

QATAR AND THE CRISIS IN THE MIDDLE EAST: CHANGING STRATEGIC ALLIANCES

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ABSTRACT

Being one of the richest regions in the world due to its oil and gas resources, the Middle East (ME) has assisted countries of this region to prosper in all spheres of life socially, politically and economically. This region also has another strength, where they share the same religion, culture and language and have a long history of tribal relations. Since countries of this region provide energy resources for most of the industrial needs worldwide, all major powers of the world have their vested interest in the region. While these interests favoured some countries of the region, it has proved detrimental for some others in the recent past like Syria, Iraq and Yemen. The recent crisis in the ME between Qatar and the “quartet” (Saudi Arabia UAE, Egypt and Bahrain) has cracked the cohesion of the region. New blocs have emerged in the region with different alliances. Major powers of the world have only focused on their interest and have not taken any keen interest in the reconciliation process. Rather this division favoured many countries and they have cashed the situation to their advantage. The situation is still fluid and there are developments with every passing day.

Keywords: Gulf Cooperation Council, Arab Spring, Arabian Peninsula, Muslim Brotherhood

GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL (GCC) AND ITS IMPORTANCE

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) was formed in the year 1981 with six member states: Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates and Oman. GCC countries share the same language, culture, religion and resources. This organisation took initiatives for development of the region by focusing in sectors of agriculture, tourism, industrial development etc. Today cracks are being detected in the closely-bonded Arabian Peninsula, formation of blocs is being witnessed, war zones are shifting from one country to the other and the tensions are continuously rising.

Arabian Peninsula is the most prominent region on the resource map of the world. Almost 50% of the world's oil resources are located in this region making it the energy hub of the world. In today's interwoven world, if problems of this regions are not contained and resolved, effects could be disastrous.

ESTRANGEMENT IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA: ITS GENESIS

Conflict started with the Arab Spring in 2010, when Qatar and the other GCC countries took opposite banks. Saudi Arabia considers Iran a threat to the region and this stance is strongly backed by the USA and Israel, whereas Qatar adopts a different policy. The present crisis came to the surface when in a speech, the Qatari Emir spoke about the tense relations with the present US government but also described Hamas as the legitimate representative of Palestinian people. In addition, he mentioned Iran as an important and credible regional power that has a definite role to play in ensuring security and stability of the region (Ulrichsen, 2017). Since then, the relationship equation of the Middle East (ME) got unbalanced and the cracks widened. Involvement of extra regional players such as the USA, Russia and Turkey as well as some fundamentalist organisations are adding further complexity to the problem.

The Middle East is presently turning into a hub of multiple blocs. Each bloc is operating in line with its interests and complete disregard to regional stability, unity and cohesion that is the prime building block of international peace and stability. Some historical allies are switching sides and new alliances are shaping in the region. All these new developments are raising the political as well the military temperature of the region.

DIGGING AND UNDERSTANDING THE FACTS

The crisis in ME is just like the tip of the iceberg. It has far reaching effects not only in the region but the overall world. Although, ME is embroiled with numerous problems, the recent tussle between Qatar and quartet has caused a major divide in the region.

Qatar's prominence in contrast to her size is attached with multiple strings. Qatar possesses the world's third largest natural gas reserves and it has used the resources to magnify her image globally. Qatar has developed strategic ties with world powers. Today, UK is heavily reliant upon LNG imports from Qatar, and in 2009 Qatar signed a 25 year agreement with China National Offshore Oil Cooperation and Petro China (Ulrichsen, 2014). Since, Qatar has secured energy needs of several countries, this ensures Qatar's security in addition to elevating Qatar's stature in the region. Qatar further balances her relations in the international arena by being a close ally of the US as it houses the largest USAF Base Al-Udeid on its territory.

KSA and Qatar are the richest and founding countries of GCC, but have a long and twisted history of relations. Smaller geography and limited international clout, instilled a security concern for Qatar and thus Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani believed that Qatar could find security only by transforming itself from a Saudi appendage

to a rival of Saudi Arabia (Fisher, 2017). Another underlying factor for tensions between KSA and Qatar lies in the bloodless coup in Qatar, which brought Hamad bin Khalifa to power. The severing of diplomatic ties with Qatar in June 2017 is not the first instance but ambassadors of KSA, Bahrain, UAE and Egypt had been called back earlier in year 2014 as well. This time there are more countries like Chad, Maldives, Mauritania, Senegal and Yemen that have joined the Saudi bloc and thus magnitude of the situation has further increased.

