

Qatar Urges Gulf Countries to Talk with Tehran and Ankara

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Last Monday, US General Frank McKenzie stated that the US shall continue to help Saudi Arabia defend itself against “the common threat of Iran”. On Tuesday, the Saudi government stressed the importance that the countries affected “by Iranian threats” should be a party to all international negotiations about the Iranian nuclear programme, while accusing Iran of “threatening the security of the region”. Tensions are on the rise, it would seem. But the situation is more complex. For the last weeks, Saudi Arabia has been alternating between sending “warnings” to Iran and making conciliatory statements. Meanwhile, Qatar aims to mediate between Saudi Arabia and Iran and to de-escalate tensions.

Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan claimed on January 22 that the Kingdom’s hands “are extended” to Iran to make peace – at the same time, he also accused Tehran of not being serious enough about peace talks and of not complying with agreements. The two countries have not had diplomatic relations since the 2016 attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran after Sunni-governed Saudi Arabia executed Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr – Iran is the world’s largest Shia-governed country (Shia and Sunni being the two major denominations within Islam). Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh responded by remarking to the Iranian Students’ News Agency (ISNA) that Iran, in its turn, would welcome reforms in Saudi policies to establish a “security mechanism” in the region.

The Middle East geopolitical scenario is changing. We have seen for example how [different Arab countries signed normalization agreements with Israel](#). While Turkey is involved in a proxy war with some Arab states in [North Africa](#), in the Gulf region things are perhaps even more complex. In a new development, Qatar is urging Gulf Arab states to enter a dialog with Iran; according to a statement by Qatari Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani on January 18, authorities in the Qatari capital of Doha could broker such negotiations. This happened some days after Joe Biden was sworn in as the new American president – during the campaign, he promised to revive the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran. Meanwhile, Doha is also having discussions with Iran and South Korea to ensure the release of an oil tanker seized by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. Saudi Arabia’s small and yet significant gesture took place after the Qatari statements.

This is also happening at a time when a landmark “solidarity and stability” agreement was signed on January 5 between Qatar on one hand, and the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and

Bahrain on the other, thus [re-establishing full diplomatic relations with Doha](#). Such agreement basically ended the blockade on Qatar and, at least for now, the Gulf crisis which lasted for three-and-a-half years. The crisis was also about Iran. In 2017, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the UAE had cut all ties with Qatar, accusing it of being “too close” to Iran (Saudi Arabia’s archenemy) and supporting “terrorism”. Could things be changing? Such rapprochement between Gulf states, according to Emadeddin Badi (an Atlantic Council senior fellow), was clearly also influenced by their desire “to preempt pressure” from the incoming Biden administration. All is not well in the Gulf, however.

Qatar basically still wishes to maintain its good relations with both Turkey and Iran. It is a complicated task: the priority today for the Arab Gulf states, after all, is no longer antagonizing Israel but countering both Turkey and Iran – two countries which also have complex and often tense relations.

In the aftermath of the Gulf countries agreement, the UAE and Oman are also making efforts to improve their relations with Turkey. Qatar has also offered to mediate between Ankara and the authorities in the Saudi capital of Riyadh. And indeed for the first time in two years – since Saudi dissident journalist of Turkish origins Jamal Khashoggi was murdered in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul (Turkey) – there seems to be a path for reconciliation between Ankara and Riyadh.

With Iran, however, things are far from that and tensions remain high. On January 22, Emirati (along with Israeli) officials expressed their approval for former US president Donald Trump’s policy of “maximum pressure” on Iran – but Omar Ghobash, UAE assistant minister for public diplomacy, also stated that the UAE does not oppose a new deal with Tehran, even though he disagrees with the way Gulf states were not included in the nuclear deal of 2015 (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action – JCPO – signed by Iran, China, US, France, Russia, the UK, and Germany).

The Kingdom of Bahrain, in its turn, accuses the Islamic Republic of Iran of fomenting unrest in the country. Bahrain is now facing demonstrations from the Shia-led opposition that are demanding reforms in the Sunni-led country.

Meanwhile, Turkey and Iran have nonetheless signed agreements with Pakistan to boost railway cooperation – thus further developing the routes linking Istanbul, Tehran and Islamabad, and even further, enhancing connectivity with the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It is worth remembering that in February 2020, state-owned Russian Railways pulled out from a \$1.3 billion railway electrification project which includes a line between Gamsar (Iran) and Ince Burun (Turkey). This was due to US pressure regarding sanctions imposed on Iran. This is a railway line also designed to connect Turkey (via Iran) to Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan.

In the end, the interests of countries such as Turkey and Iran, and even Russia, can converge against US sanctions and such countries should work together at some levels in dialog with Gulf countries to counter international isolation. In this scenario, the role of Qatar is very relevant.

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