

# THE ARAB WORLD IN TRANSITION

---

ARAKS PASHAYAN

## SAUDI ARABIA-QATAR. FROM COOPERATION TO CONFRONTATION

### Abstract

On June 5, 2017, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and its allies subjected Qatar to a series of boycotts and blockades. The initiative came from KSA, which was concerned over Qatar's growing ambitions to become an influential state in the region. In these terms, the launch of the blockade was intended to diminish Qatar's political autonomy and economic independence. Qatar never saw its tiny population and territory as a barrier to an independent foreign policy or regional influence.

It should be noted that as early as in March 2014, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) recalled representatives of their countries' diplomatic missions from Doha, as Qatar authorities had not actually fulfilled their set-forth demands.<sup>1</sup> At that time Qatar was accused of supporting the Muslim Brotherhood<sup>2</sup> through the Middle East and North Africa and beyond, as well as establishing dangerous cooperation with Turkey and Iran. The causes of the crisis are directly related also to the coming to power new, young, and ambitious leaders in KSA, Qatar, and UAE who have become the very architects of drawing new milestones of foreign policy for their countries. Saudi Arabia and its allies after the turmoil of the Arab Spring, pushed for Qatar to accept its subordinate status.

**Keywords:** *Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, Iran, boycott, blockade, crisis, Muslim Brotherhood, Arab Spring*

---

<sup>1</sup> "UAE, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain recall their ambassadors from Qatar," *Gulf News*, March 5, 2014, <https://gulfnews.com/uae/government/uae-saudi-arabia-and-bahrain-recall-their-ambassadors-from-qatar-1.1299586>, (accessed September 1, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> The Muslim Brotherhood (al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn) was founded in Ismailia, Egypt, in 1928 by Hasan al-Bannā (1906–1949) as a youth club committed to effecting moral and social reform through information and propaganda. MB is the main inspiration for many Islamist organizations in the MENA region and beyond. The movement was initially announced as a purely religious and philanthropic society that aimed to spread Islamic morals and good works. Its emergence, however, was part of a widespread reaction to alarming developments, particularly colonialism, Zionism, secularization, etc., that swept through the Muslim world in that period, Dilip Hiro, *The Essential Middle East. A Comprehensive Guide* (Carroll & Graf Publishers, New-York, 2003), 344-550.

## **Introduction**

On November 23, 2013, the final declaration adopted at the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC) called on Qatar not to support those forces that were pursuing explosive activity in the Arab world, referring to the de-facto and lasting support of Qatar for the Muslim Brotherhood movement. It was considered that if Qatar continued supporting the Muslim Brotherhood, the United States also would close its airspace for Qatar Airways, and at GCC and the League of Arab States the issue of suspension of Qatar's membership would be raised.<sup>3</sup> Despite Qatar's numerous assurances of fraternity and friendship, in particular between the ruling families of Qatar and Saudi Arabia, there were many acute and lingering issues, including border-related ones. In 1965 a demarcation agreement was signed between the two states, however, in early October 1992, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia occupied al-Khofuf, a border post with Qatar.<sup>4</sup> In 1995, when Qatar's Emir Tamim's father Hamad Al Thani (1995-2013) came to power as a result of a palace coup, Qatar accused Saudi Arabia of meddling in the internal affairs of its country. Several hundred influential representatives of the Qatari Al Murrah tribe were deprived of citizenship and expelled from the country.<sup>5</sup> In 2002, an indignant Saudi leadership, furious at Al Jazeera for providing a platform for the kingdom's dissidents, withdrew its ambassador from Doha in a diplomatic spat that lasted five years.<sup>6</sup>

Thereby, the Qatar-Gulf confrontation demonstrates beyond doubt of long-running family rivalries behind the crisis. The rulers have familiar relationship. The issues are personal. Both the Thanis and Sauds originate from the peninsula's Nejd interior, the homeland of Wahhabism. Both Saudi Arabia and Qatar seek to claim their version of Wahhabism is the right path adopting different approaches to this ultra-conservative form of Sunni Islam. "Qatari conservatism was everything but a mirror image of Saudi Arabia's long-standing puritan way of life. Qatar did not have a powerful religious establishment that could enforce ultra-conservative social norms, nor did it implement absolute gender segregation. Non-Mus-