POLITICAL IMPACT OF THE QATAR CRISIS ON THE REGION

Although three years have already passed, the crisis is still in place. Qatar is poised to stay out of the Saudi influence in regional and global matters. The quartet perhaps assumed that Qatar would take a step back, rethink and re-evaluate her foreign policy, but leveraging on her sound economic and diplomatic strength, Qatar has successfully managed to look after her citizens and national interests. Qatar has shown her diplomatic strength by improving her relations with Turkey and Iran, forming another bloc and thereby showing a resolve to withstand pressure from the quartet. There are some important aspects that help understand the political impact of this crisis on the region:

a. Arab Spring

Arab Spring started in 2011 in the form of demonstrations, protests and social media movements. All of these were focused against the ruling monarchs in countries like Yemen, Syria, Egypt, Libya and Tunisia. These protests were initially peaceful but later turned violent upon meeting armed resistance from governments, and subsequently, took the shape of civil war in countries like Syria and Libya, whereas the countries under the rule of wealthy monarchs remained largely unaffected. Main cause of the Arab Spring was biased and unjustified distribution of wealth and power in society. Countries where rulers are greatly connected to the leadership like Oman or the masses are reaping the benefits of economic benefits like in Qatar, did not feel threatened. This Arab Spring not only brought changes at the domestic level, but pounded deep cracks in the GCC. Already strained relations between Qatar and rest of the GCC members further accentuated and took them to opposite banks. Third parties like the US and Israel appreciated and supported the cause of these movements.

b. Muslim Brotherhood

(1) Qatar crisis cannot be appreciated without developing an understanding of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), rather some of the writers mention it as locus of the current disagreement among the GCC countries. Some of the countries have

declared them as a terrorist organisation, whereas in some countries like Jordan and Tunisia its members are still active in the political circle.

- (2) The relations between the MB and KSA can be traced back to Arab Cold War of 1950. Since MB fought against pan-Arabism advocated by Jamal Abdul Nasir, many members of MB fled Egypt and took refuge in KSA. Relations between KSA and MB deteriorated when King Fahd requested US to intervene in the Gulf War and demanded some radical political reforms. Thus, most of the MB members were expelled from KSA (Lacroix, 2017).
- (3) In the same time of the Arab Cold War, many religious scholars belonging to MB like Abdul Baqi Saqr and Qaradawi left Egypt for Qatar. These MB exiles were accommodated in Qatar on the pretext that they would not interfere in domestic affairs of the country, clearly underlining what activities they are allowed to take part in and otherwise (Haykel, 2013). These religious scholars played a significant role in Qatari educational spheres and had a large audience due to their religious intellect (Roberts, 2017). Popularity of the Qatari monarchs among the masses did not give any room for MB to socially interact with the people. Qatar and MB continued to maintain harmony amongst themselves.
- (4) In Egypt, MB again came into limelight in 2012, when Muhammad Morsi became the first democratically elected president. This angered not only the GCC bloc led by KSA and backed by UAE, but the Egyptian military and the secular activists. Eventually, a coup erupted against the democratically elected government of Muhammad Morsi (Khatib, 2014). Since, MB had dissimilar relations with the GCC countries, they became another bone of contention in the Arabian Peninsula.

c. Qatar – Iran Relations

- (1) Before this blockade, Iran and Qatar have not enjoyed the best of relations. Hezbollah is seen as case in point where it is supported by one, and as a terrorist organisation by the other (Naylor, 2016). In addition, when a prominent Shia scholar, Sheikh Nimr Baqir, was executed in KSA, the Saudi Embassy was attacked by a mob in Tehran. Consequently, along with Saudi Arabia, Qatar also reduced diplomatic relations with Iran. Relations have not been pleasant between the two, but it appeared to be a major factor in the GCC dispute. Some of the demands to lift the blockade were related to Iran like, scaling down diplomatic ties, close the Iranian diplomatic mission in Qatar, expel members of Iran's Revolutionary Guard and cut off military and intelligence cooperation. Trade and commerce with Iran was also required to comply with US and international sanctions (Al Jazeera, 2017).

- (2) Interestingly after the blockade, Iran popped up as a breath of fresh air for Qatar. Iran took advantage of the situation by supporting Qatar and opposing Saudi Arabia in order to enhance her long desired regional influence (Luciano Zaccara, 2019). Diplomatic relations between Qatar and Iran started to improve as of August 2017, and Qatar announced to send back the Ambassador to Iran and President Rouhani also called Emir of Qatar to reassure Iran's support (Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017). Iran's support became very evident when it not only provided air routes to Qatar Airways but also by sending airplanes with food and other items of immediate nature.
- (3) Although, Iran-Qatar nexus has provided some breathing space for both the countries, in a way this relationship has increased the width of already existing crack between Qatar and quartet. It would not be wrong to say that Iran is definitely a beneficiary of the situation, and perhaps, it is a strategic miscalculation from KSA that has brought Iran back into the game where it was successfully sidelined by GCC. It would be premature to say how long this nexus would survive and how long the cracks in GCC would take to be filled up again.
- (4) It is obvious that due to improving relations with Iran, Qatar would not only be condemned by the Quartet but also the western world, predominantly USA that considers Iran a threat to global peace. Recently, the withdrawal of US from the Iran nuclear deal and growing tension around Strait of Hormuz is a testimony to this. It is also a fact that perhaps the blockade had left no margin for Qatar, except to improve relations with Iran. This complex situation has put Qatar's diplomacy in a testing situation to balance relations with an ally like the US and a new friend Iran.

