



GCC leaders presenting a Memorandum of Understanding to US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, May 21, 2017. Photo: The White House

Engulfed in Dispute? The Future of the Gulf Cooperation Council

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The diplomatic, economic, and transportation boycott by the Arab Quartet against Qatar is in its fourth year. The crisis, which is more severe than previous crises between the countries, casts a shadow over the notion of Gulf unity. The idea of unity, which originated even before some of the countries became independent, is the principle underlying the establishment of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Despite the common challenges facing the Arab Gulf monarchies, above all the Iranian issue and the question of United States commitment to their security, they are finding it more difficult than ever to present a united front. Some of them no longer feel committed to the organization framework that they founded 40 years ago.

Keywords: Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Iran, United States, Israel

Background: A History of Crises

June 2020 marked the third anniversary of the diplomatic, economic, and transportation boycott by the Arab Quartet (Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt) against Qatar. The boycott is yet another expression of many years of suspicion, and even hostility, between the parties—a result of conflicting interests, personal rivalry, and even unresolved territorial disputes.

The current crisis did not spring from a vacuum, and is rather a continuation of previous crises in relations between the countries. The seeds of the deteriorating relations between Qatar and its neighbors lie in the seizure of power in Qatar in 1995 by Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani from his father, and the founding of the al-Jazeera media network, the voice of Qatar's independent policy, in 1996. Qatar's "independent" policy reflects what it regards as a balance between the need to avoid a conflict with Iran and its wish to limit Saudi dominance of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which since 1981 has comprised Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait, and Bahrain. Since 1995, a number of attempts by Saudi Arabia to stage a coup in Qatar have been reported, and Riyadh is openly fostering opposition in its territory to Tamim bin Khalifa al-Thani, the current ruler of Qatar.

In March 2014, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain broke off relations with Qatar on the grounds that Qatar had not complied with the terms of the November 2013 [Riyadh agreement](#), in which Qatar undertook to terminate its "intervention in their internal affairs"—a euphemism for Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood in the region and Doha's criticism of the three countries on the Qatar-owned al-Jazeera network. This criticism previously led to the closure of al-Jazeera's offices and even the arrests of its correspondents in Egypt. A new agreement reached by the countries in November 2014 that included a commitment by Doha to implement the Riyadh agreement enabled the return of the ambassadors to

Qatar and a temporary restoration of normal relations. A few days later, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who is identified with the Muslim Brotherhood, and whose vehement rhetoric against Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates were a key issue in the crisis with Qatar, issued a [written apology](#) stating that his sermons (which had been halted on the orders of the royal house in Qatar) expressed his own opinions only.

The current crisis began immediately after a visit by United States President Donald Trump to Saudi Arabia in May 2017, in which he publicly [identified](#) with the complaints by Arab Quartet leaders against Qatar, and accused Qatar of encouraging terrorism and extremism (other administration figures adopted a more moderate attitude toward Qatar). This crisis is the most severe since the founding of the GCC. In the view of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain, their demands from Qatar are consistent with the aim of "[achieving unity](#)" stated in the organization's founding charter. To Doha, these demands are no less than dictates by countries seeking to impose their foreign policy on Qatar.

The Boycott in Practice

At the outset of the crisis, the Arab Quartet made [13 demands of Qatar](#), including the termination of Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood, restrictions on Qatar's ties with Iran and Turkey, and the closure of the Qatar-owned al-Jazeera network. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi reportedly threatened to use military force, and according to Qatar, even threatened [to invade Qatar and overthrow its government](#). The Quartet expected, in part given the initial US support for their position, that Qatar would be unable to withstand their pressure. However, the joint objectives were overstretched, and ultimately [their demands were scaled back](#).

No resolution of the crisis is on the horizon, despite mediation attempts, mainly by the former Emir of Kuwait and the US administration, which appointed General (ret.) Anthony Zinni as a special emissary to represent it (Zinni has since

resigned). Yet while the crisis is unresolved, it has not remained static—the attempts to reach a compromise at one point led to a temporary hope of a solution, and various developments have aggravated the crisis, such as the events of May 2020, when the Foreign Minister of Qatar accused the “sieging countries” of attempting a coup in Qatar—referring to a [disinformation campaign](#) on Twitter in May 2020 that reported on an attempted coup against Tamim bin Khalifa al-Thani within the Qatari royal house

The main difficulty faced by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi in stepping up their measures against Doha lies in Qatar’s huge wealth and resources as the world’s leading exporter of liquefied natural gas (LNG). Qatar’s wealth has enabled it to find alternatives to a lot of the goods and services it formerly received from its neighbors, consolidate an initial independent production capacity, and obtain political support for its positions. In the response to the boycott, Doha halted its support for the Saudi-led coalition fighting in Yemen, [withdrew from the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries](#) (OPEC) in 2019, and even hinted that it was not as committed as in the past to membership in the GCC.

