

Geographical Overview | **The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and Other Actors**

# Gulf Regional Crisis: Qatar-Saudi Arabia Rivalry, Tensions within the Gulf Cooperation Council

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The isolation of Qatar by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates has substantially failed, not only because of the immediate solidarity shown since June 2017 by Turkey and Iran, but also because Western states have not diminished their relations with Doha; indeed, some countries such as Italy have even intensified them. All the major countries, from East to West, were present at the Military Maritime Fair in Qatar in March 2018, an unequivocal sign that none of them intends to isolate a country that is one of the greatest producers of gas in the world, a strong purchaser of arms and an important investor in financial and real estate markets.

Qatar under the Al Thani Dynasty has proven much more skilful than the coalition led by the Saudis and the Emirates on the main battlefields: media propaganda; economic pressure and related costs; legal disputes regarding international conventions on the rule of law; and finally, public opinion dynamics and international reputation on the global stage.

For years, the Saudis and the Emirates have tried to severely punish Qatar for its presumed support to terrorism and for having threatened their security. The problem in displaying such political bravado is that such an attitude does not convince other countries. This is because the accusations are clearly disproportionate, apart from hypocritical insofar as certain central elements such as financing Islamist movements, relations with Iran and interference with the affairs of other countries.

Both Saudi Arabia and Qatar have funded radical Islamist groups warring in Syria, a sort of conflict by

proxy against Iran's greatest ally, in an attempt to reduce the Shiite Crescent's influence in the Middle East. This has failed, above all because of Russia's intervention on 30 September 2015.

And not only. To stop the rise of Syrian Kurds, Turkey, under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, had to ally itself with Moscow and Teheran. A devastating result for the Saudis, who were obliged to likewise come to a secret agreement with Israel to deter the expansion of the Shiite forces and the Lebanese Hezbollah. The quasi-abduction of the Lebanese politician Saad Hariri in Saudi Arabia, with nearly tragicomic repercussions on the international stage, was a sign that Riyadh's diplomacy seriously felt the blow of defeat in Syria, aggravated by the military stalemate in Yemen, a war that the Saudis have not managed to win in three years.

In this international context, the economic pressure and costs sustained by Qatar for not being able to access the land, marine or aerial spaces of its besieging neighbours was only momentarily traumatic, quickly overcome when various countries came to its rescue. The supplementary costs for having to use longer sea and air routes are insignificant compared to Qatar's financial reserves.

The political and economic ties that Qatar quickly established with both neighbouring and distant countries, among them such powerful ones as Iran, Turkey and India, far outweigh the costs in the short run deriving from having to pay more air transport fuel and other costs associated with the siege. Moreover, they have strengthened the country on the diplomatic level.

You could say the besiegers have made Qatar stronger both at home and abroad, and not the other way around.

To international public opinion, but also to other countries, Qatar has appeared much more reason-

able and coherent, whereas the countries led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE have only expressed fear and anger, as well as a certain arrogance, accompanied by unrealistic, irrational requests, not to mention an inability to provide concrete proof to back up their accusations.

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Among the 13 demands Saudi Arabia made of Qatar, as if in ultimatum, there was the demand to completely shut down the Al Jazeera media group, which is based in Doha. Qatar was also to suspend all contact with the Muslim Brotherhood, a mainly non-violent and democratic Islamic movement that had been one of the driving forces behind the Arab Spring in 2010 and 2011. It was to stop supporting radical Syrian Islamist rebel groups, in particular the organization known until the end of last year as the al-Nusra Front (before changing its name to conceal its ties to al-Qaeda).

Qatar was likewise supposed to hand over all individuals accused of 'terrorism' (a very broad term in the four countries carrying out the blockade). And it was to expel all citizens from these countries living in Qatar. And finally, Qatar was to suspend practically all diplomatic and commercial contact with Iran, despite the fact that nearly all of its income derives from the enormous gas fields that it shares with Teheran. And as if this weren't enough, it was also supposed to pay compensation for the inconvenience caused and accept regular monitoring to ensure it abided by these conditions over the next ten years.

Qatar would thus need to align itself "militarily, politically, socially and economically, as well as financially," with Saudi Arabia and its allies. In practice, this would mean no more independent foreign policy and tighter control at home.

The terms presented by the hereditary Saudi prince Mohammed bin Salman to end the blockade of Qatar were so harsh as to be the equivalent of an unconditional surrender, and they were presented in such a manner as to suggest that in reality, he wanted them to be rejected.

Saudi Arabia's diplomatic attack on Qatar was actually the consequence of the failure of the Syrian war against Assad and Riyadh's frustration at not managing to win any war against Iran, its main rival in the Gulf.

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Saudi Arabia is not in a position to directly wage war against Iran, but if it did, it would only be viable with decisive American support. And nevertheless, Riyadh's defence expenditure in 2016 was circa 64 billion dollars while that of Iran amounted to 12. Economic figures are likewise clearly higher on the Saudi side, which boasts a GDP of 650 billion dollars while Iran's is around 400 billion dollars. And this not to mention oil production: Saudi Arabia's more than doubles that of Iran. The confrontation between the two economies could become further penalizing for Iran if the Americans decide to impose new sanctions on Teheran.

Data on military power in Iran shows strength in number of soldiers and in certain sectors, but the Saudis have a technologically more advanced arsenal. And yet the Saudis, who also enjoy American aerial support, cannot even beat the Zaydi Shiite Houthi resistance of Yemen.

The war between Riyadh and Teheran will always remain a war by proxy, and you could also say by luck: simply consider what it could mean in terms of oil supply on the market to see the Gulf terminals in flames.

The Saudis thus vented their frustration against Qatar, believing they would gain an easy victory. But it is known that both countries have funded the al-Nusra Front, turning a blind eye to its ties with al-Qaeda, from the moment it was fighting the Alawi regime of Syrian President Assad, an ally of the Shiites. The funds disbursed by both countries were often delivered in bags filled with cash deposited in Turkish hotels, thus it is probable that part of it reached the hands of the Caliphate, especially when in recent years the various Islamist factions have been divided regarding whether or not to support ISIS.

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In sum, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have accused and condemned Qatar for something they had just stopped doing. And this is also why Saudi action against Qatar has been a substantial failure: it has been perceived internationally as a hypocritical pretext. And probably

also as an attempt to domesticate Doha in order to take over management of their resources. In these years, Saudi Arabia has paid, much more dearly than Qatar, for the forced oil price war, directed especially against US shale oil, impoverishing government funds and the private income of the Wahhabi Kingdom.

To grasp the underlying reasons for this conflict between Qataris and Saudis, we must also take a look at economic data. Qatar has a sovereign fund of 355 billion dollars, 30 billion in stocks and bonds, and a colossal sum in other investments abroad. The Saudi royal house, on the other hand, pays a steep price, with a public debt that would have forced Riyadh into default by 2018, corresponding precisely to the huge amounts of aid granted to terrorist organizations in Syria, Yemen and Iraq, all jihadi militants now outside the new balance and defeated by the Russia-Iran-Syria triangle, which Turkey has joined after making agreements with Moscow and Teheran.

The isolation of Qatar has failed, true, considering that it even hosts an American military base, and a Turkish one as well, but the friction between Doha and Riyadh remains. On the other side of the Gulf, the Iranians are observing this with some satisfaction: the Arabs have given another political gift to the Islamic republic.