

Could Gulf Reconciliation Herald a Broader Regional Realignment?

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The annual Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) summit hosted by Saudi Arabia on January 5, 2021 culminated in the resolution of the Qatar crisis. The crisis began in 2017, shortly after President Trump’s visit to the region, as the so-called Arab Quartet (Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt) imposed a blockade against Doha to pressure it to rein in its foreign policy. The blockading countries have started lifting their pressure campaign against Qatar, although the terms of the agreement have not been fully disclosed and it is unclear if any of their initial demands were met. Some possible regional implications of the latest Gulf reconciliation include: the GCC distancing Qatar from Turkey; a widening policy gap between the UAE and Saudi Arabia; or, if the reconciliation stalls, further evidence of the intractable frictions between Qatar and its neighbors. A successful resolution to this crisis could serve Israel’s interests by promoting a more unified GCC front against Iran’s malign activity in the region and greater restraint in Turkish foreign policy. However, Jerusalem should also be aware that this development could herald shifting fault lines in the Gulf.

The January 5, 2021 summit in al-Ula, Saudi Arabia, served as the venue for US-backed and Kuwaiti-mediated reconciliation between Qatar and the Arab Quartet. The [precise formulation of the recent agreement is unclear, but the terms appear to be roughly](#) along the lines of: 1) all blockading states will reopen their airspace to flights to and from Doha and their borders to Qatar; 2) Qatar will drop all legal actions taken against the blockading states regarding damages caused by the blockade; and 3) there will be a “truce” in the media war between Qatar and the blockading states. How this agreement will play out in practice remains an open question, however, and it is worth considering the context of both the blockade and its recent resolution in order to better understand the deal’s potential implications.

The 2017 blockade of Qatar is widely believed to have been initiated by Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed (MBZ), given that opposition to Muslim Brotherhood-aligned forces supported by Doha was the primary animating principle behind his foreign policy. Other issues, such as personal vendettas between leaders, Qatar’s relations with Iran, and the outsized influence of the small and militarily weak Qatari sheikdom are

considered supplemental factors. The crisis was the most significant since the organization's founding in 1981. According to Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, and Manama, their initial 13 demands of Qatar were aimed at "[achieving unity](#)" as stipulated in the GCC's founding charter. To Doha, these demands were seen as diktats by larger and more powerful neighbors seeking to turn Qatar into a vassal state.

However, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi soon found themselves unable to escalate against Doha's economic or political standing to a level that would prove decisive, due in large part to Qatar's tremendous wealth as the world's leading exporter of liquefied natural gas (LNG). Qatar's coffers proved critical in finding alternative sources to the goods and services it formerly received from its Gulf neighbors, consolidating some independent production capacity, and obtaining political support from outside actors.

More than three years after the blockade was initiated, its results have been lackluster. The US sent decidedly [mixed messages](#) immediately after the crisis erupted, but it ultimately concluded that resolving the crisis would best serve America's national interest. Since then, Washington has [reinforced its alliances with both sides](#). Meanwhile, Qatar has [moved closer to Turkey](#), which constitutes an alternative regional security guarantor that is more closely aligned with Doha's Islamist foreign policy. This likely concerns the Gulf rivals because it signals that Qatar is not inclined to concede, and may indicate the emergence of a formidable Islamist axis in which Qatar provides the funds and Turkey provides the boots on the ground. As such, the Saudi-led reconciliation with Qatar in the absence of Doha's acceptance of the initial 13 demands might be viewed as an admission that the blockade was a policy failure. There are a variety of possible reasons why Saudi Arabia sought to end the blockade in general, and why it might have viewed January 2021 as a particularly opportune moment for doing so.

More broadly, the blockade was unlikely to bring about Qatar's complete capitulation in the near term, and Riyadh may have calculated that it was paying an unacceptable price for its policy inertia – much of the cost in public opinion currency due to the harsh coverage it received in the popular Qatar-backed al-Jazeera network on issues such as the Saudi role in Yemen. Riyadh may also feel less inclined to follow Abu Dhabi's hardline stance against Turkey and Qatar following the UAE's unilateral withdrawal from the Saudi-led campaign in Yemen.

