

Gulf Rivalries Reach North Africa

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The imprint of the Gulf countries is very visible in North Africa. And not only in terms of millionaire investments, as we had grown accustomed to thinking. The geopolitical competition between them is increasingly blatant and stark, and any situation will do to gain influence or try to snatch it from a rival.

In the 1990s, it was said that the dynamics of conflict and cooperation in the Maghreb were increasingly independent of what was happening in the rest of the Arab world. Alliances and counter-alliances were shaped by the historic rivalry between Algeria and Morocco, not the conflicts of the Middle East; the countries of the Maghreb increasingly looked to Europe or Africa; and regional powers, such as Turkey, Israel or the Gulf countries themselves did not seem to pay too much attention to what happened there. It may not have been a minor issue, but it was a secondary one.

This began to change in 2011, when a wave of protests that would shake the foundations of the pre-existing order began in Tunisia. Both the established regional powers and those that aspired to move up the ladder, such as Qatar or the Emirates, understood that new opportunities, as well as new risks, were emerging in North Africa. The biggest bets were placed in Egypt, the centre of gravity of the Arab world and North Africa's most populous country. The Gulf's influence was also felt in the Tunisian transition and the Libyan conflict.

At the same time, the countries of North Africa increasingly had no choice but to position themselves with regard to the rivalries between the Gulf countries. The clearest case was the boycott of Qatar, but the war in Yemen is equally important, as well as all things related to Iran, a highly sensitive issue for Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. An eloquent sign of just how connected the geopolitical dynamics of the Gulf and North Africa are was Morocco's decision, in May 2018, to cut off diplomatic relations with Iran, after accusing Teheran of supporting the Polisario Front through Hezbollah. As this article will explain, while this may have been the most recent case, and one of the most striking, it was hardly the only one.

Egypt: The Lifeline

The political changes in Egypt have immediately been reflected in its relations with the Gulf countries. Whilst Saudi Arabia positioned itself as one of the countries most favourable to Mubarak remaining in power, Qatar quickly bet on his fall. With the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Qatari landing materialized, amongst other things, in the form of an exponential increase in investment – more than 1,000%, coupled with the promise of another \$18 billion in the years to come.¹ More clear proof of the Qatari support could be found in the repeated injections of capital in the form of aid: some \$8 billion in a total of three payments. The last payment was preceded by a meeting between senior officials from both cabinets that ended with statements by the then-Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jas-

¹ CENTRAL BANK OF EGYPT (CBE). *Monthly Statistical Bulletin*, 249. Available at: www.cbe.org.eg/en/EconomicResearch/Publications/Pages/MonthlyBulletinHistorical.aspx (retrieved: 23 May 2018).

sim al-Thani, encouraging bilateral relations to continue apace and the countries to take advantage of the good moment.²

The tables turned again after Morsi's fall in 2013 and Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's rise to power. Qatar withdrew and Saudi Arabia and the Emirates welcomed the announced change with a disbursement of \$8 billion to Egypt for various items, including direct transfers to the Central Bank, energy supply and interest-free loans. This aid was on top of two other lifelines for the Egyptian economy: remittances from Egyptian workers in the Gulf – more than two percentage points of its GDP, coming especially from Saudi Arabia – and multi-million-dollar investments spearheaded by the Emirates to the tune of €1.3 billion a year.³

This injection of liquidity was vital to keeping the economy afloat and served as a counterweight to the pressures of international players, such as the United States and the European Union, which froze some of their financial assistance.⁴ Whilst Brussels and Washington expressed reservations or maintained a wait-and-see approach, both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi firmly supported the new regime. In the Saudi case, the main concern was to prevent the country from collapsing and to bring it closer to its sphere of influence. The Emiratis viewed the opportunity in ideological terms: it was an unbeatable chance to curtail the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood. For years, especially since 2011, the leaders of Abu Dhabi have perceived the Islamist movement as a regional rival and, above all, a threat to their own security.

