



Turkey's Persian Gulf Challenge after the Qatar Crisis

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In the morning of 5th June 2017, Turkey was caught by surprise when the Arab Quartet, Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates severed diplomatic ties with Qatar and announced multiple sanctions restricting their trade, air and financial relations with Qatar. Many small countries in the region followed them while many still wait and watch advising both sides to find a settlement through dialogue. The big countries, both in the West and the Islamic world stressed on a negotiated resolution with help of mediation efforts immediately initiated by the Kuwaiti Emir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. The American, British, French, German and Russian leadership reached out to both sides to placate the situation without subscribing to the economic and diplomatic boycott of Qatar.

It took more than a month to bring out a list of demands the quartet wanted to be met before normalising their relations with Qatar. In the process, they lost much of the support they had anticipated from the Arab and non-Arab public opinion. When the list of thirteen demands was produced, it only complicated the matter and brought the allies of both sides in an uncomfortable position. The list included unrealistic demands like a complete shutdown of Qatar's flagship TV station Al-Jazeera, closing down of Turkey's military base and expulsion of many activists and leaders of Muslim Brotherhood, and downsizing Qatar's diplomatic ties with Iran, as well as expulsion of members of Iran's Revolutionary Guard the quartet believe, are staying in Qatar.¹ The right groups believed closing down Al-Jazeera would be an attack on press freedom and many countries echoed concerns that the boycott is turning into a siege (*Hisar* in Arabic as used by the Qatari officials). Qatar dismissed the demands and considered it an attack on its sovereignty.² The list appeared to have done more harm than good to the strategy of the quartet. International reaction fell short of their expectations and they were forced to bring out a modified version of their demands after the stipulated deadline of ten days lapsed. The message was clear that Qatar is ready for a prolonged diplomatic wrangle with its Gulf neighbours and the international community is not willing to take sides in this "family" quarrel.

The newly modified list of demands was repackaged as six principles Qatar was supposed to abide by before the return to normalising the relations with its neighbouring states.³ These principles were meant to remind Qatar of its previous commitments it had made with its Gulf neighbours in 2013 and 2014 in similar diplomatic spats. The new list, however, did not include any specific individual, entity or a country, Muslim Brotherhood, Yousuf al-Qaradawi, or Al-Jazeera for example. The new list issued on 8 July 2017 in Cairo was a significant indicator of pressure the boycotting countries had faced since their declaring the embargo. Qatar played the victim and gained support and sympathy from a large section of the international media community, followed by an unprecedented diplomatic offensive launched by Qatar and UAE to all major Western powers to win support for their sides.

How Turkey Reacted?

These efforts and heated debate in public domain aside, the Western leaders did not budge to shift their position to either camp. American, British, French, German and European Union leaders visited the Gulf capitals in order to show their neutrality than to seek a resolution to the crisis. The UAE leaders maintained that the resolution lies with Riyadh and with King Salman, as no one else has the key. The most telling failure perhaps was the visit of the US State Secretary Rex Tillerson who returned without any breakthrough been achieved, despite the diplomatic proximity Saudi Arabia had secured with the Trump administration after Trump's maiden visit to Saudi Arabia in May 2017. The failure apparently was because of a clear division of opinion in the White House administration over how to respond the crisis. By end of July, stories about an imminent exit of Rex Tillerson from the Trump administration became public over his differences on major foreign policy issues, including the Gulf crisis.⁴

The Turkish response was defined by interest similar to that of American's, maintaining their military bases in Qatar. Turkey's main opposition party, the CHP, was opposed to taking side in the Gulf crisis and had asked Recep Tayyip Erdogan to exercise neutrality. The quartet expected Turkey to remain neutral and not take side in the crisis, as the Saudi foreign minister Adel Jubeir said in his press conference in Cairo on 6 July 2017.⁵ The UAE foreign minister Anwar Gargash was more vocal in expressing his reservations against Turkey's support to Qatar. He declared the visit of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar as "useless".⁶ The minister of state for foreign affairs Anwar Gargash wrote on his Twitter account "the Turkish president's visit did not carry anything new, and the hasty stand his country had taken made neutrality as the best option for Ankara. A Qatari review will achieve more than repeated visits".

