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ASSESSMENT REPORT

Recalling GCC Ambassadors from Doha: A Background and Future Predictions

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The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies is an independent research institute and think tank for the study of history and social sciences, with particular emphasis on the applied social sciences.

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After a period of muted tensions between Qatar on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia and the UAE on the other, conflict publicly surfaced once the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain decided to recall their ambassadors from Doha. Kuwait and Oman declined to follow suit.

Though Qatari-Saudi feuds are not new, they have, in recent years, often taken the form of hostile media campaigns. However, the acuity of the most recent crisis, which led to the recalling of the ambassadors, came as a surprise. The three states have issued a statement explaining the reasons prompting them to effectuate that move, ultimately accusing Qatar of failing to commit to the principles of “non-interference, directly or indirectly in the internal affairs of any GCC state, and to refrain from backing anyone who threatens the security and stability of the GCC countries, whether as groups or individuals, via direct security work or through political influence, and stop supporting hostile media.”

Despite the fact that this statement was uncharacteristically detailed, it failed to offer an adequate explanation for the reasons behind such a radical move, a task that was assigned to loyal academics and journalists who often mirror the official viewpoints of their governments.

The Reasons behind the Conflict

The tripartite move by the Gulf states was indeed intimately linked to Qatar’s positions vis-à-vis the Arab Spring, such as Al-Jazeera’s extensive coverage of the revolutions, its political and economic support for the post-revolution Arab governments, its hosting of Arab opposition figures, and its antagonism toward countries that oppose the region’s revolutions, namely Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Yet, the Saudi-Qatari discord goes back, in fact, to the period when Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa assumed power in the mid-1990s. This conflict was most apparent in the two nations’ stances toward various Arab and regional issues, especially during the Israeli aggression against Lebanon in July 2006 and against Gaza in 2008-2009. Qatar supported the stand of the Lebanese and Palestinian resistance, represented by Hezbollah and Hamas, against the Israeli aggression, providing them with significant financial and political support. Saudi Arabia, leading at the time what was known as the “axis of moderation”— which also included Egypt, Jordan, and the UAE— accused the resistance movements of provoking Israel. Accordingly, Saudi Arabia boycotted the Arab summit on Gaza that was hosted by Doha in early 2009. The summit was devoted to supporting the resilience of the Palestinian people in the face of the Israeli aggression. This did not prevent Qatar from opposing Hezbollah’s policies when

the latter supported the Syrian regime against the Syrian people. Furthermore, Qatar has persistently opposed the siege against Gaza, and supported the steadfastness of its population, contrary to the official positions of Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

The Arab Spring may have eroded the old fault lines between the “axis of moderation” and that of “resistance,” since the revolutions of freedom and dignity did not make distinctions between them, toppling the “moderate” Hosni Mubarak while confronting the dictatorship of the “resistant” Bashar al-Assad. Yet, these developments, did not end the Qatari-Saudi discord, they instead provided an additional reason to escalate.

From the beginning, Saudi Arabia, the most conservative state in the region, viewed the Arab Spring, as a threat, prompting it to lead the counter-revolutionary axis. With the help of the UAE, Riyadh did all it could to abort these revolutions, such as hosting the first deposed Arab president, Zine El- Abidine Ben Ali. It also offered to host Egyptian president Mubarak after failing to prevent his overthrow. Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE opposed the US position toward the January 25 revolution, painting it as an American abandonment of US allies. Moreover, Saudi Arabia showed no enthusiasm for the overthrow of Qaddafi’s regime, despite the acute divide between the two regimes. In fact, Saudi Arabia’s stance toward the Libyan revolution, which the UAE along with Qatar supported, was largely negative.

With Syria, Saudi Arabia kept largely silent during the first six months of the revolution, while the peaceful protests were violently suppressed with force. Riyadh did not speak out until the month of Ramadan in 2011, when the Syrian army invaded the city of Hama and the Saudi public opinion started to call for a clearer Saudi stance toward the events in Syria.