Despite the massive amount of aid received, the new Egyptian authorities sought to retain a broad margin of autonomy in foreign policy, and that did not always sit well with their creditors. The Egyptian leaders began to acknowledge that there would be no solution to the Syrian conflict without al-Assad. Al-Sisi himself explained that his priority was “to support national armies.” When asked if that applied to Syria as well, he said yes.⁵ Saudi Arabia began to show its discontent, and, in 2016, the tension between the two countries increased to the point

where Saudi Arabia cut off the oil supply in retaliation for Egypt's alignment with Russia on a Security Council resolution over the siege of Aleppo.

In 2017, the alliance was rebuilt and gestures intended to ease the tension proliferated. The most controversial of all was the cession by Egypt of two islands, Tiran and Sanafir, to Saudi Arabia. Al-Sisi showed the extent to which he was willing to take risks to normalize relations with Riyadh. Despite the popular outrage over the move, which was regarded as a betrayal of national sovereignty, and the fact that the issue was brought before the courts, Parliament, in lockstep with the Presidency of the Republic, decided to expedite the territorial concession. In June 2017, Egypt confirmed its alignment with the Saudis and Emiratis with the decision to launch a joint boycott against Qatar, which it accused of supporting terrorism and meddling in its internal affairs and those of other Arab countries. Egypt's message to its partners was that they could rely on it in the fight against the Muslim Brotherhood. This stands in contrast with the much lower profile it has assumed in other issues, such as the war in Yemen or the controversy over the Iran nuclear deal. Proof that despite its economic dependence on the Gulf, Egypt still aspires to maintain a certain degree of autonomy in foreign policy.

Choose Your Candidate: The Gulf and the Tunisian Transition

The Gulf countries' presence in Tunisia is not a new phenomenon, as attested by the large urban development projects in the capital. What is new is the highly political dimension it has acquired. With the start of the democratic transition, various Gulf countries began to see Tunisian politics as a battlefield. In keeping with its strategy of building alliances with new players to emerge in the wake of the 2011 protests, Qatar decided to support both the new Tunisian government, led by the Islamists of Ennahdha,

² DARAGHI, Borzou. “Qatar gives Egypt \$3bn aid package.” *Financial Times*, 10 April 2013. Available at: www.ft.com/content/790a7d52-a1f4-11e2-8971-00144feabdc0 (retrieved: 23 May 2018).

³ Data for fiscal year 2015/2016, from: CENTRAL BANK OF EGYPT (CBE). *Monthly Statistical Bulletin*, 249. Available at: www.cbe.org.eg/en/EconomicResearch/Publications/Pages/MonthlyBulletinHistorical.aspx (retrieved: 23 May 2018).

⁴ The European Union opened the debate on suspending aid and shutting off the weapons tap in the summer of 2013. The United States announced that it would be withholding a transfer of \$260 million and halting shipments of military equipment.

⁵ Al-Sisi hinted at his support for Assad in an interview with the Portuguese broadcaster RTP in November 2016.

and President Moncef Marzouki. Official visits multiplied and the Qatari presence became so visible that the opposition forces began to question it. By way of example, in 2014, several leaders, such as Mahmoud Baroudi, Khemais Ksila or Samir Ettaieb, boycotted a dinner in honour of the Emir of Qatar offered by the President of the Republic.⁶

Despite its economic dependence on the Gulf, Egypt still aspires to maintain a certain degree of autonomy in foreign policy

The United Arab Emirates decided to enter the game, trying to neutralize the influence of both political Islamism and Qatar. In September 2013, it withdrew its ambassador, sparking all sorts of rumours about Emirati support for Nidaa Tounes, a clearly anti-Ennahdha formation. Following Beji Caïd Essebsi's victory in the December 2014 elections, the Emirates tried to rebuild relations, but their hopes were dashed. Nidaa Tounes ended up forming a government with Ennahdha, and the Qatari presence in Tunisia did not abate. Since then, Abu Dhabi has seized every opportunity to express its disappointment. The lack of Emirati investment in Tunisia or the obstacles Tunisian citizens face to obtain visas from the country reflect the political tension between the two governments.⁷