Turkey was quick in receiving foreign ministers from Iran, Qatar, and Bahrain after the ban was declared. President Erdogan started calling world leaders, Russian President Vladimir Putin with whom he agreed on the "importance of focusing on the path of diplomacy and dialogue to lower the current tension".⁷ On Wednesday 7 June, Turkey received the Iranian foreign minister Javad Zarif with whom Turkey consulted the crisis.⁸ In next few days, Turkey had received officials from Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar and Erdogan had telephonic conversations

with both sides of the crises including King Salman bin Abdul Aziz and the Kuwaiti and Qatari Emirs. Turkey's hectic diplomacy in the wake of Qatar crisis was a result of Turkey's impending fears of losing more if any side succeeded to push the other side. Turkey-Saudi Arabia relations were reconfigured after Salman bin Abdul Aziz became the King of Saudi Arabia in 2015. Turkey has become an important destination for GCC investments and Gulf tourists along with increased military and strategic partnerships between the two sides. The Saudi-Turkey relations have been one of the most difficult tasks of Turkey's foreign affairs and for which Erdogan had invested his personal efforts.

Turkey's Persian Gulf Policy

The Persian Gulf has always been a difficult region for Turkey to balance between the warring factions, ideological and security camps. In the recent crisis, Turkey faced a very difficult and unexpected choice in Qatar where it has reset its business, strategic and security engagement only three years ago when King Salman had replaced King Abdullah with whom Turkey had a troubled relationship. Turkey, an earlier Ottoman ruler of many parts of the Gulf countries is looked upon with suspicion by big tribal leaders who later on developed their own political ambitions against the Ottoman rulers. However, the smaller tribes and rulers, in Qatar and Bahrain, maintained cordial relations with the Ottomans in order to protect their independence against the dominating tribes from Saudi Arabia and the Emirates.

The Iranian revolution led by Shia scholar Ayatollah Khomeini once again questioned the Gulf monarchies' Islamic credentials, uniting Gulf under one security vision and enhancing relations with other Sunni blocks like Turkey and Pakistan were their best policy options. It is in this context that the Gulf monarchies welcomed Muslim Brotherhood members from Egypt who were being arrested, tried, and jailed on various charges. The alliance between Muslim Brotherhood groups and Gulf monarchies deepened when the Gulf States particularly Saudi Arabia decided to support Afghan Mujahideen to fight against the Soviet invasion in 1989. Turkey, though ruled by secular nationalist governments at that time, their being the only Muslim NATO member was a reason to cooperate against the Soviet. Turk businessmen and construction companies were awarded lucrative contracts across the Arab countries. Many Turk of Islamic backgrounds were warmly welcomed to work in Gulf countries' official institutions. Abdullah Gul had served for eight years at Islamic Development Bank, Jeddah from 1983-1991 before he would come back to Turkey to start his political career and would become the Prime Minister and then President of the country under the AK Party rule from 2002 onwards.

But a closer look shows that the cooperation was carefully restricted to trade and business affairs. Political and security cooperation could not advance due to the fact that Turkey was still being ruled by either a secular or centrist government. The centrist government in Turkey often tried to balance its ties with Iran.

The arrival of AK party's rule with complete majority coincided with the United States plan to attack Iraq, the biggest test of the new dispensation's ingenuity. While the Turkish

parliament blocked American request to use Turkish air base for the military operation in Iraq,⁹ the unfolding events in Iraq caused more mistrust between Iran and Turkey as Turkey saw Iran rapidly increasing its influence in Iraqi politics and security. This brought both Turkey and the Gulf countries to a common understanding about Iran's growing influence and sectarian ambitions in the region.

