

Closed Session

The Gulf Crisis Two Years On: What Does the Future Hold?

Dr. Tarek Cherkaoui



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The TRT World Forum 2019, recognised as one of the most significant political events of the year, took place from October 21st- 22th at the Istanbul Congress Center with over one thousand esteemed guests and panellists. Consisting of nine keynote speeches and exclusive talks, 12 public sessions, and 15 closed sessions this year's Forum succeeded in providing a platform for serious engagement with the most pressing challenges of our time. The themes of the sessions ranged from the rise of far-right terrorism, populism and nationalism, environmental issues, the future of the Middle East, trade wars, the future of the European Union and cooperation of emerging powers. Uniting all of these themes was a focus on the fragmented state of today's world and a sincere desire to offer meaningful solutions.

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The Gulf Crisis Two Years On: What Does the Future Hold?

On Tuesday, October 22, 2019, the TRT World Research Centre held a closed roundtable session on the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Crisis. The focus of the session was an analysis of the ongoing Gulf Crisis, a discussion of its root causes, an examination of the multiple dimensions of the conflict, and an observation of the various geopolitical developments that have occurred during the past two years. Although some overtures have been offered lately from among

the protagonists, regional tensions still persist and affect the images of these countries in the international arena. The session aimed to explore the outcomes of the Gulf Crisis by focusing on regional tensions and the emergence of new alliances.

A distinguished group of three speakers and roughly 30 participants shared their expertise in discussion of the Gulf Crisis. They addressed the following themes:

1. What is the context of the Gulf Crisis?
2. What are the new political coalitions which have emerged in the post-Gulf Crisis period?
3. Is the GCC still relevant?
4. How does the Gulf Crisis impact the GCC countries' relationships with Iran?
5. What has been Turkey's impact on regional conflicts during the post-Gulf Crisis period?

Background



The first speaker examined the origins of the current Gulf Crisis, which dates back to 1995 when Qatar left the umbrella of Saudi Arabia to adopt an independent and open foreign policy. Qatar's emir at the time, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, sought to resist Saudi hegemony and pursued his nation's interest by leveraging Qatar's own capabilities and resources, unencumbered by Saudi threats. Having the world's third-largest reserves of natural gas, the Qatari leaders chose to think outside the realm of conventional pipelines as they would have been hindered by Sau-

di Arabia, which provided the only land routes. Thanks to the most sophisticated liquid natural gas (LNG) infrastructure in the world, Qatar has become one of the largest gas exporters globally.

Qatar's wealth provided the means for the country's leadership to conduct an independent foreign policy. This divergence obviously frustrated Saudi Arabia, which attempted to organise a coup d'état against Sheikh Hamad in the mid-1990s (BBC News, 2000). A decade later, in the mid-2000s, the Saudis saw Qatar's active diplomacy in such areas as Yemen, Lebanon and Bahrain as a direct encroachment upon their turf. Subsequently, Saudi Arabia refused to attend some summits held in Doha, notably the one on

Gaza in January 2009, which was attended by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Hamas political leader Khaled Meshaal (Black, 2009). At that juncture, Saudi Arabia was leading the so-called 'axis of moderation', a de facto alliance which included Egypt, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). They stood closer to the Israeli position in opposition to the so-called 'axis of resistance', which included Iran, Syria, Lebanon and some Palestinian movements. In the summer of 2014, tensions between Qatar on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia and the UAE on the other, publicly surfaced once the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain decided to recall their ambassadors from Doha (ACPRS, 2014: 1-2). Therefore, according to the first speaker, it was no surprise to see matters escalate in the Gulf region, but the magnitude of the Gulf Crisis which began in June 2017 came as a surprise to most observers. At that time, a Saudi-led quartet, which included the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt, imposed a land, air and sea blockade against Qatar, while also severing diplomatic ties. Allegations put forth by the anti-Qatar quartet accused their neighbour of sponsoring terrorism, betraying the GCC concerted actions, infiltrating on behalf of Iran, and

The Gulf Crisis, which began in June 2017, has remained unresolved, with numerous developments having transpired during the past two years.

proposing a threat to regional stability. The anti-Qatar coalition subsequently issued an ultimatum of 13 demands to be fulfilled within ten days. The list included paying reparations, shutting down the Al Jazeera satellite-broadcasting network (AJA), curbing bilateral relations with Iran, closing a Turkish military base and submitting to monthly external compliance checks.