d. Political Dimension of Turkey-Qatar Relations

To understand the Turkish involvement, understanding of relations between Turkey and MB must be understood. When Turkey was a secular state, MB helped the Islamist movement in Turkey (Tanir, 2019). Turkey has since then maintained close ties with MB and supported their movements in many countries. Turkey also denounced the coup against Muhammad Morsi of MB. This ideological similarity brought Qatar and Turkey close and they shared the policy of supporting new emerging movements centered around political Islam (Roberts, 2018). Sharing these ideological similarities, Turkey was the first country to lend a brotherly hand to Qatar upon the declaration of the blockade by the quartet.

e. American Role in the Crisis

- (1) The US being a superpower is naturally concerned with almost everything happening around the world. ME being the hub of energy of the world, it is

of concern to the US. US enjoys significant relations with GCC countries and enjoys significant influence in the region. The US military presence throughout the Arabian peninsula, like NAVCENT HQs in Bahrain, Naval Medical Research Unit Three in Egypt, Al-Asad Air Base in Iraq, Camp Arifjan and Camp Patriot in Kuwait, CENTCON forward HQ and Al-Udeid Air Base in Qatar and Al-Dhafra Air Base in UAE is evidence of this (Wallin, 2018). All this military presence secures US interests in the region, but also takes plea of protecting the region from external threat, predominantly Iran and other non-state actors (Martini et al., 2016).

- (2) It is for sure in the US interest that this region remains stable and none of the other powers find place and reason to create any disturbance. Peculiarity of this region is such that no one country can be regarded as more important than the other. Saudi Arabia is the largest oil producer and arms buyer of the region, whereas Qatar and Bahrain house the CENTCOM HQs.
- (3) When the blockade was declared by the quartet, the US initially supported the quartet when President Trump said in a news conference that these measures were “hard but necessary”. (Young & Raghavan, 2017). Although, the deadlock between the Arab states remained as it was, the US attitude towards Qatar has changed and this happened because of an aggressive and well-funded Qatari campaign to rehabilitate its image and reputation as a reliable US partner (Lederman, 2018). Less than a year later, Emir of Qatar was invited to the White House by the US President and Qatar’s efforts to curb the menace of terrorism were acknowledged.
- (4) The efforts to tone down the Qatar crisis have not yielded any positive results; rather new alliances have emerged. US has acknowledged Qatar’s efforts against terrorism, has sold arms to both Qatar and KSA, attacks on merchant shipping in the Strait of Hormuz, US withdrawal from Iran Nuclear Deal, Turkey buying S-400 missiles from Russia are adding complexity to the situation.

ECONOMIC OUTLOOK OF THE CRISIS

Qatar is blessed with huge amounts of petroleum reserves and this forms the backbone of its economy. It has the third largest gas reserves in the world after Iran and Russia (Baabood, 2017).

Qatar had deep rooted economic relations with GCC countries. 40% of Qatar’s food supplies were routed through the only land border shared with KSA, and UAE meets one third of her gas requirements from Qatar via Dolphin Energy Pipeline (Kabbani, 2017). Ratio of Qatari exports and imports with the blockading countries is shown in the Figure – 1 below (Collins, 2013, p. 2):

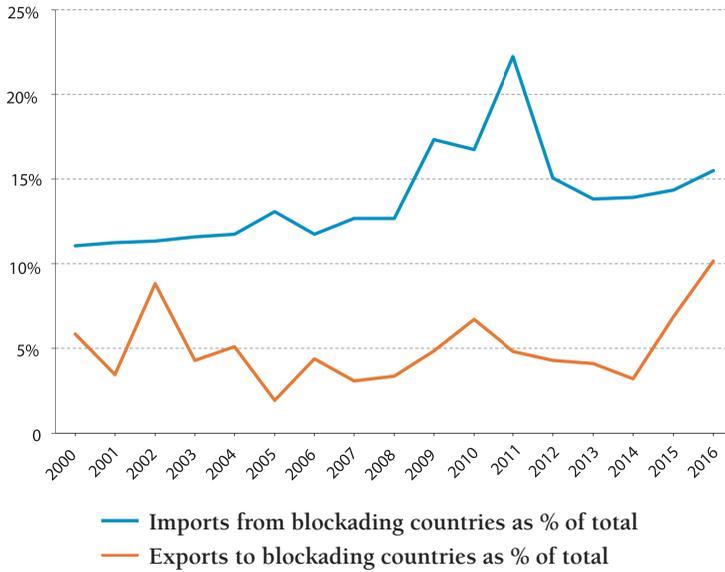


Figure 1: Ratio of Qatari Imports and Exports with Quartet
 Source: *Observatory of Economic Complexity*

When oil prices dropped, hydrocarbon dependent Qatari economy slipped into the first deficit budget in 2016, and thus Qatar realised the need to diversify her economic structure and the same can be seen from the Fig – 2 below. Although its economy still relies heavily on oil and gas, the percentage has gone down from 60.1% of GDP in 2011 to 48.2% of GDP in 2017 (QNB, 2018).