In fact, at the beginning of the revolution, Riyadh hastened to offer financial aid to the Syrian regime in order to help it quash the protest movement and thus sent the governor of the Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency (Central Bank) to Damascus in April 2011. Had it not been for the geopolitical dimension of the conflict in Syria, and Riyadh’s fears of a complete Iranian hegemony in the region if the Syrian regime were to be victorious, Saudi Arabia’s position would not have been different from its position toward other Arab revolutions. As for the United Arab Emirates’ government, its stance toward the Syrian revolution continues to remain vague.

Saudi’s government was not discouraged by the success of the Arab revolutions in overthrowing corrupt regimes; instead, it continued to undermine the nascent

democracies and veer the process of democratic transition off course. Its greatest success in this endeavor was in Egypt, the most contested subject with Qatar. On July 3, 2013, the Egyptian army, under the command of Minister of Defense General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, overthrew President Mohammed Morsi. Saudi Arabia and the UAE played a significant role in besieging the elected regime and in fanning the media campaign that prefaced the coup, including placing large investments in the Egyptian media. The situation was not devoid of irony, as the Saudi and Emirati media were allowed to use the term “revolution,” to describe the popular uprising of June 30 and the military coup of July 3. The images of Gamal Abdel Nasser, Saudi Arabia’s sworn enemy, have also been tolerated once it was seen opportune to liken al-Sisi to him in the coup against the democratic process.

Additionally, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE are playing an active role in de-stabilizing the post-revolution regimes in Tunisia and Yemen, as Saudi Arabia remains uninterested in the success of any pluralistic political experiment that involves an alternation of power. Though Saudi fears regarding democracy are understandable, the Emirati position toward the question of democratic transformation is more difficult to understand. Despite the fact that the UAE, like Qatar, is not threatened by this matter, it has adopted a quasi-“Jihadist” attitude against Islamist forces, including the moderate amongst them as well as resistance movements, while favoring normalization with Israel.

While these disagreements in the field of foreign policy cannot be given as a reason for recalling the ambassadors, Riyadh has recently stirred a number of controversial issues in order to preemptively justify the move. Some, if not most, of these issues precede Sheikh Tamim’s accession to power while others are related to statements and writings in media outlets that do not usually elicit, nor justify, such an extreme step.

The main challenge that Qatar constitutes to Saudi Arabia, and the entire political system in the region, is the adoption of an independent foreign policy from both the Saudi and Iranian axes. Qatar also hosts personalities and figures from all the prevailing intellectual and political currents in the Arab world, including Islamists, nationalists, leftists, and liberals. In fact, some observers were baffled by Qatar’s ability to group this broad and diverse spectrum of affiliations, which appears to those not accustomed to such practices in Arab politics as a sign of contradictions and inconsistency in Qatari foreign policy.

In truth, the matter is not related to divergent options within the Qatari foreign policy then, but to Qatar’s position outside the Saudi and Iranian axes. Such a position grants a margin of liberty to political forces that are critical of both axes to express themselves

and to converge with Qatar. There are not many places in the Arab Levant that can serve as a haven and a platform for those outside the circle of influence of the regional axes. This does not necessarily mean that Qatar adopts the positions of these guests, as media outlets affiliated with Saudi Arabia and the UAE often insinuate in an attempt to accuse Qatar of supporting specific political currents, such as political Islam, or a specific party within it, such as the Muslim Brotherhood. Efforts are also made to obliterate differences and distinctions between Islamic forces, these attempts reach a full circle with the conflation of the Muslim Brotherhood, terrorism, and al-Qaeda, thus placing all stripes of Islamism in a single basket.