The ultimatum constituted an attempt to 'reduce Qatar to a Saudi client state and humiliate the Emir of Qatar and the Al Thani dynasty to the point where their rule would be in question' (Lieven, 2017). There was also the feeling that Qatar had been able to influence the pan-Arab sphere since the launch of AJA in 1996. AJA had been a persistent irritant to dictators in the Middle East and had played a leading role in toppling several tyrants, including Ben Ali in Tunisia, Gaddafi in Libya and Mubarak in Egypt. On the other hand, despite having spent several billion dollars and establishing many satellite television channels to influence the hearts and minds of the Arab World, Saudi Arabia, and to a lesser extent the UAE, gained little success.

The siege of Qatar, which came during the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, halted the food supply chain. More than 90 per cent of Qatar's goods had been coming from Saudi Arabia by road, and the rest had arrived through the port in Dubai. As a result, the cost of some imported foods and medicines rose ten-fold (Gorvett, 2018). This move severely impacted the Gulf's economic and trade relations. Moreover, Qatari nationals were declared persona non grata, straining tribal and family ties in a region known for intermarriage and kinship. The Gulf Crisis, which began in June 2017, has remained unresolved, with numerous developments having transpired during the past two years. The first speaker affirmed that the key takeaway from the Crisis was that Qatar had held firm in the face of substantial pressure from its neighbours.

Relevance of the GCC

According to the second speaker, the GCC, established in 1981 to counter looming Iranian revolutionary fervour, was long seen as an organisation which lacked the necessary mechanisms to enhance cooperation or improve inter-state relations. According to the speaker, the GCC failed to play a meaningful role in mitigating a series of complex crises and three major wars in the region, from the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) to the American-led wars on Iraq in 1991 and 2003.

According to the second speaker, the Gulf Crisis brought the relevance of the GCC into the spotlight once again. While the group managed to achieve some minimal advancements in the past, including a customs union and common electrical grid, it has experienced many failures like the common currency project and the plan for a GCC-wide rail network. The GCC not only failed to mitigate the Gulf Crisis, but in fact made it worse. One of the reasons behind the GCC's ineffectual crisis management was the new generation of leaders in power. The era of the GCC founders had elapsed, and so too the traditional sense of fraternity and common interest which had characterised the alliance. The old-style decision-making that relied upon traditional approaches and tribal customs was no longer in the picture. According to the second speaker, these factors explain the impetuosity and intractability which characterised the conflict, as the younger leaders in Saudi Arabia and the UAE made no efforts toward compromise. Instead, they planned to make Qatar capitulate to Saudi-Emirati dictates.

The GCC has been undermined and has seen its division develop into three groups, with Qatar alone; the trio of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE; and 'Kuwait and Oman [which] have sought to tread a middle ground in the crisis since mid-2017, and to pursue a mediation role' (Kinninmont, 2019, p.27). This has given rise to more bilateral initiatives, which might be seen as the antithesis of the founding principles of the GCC. For example, Saudi Arabia announced a Joint Co-operation Committee (JCC) with the UAE, which

has aimed to unite the two countries in 'all military, political, economic, trade and cultural fields' (Dudley, 2018, para. 8). Saudi Arabia has also announced a bilateral co-ordination council with Kuwait to further their mutual relations (Al Sherbini, 2018). These initiatives may indicate that the multilateralism of the GCC is in dire straits, with the stated purpose of achieving unity having been neglected for self-serving policies.