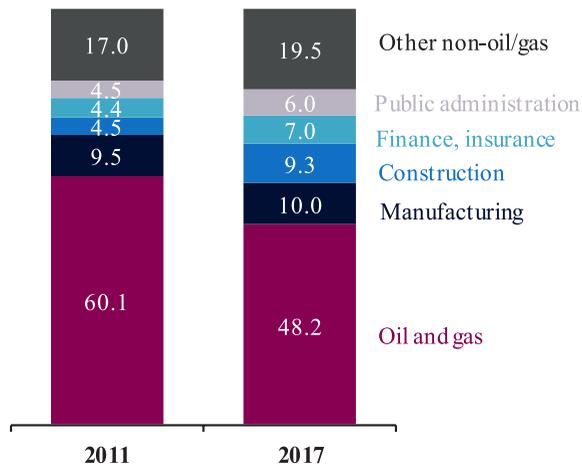


Figure 2: Diversification of Qatari Economy
 Source: *MDPS, Haver Analytics, QNB Economics*

When the blockade was declared, its effects were felt across the economy and were visible in the local markets. There was acute shortage of domestic products, but Qatar in close liaison with Turkey and Iran established new trade routes and agreements and restored the situation within a short span of 48 hours (Oxford Business Group, n.d.).

Due to her enormous petroleum reserves, Qatar has always been an active economic partner of many countries. The blockade helped Qatar to move towards self-reliance and garner new economic partnerships. Many of the countries, mostly the gas importers, including UAE, continued normal business with Qatar and that is the prime reason why this blockade failed to achieve the anticipated results. Qatar's trade and integration with other countries, particularly Iran and Turkey has grown significantly, and these relations may prove to replace the old ties with GCC (Kabbani, 2017).

QATAR-TURKEY RELATIONS – A VIEW FROM THE ECONOMIC PRISM

Turkey had enjoyed good relations with GCC countries through mutual investments and projects. GCC and Turkey signed a Free Trade Agreement in 2008, and this brought in significant amounts of FDI to Turkey, particularly from KSA and UAE (Emirate247, 2008). The FDI inflow in Turkey from GCC countries and Turkish export to these countries is shown in the Figure – 3 and Figure– 4 below (Küçükacı, 2019, p.6-7).

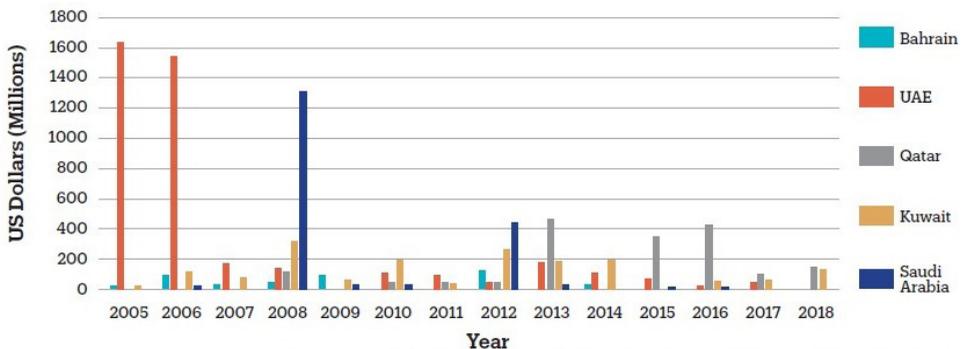


Figure 3: FDI Inflow to Turkey by the GCC Countries

Source: Provisional data, Central Bank of the Republic of Turkey

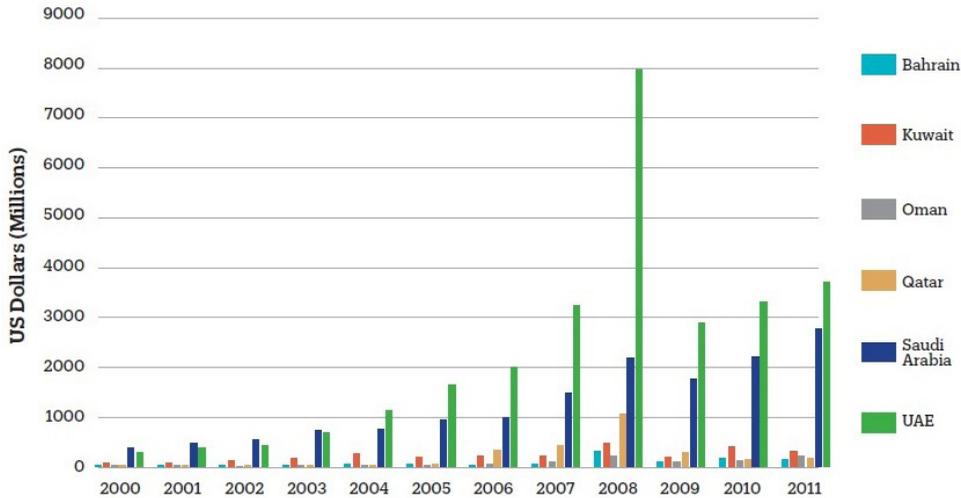


Figure 4: Turkish Exports to GCC Countries (2000-2011)

