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Gulf Crisis: Rewriting the Political Map?

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

A rupture in Arab diplomatic and economic relations with Qatar as well as the Gulf state's involvement with a Saudi-led, 41-nation Sunni Muslim military alliance threatens to force non-Arab Muslim nations as well as China to choose sides.

Commentary

SAUDI ARABIA and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), by breaking off diplomatic relations and seeking to impose an economic boycott of Qatar, have opened the door to a rewriting of the political map of the Gulf, with potentially far-reaching consequences for nations across the globe.

The dilemma for non-Arab nations like Malaysia, Indonesia and Pakistan is most immediate. Qatar's expulsion from the 41-nation, Saudi-led, Sunni Muslim Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism complicates their strenuous efforts to avoid being sucked into an increasing visceral power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran. So does the fact that the crisis is likely to be prolonged given that Qatari acceptance of Saudi and UAE demands would not only humiliate the Gulf state, proud of a history of charting an independent course for decades, but also turn it into a vassal of its bigger Gulf brethren.

Political Fallout

The demands are believed to include the muzzling if not closing of Qatar-backed media such as Al Jazeera, expulsion of leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, the Palestinian group that controls the Gaza Strip, and the limiting of Qatar's

relations with Iran to issues associated with the fact that it shares the world's largest gas field with the Islamic republic.

The fallout of the crisis in Asia is likely to be initially more political than economic. Saudi and UAE isolation of Qatar could push the Gulf state to draw closer to Iran, Turkey and Russia, a move that would increase regional polarization and could significantly weaken the Gulf Cooperation Council. The GCC groups the region's six monarchies: Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain.

Saudi soft power across the Muslim world is also complicating efforts by non-Arab Muslim states to remain on the side lines of the escalating Saudi-Iranian rivalry and an increasingly aggressive UAE-driven campaign against expressions of political Islam that is now also targeting Qatar.

Decades of Saudi funding in what amounts to the largest public diplomacy in history has bought the kingdom significant influences in branches of government in multiple Muslim majority countries.

The timing of the crisis in the Gulf was for Malaysia, for example, particularly unfortunate. It came weeks after Malaysian Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Anifah Aman visited Qatar to further enhance relations with Qatar. Malaysian defence minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein had earlier announced that Malaysia and Qatar were elevating their diplomatic ties by forming a High-Level Committee (HLC) to focus on the structural framework of both countries' defence institutions.

Responding to the rupture in diplomatic relations and the military suspension, sources close to the Malaysian foreign ministry said that the government was advising its agencies to remain neutral in the dispute. Some sources cautioned however that the defence and interior ministries may adopt a more independent approach.

A Global Boycott?

The dilemma for Pakistan is no less acute. Pakistan's diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE initially soured after the Pakistani parliament in 2015 rejected a Saudi request for Pakistani military assistance in Yemen. The unprecedented decision ultimately left Pakistan with no choice when the kingdom two years later asked it to allow General Raheel Sharif, who had just retired as chief of army staff, to take over the command of the Saudi-led military alliance.

Despite insisting that Sharif would use his position to mediate between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Pakistan has seen violence along its volatile border with Iran increase, relations with the Islamic republic deteriorate, and prompted calls for Pakistan to recall Sharif.

Equally worrying for Muslim and non-Muslim countries like China and Singapore alike are indications that Saudi Arabia and its Arab allies may want to turn their cutting of air, land and sea links to Qatar into a more global boycott.

Saudi Arabia's state-owned Saudi Press Agency reported that the kingdom would

“start immediate legal procedures for understanding with fraternal and friendly countries and international companies to implement the same procedure as soon as possible for all means of transport to and from the State of Qatar for reasons relating to Saudi national security”.

The statement appeared to be referring to Saudi transport links with Qatar but seemed to hold out the possibility of Saudi Arabia pressuring its public and private economic and commercial partners to follow suit in cutting ties with the Gulf state. Leaked emails showed the UAE ambassador in Washington, Yousef Al Otaiba, campaigning against Qatar and supporting efforts to persuade US companies not to pursue opportunities in Iran. That approach could be also applied to Qatar.

Rewriting the Gulf Political Map

The crisis in the Gulf could also complicate implementation of China’s One Belt, One Road (OBOR) now known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). A potential effort to force countries to join the boycott adds to Chinese fears that Saudi Arabia intends to expand its proxy war with Iran into Balochistan, a key Pakistani node of OBOR, in a bid to destabilise Iran.

The crisis could also complicate Chinese efforts to keep its Middle East policy in sync with that of the United States, the major power in the region, if Washington were to side with Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

From the perspective of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the confrontation with Iran as well as Qatar is an existential battle for survival of absolute monarchies. It increasingly threatens to become a battle in which they take no prisoners and adopt a “you are with us or you are against us” approach that would put Muslim and non-Muslim nations in a bind.

The outcome of the Gulf battle, irrespective of who wins, is likely to rewrite the political map of the region and force Muslim and non-Muslim nations to take stock. The map is already changing with Turkey and Iran coming to Qatar’s aid and Turkish troops being dispatched to the Gulf state. If Qatar survives the battle with its controversial policies and media assets intact, it will have put the limitations of Saudi and UAE power on public display. By the same token, a Qatari defeat would allow Saudi and UAE-inspired sentiment against Iran and political Islam to reign supreme.

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