The GCC has stopped cooperating at the highest level, which may cause its demise as a multilateral institution. Moreover, even if a 'cold peace' is negotiated to end the current status-quo, the accumulation of mistrust and resentment will not be resolved anytime soon. Feelings of bitterness deepened as a result of a series of humiliating actions which affected ordinary Qatari citizens. While there is a 'belated realisation in the Saudi capital that the self-inflicted rift in the GCC is counterproductive and that the Gulf is more powerful together than divided' (Krieg, 2019, para.13), the series of symbolic and face-saving moves undertaken by the quartet, such as their respective teams' participation in the 2019 Arabian Gulf Cup in Doha, will do little to convince the Qatari leadership to relinquish their national sovereignty, independent foreign policy or dynamic public diplomacy. Therefore, as the GCC continues to display minimal functional or low-level cooperation, significant doubt remains about the organisation's relevance in the long run.

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New Strategic Alignments

The third speaker tackled new political partnerships that have emerged in the post-Gulf Crisis period. These included the Qatar-Turkey, China-UAE, Russia-Saudi Arabia and Russia-UAE alignments. According to the speaker, the Qatar-Turkey strategic partnership has been strengthened, with Turkey proving to be an extremely reliable partner in times of need. Two days after the blockade, 'Turkey fast-tracked two pieces of legislation to allow more troops to be deployed to a military base in Qatar' (TRTW, 2018, para.4). This allowed Qatar to deter any potential use of military force by the blockading countries and it reinforced its leverage. Turkish cargo planes also flew in food products, helping Qatar sustain its needs during a period of substantial supply-chain upheaval. Additionally, 'the value of projects handled by firms from Turkey crossed over \$14 billion by January 2018' (TRTW, 2018, para.11). This shows that the alliance was beneficial for both parties, especially considering that Qatar pledged to bolster Turkish currency during the recent financial turbulence, vowing to inject \$15 billion in investments in Turkey (Gokoluk, 2018).

From the third speaker's perspective, another significant development has been the 'look east' policy that seems to be in vogue in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi as a counterweight to the United States, which is perceived as increasingly in retreat from the Middle East. New bilateral partnerships are being shaped between Saudi Arabia and the UAE on the one hand, and with China on the other. The Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a comprehensive connectivity and cooperation plan that spans three continents and has the potential to boost global trade routes. The BRI includes the establishment of dozens of railroads in countries across the MENA region, such as Saudi Arabia. China's maritime Silk Road also passes through the Arabian and Red Seas via the Suez Canal to the Mediterranean.

In April 2019, Dubai's leader Al Maktoum announced a deal as part of the BRI that would 'potentially boost existing \$53 billion bilateral trade to \$70 billion in 2020' (Murphy, 2019, para.3). This followed Xi Jinping's visit

to the UAE in July 2018, when 'the diplomatic relations turned from mere bilateral cooperation to a comprehensive strategic partnership...and the two nations announced 13 agreements and Memorandums of Understandings' (Salles, 2019, para.16). These developments exhibited a palpable strengthening of relations between the UAE and China, and both countries are also working together on military affairs. UAE defence spending grew by 10.8% from 2017 to 2018, as Chinese weapon systems were bought and used in the Yemen War (Salles, 2019). The UAE also became the first Gulf nation to incorporate the Chinese language into their national education system (Salles, 2019).

Russia has also increased its footprint in the Middle East, and its enhanced cooperation with the UAE is noteworthy. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed visited Moscow in 2018, and the 'two nations also signed a declaration of strategic partnership in all domains, including political, economic, cultural and security' (Salles, 2019, para.32). Russia, too, has been supplying weapons to the UAE, and in 2017 Moscow signed an agreement to sell multiple fighter jets to Abu Dhabi (Majumdar, 2017). This was in addition to the UAE awarding a \$708 million anti-armour contract to the Russian agency Rosoboronexport in 2017 (DW, 2019). Commerce has also been a focus of this alliance. Trade between the two nations has increased by nearly 36% year-on-year, to reach \$3.4 billion in 2019 (RBT, 2019).