<sup>3</sup> A. I. Alexandrov, "Qatar i Saudovskaya Araviya: otnosheniya obostryayutsya," (in Russian), ["Qatar – Saudi Arabia relations have been strained."], *Institute of the Middle East*, March 11, 2014, <http://www.iimes.ru/?p=20224>, (accessed July 27, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> "Qatar Says Saudis Seized Its Border Post," *New York Times*, October 2, 1992, <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/10/02/world/qatar-says-saudis-seized-its-border-post.html>, (accessed May 7, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> "The long-running family rivalries behind the Qatar crisis," *The Guardian*, July 21, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/21/qatar-crisis-may-be-rooted-in-old-family-rivalries>, (accessed May 15, 2018)

<sup>6</sup> "What is the Muslim Brotherhood," *Al Jazeera*, June 18, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/06/muslim-brotherhood-explained-170608091709865.html> (accessed July 2, 2018)

lims could practice their faith in their own houses of worship and were exempted from the bans of alcohol and pork”.<sup>7</sup> Qatar has sought to develop the soft power need to compensate for its inability to ensure its security militarily. Qatar calls into question the Saudi version of Wahhabism thereby challenging Riyadh’s internal and foreign policy.

**Qatar’s regional power aspirations.**  
**Support for the Muslim Brotherhood**

It is noteworthy that Qatar was largely involved in provoking and promoting the Arab Spring processes, which resulted in the removal of several Arab regimes from power. “Qatar’s political stability, economic wealth, ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, and international reputation as a mediator gave it the confidence to take an intervention role during the Arab Spring”.<sup>8</sup> The political establishment backed oppositional Islamist political forces in transitioning countries and led the regional response to upheaval in several countries like Syria for seeking Arab solutions to Arab problems. According to certain information, the Arab Spring processes were prepared by US research-analytical centers based in Qatar and afterward launched with the support of the ruling family.<sup>9</sup>

Doha intended, with the help of Turkey, to bring the Muslim Brotherhood to power in the Arab countries; in such a case, Qatar’s role would increase within the political and economic processes of Arab countries. It is no coincidence that since 2012, within the Arab Spring period, the Palestinian Hamas branch began operating in Qatar, which was directly linked to and sponsored by the Muslim Brotherhood and which had been based in Damascus before.

In the same period, the Muslim Brotherhood movement led by Mohamed Morsi came to power in Egypt. Shortly after, on July 3, 2013, Morsi was deprived of power by the military and was imprisoned. In 2013, Saudi rulers threw their weight behind Egypt’s brutal crackdown on Muslim Brotherhood supporters. In March 2014, Saudi Arabia designated Muslim Brotherhood a “terrorist” group. A brand of Sunni Islamism that called for

---

<sup>7</sup> James M. Dorsey, “Qatari Wahhabism vs Saudi Wahhabism and the perils of top-down change,” *BESA Center Perspectives*, Paper No. 676, December 7, 2017, <https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/qatar-saudi-arabia-wahhabism/> (accessed June 5, 2018); James M. Dorsey, “Wahhabism vs. Wahhabism. Qatar challenges Saudi Arabia,” *RSIS*, No. 262, September 06, 2013, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/rsis-pubs/WP262.pdf> (accessed June 5, 2018)

<sup>8</sup> Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, “Qatar and the Arab Spring. Policy Drivers and Regional Implications,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, September, 2014, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Brief-Ulrichsen\\_Qatar.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Brief-Ulrichsen_Qatar.pdf) (accessed May 7, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> A. I. Alexandrov, “Qatar i Saudovskaya Araviya”.

political participation and electoral legitimacy, of which the Muslim Brotherhood is perhaps the best example, was seen as a threat, because it offered a different model of Islamist politics to that of the Saudi state.

### ***The Qatar-Gulf clash. Inside story***

As already mentioned, in June 2017, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt finally suspended diplomatic relations with Qatar and subjected the small country to air, land, and water blockades. Qatar, in the meantime, had gained significance politically and economically and was in the process of being charged with supporting extremism and terrorism. It is noteworthy that on May 21, 2017, a new wave of conflict between Qatar and its neighbors began in Riyadh, about two weeks after the joint summit of GCC and the USA, and US President Trump's visit to the region.<sup>10</sup> The final declaration adopted at the Summit "condemned the destructive role of Iran in the Middle East" and "interference in the affairs of the region."<sup>11</sup>

The US President's visit to Saudi Arabia further highlighted the aspirations of both sides, Washington's desire in particular, to activate the anti-Iranian front; one of the goals of Washington was also the rapprochement of Saudi Arabia and Israel. At the same time, it is unlikely that Riyadh had not previously warned the United States about its movement to break relations with Qatar and had not attained the United States' consent to do so, if we also consider Trump's unwithheld support for Mohammad bin Salman.