Source: Foreign trade statistics, Turkish Statistical Institute

This mutually rewarding trade between the GCC and Turkey was seriously hampered by the 2013 coup in Egypt. Majority of GCC countries supported the coup, whereas Qatar and Turkey supported President Morsi. This brought Qatar and Turkey close and distanced them from the quartet. The change in the trade paradigm can also be seen from Figure 4 above. When the blockade was declared, Turkey immediately replenished the Qatari markets with food supplies and also promised to provide crucial construction material for ongoing FIFA 2022 world cup projects (The Peninsula, 2017). Turkish exports increased about 50% from 2016 to 2017, reaching US\$ 750 million. As of 2018, the current bi-lateral trade between the two countries stands at US\$ 1.5 billion that they intend to increase up to \$5 billion in the coming years (Mogielnicki, 2018).

Qatar also responded strongly during the currency crisis in Turkey when the Turkish lira lost 35% of its value against the dollar by investing about US\$15 billion in the Turkish economy (The Guardian, 2018).

Despite coming close to each other and a maintaining strategic alliance, the trade volume between the two is not significant. If the blockade continues, this alliance between Turkey and Qatar is likely to grow and strengthen but with certain caveats. Qatar has to strike a balance between US and Turkey who are not in good terms with each other right now; moreover, Turkey would not like to lose major trading partners in GCC at the cost of solely focusing on Qatar.

QATAR-IRAN ECONOMIC COOPERATION

The quartet had demanded Qatar to conduct trade with Iran under the ambit of international and US sanctions. But contrarily, relations improved in diplomatic and economic fronts. In fact, Iran was among the first respondents to practically reach for Qatar's assistance after blockade. Quartet closed air space for Qatar Airways but Iran provided new time slots to use Iranian air space. This not only benefited Qatar Airways to continue its flight operations but also benefited Iran in the form of substantial over flight charges (Zaccara, 2019).

The blockade also provided an opportunity for the Iranian business community to tap Qatari markets. Consequently, Iranian exports to Qatar rose sharply. Iran exported non-oil products such as food, agricultural products and bitumen worth US\$139 million from April to October 2017, that was about 117.5% more than the previous year (Dudley, 2017).

Trend of Qatari imports from UAE, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain vis-à-vis from countries like India, Kuwait, Oman, Turkey and Iran can be seen from Figure – 5 and Figure-6 respectively (Zaccara, 2019, p. 8-9).

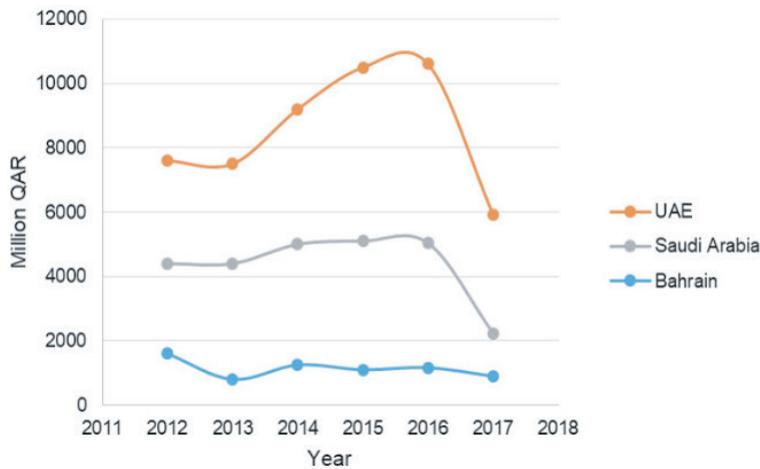


Figure 5: Trend of Qatari Imports from UAE, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain

Source: Estimates obtained from CEIC Insights data

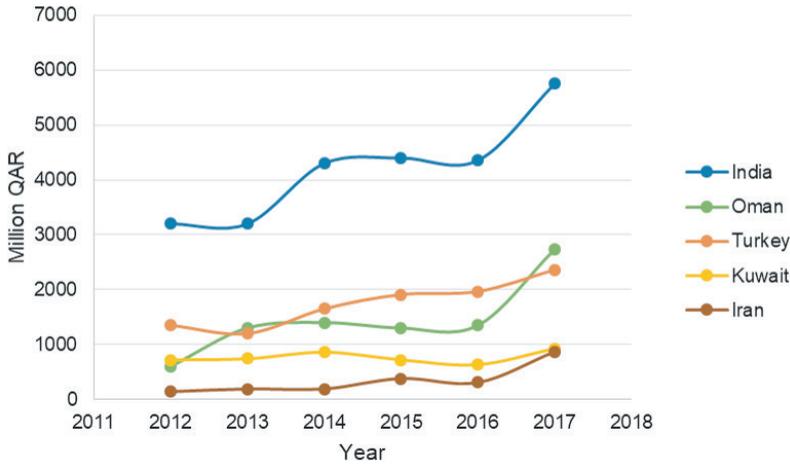


Figure 6: Trend of Qatari Imports from other countries
Source: United Nations COMTRADE data

Although, there is a considerable increase in Iranian exports to Qatar, the volume is not significant when considered in relation to other countries like US, Japan, Germany and India. Iranian exports are mostly limited to perishable food items. Iranian businesses want Qatar investments in their production facilities, whereas Qataris are looking at establishing factories in their own land (Zaccara, 2019).