What these new alignments reveal, according to the speaker, is that rather than relying solely on the GCC as their primary platform, or on the United States as their protector, the various constituents are branching out to find other partners. The Gulf Crisis has been both a bane and a boon in this regard, as even though the GCC is no longer united on critical issues, countries like Qatar are more self-determining and have increased opportunities to develop other ties.

Relations with Iran

The three speakers have concurred that the Gulf Crisis has impacted the GCC countries' relations with Iran in numerous and varied ways. These include Iran's relationships with Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait and the UAE. The relationship between Qatar and Iran has been irritating Riyadh for decades. According to the first speaker, Qatar shares the world's largest gas field with Iran, known as North Dome in Qatar and South Pars in Iran, and 38% of the gas field lies under Iran's territorial waters (Erdbrink, 2010). While the quartet aimed to downgrade Qatar's ties with Iran, their actions led instead to a rapprochement between the two countries, with Iranian President Hasan Rouhani criticising the embargo and announcing that Iranian airspace, land and sea would remain open to Qatar (Majidiyar, 2017). In addition, there was a 'significant missed opportunity for the quartet to stoke up dissatisfaction with Qatar's foreign policy... [not exploiting] the traditionally widespread negative views of Iran among the Qatari intelligentsia and media' (Kinninmont, 2019, p.26). Qatar re-sent its ambassador to Iran three months after the embargo began. He had been earlier recalled when Qatar had displayed solidarity with GCC ally Saudi Arabia during a schism in Iranian-Saudi relations in 2016 (LAT, 2017). Additionally, Iran began sending resources like food supplies to Qatar, Qatar was allowed to use Iranian shipping routes, and trade increased substantially between the two nations. As Qatar and Iran share the large South Pars gas field, their relationship has continued to strengthen throughout the Gulf Crisis. However, the Qatar-Iran relations faced some obstacles, such as the current U.S. sanctions against Iranian banks, which prevented the exchange of currencies (Cafiero & Paraskevopoulos, 2019, para.6).

The second speaker emphasised that Saudi-Iran relations have continued to deteriorate during the self-inflicted Gulf Crisis. Tensions have existed for several years, with both blaming each other for critical devel-

opments. For example, Iran believes that Saudi Arabia 'played a role in the withdrawal of the U.S. from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on Iran's nuclear activities' (Vakil, 2018, p.6). They also rival each other for regional dominance, which has led to a clash of disparate policy objectives. For instance, a war with Yemen has been waged by Saudi Arabia against the Houthi movement due to a brash crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and his adventurist policies. These have increased the 'risks of miscalculation and overstretch' (Kinninmont, 2019, p.21).

As the Houthis are allied with Iran, 'successive reports from a panel of U.N. experts have demonstrated significant assistance for the Houthis from Tehran in terms of both technology and weaponry' (Marcus, 2019, para.16). The rise of proxy conflict has defined relations during this post-Gulf Crisis period, whether in Syria or Yemen. The rising tensions could lead to a much broader conflict (Marcus, 2019, para.12). Furthermore, the US has also accused Iran of being 'behind [the] attacks that set ablaze two major oil installations in eastern Saudi Arabia' (AJ, 2019, para.26), which debilitated half of Saudi Arabia's oil production output. The Gulf Crisis and embargo on Qatar have placed GCC mediation efforts with Iran on hold and have even strengthened Iran. Saudi Arabia's relations with Iran are in danger of further decline.

The third speaker discussed the other GCC countries' relations with Iran, which are wide-ranging. For example, Oman was the only GCC country not to downgrade its relations with Iran. In fact, it has positioned itself as a mediator, trying to bring Saudi Arabia and the Houthis into talks (Vakil, 2019, p.9). Kuwait also used its position to mend fences between the GCC on the one hand, and Iran and Qatar on the other hand (Vakil, 2019, p.10). Lastly, the UAE's relationship with Iran is more nuanced; Dubai has long-established relations with Tehran. In contrast, Abu Dhabi 'publicly supported the withdrawal of the US from the JCPOA and has

been cooperating to constrain Iran financially by closing down money transfers and sanctioning companies operating out of the emirates' (Vakil, 2019, p.13). This has strained the UAE-Iran relations over the past two years. Recently, however, Abu Dhabi has been negotiating behind the scenes with the Iranian leadership to smoothen the bilateral relationship. As a result,

the Emirati leadership freed millions in frozen funds to Iran (TOI, 2019) and signed a joint security Memorandum of Understanding in 2019 (Jansen, 2019). This has constituted a departure from the more hawkish stance adopted by Saudi Arabia and the Trump administration.