The Muslim Brotherhood is a political movement that Saudi Arabia supported, specifically against Abdel Nasser, hosting Brotherhood figures for many decades. Regardless of his position toward the Brotherhood, any objective political analyst would agree that the Brotherhood has evolved since that period. The Muslim Brotherhood has participated in parliamentary elections in several countries, and has grown into a legitimate political power in the context of any pluralistic system. However, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have turned anti-Muslim Brotherhood only when the movement became more pragmatic. While there is plenty of evidence of Saudi support to the Brotherhood against Nasser's regime during the 1950s and the 1960s, nobody has, thus far, provided evidence of Qatar's support for the Brotherhood. As for the conflation between Qatar's support of an elected government that was acknowledged by the entire international community and support for the Brotherhood, it is a premeditated attack tactic because support for democracy and legitimacy cannot be an accusation.

In this regard, Qatar provided the Brotherhood with a platform to express itself, though this privilege was also extended to other movements, including enemies of the Brotherhood and of political Islam in general. Al-Jazeera's coverage of Arab revolutions, particularly in Egypt, was one of the main reasons for discord with Saudi Arabia, and as a media source, it represents a platform that permits intellectual figures and political personalities from different movements, Islamic or otherwise, to express their support for resistance and democracy. It is enough to just imagine the state of the Arab political and media scene in the absence of this platform in order to understand its value and importance. Moreover, Qatar's media, unlike those of its critics, often presents opposing views, including voices supportive of the coup in Egypt, the Syrian regime, and the current Saudi stance. Conversely, the counter-revolutionary camp in the region appears as a single homogenous chorus, not unlike the official media in dictatorial regimes. The best

expression of the situation's reality may be in the accusations hurled at Qatar that is "acting outside the flock".

Qatar can be faulted for not taking a sufficiently critical distance from the Brotherhood in Egypt, but Doha's argument is that conspiracies against the elected regime in Egypt did not permit other options. Qatar has ultimately dealt with those who were elected by the people, and that it was more biased toward Islamic movements since it believed this was based on public opinion. In this way, it was not fully aware of the level of diversity within the Arab public opinion and of the forces that ascended after the revolutions.

Qatar, like the other GCC states, has a number of problems, many of which are a result of its rentier economic system, its alliance with the United States, its conservative social structure, its increased percentage of foreign laborers and questions relating to their rights, and the perpetual challenges facing the country's identity. These problems, however, are prevalent in all GCC states, and they are definitely not the reason for Saudi and Emirati criticism. Rather, the charges made against Qatar are due to the positive aspects that have distinguished Qatar in terms of its openness and its positioning outside the regional axes.

Where are Things Heading?

Qatar has expressed its desire to contain the discord and avoid escalation, which was apparent in its decision to declare that recalling the three ambassadors is not seen as an option. Doha also announced that it is committed to the GCC's charter, security, and the interests of its people. At the same time, it cannot simply capitulate. What is being requested is the abandonment of its independent foreign policy, its support for Arab revolutions, and its hosting of Arab opposition figures who could not express themselves in their original countries. Moreover, it has been asked to close down Al-Jazeera. Conversely, these actions could potentially move Qatar closer toward the Iranian axis, an option that was not on the table even in far more difficult times in the past, especially after it became evident that bowing to pressure only leads to further demands, and that there are some that accept nothing less than complete surrender .

It is not Qatar's place to interfere in the affairs of other Gulf states, just as it does not accept anyone interfering in its affairs. This is a question of historical and strategic neighborly relations that must be afforded special care and diligence. Moreover, Qatar

must realize that it has taken upon itself a host of regional and international issues that cannot all be treated at once. On the other hand, Qatar cannot accept the dictates of others, or abandon the positive aspects resulting from its own decisions, or the initiatives that have given Qatar its distinct character on the Arab and international scenes. Qatar also must continue in furthering its relations with other Gulf states in a manner that serves common interests and within a framework of cooperation that permits a margin of difference in issues that do not pertain directly to the GCC countries. Any escalation will eventually lead to reconciliation, and any reconciliation will simultaneously rely on the principles of independence, respect for the sovereignty of states, and shared Gulf interests.