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Al-Ula GCC Summit Ends the Blockade of Qatar

Unit for Political Studies

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Unit for Political Studies

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Three and a half years after the crisis that struck the core of the Gulf Cooperation Council, the 41st Gulf Summit, held on 5 January 2021 in the Saudi Arabian city of al-Ula, brought the blockade on Qatar to an end. The final communiqué declared that the Gulf Cooperation Council members will “stand together as one to confront any threat to any member state” and prevent any “violation of sovereignty or disturbance to the security of any GCC state”.⁽¹⁾ According to the Saudi Foreign Minister, Prince Faisal bin Farhan, “the outcomes of the summit confirm a comprehensive resolution of the points of disagreement with Qatar” and a complete return to diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt, on the one hand, and Qatar on the other.⁽²⁾ The resolution to the crisis generated positive reactions in Arab and international circles.

The Beginning of the Crisis

The siege of Qatar began only two days after the 2017 Riyadh summit, the declared goal of which was to confront terrorism and contain Iran and was attended by the US president along with representatives of about 50 Arab and Islamic countries. In the early hours of 24 May, the Qatar News Agency (QNA) was hacked and fabricated statements attributed to the Emir of Qatar during a graduation ceremony for students at a military college were published and used as a pretext to ignite the crisis. An unprecedented media campaign was launched against Qatar, culminating in the 5 June 2017 announcement by Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain, along with Egypt, that they would sever diplomatic ties with Qatar. The measures also included closing land, sea and air access with it, and prevention of transit of their territory, airspace and territorial waters as well as prohibiting their citizens from traveling to Qatar.

This was not the first crisis between Qatar and its Gulf neighbours, as the same three Gulf states previously withdrew their ambassadors from Doha in February 2014. Disagreement over positions on the 2013 military coup overthrowing elected president, Mohamed Morsi in Egypt instigated that crisis. However, mediation carried out at the time by Kuwait succeeded in containing it and negotiations pursued over eight months led to the First Riyadh Agreement, subsequently culminating in the Riyadh Supplemental Agreement. The crisis was diffused and the ambassadors of Saudi Arabia, the Emirates and Bahrain were returned to Qatar, for the Doha 35th Gulf Summit to convene in December 2014 with all member states present. The Gulf crisis did not spin out of control at that time because of the state of anxiety that gripped the capitals of the blockading countries as a result of the Obama administration’s policies in the region. Obama’s conciliatory policies toward Iran, a sense of US abandonment in the Gulf, and growing Iranian hegemonic policies all led to a generalized Gulf malaise. This prompted Saudi Arabia and the UAE to suspend their differences with Qatar, especially considering their need for Qatar’s media, financial and military support at the beginning of the war in Yemen in 2015.

1 The final communiqué of the 41st GCC Supreme Council, *The New Arab*, 5/1/2021, accessed on 7/1/2021 at: <https://bit.ly/3rVMbEZ>.

2 Ibid.



The Centrality of the US and Trump's Political Trajectory

The inauguration of the Trump administration at the beginning of 2017 represented a major change in the international environment. The four countries saw the end of the Obama tenure as an opportunity to return to a full partnership with Washington and an end to the tensions that had arisen from the Arab Spring revolutions and the US-Iranian rapprochement. The outspoken hostility shown by Trump to the legacy of the entire Obama era contributed to their moving in this direction, with Trump's negative stance on the nuclear deal with Iran and absolute disregard for democracy and human rights.⁽³⁾

Since the beginning of the crisis, Qatar has sought to change President Trump's stance – which the countries blockading Qatar relied on – while additionally working in Congress to confront a coordinated Israeli-Emirati lobby. Qatar was able to reap the fruits of its intensive efforts in Washington during the last summit meeting that President Trump held with the Emir of Qatar in July 2019. The change in President Trump's position on the Gulf crisis was clearly reflected in the joint statement made after the two parties' talks at the White House, emphasizing the close and strengthened strategic and defense relationship between the two countries.⁽⁴⁾

This translated into a change in President Trump's position on the crisis, moving from a champion of the blockade-imposing countries, to a mediator alongside Kuwait in resolving the crisis. Until that point, Kuwait's mediation had not succeeded in bringing about any change in the position of the four blockading countries. For three years, the United States sought, with varying degrees of seriousness, to reach a solution to the crisis until its efforts finally culminated in reaching an agreement in which the president's son-in-law and advisor, Jared Kushner, played a major role mediating between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, in coordination with Kuwait. The direct Saudi-Qatari communication achieved an important breakthrough during Kushner's tour in early December when the two parties agreed on a joint declaration and Saudi Arabia persuaded the other three countries to follow suit in the agreement. This formula allowed the 41st Gulf Summit to convene in the Saudi city of al-Ula, instead of Manama, with the Emir of Qatar's attendance. An agreement was reached in early December because of negotiations between Qatar and Saudi Arabia alone but its announcement was delayed until Saudi Arabia was able to convince its allies of the futility of resisting a solution to the crisis that had become a burden. Bi-partite committees will deal with bilateral disputes between countries, as in the case of Egypt and Qatar.