Turkey's Impact on Regional Conflicts

All three speakers have agreed that Turkey has increased its strategic footprint during the post-Gulf Crisis period. This process has included engagements in Syria, Libya and Somalia. Firstly, Turkey has been involved in the Syrian Civil War, supporting the Syrian opposition against Bashar Al Assad's regime and its allies. Ankara's primary concern has included 'the security of Turkey, the return of the Syrian refugees and the security of Syrian civilians living in Syria' (Ataman, 2019, para.1). For example, in October 2019 Turkey launched Operation Peace Spring, aiming to establish a safe zone for Syrian refugees, and this was the third in a series of cross-border anti-terror operations in northern Syria targeting terror groups, such as Daesh and the PKK's Syrian branch People's Protection Units (YPG) (DS, 2019, para.3). This operation was initiated in the post-Gulf Crisis period to address Turkey's security concerns and to establish the right of return for

its nearly four million Syrian refugees who were displaced during the civil war. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been critical of Turkey's operation, wanting instead to affirm and normalise relations vis-a-vis Bashar Al Assad's regime; the UAE has gone so far as to re-establish its diplomatic relations with Syria, reopening its embassy there (Baloch, 2019, para.4).

Another regional conflict that Turkey has impacted during the post-Gulf Crisis period has been in Libya. Turkey has supported the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) in a war-torn Libya during this conflict. For example, Ankara has signed Libyan-Turkish security agreements with the GNA (Megerisi, 2019). The main threat is General Khalifa Haftar, a warlord backed by countries which include Saudi Arabia and the UAE; Haftar has waged an illegal struggle for 'consolidation of a de facto partition of the country' (Mezran, 2019, para.6). Turkey has sent shipments 'involving a wide range of weaponry suited to confounding Haftar, including drones and air defence systems' (Megerisi, 2019, para. 44), attempting to reinforce an anti-Haftar war effort to avoid protracted instability in the country. Turkey's main objective has been to help de-escalate the conflict and to potentially manufacture a 'multilateral group of regional actors... to push for a political settlement' (Megirisi, 2019, para.45). Turkey also aims to secure a long-term relationship with Libya rooted in cooperation during the post-Gulf Crisis period.

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Turkey had been involved in Somalia before the Gulf Crisis in humanitarian efforts. In 2017, however, Ankara set up a large military facility in Mogadishu. The primary aim was to help Somalia 'in terms of restructuring, equipping and training the Somali armed forces' (Paksoy, 2018, para. 12). Turkey has appreciat-

ed Somalia's strategic location, and the latter's issues with terrorism and domestic fragility have meant that Turkey's contributions have been well received. In the interim, humanitarian and development aid to Somalia is ongoing (Vertin, 2019).

Recent Progress in Mediation

Recent media reports suggest that the Qatar blockade may end soon as mediation gears up, and recent events could prove to be significant developments for the future of the region. The blockade has allowed Qatar to become more independent and develop new trade relations. At the same time, the blockading countries may have come to the belated realisation that the Crisis is counterproductive and that the United States is an unreliable partner (Krieg, 2019). For example, 'athletes from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE are taking part in the Gulf Cup Tournament, to be organised by Qatar this month' (MEM, 2019, para.3). This would indicate significant progress, and it could lead to the beginning of the normalisation of relations. Moreover, a Qatari delegation is thought to have paid recently an official visit to Saudi Arabia (MEM, 2019, para.4). Constructive diplomacy, good-faith communication, and a decline in the 'war over narratives' (Krieg, 2019, para.3) could see the embargo finally come to an end. The Kingdom could also be more open now to Kuwaiti mediation. For example, the Kuwaiti Emir recently sent a message to the Saudi King, advising him to end the Crisis (MEM, 2019, para.5).