MILITARY IMPLICATIONS OF QATAR CRISIS IN MIDDLE EAST

One of the core reasons for founding the GCC was mutual and collective defence of the member states. The perceived threats were from Iran and Israel. After the blockade, Iran took advantage of the intra-GCC rift and managed to strengthen and improve its relations with Qatar.

The contours of the present crisis are not limited to GCC countries only but has implications for the west as well, who are operating their forces from different locations in the region. Extra-regional military presence in the region can be visualised from the Figure – 7 below (Hackett, 2019).

Selected foreign military contingents in the Gulf region

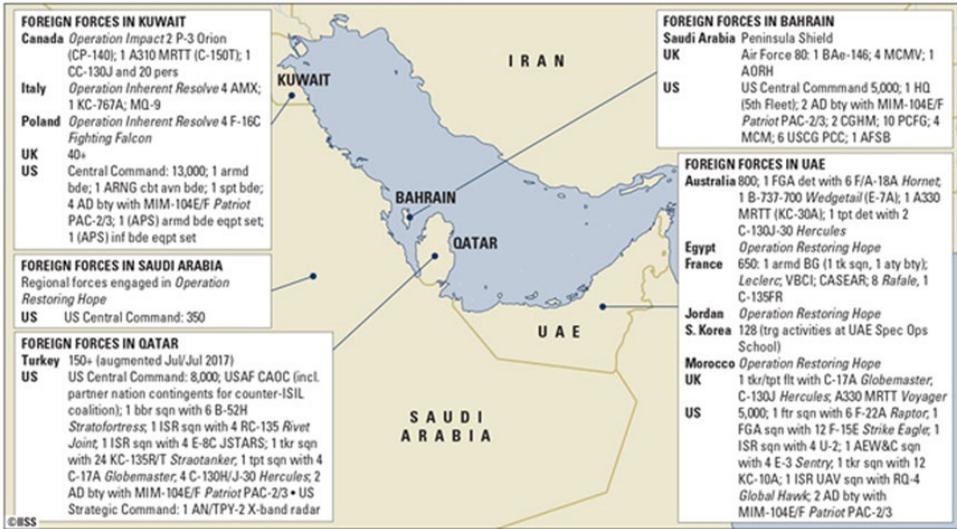


Figure 7: Foreign Military Contingents in the Gulf Region

Source: *Dispute in the Gulf: potential defence implications*, International Institute for Strategic Studies.

QATAR CRISIS AND FOREIGN MILITARY IMPLICATIONS

The gas rich small state of Qatar is not only a major buyer of western military equipment but is also the nerve center for most of the air operations undertaken in the region by US and other western allies. The same holds true for other regional countries like KSA, UAE and Bahrain as well. The most significant foreign presence in Qatar is at Al-Udeid airbase, which is home to US Central Command's Combined Air Operations Centre (CAOC) as well as air components of UK and France (Hackett, 2019). The arms imports in ME has swollen between 2012 and 2016. KSA and UAE increased their arms imports by 212% and 63% respectively, whereas Qatar increased arms imports by 245% (Salacanian, 2018).

Already on a military spending spree, Qatar has signed many military agreements after the blockade. Qatar signed a deal to purchase 24 Typhoon fighter jets from Britain, 12 Rafale fighter jets from France, 490 Armoured Infantry fighting vehicle from France, installation and maintenance of 'Patriot' air defence system from US, 7 naval vessels from Italy and 36 F-15 fighter jets from the US (Kandil, 2017).

QATAR – TURKEY MILITARY COOPERATION

Qatar and Turkey maintain cordial relations and have taken similar stances on several international issues like supporting MB as an organisation, opposition the coup against Egyptian President Muhammad Morsi and supporting rebel forces

in Syria against the Assad regime. A comprehensive agreement between both the governments on cooperation in military training, defence industry and deployment of Turkish armed forces in the territory of Qatar was signed in December 2014 (Paul Cochrane, 2016). These agreements resulted in the establishment of the first Turkish military base in Qatar in 2014, reciprocally Qatari forces can also be deployed in Turkey (Aras & Akpınar, 2017).

Soon after the blockade, Turkey's parliament authorised the deployment of about 3,000 Turkish troops in Qatar (Gurbuz, 2017). Although, Turkey has emphasised numerous times that Turkish presence in Qatar is not a threat to the GCC bloc, it cannot be ruled out that Turkey would definitely support the Qatari regime whenever requested or deemed appropriate by mutual consent.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Today, ME is a hotspot where numerous problems have brought economic, political and security challenges to the nations. Effects of these problems are quite evident where a common man is devoid of shelter in Syria and food in Yemen. Despite the presence of international organisations like the United Nations, regional organisation like Gulf Cooperation Council and religious and cultural organisation like Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, problems seem far from solutions and rather expanding geographically, politically and economically.

