

The Qatar Gulf

Regional Diary

Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and UAE broke up their diplomatic ties with Qatar last week, with Egypt, Libya and Yemen following. Oman and Kuwait (part of the Gulf Cooperation Council-GCC) have stayed neutral until today. Surprisingly, from South Asia, Maldives have followed the Saudi suit!

Besides the diplomatic breakup, few have also closed their air space, with Saudi Arabia (which shares Qatar's only land border) also imposing an economic blockade. According to reports, some have also closed the maritime space, meaning the use of their ports to ships heading off to Qatar.

How genuine are those allegations against Qatar? What are the intentions behind the actions against Doha? And what are the likely fallouts of this new crisis in Gulf?

Does Qatar support terrorism and Iran?

The primary complaints against Qatar by those who broke diplomatic ties and imposing sanctions are twofold. First, Doha supports militant and extremist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, Hezbollah, ISIS and the Taliban. Second, Doha has close ties with Tehran.

Qatar has been politically active in mediating between various actors in different conflicts in West Asia and has taken a position independent of other countries in the Gulf. The Afghan Taliban did have an office in Qatar, and Doha did attempt to mediate between Taliban and the Afghan government. Similarly, it did have contacts with the leadership of Muslim Brotherhood. But to consider Doha's initiatives vis-a-vis these groups and conflicts as supporting terrorism is farfetched.

On Syria and the ISIS, the support from Qatar is Janus-faced. Qatar has been supporting the fight against the ISIS, thereby the Assad regime as well. Whereas few Qatari individuals have been accused of supporting radical ideology, in helping the emergence and sustenance of radical groups such as the ISIS. As a result, Qatar's position and role in the Syrian crisis could be viewed, according to who is writing the story. But Saudi Arabia complaining Qatar supporting extremism is pot and kettle story; at the international level, there is ample evidence for the role played by Saudi individuals in exporting terrorism. From Bin Laden to those 15 (out of 19) 9/11 hijackers are sufficient enough to underline where the problem is in the Middle East.

With Iran, Qatar does not share the animosity that most of the other GCC countries have – especially Saudi Arabia. Qatar has a working relationship with Iran; both countries share one of the largest gas fields stretching over 9,000 sq kms. Qatar has also maintained diplomatic ties with Tehran and has been cautious in commenting on its internal developments within. However, the above relationship with Iran for Qatar is more pragmatic than anything based on principles or politics.

The Story Behind

If complaints of Qatar supporting militant groups and extremism are exaggerated, what are the reasons behind the crisis? Where is the problem?

Clearly, Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom wants to become the Arab hegemon within the Muslim World. How can it allow Qatar, a small kingdom in one of its corners, pursue an independent foreign policy? Saudi Arabia perhaps prefers the other countries in the Gulf to be vassal states, as the UAE has been. With the recent visit of the American President and his own anti-Iran positioning, perhaps Saudi Arabia is overconfident and willing to be adventurous.

Economically, Qatar is rich. It is one of the top countries with highest per capita income at the global level. Originally dependent on pearl hunting and fishing, Qatar's fortunes changed ever since the discovery of oil and gas. More than 12 percent of global energy reserves are in Qatar. However, militarily, Qatar with around 12,000 military troops, is no match for the Saudi troops and weapons.

The larger problem for Saudi Arabia and some of the other countries that are either dictatorships or monarchies – is the independence and the influence of Al Jazeera. The absolute rulers of the region, who are genetically against democracy and liberal institutions, believe Al Jazeera as a reason behind the Arab Spring. Perhaps, they are correct to an extent.

Fallouts of the new Gulf Crisis

Immediate implication would be the economic blockade of Qatar. Saudi Arabia being the only land route, most of Qatar's food supplies come from across the border. However, Turkey and Iran are chipping in and off the block already. Iran should be able to use this opportunity and reach out to the Qataris on time and in sufficient numbers. According to recent reports, Iran has already sent five plane loads of food; obviously this means, more would come. Given the geographic proximity, it should not be a logistical issue for Iran, if politics demands it.

The closure of air space may have an initial impact on the Qatar Airways. With Qatar making a conscious decision to convert Doha as a transit hub between Europe, Africa, America on the one side, and the rest of Asia and Australia on the other side, Qatar Airways have become a favourite airline for many. Especially in South Asia, many would prefer the Doha hub, even over the European cities.

The larger implication would be on the Muslim World itself. Will this lead to an Arab Implosion? Though Kuwait has attempted to mediate, much would depend on Saudi Arabia and how far it is willing to go. The differences in the Gulf also mean a faultline within the Sunni world, dividing the coalition against Iran. The much publicized Islamic Military Alliance led by Saudi Arabia is likely to feel the pangs of the present gulf within the Gulf. Pakistan for example, is wary of the developments; so would be some of those Muslim countries in Southeast Asia.

Will the crisis lead to a regime change in Qatar? The House of al Thani has been ruling Qatar for the last three centuries. As the Emir of Qatar, the al Thanis have been able to provide stability to the country.

Unlike their neighbours, the al Thanis did initiate reforms within, despite sticking with the monarchy. Qatar has a written constitution, popular media (Al Jazeera) and will be hosting the FIFA world cup football in 2022. Across the Ottoman and British empires, the al Thanis did succeed in managing the affairs of Qatar. Given the unity within Qatar, and the popular support across the region and elsewhere, it is unlikely that the current crisis will lead to a regime change within Qatar.

Finally, what role will the US and its President play? Trump's initial remarks seem to support Saudi Arabia's position on Qatar supporting extremism. His tweets even indicated him taking credit for what is happening! However, the larger response from the US is likely to be measured, given the fact that the Americans have one of their largest military bases in the region, in Qatar. When compared to Trump's initial message, the subsequent note from the US Secretary of State is balanced. Around 10,000 American troops are based in Qatar. Doha has been proactive with supporting American military strikes in the region – from Afghanistan to Syria, by allowing its territory to be used as a base. Qatar's Ambassador to the US has already requested the US to play a role calming the crisis. Outside Trump, the US is likely to pursue a cautious approach.

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