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## QATAR 1.5 year after the blockade

### A PR win or the rise of yet another arch enemy for Saudi Arabia and its allies?

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***Almost two years after the imposition of a blockade to Qatar by the Anti-Terror Quartet (ATQ), what started as an effort to force Doha into the Saudi sphere of influence has now turned into a power struggle between the Gulf monarchies. Despite the fact that there is no clear winner in this rivalry, the tiny but resilient Gulf state is now posing as a strong adversary to Saudi Arabia, emerging as an aspiring leader with conflicting economic interests and significant involvement in vital Saudi operational theaters, such as the Yemeni one. In what way has the Gulf crisis reshaped conditions in the region and is there any chance for reconciliation?***

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The blockade imposed to Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the U.A.E., Egypt and Bahrain in June 2017 aimed at targeting Doha, which was believed to be maintaining ties with Islamist organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood, funding terrorist groups - such as Hamas, Kataib Hezbollah in Iraq and ISIS - according to the ATQ, and maintaining close relations with Iran. Doha was handed a list of 13 demands, amongst which was shutting down the Al Jazeera network and severing ties with the Muslim Brotherhood. As Qatar did not comply with any of the demands, it was forced to experience an unprecedented economic, political and air blockade by its former allies. Shedding light to the real reasons behind the blockade, the Quartet, led by Saudi Arabia, aimed at limiting Qatar's aspirations to rise as yet another leading power in the Gulf and at forcing it to comply with Riyadh's policies and strategic interests. Saudi Arabia saw a threat in Qatar, both in its support of popular Islamist movements amongst the Arab world and in its development of an independent foreign policy. However, the blockade, a short and successful measure in planning, led to a long-lasting conflict of interests and to another open wound for the ATQ and Riyadh, particularly.<sup>1</sup>

### **Crisis consequences**

Qatar suffered severe consequences from the crisis – mainly financial and social ones – and was forced to reshape its economy entirely, to seek new allies and to further develop its foreign policy away from that of its Gulf neighbors. Almost two years into the blockade, Doha had to utilize its economic reserves in order to overcome the sudden cut of ties imposed by its neighbors and to gradually adapt to the new conditions. The tourism income of the country has significantly decreased, whilst prices have gone up.<sup>2</sup> Namely, in the first half of 2018, Qatar welcomed 945.000 visitors compared to 1.5 million for the previous year, while visitors from GCC states dipped by 84%.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, the country seems to be winning the unclaimed Gulf war, at least on a rhetoric level. As of January 2019, Qatar left OPEC, while its Prime Minister decided not to attend the latest GCC summit, pointing out that a solution to the crisis is not possible. On top of that, the country has gradually developed closer relationships with Turkey, Iran and the West, as Saudi relations to all parties are declining.<sup>4</sup> This development comes as Saudi Arabia is facing backlash from its continuing involvement in the Yemeni war and the murder of Saudi journalist Jamaal Khashoggi in the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul. The later incident sparked international discontent, which created a more favorable environment towards Doha.

### **Qatar strikes back**

However, how was tiny Qatar able to overcome the crisis and rise against its much bigger counterparts? The answer does not only lie in the abilities of the country itself. In fact, it is a combination of factors, including the declining prestige of Saudi Arabia internationally, as well as the regional developments in Syria and Yemen. The blockade on Qatar came only a few weeks into the rule of Mohammad bin Salman on 5 June, 2017, and was believed to be a decision of the newly appointed Crown Prince, who failed to force the Qatari leadership into following his regional agenda.<sup>5</sup> Bin Salman was also believed to be the architect of the war in Yemen and the blockade to Qatar was partially perceived – even by the West – as part of his wider hegemonic policies. This belief was enhanced by a strong PR campaign spearheaded by Qatar targeting Western mainstream media, such as CNN. Qatar is believed to have spent more than \$ 1.5 billion on PR efforts since the beginning of the crisis. From its side, the Quartet with Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E., particularly, invested both in PR campaigns aiming at influencing public opinion in the West as well.<sup>6</sup>