The relations between Tunisia and Saudi Arabia have followed a different logic. Despite offering Ben Ali safe harbour when he fled the country, Riyadh has decided not to interfere in the day-to-day battles of Tunisian politics. In exchange, the Tunisian authorities have endeavoured not to irritate the Saudis. A good example of this was when the Prime Minister sacked his Religious Affairs Minister, Abdeljalil Ben Salem, in November 2016 over remarks linking terrorism to Saudi Wahhabi proselytizing.⁸

Choose Your Militia: The Gulf and the Libyan Conflict

The Gulf countries played an important role in the fall of Gaddafi. Unlike in the mobilizations in Egypt or Tunisia, there was almost complete convergence in Libya. Animosity towards Gaddafi was one of the few things on which all the Arab Gulf capitals agreed. Not in vain, the Libyan leader had come to use very coarse language to refer to the Gulf monarchs, in particular, the Saudis. One of the final incidents occurred at a 2009 summit, when Gaddafi said, "I have been waiting six years to tell you that you are a liar. You were made by Britain and protected by the United States."⁹ When the protests began in Libya, the Gulf Cooperation Council was one of the first organizations to call for the imposition of a no-fly zone. It was followed, in similar terms, by the Arab League, lending regional legitimacy to UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which ultimately resulted in a regime change operation. Although the operation was led by NATO, the Emirati and Qatari air forces joined the coalition.

With the start of the democratic transition, various Gulf countries began to see Tunisian politics as a battlefield

The other major moment in which the Gulf countries left their mark in Libya was in 2014. That year saw the derailment of the transition and the start of the second phase of the conflict. Following the elections of 25 June, two centres of power emerged: Tripoli and Tobruk, supported by Qatar and the Emirates, respectively. They were not the only regional players to take sides, but they were amongst the most influential. The Gulf countries' involvement mainly took the form of financial or military support for the parties to

⁶ Z.A. "Tunisie-Politique: L'opposition boycotte le dîner en l'honneur de l'émir de Qatar." *Kapitalis*, 2 April 2014. Available at: www.kapitalis.com/politique/21569-tunisie-politique-l-opposition-boycotte-le-diner-en-l-honneur-de-l-emir-du- (retrieved: 23 May 2018).

⁷ For more information, see: CHERIF, Youssef. "Les relations incertaines de la Tunisie avec les pays du Golfe." *Orient XXI*, 17 May 2017. Available at: <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/les-relations-balbutiantes-de-la-tunisie-avec-le-golfe,1810> (retrieved: 23 May 2018).

⁸ RFI. "Tunisie: le ministre des Affaires religieuses parle du wahhabisme, il est limogé." *RFI Afrique*, 5 November 2016. Available at: www.rfi.fr/afrique/20161104-tunisie-ministre-affaires-religieuses-wahhabisme-limoge-abdeljalil-ben-salem (retrieved: 23 May 2018).

⁹ HAMID AHMED, Abdul. "Libyan, Saudi leaders walk out of Arab Summit after a spat." *Gulf News*, 30 March 2009. Available at: <https://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/qatar/libyan-saudi-leaders-walk-out-of-arab-summit-after-a-spat-1.60102> (retrieved: 23 May 2018).

the conflict. Several Arab countries have accused Qatar of funding groups included on lists of terrorist organizations, such as Ansar al-Sharia and the Benghazi Defence Brigades. Doha denied the accusations. In contrast, its support for the government in Tripoli and groups linked to the Muslim Brotherhood is a proven fact.¹⁰ As for the Emirates, a United Nations report concluded that the country was violating the arms embargo, but Abu Dhabi did not feel it was necessary to deny it or to respond to the questions put to it by the UN.¹¹ The Emirati support for the forces led by Khalifa Haftar is no secret, with several meetings between Mohamed Bin Zayed and the Libyan general having been made public.