The confrontation between Qatar and the Quartet states became the basis for the statement on regional cooperation made by Hamad Al Thani, which was posted on the Qatari state news agency website and which noted in particular: "It's not wise to have strained relationship with Iran, which is a powerful state and a guarantor of stability in the region." Afterward, the representative of the Qatar Foreign Ministry said that the Qatari agency website had been hacked and Qatar Emir's statement was posted by the hackers.<sup>12</sup> Some of the requirements set forth referred to the closure of Qatari Al Jazeera and its sister structures. It was considered that Al Jazeera had served as an information and propaganda platform in the course of the Arab Spring processes. Doha shaped the emerging narratives of protests through Al Jazeera media network.

<sup>10</sup> "US, GCC Summit communiqué condemns Iran's regional interferences," Al-Arabiya English, May 22, 2017, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2017/05/22/US-GCC-Summit-communique-condemns-Iran-s-regional-interferences.html> (accessed April 7, 2018).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> T. A. Shmelyova, "Istoki konflikta mezhdu Saydovskoh Araviyeh i Qatarom," (In Russian), ["The sources of conflict between Saudi Arabia and Qatar."], *Institute of the Middle East*, June 5, 2018, <http://www.iimes.ru/?p=44881> (accessed September 2, 2018).

### **The role of Iran and Turkey in the conflict**

Saudi Arabia and its allies set thirteen claims as precondition for restoring relations with Doha.<sup>13</sup> Some of those requirements were related to Iran. They demanded that Qatar diminish the level of diplomatic relations with Iran, shut down Qatar's diplomatic mission in Iran, expel from Qatar Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps officials and all those who were connected with those officials, and limit economic ties with Iran in line with international and American sanctions so that they would not have a negative impact on the security situation of the Gulf Cooperation Council Member States, as well as terminate any kind of military and intelligence cooperation with Iran.<sup>14</sup>

The other part of the claims was related to Turkey. The Quartet states demanded immediate closure of the Turkish military base in Qatar and complete suspension of military cooperation with Turkey on the territory of Qatar.<sup>15</sup>

In any case, the Qatar crisis contributed to strengthening the positions of both Turkey and Iran in the Middle East as Saudi Arabia, aspiring to dominate over the region, was so persistently striving to do. Still in 2015, Saudi Arabia and its allies, including Qatar, were drawn into the Yemeni crisis so as to counteract Iran's advancement. However, it was ineffective. In recent years, Saudi Arabia and its allies have failed to cause tangible damage to Iran's positions in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. As for Turkey, it should be noted that if Iran is an enemy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Turkey is its main competitor in the region.

Let us state that by the end of November 2017, two competitive processes took place in the Middle East. A trade deal between Iran, Turkey, and Qatar was signed in Tehran<sup>16</sup>, whereas the Defence Ministers of the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition, which was formed with about forty-member states on the initiative of the KSA as early as May 26, December 2015, conveyed the first summit in Riyadh.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, if earlier KSA was concerned with the rapprochement of Qatar and Iran, after the blockade of Qatar, bilateral relations would enter a new phase. A new giant port was launched in Qatar which is called on to become Iran's marine gateway. This circumstance will, naturally, boost

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> "Turkey, Iran and Qatar sign new trade-transport agreement," *Middle East Monitor*, November 27, 2017, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20171127-turkey-iran-and-qatar-sign-new-trade-transport-agreement/> (accessed April 14, 2018).

<sup>17</sup> Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition, Closing Declaration of the Inaugural Meeting of the IMCTC Ministers of Defence Council, November 26, 2017, <https://imctc.org/English/NewsroomDetail/Index/636473045674267274> (accessed May 16, 2018).

the bilateral commodity turnover by the forthcoming 2022 World Football Championship. Additionally, Tehran has provided Qatari airplanes, in particular Qatar Airways, its airspace for flights.<sup>18</sup> The Qatar, Turkey, and Iran alliance creates a new balance of forces in the Middle East, explicitly challenging the dominant positions of Saudi Arabia in the region. The ultimatum proposed to Qatar was not only a serious challenge to the sovereignty of the country, but was also directed against the influence of Iran and Turkey in the region. The confrontation that emerged between Qatar and Saudi Arabia and their allies was also banking-related; a financial-credit war that exposes the competition in the region, in general.<sup>19</sup>