The use of a SWOT analysis helps to understand, analyse and recommend the way forward to ease the increasing tensions in the region.

STRENGTHS

The main stakeholders of the crisis are the state of Qatar and the quartet. Qatar is not alone as it has gained major support from Turkey and Iran. There are other countries like Oman, Jordan, Kuwait and even the US that are trying to remain neutral due to their own interests and are managing to have reasonable relations with both the sides.

a. Political Stability of Qatar

Unlike some Arab countries, Qatar did not feel threatened from any uprising like the Arab Spring. The reason lies in the economic well-being of its people and people-centric policies of the ruling monarchs. Qatar's rulers enjoy popular public support and thus enjoy a stable political structure in the country. Qatari government efficiently looked after the people during the crisis and this strengthened people's belief in their government.

b. Biggest per Capita Petroleum Reserves

Economically stable countries have lesser problems when compared to economically struggling countries. Qatar has invested its wealth in various sectors worldwide and the effects of this sound economy are enjoyed by the public as well. Qatar's enormous amount of wealth has thus assured her inner stability as well as outer security.

c. Realisation of Self-Sufficiency

After the blockade, Qatar has realised that dependence on any country for basic needs is a weakness. Qatar has achieved a relative degree of self-sufficiency in dairy and agriculture sectors. Although Qatar learnt the hard way, it has far-reaching benefits in the form of investments and job opportunities that support the national economy.

WEAKNESSES

Some of the identified weaknesses are as follows:

a. Possible Internal Disturbance due to Public Pressure

Qatar shares the same religion, language and culture with the quartet. If the governments remain disengaged, the population on both sides may force the governments resulting in some initial instability but that might contribute to solving the problems and bridge the gulf in the longer run.

b. Muslim Brotherhood

Muslim Brotherhood is assumed to be the root cause of the crisis. MB has a history and following in the Arab world. Democratic election of the then President Muhammad Morsi in Egypt, states the fact that MB enjoyed popular public support. Today, MB has been declared a terrorist organisation by many countries, but in countries like Turkey and Tunisia they have positions in the government. There might be some sleeper cells that may find some chance to attack the forces that crushed and disbanded their organisation.

OPPORTUNITIES

Qatar has been successful in garnering international support from many regional and extra-regional countries. Qatar effectively used the elements of her national power to subdue the allegations put forth by the quartet.

a. Improved Diplomatic Relations with Iran

The unexpected severing of ties by the quartet forced Qatar to look for alternate relations. Similarly, this blockade provided a window of opportunity to Iran as well to make herself more relevant in the Arab world. Coinciding interests have brought the two closer and despite certain differences both are standing by each other. Since there is no improvement in Qatar's relations with the quartet, relations with Iran can be safely forecasted to improve adding complexity in the fragile geopolitical situation.

b. Improved Diplomatic Relations between Qatar and Turkey

Relations between Turkey and UAE strained before the crisis over issues of UAE's support to Greek-Israel cooperation and visit to Armenian genocide site. Since UAE membered the quartet, Turkey joined Qatar to counter UAE on another front.

c. Recognition by the US

Though US initially sided with the quartet, active Qatari diplomacy along with some deals to buy expensive US military hardware changed the picture. President Trump has formally acknowledged that Qatar is making all requisite arrangements to curb terrorism around the globe. Winning US support is an achievement for Qatari diplomacy.

d. Economic Relations with Other Countries

Countries like China and UK have long term gas supply agreements with Qatar. Even UAE, till date, continues to acquire gas from Qatar through the Dolphin Pipeline. This means many of the world's countries are dependent upon Qatari resources. Dependence of countries on Qatari resources ensures security for Qatar.

e. World Powers' Tacit Support to the Triad

KSA and US are strategic allies. This new Qatari bloc has provided an avenue to other world powers to counterbalance American influence in the region. Relations of Turkey with the US are at the lowest ebb as evident from the removal of Turkey from the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) Program. However, Russia has offered SU-35 jets to Turkey as replacement of F-35 JSF. In this scenario, this triad has the leverage to enjoy support and assistance from other powers and thus can avoid any pressure from US as well.

THREATS

The present bloc's emergence in ME has certain threats as well, that make the situation more unpredictable. This unpredictability brings unknown fears of mistrust that can hamper long term partnerships and projects. Some of the identified threats are:

a. Religious Ideology

Shia and Sunni are two major sects of Islam. In many countries of the world like Pakistan, both the sects co-exist in harmony. People from both sects have learnt to tolerate each other's values and beliefs and this contributes to well-being of the society. Countries like Iran and KSA do not tolerate each other's ideology and continue to denounce each other, and this, in turn, has caused a major split in the Arabian Peninsula. Iran sees present Shia regime in Syria and Iraq as an increase in her sphere of influence and the same is seen as a threat by the Saudi regime. Qatar, although a Sunni Muslim country, due to the geopolitical scenario has come closer to Iran and away from the Sunni quartet. The ideological difference of Qatar and Iran is a threat to both the countries. In order to survive, both countries would have to keep the religious ideologies aside and concentrate on mutual interests.