The Gulf countries played an important role in the fall of Gaddafi. Unlike in the mobilizations in Egypt or Tunisia, there was almost complete convergence in Libya

Occasionally, the involvement of the Emirates and, by its side, Egypt has gone further. In the first months of the conflict, the UAE Air Force, with Egyptian support, launched a campaign to strike government-controlled targets in Tripoli.¹² In 2017, Egypt bombed the city of Derna, apparently with Emirati support, in retaliation for an attack that killed dozens of Copts.

The involvement of all these players shows how Libya has become the scene of a regional conflict with a strong ideological component. The players who perceive the Muslim Brotherhood and political Islam as a threat to the security of the regime or, on the contrary, as an opportunity to expand their influence are the ones who have become most explicitly involved.

Choose Your Side: The Qatar Boycott

In June 2017, four Arab countries (Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Egypt and Bahrain) made a decision as drastic as it was risky: they announced the blockade of Qatar with measures that included not only breaking off diplomatic relations, but also restrictions on the mobility of people and goods. Shortly thereafter, they published a list of ¹³ demands to lift the blockade, and Doha chose not to compromise. The division between the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council was transferred to the rest of the Arab countries and, therefore, to North Africa, as well. Doha asked for help to resist, whilst the backers of the boycott asked the rest of the countries to join. Of all the countries in the Maghreb, the most interesting positionings were those of Morocco, Algeria and Mauritania.

Morocco is a traditional Saudi ally and has long sought to strengthen its ties with the Gulf countries. Three examples may help to illustrate this unique relationship: Morocco was the only Maghrebi country, in 1991, to contribute troops to the international coalition to oust Saddam Hussein from Kuwait; in the midst of the Arab Spring, the Saudis broached the possibility of Morocco joining the Gulf Cooperation Council; and, in 2015, Rabat joined Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen. This move sparked some debate within the country, especially following the shooting down of a Moroccan fighter jet in May of that year.

In contrast, in 2017, Morocco not only declined to join the boycott but also, in the first few weeks, sent a plane with food supplies to Doha.¹³ Rabat sought to square the circle: to preserve its ties with Qatar, one of the countries that had most increased its investment in Morocco,¹⁴ whilst arguing that this did not mean it had taken part and that, precisely for that reason, it supported the mediation efforts of Kuwait.

¹⁰ KIRKPATRICK, David D. "Qatar's Support of Islamists Alienates Allies Near and Far." *The New York Times*, 7 September 2014. Available at: www.nytimes.com/2014/09/08/world/middleeast/qatars-support-of-extremists-alienates-allies-near-and-far.html (retrieved: 23 May 2018).

¹¹ UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL (UNSC). "Final report of the Panel of Experts on Libya established pursuant to resolution 1973." Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/N1711623.pdf> (retrieved: 23 May 2018).

¹² KINGSLEY, Patrick, STEPHEN, Chris, and ROBERTS, Dan. "UAE and Egypt behind bombing raids against Libyan militias, say US officials." *The Guardian*, 26 August 2014. Available at: www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/26/united-arab-emirates-bombing-raids-libyan-militias (retrieved: 23 May 2018).

¹³ REUTERS STAFF. "Morocco says will send food to Qatar after Gulf states cut ties." *Reuters*, 13 June 2017. Available at: www.reuters.com/article/us-gulf-qatar-morocco/morocco-says-will-send-food-to-qatar-after-gulf-states-cut-ties-idUSKBN1940RD (retrieved: 23 May 2018).

¹⁴ Specifically, it increased 46% between the years 2014/2015 and 2015/2016. See: "Balance des Paiements. Neuf premiers mois 2016." *Office des Changes, Maroc*, p. 38. Available at: www.oc.gov.ma/portal/sites/default/files/stat-echange-exterieur/Publications%20Statistiques/Brochure_BP_Septembre_2016_0.pdf (retrieved: 23 May 2018).

