

Qatar and GCC Detente? In the Wake of a Three Year Blockade Imposed by Saudi Arabia

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The unexpected detente between Qatar and its GCC partners saw the full restoration of political ties between them following the end of the over three-year-long blockade against the peninsular nation, but speculation remain about the future of their reconciliation considering the unresolved issue of Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood and the UAE's reported umbrage with Saudi Arabia's decision to go through with all of this despite the uncertainties, though the arrangement will likely survive even if only because its optics serve every involved parties' interests for the time being at least.

From "Blood Borders" Back To "Brotherhood"?

Analysts have scrambled to interpret the unexpected detente between Qatar and its GCC partners which just saw the [restoration of political ties](#) between them following the end of the over three-year-long blockade against the peninsular nation. I analyzed this dispute's externally provoked divide-and-rule origins in a piece that I published in June 2017 about "[The Machiavellian Plot to Provoke Saudi Arabia and Qatar into a 'Blood Border' War](#)", which claimed that the UAE exacerbated tensions between two of its main partners through a [fake news hack](#) in order to embroil them in an unnecessary internecine dispute that Abu Dhabi could then exploit in pursuit of its grand strategic ambition to become the Arab World's next hegemon. Although no kinetic conflict of an international or internal nature ever materialized in either Qatar or Saudi Arabia, [reports](#) from last summer confirmed that the former scenario was in the cards until Trump inexplicably quashed it.

"Little Sparta's" Strategy

At any rate, the UAE succeeded in its goal of becoming the most important catalyst of geopolitical change in the Arab World in the years since after Saudi Arabia and Qatar were forced to focus on countering one another instead of leveraging their religious and media influence respectively to advance their regional agendas. Had that not happened, then each on their own might have been able to retain their corresponding edge over the UAE, let alone possibly joined forces to further sideline the overly ambitious state that US military forces once affectionately nicknamed "[Little Sparta](#)". Instead of that happening, they were distracted with one another, which created the space for the UAE to flex to its leadership muscles. It proved its military prowess in the War on Yemen where it also [cunningly undercut](#) its Saudi "ally's" strategy by cultivating South Yemeni separatists, while also [brokering peace](#) between Eritrea and Ethiopia as well as [pioneering its own "peace"](#) with "[Israel](#)".

Saudi Pragmatism

The recent reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Qatar therefore goes against the UAE's interests even though it succeeded in buying itself enough time to come out on top as the Arab World's new unofficial hegemon and the Gulf's main catalyst of geopolitical change. Nevertheless, the question on everyone's mind is why Saudi Arabia decided to go through with this in the first place despite Qatar not complying with any of the [prior 13 demands](#) that were made of it at the onset of their crisis. The answer can't be known for sure, but it might very well be that Riyadh realized that the costs of indefinitely continuing this ridiculous feud with Doha far outweigh the expected benefits which nowadays appear further from reach than ever. The Kingdom's [de facto defeat](#) in its War on Yemen, low oil prices as a result of [World War C](#), and its overall regional failures likely contributed to Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS) deciding to throw in the towel.

The Biden Factor

MBS also fears that he'll face unprecedented pressure from the US to further scale down his disastrous campaign of destruction in Yemen once Biden takes office (even if the incoming leader only "[does the right thing for the wrong reasons](#)"), to say nothing of how worried he is [about the possibility](#) that the President-Elect might rejoin the Iranian nuclear deal and subsequently enter into a rapprochement with the Islamic Republic. With these calculations in mind, it makes sense why MBS would go along with Trump's legacy-solidifying effort to broker "peace" in the Mideast by agreeing to normalize relations with Qatar. The outgoing American leader earns another proverbial feather in his cap while the Saudi one can preempt his incoming American counterpart from weaponizing that dispute against him as part of a forthcoming comprehensive pressure campaign. The UAE, having lost control of events, was begrudgingly forced to go along with them.

Abu Dhabi's Divide-And-Rule Games Aren't Over...

It's not all bad for Abu Dhabi, however, since this detente is mostly superficial as it's thus far failed to resolve the most contentious issue of dispute: Qatar's support of the Muslim Brotherhood (which is banned as a terrorist group by Bahrain, Egypt, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and the UAE). Unless Qatar capitulates in this respect, which appears unlikely since a significant share of its soft power is derived from patronizing the organization and its many proxies across the region, then this will remain a divisive variable which could be exploited by the UAE to keep its two "partners" at arm's length from one another. Furthermore, Doha hasn't scaled down its relations with Ankara or Tehran which became supercharged as a result of the GCC Cold War, so it hasn't actually done anything to earn Riyadh's trust. This will make it all the easier for Abu Dhabi to manipulate the mostly superficial detente between them so that it doesn't become substantive.

...Or Are They?

That said, one of the sides — be it Qatar or Saudi Arabia — could unilaterally submit to the other in the interests of "regional peace" or whatever else, thereby mitigating the impact of these two currently unresolved but related issues: Qatar's support of the Muslim Brotherhood and its concomitant closeness with the group's Turkish and Iranian partners (the latter ties of which are presently unclear but [speculated](#) to have improved in recent years). Considering the fact that Saudi Arabia is nowadays weaker than it's ever been in recent memory, it seems likely that Riyadh might be the one to make "friendly" moves in this direction by simply asking Doha not to support Muslim Brotherhood movements within its borders even if it continues doing so elsewhere. Such a development, which already

seems to be in the works behind the scenes [given the vagueness](#) of those two countries' detente, would be extremely detrimental to Abu Dhabi's divide-and-rule interests.

Keeping Up The Charade

More than likely, however, the GCC detente will probably persist because the optics serve everyone's interests. Qatar and Saudi Arabia officially patched up their dispute and can now focus on much more important issues of individual and shared interest, the latter of which relates to dealing with the energy market's global downturn. As for the UAE, it doesn't want to risk being exposed as the regional spoiler that it's been over the past few years by making too loud of a fuss about the unresolved status of Qatar's ties with the Muslim Brotherhood or the possibility of Saudi Arabia looking the other way on this due to Riyadh's recent weakness. It should be said, however, that this second-mentioned factor is largely due to the UAE's Machiavellian machinations, so it would be a form of blowback if it results in Saudi Arabia passively accepting Qatar's continued patronage of the Muslim Brotherhood despite Abu Dhabi's intense aversion to that scenario.

Concluding Thoughts

The unexpected GCC detente caught many observers by surprise, but that's mostly because few realized just how weak Saudi Arabia had recently become. It can no longer indefinitely remain hyper-focused on Qatar at the expense of its other interests after its regional strategy collapsed as a result of being dragged into this dispute and likely also the War on Yemen due to the UAE's Machiavellian machinations. It's unclear whether MBS realizes that he's been played for a fool by his [mentor](#) Mohammed Bin Zayed (MBZ), or if this will ever even happen, but what's important to pay attention to is how the Emirati leader responds to this new regional development. It's the first time in several years that he's lost control of events, and he certainly isn't happy about it since he'd have preferred to have his countries' two "partners" strategically bleed one another dry while his own continues rising in the aftermath. Whether he plays the spoiler or not, only time will tell.

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