Qatar has also enjoyed better ties with the United States in the past three years. The two countries have had a security cooperation agreement since 1992, under which 10,000 American soldiers are stationed in Qatar. Washington and Doha launched a [strategic dialogue](#) in 2018. In order to draw closer to the United States and win its support, Qatar is now paying for renovations on the huge US al-Udeid Air Base in its territory, and is substantially increasing its procurement of weapons from the United States. Washington has reportedly considered moving forward with [naming Qatar as a major non-NATO ally](#), a status that provides foreign nations with benefits in defense trade and security cooperation, a title even Riyadh and Abu Dhabi still don’t enjoy.

The Gulf Cooperation Council: Situation Assessment

The Gulf Cooperation Council was established as a result of prolonged cooperative processes, mainly in trade and economics, and aimed “to effect coordination, cooperation, and integration in all fields.” The organization reflected shared interests, the monarchical nature of the members’ regimes, their economies, their religious affiliation as Sunni Muslims, and their common Arab origin, in contrast to revolutionary, Shiite, and non-Arab Iran. It was an expression of the attempts to find an agreed formula for security in the Gulf, which began even before the British left the Gulf in 1971.

The events in the late 1970s and 1980s accelerated the pace of cooperation and contributed to a change in its character. The countries believed that they were capable of putting aside the disputes that had hindered their relations, and of cooperating on the basis of common interests. A number of seminal events contributed to this, especially the revolution in Iran and the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War, which led the Gulf states to recognize that they had to cooperate in order to confront the potential threats against them more effectively. Yet while steps were taken toward cooperation, progress was especially slow, due to the cautious and calculating nature of the Gulf rulers, who were sensitive to any change in the status quo, and were suspicious of their Arab “brethren.” Despite the obvious advantages of cooperation, due to the countries’ military weakness and the threats directed at them (which were inversely proportionate to their size, location, and military capabilities), potential unification with Saudi Arabia, which has a geographic, economic, and military advantage over the smaller countries, complicated any such initiative. Saudi Arabia’s neighbors complain that it wants to dominate over them through the GCC organization (based in Riyadh).

On the positive side, the GCC is the most successful model of inter-Arab cooperation.

The history of the organization's six member countries proved that as the threats to them increased, it became easier for them to put their disputes aside. It is possible, however, that some of them no longer believe that the organization can contribute to their security. In the first few years of the current decade, for example, when the region was in upheaval, a number of initiatives were proposed aimed at changing the GCC's position. These initiatives, the most important of which are reviewed below, originated in Riyadh and were never carried out—perhaps precisely for that reason.

The first initiative was “to move from cooperation to unification in the framework of a single entity,” according to Saudi King Abdullah. The initiative toward full political union was quashed, likely because of disagreement about the organization's character and concern among the small countries about Saudi domination.

The second initiative was to add Jordan and Morocco to the organization, thereby consolidating a “regional-monarchical organization.” This initiative also encountered difficulties because of anxiety on the part of several GCC members about a possible lowering of their status in the organization, and because of the economic burden that would follow the accession of relatively poor countries to the organization.

A third initiative was to add Jordanian (and possibly Moroccan and Egyptian) soldiers to the Gulf states' armed forces in exchange for generous economic aid to Jordan by the six GCC member countries. The initiative was also abandoned, because the member countries preferred hiring non-Arab mercenaries.

Throughout the GCC's 40-year history, the member countries have found it difficult to concede any symbols of their sovereignty in order to adopt a uniform political and security line. They failed to achieve this even when the threats that inspired the GCC's establishment mounted, and in spite of their similar economic, political, and cultural structures. The result is that since the GCC was founded, expectations

from the organization have diminished. From hopes of union, or at least federation, the organization has become, like the Arab League, no more than a platform for a display of Arab unity. At the same time, this bloc of countries has also been able to adapt itself to regional changes and the different views of its members, while making tentative progress toward achievement of its goals.