The current moment may have been viewed by Riyadh as a unique opportunity for reconciliation due to the upcoming change in Washington and the need to demonstrate to the incoming Biden administration that Saudi Arabia, and MBS in particular, can be constructive US partners in the region. [Biden's harsh words about US-Saudi relations](#) during his 2020 presidential campaign may end up empty rhetoric, but they certainly have

the Saudis concerned given the important role that the US security guarantee has traditionally played in Riyadh's security concept. In tandem, the outgoing Trump administration applied significant pressure to mend the GCC rift prior to the expiration of President Trump's term – and the significance they attached to it is evident from [Jared Kushner's attendance](#) of the summit in al-Ula.

In addition, due to concerns that Biden will lift sanctions on Iran after [his planned return to the JCPOA](#), MBS may view resolving the Qatar crisis as a pathway to a more unified GCC policy on Iran's subversive activity in the region. However, it is likely that Qatar will continue to hedge between Saudi Arabia, its larger Arab Gulf neighbor with which it shares its only overland border crossing, and Iran, with which it shares the world's largest gas field.

Thus while MBZ may have led the Quartet into the blockade, MBS appears to be leading the way out. Though the full details of the 2021 reconciliation agreement are not known, the deal's impact will be determined by the terms and their enforcement. The question of Qatar's concessions and UAE's support for reconciliation is significant because they could be indicators of a potential regional realignment. There appear to be three possible scenarios for how events could unfold:

1. If Qatar makes considerable regional concessions and the UAE takes significant confidence building measures in return, this could herald a revitalization of the GCC and an erosion of the Turkey-Qatari Islamist axis. [As Doha is currently believed to be bankrolling Turkey's regional activities](#) in Libya, Syria, and beyond, after the GCC reconciliation Ankara could find itself in a position of overstretch and return to a less aggressive regional policy.
2. If Saudi Arabia should reconcile with Qatar without extracting any major compromises from Doha, this could become a source of friction in the Saudi-Emirati relationship. It would be yet another manifestation of the differing priorities in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, following tensions regarding the means and ends for the campaign in Yemen. While both countries consider Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood significant threats, the Saudis prioritize the Iranian threat while the Emiratis prioritize the Muslim Brotherhood. Through its reconciliation with Qatar, Saudi Arabia may broadly reposition itself away from sitting squarely in the Emirati-Egyptian anti-Islamist camp and work more closely with countries such as Turkey and Qatar when that suits its needs to counter Iran. This may be viewed by Riyadh as matching Abu Dhabi's approach to Tehran, as the [UAE also has limited cooperation with Iran when that suits its needs](#).
3. A third possibility is that the reconciliation will be short-lived. The 2017 crisis did not develop in a vacuum, and was actually the third in a series of similar events caused by friction between Qatar and its neighbors over the past two decades.

Emboldened by its ability to wait out and ultimately “beat” the blockade, Qatar may return to its previous *modus operandi* that its neighbors found dangerous and potentially destabilizing, and yet another diplomatic spat could ensue.

From the Israeli perspective, a resolution to the Qatar crisis that leads to a more unified GCC has the potential to improve Jerusalem’s strategic balance. The implications of such a development could be a more united front against Iran’s malign activity in the region and the dilution of the Islamist axis that threatens to destabilize Israel’s neighbors. In addition, Israel may find that it is now better able to cultivate cooperative relations with Doha, if it no longer faces pressure from other Gulf partners to take a hostile approach to Qatar.

However, given the incomplete details published thus far regarding the reconciliation, it seems plausible that Doha does not intend to dramatically reinvent its foreign policy. In that case, the dispute could re-emerge or the Saudi approach to Qatar could shift in a way that accentuates the gap in threat perceptions between Abu Dhabi and Riyadh.

While rumors have long circulated that the blockade of Qatar was nearing resolution, Saudi Arabia’s precarious position vis-à-vis the Biden administration appears to have provided the necessary impetus to move forward. The other issues for which MBS will likely be targeted by Washington – the Khashoggi murder, the crackdown on political freedoms in the Kingdom, and the war in Yemen – are by comparison much more complicated than the Qatari issue to resolve. Yet [if past is prologue](#), a new agreement will not necessarily resolve the deeper divergences, and distrust will continue to overshadow Qatar’s relations with its neighbors.