Turkey's Syria policy and the Arab uprising, in general, had a clear ideological imprint on it. It angered Russians, Iranians, Shia militant groups who are fighting to defend Bashar al Assad. The Arab Left-liberals politicians and activists either opposed the Arab uprising in its entirety or changed their position after the uprising entered Syria. The Emirs and Kings of Gulf monarchies had reluctantly accepted the change in Tunisia and Egypt but they effectively intervened to stop any change in Bahrain and reversed the pre-uprising order in Egypt and Yemen.

Turkey-GCC Equations

The military coup in Egypt on 3 July 2013 clearly changed the Persian Gulf politics where Qatar continued its support and shelter to the activists and leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood, many wanted by Egypt for several charges related to terrorism and sedition. Saudi Arabia and the UAE remained steadfast in their support to Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, both diplomatically and financially. Qatar though recognized Al-Sisi and the change aftermath, its media outlets, mainly Al-Jazeera and Al-Jazeera Mobasher continued a sustained criticism of Al-Sisi. Turkey does recognize the change and supported Muslim Brotherhood and sheltered its leaders and activities in Turkey. Soon after the death of King Abdullah, King Salman found Houthi militias in Yemen challenging the Saudi leadership and a non-responsive Egypt frustrated Saudis enough to rethink about Turkey and start high-level engagement. Turkey demonstrated flexibility Saudis needed, by moderating anti-Al-Sisi criticism and enhancing cooperation to counter the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. The Turkish position evolved more in consideration of who replaces ISIS, rather than who is the most effective in defeating them. Iran's hegemonic expansion in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen is the buzzword in all Sunni capitals which finally brought them together to form a counter-terror military alliance in which Iran is excluded.

At the same time, Erdogan has earned displeasure from his Western allies on a range of issues persistently irritating both sides. Turkey finds NATO security cover insufficient for its expanding Middle Eastern role, particularly the civil war in Syria and Lebanon and their descent into the hands of DAESH control has profound impacts on Turkey's security perception of its Middle Eastern neighbourhood. Turkey's efforts to upgrade its entire defence system by becoming less dependent on Western technology and equipment, becoming the defence exporter country, and opening its defence sector to Russia and China is carefully watched by the West. Turkey's decision to buy the Russian missile defence system S-400 has not been well received by its NATO allies. The gap between Western and Turkish militaries' security views is widening on many issues including the threat perception from the Kurdish militant groups, Cyprus-Turkey dispute, Iraq, Syria or the Persian Gulf. The European Union's overdue membership remains still unachievable or even unthinkable in the current context of acrimonious diplomatic falling out with Germany

and other EU member countries. In this context, Turkey's steady tilt to the Arab-Islamic axis remains Turkey's best hope to compensate, unrealistic and insufficient though, for Turkey's business, trade, tourism and investment incomes from the region. It is true that in recent years Turkey has seen a significant surge in investment inflow from the rich oil producing nations; Iraq (first), Saudi Arabia (3rd), Kuwait (4th), Qatar (7th) and Bahrain (10th) are among the top foreign investors in Turkey's real estate.¹⁰ In other areas of cooperation, the two sides have not yet seen much progress, but they have indeed shown greater interest to deepen their relations in the recent past. Both Turkey and Saudi Arabia have found common interests beyond their immediate region, particularly Saudi Arabia's recent tilt to China where Saudi Arabia has announced major investments in 21st Century Maritime Silk Route (MSR) in which Turkey is actively involved.¹¹ Saudi Arabia has announced to invest in China's MSR which will connect Chinese, European and Middle Eastern seaports. Turkey is an active member and bridge country in the Chinese project. Saudis need Turkey to counter Iran's expansion in the region and the close interactions between the leaders since the crisis started, show that Saudis find Turkey more trustworthy partner against Iran's expansion in the region.