The GCC members remain divided on almost every issue on the agenda, beyond disputes about the organization's purpose. The public displays of friendship and solidarity between leaders are a thin veneer for conflicting interests and personal hostility.

Indeed, it is the slow and flexible decision making process typical of the GCC that arguably has enabled Qatar, Oman, and even Kuwait to act more than once outside the Gulf consensus, thereby contributing to the organization's longevity. The organization's institutions have continued to function even during crises, and have been driven by joint economic ventures, such as a shared electrical grid and railway network, while the trade barriers between the countries have been gradually lowered. Coordination on political and economic matters is also underway, as well as cooperation on border controls, the war against terrorism, and consolidation of a [joint military capability](#), albeit a limited one.

Nevertheless, the GCC members remain divided on almost every issue on the agenda, beyond disputes about the organization's purpose. The public displays of friendship and solidarity between leaders are a thin veneer for conflicting interests and personal hostility. The declarations by the organization's leaders about their shared challenges, relations of trust, and good neighborliness, which are repeated at every GCC summit, stand in stark contrast to the six countries' inability to formulate a consensus on matters of regional security.

The six Gulf states regard Iran as the main threat to their security, but they have adopted different policies towards it, based on their particular interests and different strategic outlooks. While Saudi Arabia has chosen a more belligerent attitude toward Iran over the years, Oman and Qatar have preferred to maintain correct relations with Tehran, in tandem with their membership in the GCC, as a way of coping with the threat posed by Iran.

Qatar is not the only country following an independent policy. For example, since the idea of full political union between the six monarchies was raised, Oman has publicly opposed it—a rare occurrence in the Gulf. During the annual conference of the six leaders in December 2013 in Kuwait, the Foreign Minister of Oman emphasized his country's opposition to the idea of a Gulf union, and [threatened that Oman would withdraw from the GCC](#) if such a union were instituted. This statement aroused subsequent Saudi wrath against Oman, reminiscent perhaps of Riyadh's anger about Oman's behind-the-scenes role in initiating the negotiations between the United States and Iran, when Saudi Arabia accused Oman of acting behind its back, to the point of betrayal.

Furthermore, Oman maintains close relations with Tehran, and shares control of the Straits of Hormuz with Iran. Relations between Oman and Iran warmed especially after Hassan Rouhani was elected President of Iran in 2013, and Oman has worked to take advantage of this, in contrast with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, who are trying to induce Oman to follow their example. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have accused Oman of supporting Qatar and [the Houthi rebels](#). Oman, which has tense relations with the UAE, [recently accused it of espionage in its territory](#), and in April 2019 put five UAE citizens on trial on these charges. UAE Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed visited Oman in December 2019, when the late Sultan Qaboos was undergoing medical treatment in Belgium.

The Feasibility of Compromise

Despite its continuation, the ongoing Arab Quartet boycott against Qatar has eroded over the years. For example, representatives of Qatar continue to take part in GCC activities. Qatar participated in the [Dir al-Jazeera 10 \(Peninsula Shield 10\) military exercise](#) in Saudi Arabia in 2019, which saw the participation of all six GCC countries. [Qatar continues to export gas to the United Arab Emirates](#) (the Dolphin Gas Project); the UAE renewed its postal service to Qatar; soccer players from the two countries played together; and Qatar's Prime Minister [participated in the annual GCC summit in Riyadh](#) in December 2019.

With the continuation of the crisis, it appears that the price paid by Saudi Arabia in damage to its status exceeds the benefit it sought. Saudi Arabia's difficulty in imposing its will on such a small (and "recalcitrant") country as Qatar detracts from its image as a regional power, and its relations with important Muslim countries such as Pakistan and Morocco have worsened because of their "neutral" stand in the crisis. Saudi Arabia's opponents see that it is unable to enforce order on its "home turf," and other countries will likely regard it as incapable of leading the Arab world. On the other hand, the crisis helps Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad gain internal legitimacy by fanning nationalistic feeling.

Furthermore, instead of Qatar cooling its ties with Iran and Turkey, as demanded by its neighbors, it has strengthened them, and these ties help Qatar weather the crisis. Turkey has since stepped up its economic and security cooperation with Qatar. It was reported that Turkey opened a [second military base](#) in Qatar in 2019, with naval and air capabilities, and that thousands of Turkish soldiers were stationed in Qatar. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi see Turkey's military presence in the Gulf as a direct threat and an [element of instability in the region](#).

Iran also stood by Qatar in an effort to widen the split in the GCC, and sent various goods to Qatar as a substitute for the Saudi market.