What is even more interesting is the unclaimed “cyberwar” occurring between the two sides, even before the blockade. On May, 24th 2017 hackers attacked the official Qatari News Agency (QNA),

posting a story regarding a speech by the Sheikh of Qatar, Al Thani, who was reportedly expressing his support to Hamas, Hezbollah, the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran. The story was later deleted and marked as fake news by the Qatari foreign ministry. This resulted in a counterattack towards the U.A.E. Ambassador in the United States, whose email account was hacked and all mails leaked. Following the blockade, Twitter was filled with the hashtags “Tamim the Glorious” and “Qatar Is Not Alone”, supporting Doha, while from the side of the ATQ, the hashtag “Gaddafi of the Gulf”, portraying Sheikh Tanim as the late Muammar Gaddafi was trending. However, it was later revealed that the hashtags were in fact pushed by fake accounts, namely bots, as a way to influence public opinion.<sup>7</sup> What is more, when the U.A.E. hosted a conference with famous anti-Qatar speakers in late 2018,<sup>8</sup> reports emerged claiming that protesters were paid off to attend anti-Qatar protests in New York and London.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, the ATQ seems to be losing this war, at least on a PR level as their efforts have been overshadowed by the aggressive policies of the newly appointed Saudi Crown Prince. On top of that, developments in Syria have led Qatar to disengage from the Islamist factions it was supporting in the country, thus showing signs of “penitence” which could count in its favor regarding relations in the Gulf.<sup>10</sup>

These developments influenced the Western public opinion in favor of Qatar, which presented itself as a reactionary power opposed to Saudi hegemonic aspirations. Qatar is doing so, first, by engaging in operational theaters with high stakes for Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies; second, by making efforts to increase its momentum in Yemen by providing support to the Houthi rebels and partly to the Islah faction; and third, by presenting itself as a peacemaking power in Yemen, and recently supporting the U.S. calls for a ceasefire in the country, while also agreeing with the U.N. to provide shelter and financial support to 26,000 Yemeni refugees.<sup>11</sup> What is more, the Qatari media were allegedly sympathetic towards the Houthi and tried to shift public opinion towards the humanitarian crisis in Yemen during the retreat of the rebels from western Hodeidah. But Yemen is not the only country where Qatar tries to outrun Saudi Arabia. Doha has provided \$500 million of financial aid to Lebanon, which also maintains strained relations with Saudi Arabia, since Riyadh retracted its financial support to the country in 2016, due to the rising influence of Hezbollah in the political scene of Beirut. The Qatari aid was welcomed by Lebanon, which took a stand next to Doha, an alarming development for Saudi Arabia which announced that it would only support Lebanon when it would regain stability.<sup>12</sup>

It is evident that the crisis between Qatar and the Quartet is far from being resolved. Both sides have escalated their rhetoric and have no intention to reconcile. Saudi Arabia and its allies saw an opportunity in keeping Qatar occupied with the consequences of the crisis, as they would be able to shape developments on the ground and counter Qatar’s efforts to claim a share in the power play taking place in the Gulf. On the contrary, Doha, though deeply damaged by the crisis and its social and financial aftermath, was able to extend friendship to new allies such as Turkey, and pursue its own strategic objectives. For the Quartet, and for Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E., specifically, the blockade did not evolve as expected. Instead of an effective means of pressure, it turned out to be yet another problem, the effects of which are evolving concurrently with their rivalry with Iran and with the ongoing Yemeni civil war. In addition, the ATQ pushed Doha closer to Tehran, and created a significant rift within the Gulf alliance. The fact that these developments took place shortly after the change in the Saudi leadership shaped the belief that the decision was indeed incited by Mohammad Bin Salman and the fact that it was followed by other aggressive policies, turned the West in favor of Qatar. Even though Qatar cannot be considered as a winner of the crisis, since it still suffers from its financial consequences, it has however, won this unclaimed war on the PR level. It remains to be seen whether Doha will be able to withstand the pressure, in the long-term, and what the results of this new animosity will bring for the geopolitical reality in the Gulf.

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