Significant Timing

Despite the efforts made by Kuwait and the United States over the past three years, there had been no real progress on a resolution. On more than one occasion during 2019, hopes arose that a

³ Jonathan Weisman & Julie Hirschfeld Davis, "Republican Lawmakers Vow Fight to Derail Nuclear Deal," *New York Times*, 14/7/2015, accessed on 7/1/2021, at: <https://nyti.ms/2KF9saU>

⁴ "Emir of Qatar and Trump affirm strengthening their countries' strategic and defense relations," *Al-Jazeera Net*, 9/7/2019 accessed on 7/1/2021 at: <https://bit.ly/2XqHPsm>.

breakthrough could bring an end to the crisis. Qatar participated twice at the prime ministerial level in summits held in Saudi Arabia, namely the three Mecca summits of May 2019 and the December 2019 GCC summit in Riyadh. Qatari Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdul Rahman Al Thani also paid a secret visit to Riyadh in late 2019.⁵ However, no breakthrough came. Qatar's calls to lift the blockade and unify Gulf Cooperation Council countries' efforts in confronting the Covid-19 pandemic fell on deaf ears.

But circumstances changed dramatically after the US presidential elections of November 2020, as President Trump's defeat and the victory of his Democratic opponent, Joe Biden, led to a major change in Saudi calculations. Riyadh began reconsidering its policies, seeking to resolve some regional issues. Saudi Arabia, which enjoyed strong ties with the Trump administration, is expected to face pressure under the Biden administration. During his election campaign Biden did not hide his intention to reconsider a number of policies related to Saudi Arabia, including arms sales, human rights issues, and Washington's support for the war in Yemen. The president-elect's support base, especially on the left, lobbies for ending US support for Saudi Arabia, and to end it. Moreover, Saudi Arabia is concerned about the possibility of a US return to the Obama administration's policies regarding Iran, as the president-elect has promised to re-join the nuclear agreement from which Trump withdrew in 2018. An early end to the "maximum pressure" policy that Trump adopted towards Iran is not something that Saudi Arabia views favourably.

Accordingly, Saudi Arabia is trying to pre-empt any pressures from the new US administration, through reconsidering policies proven to be ineffective, primarily the decision to blockade Qatar. The Saudi push towards ending the crisis within the Gulf Council may also seek to demonstrate the independence of its foreign policy. By resolving the crisis with Qatar, despite the overt (for varying reasons) opposition of its allies, Saudi Arabia thus conveys the impression that it is the leading country in the Gulf Cooperation Council.

The Trump administration's relentless efforts to end the Gulf crisis in its last days in power come as part of its "maximum pressure campaign" against Iran, accompanied by the belief that Gulf reconciliation will lead to unified Gulf ranks in confronting Iran. The US media reported that in summer 2020 Kushner persuaded Saudi Arabia to open its airspace to Qatar Airways, in order to tighten pressure on Iran by depriving it of the US \$133 million that it has received annually in payment from Qatar for use of its airspace, but the UAE opposed the idea.⁶ The Trump administration also realizes that it is largely responsible for sparking off the crisis, and it wants to exit with a respectable legacy, at least in terms of international politics; hence it pressured the Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, to end the blockade of Qatar.

After Riyadh finally dropped the 13 conditions that it had insisted upon Qatar agreeing to before turning the page on the crisis and after demanding an end to it – despite the objections of its GCC

5 "Qataris, Saudis Make New Bid to Mend a Long-Festering Feud," *The Wall Street Journal*, 28/11/2019, accessed on 7/1/2021, at: <https://on.wsj.com/2Xgj7tB>.

6 "Trump Makes Fresh Attempt to Resolve Saudi, Qatar Feud," *The Wall Street Journal*, 3/6/2020, accessed on 7/1/2021, at: <https://on.wsj.com/2L34WG6>.



allies – Qatar responded to Saudi Arabia’s desire to move forward. From the outset of the blockade, Qatar had focused on bringing about a change in the Saudi position, in isolation from the rest of the parties, given Saudi Arabia’s status, location and importance. Qatar conveyed the Emir’s readiness to attend the Gulf Summit in Saudi Arabia, if this entailed the lifting of the blockade on his country; Saudi Arabia responded favourably, allowing the summit to take place, with the ratification by all parties of the Al-Ula Communique effectively resolving matters.

Conclusion

The 41st Gulf summit ended the most critical crisis faced by the GCC by lifting the blockade on Qatar, while the latter dropped legal cases brought before the International Trade Organization and the International Civil Aviation Organization (“ICAO”) to obtain compensation amounting to five billion dollars due to damages incurred from the airspace closure. An end to the mutual media campaigns was also agreed upon. It was remarkable that the crisis ended without any significant gains for any of its parties. On the contrary, it only yielded severe economic and political damage on all parties and wasted four years that the GCC could have been working together to confront major economic and political challenges. The parties will now need to restore confidence and work to overcome some of the ongoing points of tension, especially with the more reluctant countries. Appropriate and effective mechanisms to resolve Gulf disputes also need to be agreed upon in order to prevent the recurrence of such crises, along with a Gulf Charter of Honour that prohibits the use of force, boycott or blockade in resolving intra-Gulf disputes.