As soon as the crisis began, Qatar renewed its diplomatic relations with Iran, and its airplanes have [used Iranian airspace ever since](#). Moreover, the current crisis is not confined to the Gulf; the rivalry between the parties also affects various conflicts in the Middle East, including military—previously in Syria and now in Libya.

The front presented by the Arab Quartet members is also not uniform. Since the crisis began, Riyadh has softened its position and showed a more pragmatic attitude than Abu Dhabi. In this framework, it was reported that Saudi Arabia conducted direct talks with Qatar in 2019; these failed despite Qatar's willingness to downgrade its ties with the Muslim Brotherhood. It therefore appears that the main obstacle to a solution is the leaders' need to maintain their honor and show that they have not abandoned their principles.

The crisis with Qatar has affected not only relations between the GCC members, but also efforts to achieve security cooperation in the GCC under United States sponsorship, as well as recent US efforts to consolidate a solid Gulf bloc as part of the campaign to pressure Iran. In the summer of 2020, [a renewed American effort](#) was reported to reach partial agreement between the two sides, including opening Saudi airspace to Qatar, so that its airplanes would not use Iranian airspace (the United States wants to deny Iran proceeds from the passage of aircraft over Iranian territory). Riyadh insisted on retaining this bargaining chip—perhaps the last one it possesses. Even if US pressure is successful, however, and the countries reach a new agreement, it will not resolve the deeper disputes and distrust, which will continue to overshadow their relations in the future, and will exert a negative impact on the potential of a Gulf political union.

The Israeli Angle

Israel is not directly involved in the internal Gulf dispute; moreover, it has significant separate [ties](#) with all of the actors involved. Its interest is to maintain proper relations with

these actors while keeping its distance from the dispute. In recent years, Israel's relations with several Gulf states espousing a similar view of the strategic environment have expanded to [additional](#) spheres of cooperation. In September 2020, Israel signed a normalization agreement with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, a measure likely to prompt other Gulf states to improve their relations with Israel. Israel's policy toward Qatar, on the other hand, is ambivalent. On the one hand, senior Israeli officials have [sharply criticized](#) Qatar in recent years, and ways to take advantage of the boycott to further isolate Qatar [have been discussed](#). Israel may have seen this as an opportunity to score points with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and overall, the political tension in the region involving Turkey and Qatar played a role in expanding cooperation between Jerusalem and Cairo, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi, who all see political Islam as an immediate, concrete threat.

On the other hand, Israel and Qatar have stepped up their cooperation since Operation Protective Edge in providing humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip and in mediation with Hamas. Israel has a clear interest in the continuation of Qatar's aid, because it believes that improvement of the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip will help ward off a conflict with Hamas. Mossad head Yossi Cohen reportedly [visited](#) Doha in February 2020 in order to ensure that Qatar's aid to the Gaza Strip, which has totaled over \$1 billion since 2012, would continue. Qatar believes that giving aid to the Gaza Strip reinforces its regional status and contributes to strengthening its relations with the US administration, thereby improving its bargaining position in the dispute within the GCC.

There is fundamental tension between Israel's interest in improving the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip and the need to maintain good relations with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, which are concerned by Qatar's growing influence in the Gaza Strip. In this context, these countries may have asked

Israel to cool its relations with Qatar. Israel, however, has an interest in relieving the tension in the GCC in order to obstruct ties between Turkey and Qatar and lessen Doha's economic aid to Ankara, which could then undermine Turkey's status and lead it to adopt a more conciliatory policy toward Israel. Israel still regards Qatar as problematic, but is **forced to cooperate with it on the basis of a shared interest**.

Apart from the its wish to improve both its image in the US Congress and its access to advanced American weaponry, Abu Dhabi, through signing a peace agreement with Israel, is striving to score points with the US administration regarding its conflict with Qatar and to strengthen its status and influence in the regional and international arenas. Israel's continuing reliance on Qatar as its preferred broker in the Palestinian arena, together with the ongoing hostility and strategic competition between Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, even if the Gulf boycott is lifted, will put Israel in a difficult position with the UAE. Against its will and due to circumstances, Israel could find itself caught in the struggle between Abu Dhabi and Doha, affecting its relations with them.