While relations between Saudi Arabia and Qatar are thawing, a similar move could take place with Bahrain. Conversely, such a momentum would not include the UAE, as the divide with Abu Dhabi seems too wide to bridge at this juncture (Krieg 2019, para.20). The lifting of a travel ban would mean that Qatar Airways could regain overflight rights, whereas Saudi Arabia could benefit from Qatari capital inflows (Krieg, 2019, para.17).

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Conclusion

In conclusion, all of the above interventions dovetail, revealing that there have been numerous developments two years on from the Gulf Crisis. Firstly, the new political alignments have been addressed. These have included the Qatar-Turkey, China-UAE, and Russia-UAE alliances. The Qatar-Turkey strategic partnership has been strengthened to an unprecedented extent, with Turkey proving to be an impressive partner. There has also been a palpable advance in relations between the UAE and China, with both countries also working together on military affairs. Russia has also increased its footprint in the Middle East with its significant enhanced cooperation with the UAE.

Secondly, the Gulf Cooperation Council has demonstrated little relevance. The GCC has had some successes, like a customs union and common electrical grid, but there have been many failures, including a common currency and a GCC-wide rail project. The GCC has been undermined in this post-Gulf Crisis period due to its lack of influence in the remediation of the Crisis. However, mediation efforts are being rekindled which may prove consequential for the future, despite the inadequate relevance of the GCC. Thirdly, the GCC countries' relations with Iran have been impacted during the Gulf Crisis. They include Iran's relationships with Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait and the UAE. While the blockading countries have aimed to downgrade Qatar's ties with Iran, the Crisis has instead led to a rapprochement between Doha and Tehran as Iranian air, ground and sea space has been opened to Qatar during the embargo. Saudi-Iran relations have continued to deteriorate during the self-inflicted Gulf Crisis. Saudi Arabia and Iran are rivals for regional dominance, which has led to a clash of disparate policy objectives. Oman has been the only GCC country to avoid downgrading its relations with Iran, and Kuwait has used its position to promote mediation. The UAE's relationship with Iran is more multidimensional, with contrary views in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, but there are signs that these ties are improving, and that the UAE is distancing itself from Saudi's sphere of influence.

Fourthly, Turkey has had an impact on regional conflicts during the post-Gulf Crisis period. Turkey's involvement includes engagements in Syria, Libya and Somalia. Turkey has been involved in the Syrian Civil War, supporting the Syrian opposition against Bashar Al Assad's regime and its allies. Turkey launched Operation Peace Spring in October 2019, aiming to establish a safe zone for Syrian refugees and to target terrorists affiliated with Daesh and the PKK's Syrian branch, the People's Protection Units (YPG). In Libya, Turkey has supported the UN-backed GNA against warlord Khalifa Haftar. Turkey has signed security and defence agreements and has also been active on the diplomatic front to de-escalate the conflict. Turkey has also been involved in Somalia, a strategic location. Turkey has provided substantial development aid. In 2017, Turkey also set up its largest overseas military base in Mogadishu to help Somalia in terms of restructuring, equipping and training the Somali armed forces.

Lastly, there have been developments in the mediation of the Gulf Crisis. Recent media reports suggest that the Qatar blockade may end soon as mediation gears up. The blockading countries may come to the belated realisation that the Crisis has been counterproductive and that the United States as a partner has been unreliable. Athletes from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE are taking part in the 2019 Gulf Cup Tournament, and a Qatari delegation is planning to pay an official visit to Saudi Arabia soon. The Kingdom could also be more open to Kuwaiti mediation at this point, with the Kuwaiti Emir recently sending a message to the Saudi King urging him to end the Crisis. The United States, as the pre-eminent security ally of all the GCC countries might also flex its diplomatic muscle to bring the quartet together. These developments could prove to be significant for progress in ending the embargo and remediating the Gulf Crisis.

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