Saudi Arabia did not see things the same way and began to make its displeasure known to Morocco, choosing the sphere of sports to send a clear signal. Turki al-Sheikh, head of the highest Saudi sport authority, the General Sports Authority (GSA), took advantage of the Moroccan candidacy for the 2026 World Cup to send a warning. "If we were asked for support, we would firstly look at what serves Saudi Arabia's best interest," he tweeted from his official Twitter account. Al-Sheikh made it clear that "to be in the grey area is no longer acceptable" for Saudi Arabia, in reference to Morocco's neutral stance in the Qatari blockade.¹⁵

It is in this context that Morocco's decision to cut off relations with Iran in May 2018 must be understood. Rabat accused Iran of training and providing military support for the Polisario Front via Hezbollah in Algeria. The message was intended for multiple recipients, one of which was certainly Saudi Arabia.

The Algerian position is also interesting, as the country has long sought to stay out of the regional confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Algiers declined to join the so-called Islamic Military Alliance promoted by Saudi Arabia, which brings together the vast majority of Sunni Muslim countries. With regard to conflicts such as those in Syria and Yemen, it has always advocated trying to find a negotiated solution. Algeria's neutrality in relation to the crisis between the Gulf countries must thus be interpreted as a new affirmation of autonomy. And yet, it does not seek to be hostile towards Saudi Arabia. Were that the case, it would have offered a token of support to the Qatari authorities. Why? The key lies in Saudi Arabia's preeminent position in the energy market, an essential aspect for the survival of the Algerian economy and, therefore, the country's political stability.

Mauritania is a completely different case, as it was one of the few countries that did break off relations

with Qatar and quickly joined the boycott. This decision can be explained, firstly, by the country's domestic political dynamics: one of the main opposition forces is the Islamist Tawasul party, close to the Muslim Brotherhood, which was also accused of receiving Qatari support.¹⁶ However, other factors may also have played a role in the decision, such as the growing investment, development aid and military cooperation provided by Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, not only in Mauritania, but to the Sahel and West Africa as a whole.¹⁷ That would explain, for instance, why the Mauritanian positions with regard to the crisis between the Gulf countries are more akin to those of Senegal or Niger than to those of its Maghrebi neighbours.

And Now What?

Five trends are taking shape: (1) the Gulf countries, especially Qatar and the Emirates, no longer consider North Africa a secondary issue, but rather one of the preeminent stages on which to project their influence; (2) the volume of aid and investment that they are disbursing in these countries reduces the influence and conditionality of other players, such as the European Union; (3) the political fragmentation or polarization in North Africa opens up spaces for interference by external actors; (4) the support of the Gulf countries for rival political groups further polarizes political transitions and is an obstacle to resolving some conflicts that, like the Libyan conflict, remain open; and (5) North African countries are under increasing pressure to take sides in the Gulf rivalries and any attempt to preserve autonomy or declare their neutrality makes their creditors uneasy. Until these trends are reversed, we will have to get used to analyzing the political and security dynamics of North Africa with one eye turned to the Gulf.

¹⁵ AL JAZEERA NEWS. "Saudi official hints Riyadh may not support Morocco 2026 FIFA bid." *Al Jazeera*, 19 March 2018. Available at: www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/03/saudi-official-hints-riyadh-support-morocco-2026-fifa-bid-180319075225536.html (retrieved: 23 May 2018).

¹⁶ SIDYA, Cheikh. "Mauritanie: quel avenir pour le parti islamiste après la rupture avec le Qatar?" *Le 360 Afrique*, 11 June 2017. Available at: <http://afrique.le360.ma/mauritanie/politique/2017/06/11/12570-mauritanie-quel-avenir-pour-le-parti-islamiste-apres-la-rupture-avec-le-qatar-12570> (retrieved: 23 May 2018)

¹⁷ REUTERS STAFF. "Saudis pledge \$100 million to African anti-jihadist force: Mali." *Reuters*, 4 December 2017. Available at: www.reuters.com/article/us-africa-security-saudi/saudis-pledge-100-million-to-african-anti-jihadist-force-mali-idUSKBN1DY2J5 (retrieved: 23 May 2018).