richest countries and the largest global exporter of gas.²² The embargo has enjoyed limited societal support in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, due to other, more impactful foreign policy concerns, while being probably more popular in the UAE – although this is difficult to evaluate.²³

The embargo appears to have increased, instead, Qataris' support for their government, which was faltering before due to foreign policy objectives the population perceived as interfering too much in the wider Middle East.²⁴

Additionally, the disputes regarding the self-perception of these states in the run-up to the Al-Ula accords is significant. Trump's presidency, after Obama's rapprochement efforts towards Iran and the growing sense of a downsized US presence in the Gulf, ensured Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt closer cooperation with Washington again.²⁵ Qatar intensified its efforts in Washington to alter Trump's stance on the issue.²⁶ This resulted in the US changing their position from actively supporting the blockading countries to siding with those attempting to mediate a resolution.²⁷

¹⁶ Dahle e.a., 'The Qatar Crisis', 14.

¹⁷ Marc Lynch, 'Three big lessons of the Qatar crisis', *POMEPS Brief*, nr. 31 (2017): 14.

¹⁸ Lynch, 14.

¹⁹ Fakhro, 'Resolving the Gulf Crisis Outside the Gulf'.

²⁰ Lynch, 'Three big lessons of the Qatar crisis', 14–15.

²¹ Stephens, 'Why key Arab countries have cut ties with Qatar—and what Trump had to do with it', 13.

²² Jane Kinninmont, 'The Gulf Divided: The Impact of the Qatar Crisis', Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank, 30 May 2019, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2019/05/gulf-divided-impact-qatar-crisis>.

²³ Kinninmont.

²⁴ Kinninmont.

²⁵ ACRPS Unit for Political Studies, 'Al-Ula GCC Summit Ends the Blockade of Qatar', 11 January 2021, http://arabcenterdc.org/policy_analyses/al-ula-gcc-summit-ends-the-blockade-of-qatar/.

²⁶ ACRPS Unit for Political Studies.

²⁷ ACRPS Unit for Political Studies.

Joe Biden's presidency indicates the calculated movements by the actors in this crisis, as, for example, the Saudis, anticipating pressure from the new administration, sought to resolve the Qatar blockade (and thus to some extent prevent unfavourable developments for them) whilst simultaneously position themselves as a leader within the GCC.²⁸

In light of the US-Iran relations and the 'Abraham Accords', which saw relations normalised between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain, the geopolitical context in which Iran and Saudi Arabia support opposite sides in various regional hotspots is crucial and the need to 'bring back' Qatar in the GCC's regional policies can be understood in this light.²⁹

To conclude, the rift among the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council that resulted in the so-called Qatar crisis of 2017 was predominantly a conflict over diverging foreign policy perspectives, largely aimed at Qatar's relation with Iran. This conflict had external reverberations across the Middle East and Africa, where various conflicting parties were supported by the opposite sides of the Qatar crisis. The power projections of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar have played a key role in the conflict, but instead of consolidating power for one side, have increased the division among the members of the GCC. This sentiment increased as other members – Oman and Kuwait – refrained from taking sides and actively mediated to end the crisis.

At the summit of Al-Ula, as the Saudi crown prince and Qatar's emir embraced and diplomatic ties were restored, the crisis seemed to end, at least for the time being. After the reconciliation efforts at Al-Ula, all members of the GCC recognise the importance to form a unified front in tackling regional issues.

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²⁸ ACRPS Unit for Political Studies.

²⁹ Prasanta Kumar Pradhan, 'Al-Ula Summit: Restoring the Unity of the GCC | Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses', consulted on 25 June 2021, <https://idsa.in/idsacomments/al-ula-summit-gcc-pkpradhan-120120>.

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