b. Economic Relations between Qatar and Turkey

Qatar and Turkey have stood by each other in testing times. Turkey supplied essential food items and construction material for FIFA World Cup constructions, whereas Qatar supported the falling Turkish Lira. Trade volume between the two is not significant and this makes their economic cooperation, a weak preposition. Either one of them backing off would make the other vulnerable against the quartet.

c. Trust Deficit between Qatar and Iran

Iranian exports to Qatar have risen multiple times, but that are mainly limited to perishable items. Despite this increased trade activity, there has not been any agreement at the industrial level. Qatar is being cautious to engage in long term deals with Iran, and this may be because of ideological differences, not very pleasant history of relations or present engagement on opposite sites in numerous international issues. This again weakens the bloc formed by Qatar, Iran and Turkey.

d. Misalignment of Threat Perception in GCC

One of the core reasons for the formation of GCC was assurance of mutual security against common threats like Iran and Israel. Today, some of the GCC countries like Qatar, Oman and Kuwait do not recognise Iran as an immediate threat and believe in positive engagement. This misalignment of common threat weakens stance of the organisation.

e. Militarisation of the Region

West has been successful to showcase Iran as a threat. On this pretext, US is selling vast amounts military equipment to many countries. The Qatar crisis again suits western arms manufacturers, particularly in the US. Both parties, quartet and Qatar, are making considerable military deals to counter-balance each other. West is making money at the cost of heavy militarisation of the region. Any miscalculation can bring catastrophic results for the region.

f. Foreign Military Bases in the Region

Presence of foreign military is never a preferred option but keeping in view this crisis, presence of foreign military bases prove to be a factor of assured security and balance. Qatar feels secure due presence of US and Turkish military bases, whereas foreign forces' presence in Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain also ensures their security against any misadventure from Qatar or predominantly from Iran.

g. Deteriorated Relations between Turkey and Quartet Members

Relations between Turkey and quartet are another factor that drags this crisis away from any solution. Relations between Turkey and quartet became sour when Turkey favoured Arab Spring and MB. Problem became more compounded when a Saudi journalist, Jamal Khashoggi, was killed in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. Today, Saudi Arabia and Turkey openly criticise each other.

CONCLUSION

This problem is rooted in the fact that KSA did not like and agree with the bloodless coup in Qatar, when Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani took over the rule from his father. Leveraging on considerable oil and gas reserves, Qatar improved global ties and economic relations with many countries and decided to step out of the Saudi shadow in ME. Qatar diversified its foreign policy to suit her interests. Qatar established relations with Iran and supported MB and Arab Springs as well. The same was not appreciated by the GCC members, particularly KSA and UAE.

The blockade imposed in 2017 was initially supported by US and was expected to bring devastating effects but Qatar's active diplomacy and vibrant economy quickly overshadowed the forecasted effects. Since then, the blockade has failed to generate any significant political, economic, diplomatic or military effect on Qatar.

There is another dimension of this rift i.e. new and relatively young leadership in Arabian Peninsula. Wealthy and powerful personalities like Muhammad bin Salman, Muhammad bin Zayed and Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani enjoy a lot of influence in their countries but perhaps they desire to project their power and influence across their borders as well.

It is evident that extra regional players are not taking any sides. US is contended with the arms deals secured from KSA and Qatar, whereas Turkey and Iran are happy to find some place in the Arabian affairs. Qatar crisis is far from solved and perhaps both sides have silently agreed to maintain the status quo. The blockade has failed to stop any movement of goods in and out of Qatar, but it has been successful to split the Arabian Peninsula.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Today Muslim world is mired with a lot of problems. Due to ruthless geo-political interests, economic interests and egoistic regimes, Muslims are suffering in many countries such as Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Afghanistan, Kashmir, Burma, China etc. Unfortunately, the OIC has failed to do anything for the security and well-being of the Muslim world. Therefore, OIC will have to turn itself into an active and dynamic organisation to address social, political and economic interests of the Muslim world. OIC must call upon a dedicated session to address the issues, where the opposing parties can discuss and reach a solution with input from other member states. OIC must be empowered as an organisation. If any member country is acting in contrast to the collective interest of other states or people, action like sanctions, blockade etc. must be taken after passing a resolution from the organisation.

In order to soften up the situation, quartet must lift the blockade and engage in negotiations with all the stakeholders. This would ease out the undue tension in the region and some head way may be made. Neutral GCC countries like Kuwait and Oman must play their role in this regard. Being a superpower and having close relations with ME states US must play a role to pacify the situation between the Arab nations. The only reason for US to interfere in the conflict is growing relations between Qatar, Iran and Turkey. US is not in good terms with both the allies of Qatar, and therefore, must help to find a political situation of the problem. Additionally, to deal with terrorism, the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition was formed in 2015, but includes only Sunni majority countries. Shia countries may also be made part of the coalition in order to deal with terrorism in a wholesome fashion.

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