### **Qatar in the focus of terrorism claims**

Finally, another important piece of Qatar paper package was related to supporting international terrorism and extremism by the country.<sup>20</sup> Qatar was required to cut off ties with terrorist, sectarian, and ideological organizations, in particular with the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamic State, Al-Qaeda, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (Jabhat al-Nusra), and Hezbollah. The Quartet countries demanded that Qatar stop financing terrorists, including terrorist groups that were on the Quartet, the US, and international lists; extradite and imprison all those enlisted with involvement in terrorist acts; confiscate their personal movable property and real estate; and not hide or sponsor such persons in the future. It was noted that upon making a query, Qatar was obliged to provide information on the movement, settlement, and financial situation of such persons, and extradite or return to their homeland all those persons who were released by Qatar after the break of diplomatic relations with the Quartet countries.<sup>21</sup> Overall, Saudi Arabia and its allies demanded that Qatar stop interference in the internal affairs of foreign states, deprive expatriated citizens from Quarter member states of the Qatari nationality, and provide information and relevant evidence about the citizens of the Quartet member states who had ties with Qatar. Additionally, Qatar would undertake a partnership policy with the GCC member states and Arab countries at all levels (military, political, economic, social, and security).<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> "Qatari flights to use Iran's airspace," *Mehr News*, June 06, 2017, <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/125759/Qatari-flights-to-use-Iran-s-airspace> (accessed July 4, 2018).

<sup>19</sup> F. I. Laskaris, "Katar-Saudovskaya Araviya: vojna v finansovo-kreditnoy sfere," (in Russian), [Qatar-Saudi Arabia. a war in financial and credit sphere.], *Institute of the Middle East*, October 13, 2017, <http://www.iimes.ru/?p=38353> (accessed June 3, 2018).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

The authorities of Qatar slammed the Quartet's claims as ungrounded and unproven, particularly the claims related to Qatar's support of international terrorism.<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, even a year later, the government of Qatar did not accept or meet halfway with any of the Quartet's conditions. The government of Qatar, blockaded by its neighboring states, pursued instead rather bold state policies during this period of political crisis, unexpectedly showing that perhaps the steps taken against Qatar did not have tangible consequences nor did they affect Qatar's sovereignty and widening influence.

### **Overcoming the blockade of the Arab countries**

During the crisis, Qatar suffered a loss of 43 billion dollars; however, the economy of the country did not exhibit a downturn and instead surprisingly recorded growth. For 2018, a 2.8 per cent economic growth is forecast instead of the average 2.3-2.5 per cent<sup>24</sup> of recent years. As of 2018, the annual gas export volume of Qatar amounts to 77 million tons. For 2022-2024, Qatar plans to increase that number up to 100 million tons.<sup>25</sup> It is a fact that Qatar managed to overcome the crisis first of all with the support of Iran and Turkey. It can be stated that Qatar's relationship with Kuwait and Oman is rather stable. After the interruption of commodity turnover with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, the Qataris compensated the loss by an increase in goods turnover with Iran and Turkey. It is known that since the blockade, Iran has opened up its ports and airports to supply various types of goods to Qatar, as a result of which Iran's commodity turnover to Qatar increased by 117 per cent<sup>26</sup>, and trade between Turkey and Qatar increased by 30 per cent, amounting to 1.5 billion dollars per year.<sup>27</sup> In fact, a number of factors helped Qatar to overcome the blockade of the Arab countries: firstly, availability of 320 billion dollar reserve funds, and secondly, to a certain degree, multi-vec-

<sup>23</sup> "What is the Qatari crisis?," *DW*, October 21, 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/what-is-the-qatar-crisis/a-39795408> (accessed July 8, 2018).

<sup>24</sup> "Qatar's GDP forecasts revised up for 2018," *Gulf Times*, April 7, 2018, <https://www.gulf-times.com/story/588081/Qatar-s-GDP-forecasts-revised-up-for-2018> (accessed August 12, 2018).

<sup>25</sup> "Qatar to boost gas production by 30% to 100 million tonnes a year," *The Peninsula*, July 4, 2017, <https://www.thepeninsulaqatar.com/article/04/07/2017/Qatar-to-boost-gas-production-by-30-to-100-million-tonnes-a-year> (accessed August 12, 2018).

<sup>26</sup> "Sepehr Arefmanesh, Iran Exports to Qatar Up 117%," *Financial Tribune*, November 19, 2017, <https://financialtribune.com/articles/economy-domestic-economy/76398/irans-economic-ties-with-qatar-booming-exports-up-117> (accessed August 15, 2018).