The Role of the Major Powers

Enhancing cooperation with its allies in the Gulf has always been a stated goal of the United States, which played a major role in the formation of the GCC. Paradoxically, however, the important US security role in the Gulf, especially since the early 1980s, has detracted from the six Arab Gulf states' ability to cooperate thoroughly and effectively in the GCC framework: Washington prefers to work directly with the respective capitals on substantive issues, such as economics and defense, and the small Gulf states prefer to strengthen their bilateral relations with the United States in order to improve their room for maneuver vis-à-vis their neighbors.

For the past 50 years, the Gulf has been a major theater of US dominance, especially in

security. The Arab Gulf states realize that at the present time, there is no attractive substitute for the US security support, but they have **growing doubts** about the reliability of the US political commitment. They are therefore also trying simultaneously to step up cooperation with Russia and China, while at the same time taking into account US sensitivities. Better ties with the Gulf states is also an important goal for Russia. Moscow especially regards Saudi Arabia and the UAE as key Middle East countries, and believes that ties with them will help it advance its political and economic interests; without these countries, Russia will have difficulty increasing its influence in the region. For their part, the Gulf states **seek** to drive a wedge between Russia and Iran, and enlist Russian support for stabilizing oil prices—a critical factor in their economic stability—despite their past disputes with Russia and covert competition with it in the energy sector.

The Gulf states do not regard their relations with China as a substitute for their strategic link with the United States. Their goal is to supplement their ties with Washington in certain aspects, including in security and strategic matters, and possibly even use relations with China as potential leverage vis-à-vis Washington, which for its part is **showing growing sensitivity** to Chinese involvement in the Gulf. As the political and security weight of Beijing and Moscow in the Gulf grows, the Arab countries there will find it increasingly difficult to maintain this delicate balance.

A Look Ahead

In 1981, when their security was at stake, the six Arab monarchies in the Gulf deemed it necessary to establish a joint mechanism for regional security. Four decades later, doubt is mounting about the relevance and necessity of the GCC. The crises with Qatar in 2014 and 2017 highlight the large gaps between the member countries in the organization, which are liable to end its existence in its current format. Already in 2017, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the most

important economic and military powers among the Gulf states, established a [new framework for coordination and cooperation](#) as a substitute for the unstable GCC framework, probably for the purpose of increasing Qatar's isolation, and in order to institutionalize the existing cooperation between them in the military, political, and economic spheres.

Should the conflict worsen, the inability of the Gulf states and external parties, headed by the United States, to resolve the current crisis in the GCC is liable to culminate in Qatar's withdrawal from the organization. Since the crisis began, there have been a number of [reports that Qatar is planning to leave the GCC](#), and it may eventually decide to do so. Qatar clearly prefers to stay out of organizations dominated by Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have an interest in Qatar remaining a GCC member, although they would prefer it to follow their policy. The United States and Israel share the same interest. If Qatar leaves the GCC, Oman will face a dilemma, because it also wishes to follow an independent policy, especially on Iran. Despite Saudi and UAE pressure on Oman to conform to their policy on Iran, Oman preferred to retain its GCC membership for the moment, also because of its economic distress. Dissolving the organization will not resolve the existing disagreements between the countries; it is even liable to aggravate them. Iran and Turkey will in any case be the big winners from prolonging the crisis between the Gulf states.

Since the GCC was founded, its members have sought to present a united front. In practice, however, each has acted according to its own individual profit and loss calculations. The result is more autonomy in decision making, but little security in comparison with a conventional defense pact. Even if the Gulf states largely share recognition of the threat posed by Iran's nuclear program, political subversion, and sponsorship of terrorism, they are [hedging the threat in different manners](#), in part because of

their respective geographic and demographic features.

Over the years, it appears that the tensions between the Gulf states [wax in times of calm and wane in times of external conflict](#). When the region's security and the stability of the regimes were jeopardized, this joint security became a necessity. For example, when the minority Sunni regime in Bahrain was under threat in 2011, a military force entered the island under

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the GCC flag in order to suppress the mainly Shiite rebellion. As the threat from Iran grows, the GCC's importance increases accordingly, and some improvement in cooperation is visible. For example, in August 2020, the six countries sent a [letter to the UN](#) demanding the continuation of the arms embargo against Iran and expressing concern about Islamic Republic policy.

For nearly 40 years and in light of its special conditions, the GCC, has displayed a considerable degree of coordination and cooperation, together with the almost inherent disagreement between its members. Only if the ruling elites are jointly convinced that the organization can contribute to their national security will they agree to strengthen it. Until that occurs, the GCC's contribution to security in the Gulf will continue to be marginal at best.

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