But the short-lived bonhomie between Saudi Arabia and Turkey started declining following the fall of Aleppo. For Turkey, the rise of Kurdish militias across its southern borders, in full complicity with Turkey's Western allies, the United States and Europe, emerged as the main determinant of its Syria-Iraq policy, Turkey's response to the Islamic State, Basher al-Assad, and anti-Assad armed rebels was to be reconfigured. With help of Iran and Russia, Turkey instituted the Astana Dialogue to try to find a political outcome of the seven years long Syrian civil war, by excluding the Saudi supported Salafi groups in Syria who often fought against moderate rebels.

The prolonged and deepening military conflict in Yemen with no political outcome in sight is an irritant between Turkey and the Gulf countries. As the Saudi military engagement prolongs, its dependency on Egypt and UAE is deepening. Turkey and Pakistan are not happy with worsening humanitarian crisis as both countries have a significant Shia population and have good relations with Iran. Now the UAE's active military involvement in Yemen and Libya, in coordination with Egypt, has raised UAE's strategic profile in the region. Egypt-UAE operation in Libya has changed Libya power struggle bringing once exiled Qaddafi era military officer General Haftar in the central position in any future settlement of the country. In Yemen, the UAE has a clear choice between the Houthis and Ali Abdullah Saleh whose family has significant business interests in the UAE. Decision makers in Qatar, Iran, and Turkey and even Saudi Arabia do not welcome these forces. As a result, Turkey and Qatar have emerged more of natural allies to each other than Turkey-UAE or Turkey-Saudi. However, Turkey's objectives in the Persian Gulf remain incomplete if its newly improved relations with Saudi Arabia and UAE get spoiled. Turkey's challenge is to prioritize its interests in each country and advance a policy to achieve these interests without losing the other.

Turkey's limited choices

When Saudi Arabia decided to host an Arab-Islamic-American summit to be attended by the US President Donald Trump on his maiden foreign trip starting from Saudi Arabia on 20th May 2017, the Turkish President was conspicuously absent. Turkey perhaps failed to postulate the rapid transformation the Saudi Kingdom was going through under the Deputy Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman. The Saudi summit had established the Deputy Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman overshadowing the authority of his brother Crown Prince Mohammad bin Nayef. Prior to the Saudi summit, Mohammad bin Salman had already traveled all powerful capitals to meet and attend establish direct communication with their leadership.

As the Arab-Islamic summit concluded, the change began to come through overnight reshuffle within the royal family which eventually replaced Mohammad bin Nayef with Mohammad bin Salman as Crown Prince. The development shows that Turkey was caught off guard. Only in September 2016, Crown Prince Muhammad bin Naif had visited Turkey, after three months of King Salman's weeklong visit to Ankara. Turkey was not ready for such dramatic crisis unfolding in a short span of time after Saudi Arabia hosted President Trump in May 2017. Turkey's top priority was to continue the relationship it redefined with King Salman through several highest level interactions between 2015 and 2017. Turkey had supported the Saudi-led Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFIT) which Erdogan's advisor Ibrahim Kalin thinks will usher a "new period of intra-regional solidarity" and "regional ownership" that will deal "with the challenges and crises of the Middle East and the Muslim world through strengthened dialogue in the fields of security and economic cooperation".¹²

However, both the changing Saudi royal politics and subsequent intra-Gulf disputes, have challenged Turkey's key interests in the region. The diplomatic offensive Turkey has launched to resolve the Qatar crisis is faced with three difficult scenarios:

1. Turkey takes a clear side either by supporting Qatar and losing the most important player in the region, Saudi Arabia, and the rich investor United Arab Emirates. This will bring a prolonged period of inconvenient if not hostile relations, which would eventually disrupt Turkey's current Middle East diplomacy, which aims to deepen and expand the volume of its overall relations with the Persian Gulf countries. Qatar is an important country for Turkey's Persian Gulf policy, but it can not replace Saudi Arabia. Qatar has transformed itself from a tiny state to an influential energy supplier and a developed and modern looking urban Emirate which can compete with Dubai and Abu Dhabi. Moreover, Qatar remains more open to political reforms which can transform Qatar into a constitutional Emirate. Qatar has emerged an important and reliable partner in helping Turkey to expand its relations across the Middle East. With Saudi Arabia and UAE, Turkey's relations are still evolving and both sides need more time to find a common vision for regional security. If Turkey abandons Qatar accepting the Saudi-Emirati demands, Turkey fears that anti-Turkey hostility will follow soon as it happened in Egypt. By all of the sudden declaring sanctions on Qatar, the Saudi-led quartet has put Turkey in an uneasy

situation where trust-deficit between Turkey and the Persian Gulf countries will remain a major problem for their strategic cooperation.

2. The quartet expects Turkey to remain completely neutral, as the Saudi foreign minister stated in his press statement in Cairo. But their expectation of neutrality requires Turkey to accept every decision imposed on Qatar by the Saudi-led quartet, including the closure of Turkish military base. Turkey's "neutrality" would have allowed Qatar either to accept the quartet's demands or to seek an immediate rescue from Iran. The "regime change" rhetoric has been moving around in their diplomatic and media narratives quite often. Neutrality, as Turkey defines, is to not let Turkey's bilateral relations with Qatar dictated by third parties. The exclusion of Turkey's military base from the second demand list can be seen as an attempt to pacify Turkey's concerns and press Turkey to use its influence over Qatar.
3. Turkey exercises careful balancing between its core interests in Qatar and the other Gulf States. Turkey does not enjoy the flexibility of taking a radical position against the powerful Gulf States which remains very clear in Turkey's repeated efforts to remain in close contact with Saudis since the crisis has started. Turkey's political narratives have somehow zeroed down the United Arab Emirates as the main culprit of the crisis and evolve separate approaches for both Saudi Arabia and the UAE. It depends on how much Turkey is successful in proving its credentials to the Saudis but it seems that they are not much worried about the United Arab Emirates rather their diplomacy is focused on convincing Saudi Arabia and perhaps to offer them mediation to talk with Iran.

As the current Turkish diplomacy indicates, Turkey has three key objectives in the crisis and wants to convince Saudi decision makers in securing them. First, to stop any regime change prospects in Qatar, second, to protect Turkey's recently established military base and third, to ease restrictions on Muslim Brotherhood and Al-Jazeera, in exchange of some compromises Turkey may persuade Qatar to accept.

Much of opposition to mediation efforts by the international community to resolving the crisis is coming from the United Arab Emirates with whom Qatar has a competitive relationship. Reports are emerging that Kuwait's mediation efforts were not sufficiently allowed to succeed and its role of mediation was later on reduced to "mailman", something that Kuwait is not happy with its efforts not being accepted by either side.¹³

Saudis have been advocating for the Gulf Union which would have more integration of Gulf policy making, an idea that smaller states have apprehensions about. Saudi Arabia is in the process of shifting its priorities in the region, rapprochement with Iraq and its Shia communities, finding a political settlement in Yemen and Syria. The Saudi-Qatar reconciliation is not impossible if Qatar continues its previous commitments it had promised with Saudis in 2013 and 2014. But what Qatar and Turkey are worried about Saudi Arabia is its rapidly changing political

landscape, particularly since Mohammad bin Salman has been promoted as Crown Prince replacing Mohammad bin Nayef.

The increasingly hardening policy of Saudi Arabia towards the Muslim Brotherhood has worried Turkey and Qatar. But Saudi Arabia needs Turkey on its side to counter Iran's growing influence in the region. Turkey, as the only powerful Sunni country and a NATO member shares concerns with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates on a host of issues including the Syrian crisis, Islamic Military Alliance against Terrorism and defeating the Islamic State. Turkey prefers the return of the GCC-led regional security architecture which adjusts Turkey's interests, its special relations with Qatar particularly.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.

Endnotes

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