<sup>27</sup> "Qatar-Turkey trade grows by 30 per cent since Gulf crisis," *Middle East Monitor*, January 17, 2017, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20180117-qatar-turkey-trade-grows-by-30-per-cent-since-gulf-crisis/> (accessed August 3, 2018).





conducting the propaganda war.<sup>32</sup> According to some estimates, Qatar has spent about 1.5 billion US dollars on PR activities in the United States and Western Europe, aiming at neutralizing Qatar's ties with terrorism. It should be noted that Former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson was involved in the improvement of Qatar–Gulf relations, yet he failed to succeed in that mission by March 2018, before his resignation from office.<sup>33</sup> The US mediation on overcoming the crisis can be said to have exhausted itself.<sup>34</sup> An official statement of Kuwait announced that the Kuwaiti initiative also failed.<sup>35</sup>

Hence, Qatar has spent about \$1.5 billion on PR efforts since the conflict. Similar amounts were expected to be spent by Saudi Arabia.<sup>36</sup> The Qatar crisis became the biggest split in the Arab world since the second Gulf War. It was a great challenge to regional stability as well. The clash challenged the GCC as well. It has proven itself incapable of serving as a mechanism to resolve the crisis.<sup>37</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The research argues that the anti-Qatar coalition failed in its efforts of forcing Qatar to accept its 13 demands, including shutting down Al Jazeera, to cease support for various regional Islamist groups, both Sunni and Shiite, and to break Qatari economy. Saudi Arabia's and its allies' real goal was to force Qatar unable to carry out any independent foreign policy. To that end, the anti-Qatar coalition carried out international propaganda against Doha. It is worth noting the confrontation played out in Qatar's favor. Doha turned for support to Turkey and Iran. On the other hand, anti-Qatar coalition benefits Iran's and Turkey's regional power aspirations in the MENA region. Reports by international organizations

<sup>32</sup> A.Kuznetsov, "Qatarskih krizis: god spustya." (in Russian), ["The Qatari crisis. one year on"], *Institute of the Middle East*, June 15, 2018, <http://www.iimes.ru/?p=45186> (accessed August 9, 2018).

<sup>33</sup> "Top U.S. diplomat ends talks in Gulf; no. sign Qatar crisis resolved," *Reuters*, July 12, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-gulf-qatar-idUSKBN19X0WM> (accessed June 7, 2018).

<sup>34</sup> Kristin Smith Diwan, "Qatar's Domestic Agenda and the Gulf Crisis," *Lawfare*, February 25, 2018, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/qatars-domestic-agenda-and-gulf-crisis> (accessed May 21, 2018).

<sup>35</sup> "Kuwait: Not resolving GCC crisis is destructive to region," *Al Jazeera*, April 24, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/04/kuwait-resolving-gcc-crisis-destructive-region-180424074856648.html> (accessed April 30, 2018).

<sup>36</sup> Hassan Hassan, "Qatar won the Saudi blockade," *Foreign Policy*, June 4, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/06/04/qatar-won-the-saudi-blockade/> (accessed September 3, 2018).

<sup>37</sup> Rorry Miller, "The Gulf crisis: How it all started," *Al Jazeera*, June 1, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/gulf-crisis-started-180531140250121.html> (accessed June 23, 2018).

suggest Qatar in the period of conflict improved its human rights record and geopolitical standing.

The murder of Jamal Khashoggi on 2 October, 2018, in Saudi Arabia's Istanbul consulate has damaged Riyadh's reputation and the "counterterrorism" narrative. The new circumstances can put Riyadh to compromise with Doha under Washington and international pressure. In this situation Crown Prince Mohammed Ibn Salman acknowledged the resilience of Qatar's "strong economy" more than a year enforcing an embargo against the small gas-rich emirate.<sup>38</sup> The possible reconciliation between Saudi led coalition and Qatar would serve to US interests advancing "Arab Nato" planes of Donald Trump administration. The United States, which maintains close relations with both sides, could play an active role in trying to bring its quarreling partners together to counter Iran's influence in the region.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> "Saudi Crown Prince vows Khashoggi justice in defiant speech," *Bloomberg*, October 24, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-10-24/saudi-prince-vows-to-protect-turkey-ties-after-khashoggi-death> (accessed November 4, 2018).

<sup>39</sup> Philip Gordon, Amos Yadlin, Ari Heistein, "The Qatar Crisis: Causes, Implications, risks, and the need for compromise," *The Institute for National Security Issues*, Special Publication, June 13, 2017, <http://www.inss.org.il/publication/qatar-crisis-causes-implications-risks-need-compromise/> (accessed May 16, 2018).