



Is the GCC in Peril?

by Prof. Joshua Teitelbaum

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 240, March 12, 2014

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Tension over Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood has damaged relations between Doha and its Gulf neighbors. The days of the GCC, long dominated by Saudi Arabia, may be numbered.

After several years of ups and downs, relations between the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) reached a new nadir on March 5, when, in a fit of pique, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE announced they were withdrawing their ambassadors from Qatar.

Founded in 1981 as a response to the Iranian revolution and the Iran-Iraq war, the GCC has always been dominated by Saudi Arabia. While Riyadh has seen eye-to-eye with Manama and Abu Dhabi on most issues, Doha has chafed under the Saudi yoke ever since Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani overthrew his father in a palace coup in 1995. Flush with cash from the North Dome/South Pars gas field, the largest gas field in the world (which it shares with Iran), tiny Qatar put itself on the map with its freewheeling *Al Jazeera* channel, founded in 1996. *Al Jazeera* has always been a pointy thorn in the Saudi side. Qatar's mediation of disputes in the Muslim world (West Bank and Gaza, Sudan, Afghanistan), its continued good relations with Iran, and Doha's funding of competing Syrian rebel factions were all perceived as affronts by Saudi Arabia. Indeed, Riyadh did not even have an ambassador in Qatar between 2002 and 2007. For Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE, Qatar is punching way above its weight.

But the straw that broke the camel's back has been Doha's continued support for the Arab uprisings, and particularly for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Riyadh wishes to turn the GCC into a conservative monarchies club, even floating the idea of Morocco and Jordan joining the organization. It may have

hoped the new emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, who succeeded his father in June 2013, might turn over a new leaf and hew to Riyadh's leadership. But matters have now taken a serious turn. Although it is still too early to begin preparing a eulogy for the GCC, it is unclear whether the organization will be able to weather this latest crisis.

In a statement from Riyadh, Bahrain, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia announced that the move was a response to Qatar failing to follow through on agreements to protect mutual security. Qatar had failed to abide by the clause on "non-interference in the internal affairs of any of the GCC countries," and on abstaining from the support of the work of organizations and individuals who threaten security and stability (a reference to the Muslim Brotherhood). Qatar also continued to support "hostile media" (read: *Al Jazeera*). The countries took Doha to task for not following through on a previously unannounced agreement it apparently signed at a November 2013 meeting in Riyadh, even after it had been given another chance at a March 4 meeting immediately preceding the announcement. According to high-level GCC sources quoted by *Defense News*, at the November meeting Qatar had agreed to rein in the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated cleric Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who broadcasts a hugely popular show on *Al Jazeera*, stop the channel from airing "negative media" against fellow Gulf states, and end support for the Brotherhood.

Matters, therefore, have been coming to head for a while. In January, the UAE protested to Qatar over Qaradawi's anti-UAE and anti-Saudi statements. The UAE tried over a hundred Muslim Brotherhood members in several trials in 2013, and on March 3 sentenced Qatari physician Mahmud Abd al-Rahman al-Jaydah to seven years in prison for fundraising for the movement. On March 8, Saudi Arabia declared the Brotherhood a terrorist organization.

For its part, Qatar's cabinet expressed "regret and surprise" at the decision, and declared that it would not change its foreign policy, regardless of the pressure. A former Qatari official told *Al Jazeera* that some GCC countries "are trying to force Qatar to take certain policies which have nothing to do with the Gulf," and that the dispute was really about Saudi Arabia's support for Egypt's Field Marshal Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi.

Qatar's government-supported *Al Jazeera* channel encouraged the Arab uprisings opposed by Saudi Arabia and its allies. Qatar poured money into Egypt following the election victory of Muslim Brotherhood activist Mohamed Morsi. Indeed, it is Qatar's support for the radical and anti-monarchy Muslim Brotherhood that irks Saudi Arabia and its allies the most. When President Morsi was overthrown in July 2013 by al-Sisi, several *Al*

Jazeera journalists were thrown in jail, accused of supporting the Brotherhood. On March 6, Egypt joined its Gulf brethren and withdrew its ambassador from Doha.

These diplomatic developments come, of course, against the background of overwhelming Saudi, UAE, and Bahraini frustration with America's position towards the Iranian nuclear program. The Gulf countries perceive US policy in the region as knuckling under to Iranian hegemonic aspirations. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel visited the region in December 2013 and proposed several new initiatives aimed at bolstering US-led defense cooperation in the region. This included selling weapons to the GCC as a block instead of to individual countries, and developing a unified GCC missile defense shield based on US-made Patriot and Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) systems. He followed that up with a well-publicized visit to the American Combined Air and Space Operations Center in Qatar. President Obama is scheduled to visit Saudi Arabia later this month to try to assuage Saudi concerns.

But given the state of GCC relations, the level of cooperation desired by the US is unlikely to come to fruition. When the Saudis proposed on December 7 that the GCC form a political union, Oman objected publicly. A few days later the GCC announced the formation of a unified military command and police force, but no political union. None of these initiatives are likely to see the light of day.

For Qatar, the recent spat has come at a bad time. Scheduled to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup at cost of an estimated \$200 billion, Doha has committed to a compressed building schedule. The Qatari effort has led to reports of horrible living and working conditions for the foreign labor force. The International Monetary Fund and Human Rights Watch have been particularly critical of Qatar, and a Nepalese human rights organization has claimed that more than 400 Nepalese have died during the construction.

Nevertheless, Qatar is unlikely to buckle under to Saudi pressure. Tactically, however, it would not be beyond taking small steps for the sake of mollifying its neighbors.

The GCC has never really taken off as a unified organization. It is no European Union or NATO, and never will be. Kuwait will most probably take on its usual mediatory task in the recent tensions. Oman follows a separate foreign policy and has never been a GCC team player, a position made abundantly clear when it secretly mediated talks between the US and Iran last year, behind the back of its fellow GCC members. The latest move by the

UAE, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia puts another nail in the coffin of this moribund organization, although the actual burial may still be some time off.

Prof. Joshua Teitelbaum, a senior research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, is a professor of Middle Eastern studies at Bar-Ilan University, and a visiting fellow and contributor to the Task Force on Islamism and International Order at Stanford's Hoover Institution. He is an expert on the Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia.

BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity
of the Greg Rosshandler Family