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Istituto Affari Internazionali

## The Intra-GCC Crisis: Domestic, Regional and International Layers

by Cinzia Bianco

The crisis shaking the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) since June 2017, when Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain (followed by Egypt) cut relations and closed their borders with Qatar, has taken many observers by surprise. In spite of recurrent spats among the GCC monarchies the latest crisis has escalated at an unprecedented pace. However, the underlying causes of the conflict have deeper roots and, arguably, three levels of analysis are needed to better understand its dynamics.

The first level is one we might call domestic. Much of the current intra-GCC animosity can be traced back to the personal acrimony and competition among the rulers of the Arabian Peninsula. The political rise of two young and assertive Crown Princes in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, Mohammad bin Salman and Mohammad bin Zayed, both with aspirations for regional hegemony,

has inevitably accelerated the collision course with the young Emir of Qatar, Tamim bin Hamad. Tamim, who ascended to the throne in June 2013, shares the vision of his father, the former Emir of Qatar, who sought to build an international profile for the Emirate that was unrestrained by Saudi hegemony, and active on some of the most sensitive fronts in the broader Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

Beyond that, the crisis also has a strong regional dimension. Arguably, it cannot be separated from the series of events that turned the wider Middle East upside down since 2003, unleashing a formidable competition for power in the region. The failure and gross mismanagement of the 2003 Iraq war, that left the country vulnerable to the rise of jihadist groups and paved the way for a stronger Iranian influence in Baghdad, was the first of such events. The 2011 Arab uprisings represented another watershed moment, as an

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unprecedented wave of popular mobilization ousted authoritarian regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, precipitated Syria, Libya and Yemen in a civil war and even threatened the stability of the Arab Gulf regimes, Bahrain in particular. The 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, Saudi Arabia's main geopolitical competitor, represents a further driver for the present crisis. The deal stoked fears of a gradual normalization of Iran's role in the region, and, therefore, the expansion of its regional influence.

In all of these theatres, where Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE saw existential threats, Qatar saw an opportunity to embrace such changes, and ride them to its advantage. While the rise of Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated parties represented a direct threat to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Qatar leveraged its long-lasting relations with Brotherhood figures inside Doha's bureaucracy to support their political aspirations in the post-Arab uprisings Middle East, whether in Egypt, Tunisia, Syria or Libya. An essential part of this strategy has been to coordinate with Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), building a strategic relationship that has visibly paid off with Turkish President Erdoğan's unconditional support for Qatar during the current crisis. On the other front, Doha also adopted a more pragmatic approach vis-à-vis Iran, factoring in its calculus potential benefits to increased economic cooperation and political dialogue with Tehran. In Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Manama these actions were considered detrimental both to their internal legitimacy and their ambitions

for regional hegemony.

Overlapping with these domestic and regional dynamics is the international dimension, in itself shaken by major readjustments. The United States, for decades the undisputed security guarantor of the Gulf region, was the primary source of Iraq's destabilization post-2003. Then, under the administration of Barack Obama, the US actively pursued policies that, from the standpoint of the Gulf monarchies, utterly ignored their security interests. The United States withdrew support for Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in the midst of the Arab uprisings, leading to his downfall, refused to intervene in the Syrian civil war against the Iranian-allied Syrian regime and was the driving force behind the nuclear agreement with Iran. At the same time, President Obama signalled his intentions to retrench from the US's traditional role in the region and progressively asked partners in the Arab Gulf to share the burden and responsibility for regional security.

It is this combination of domestic, regional and international factors that pushed the Gulf monarchies to embrace increasingly proactive and assertive regional strategies. Those GCC monarchies that, enriched and emboldened by the oil boom of the early 2000s, viewed themselves as emerging leaders in the Middle East, became entangled in a fierce competition for influence. This competition extends into the Sunni camp, with factions rooting for a re-shuffle of the region under political Islam – guided by Qatar and Turkey – versus actors that vehemently oppose

Islamist groups – guided by the UAE and, more reluctantly, Saudi Arabia. The latest intra-GCC crisis can hardly be disentangled from these conflicting visions about the region's future and, in turn, this geopolitical competition can hardly be shut down entirely, even should the present crisis be resolved. The two rival axes – pro and against political Islam – will continue to compete for a predominant role in this volatile region, and do so while its people are exposed to mounting socio-economic turmoil and suffering.

Indeed, the latest crisis arguably highlights major realignments that have been brewing in Gulf geopolitics for some time. The United States appears weakened and confused, divided from within as to the best means to manage a severe crisis that has real potential to further destabilize the region. President Donald Trump expressed support for Riyadh and Abu Dhabi and confidence in their regional leadership, thus undermining the more conciliatory tone exposed by the US State Department or the Pentagon. The approach of the European Union and of European countries such as Germany and the proactive France, has been widely dismissed in Gulf circles as biased by Europe's growing interest in Iran. The United Kingdom has appeared rather absorbed by its own political and domestic affairs on the one hand and a willingness to follow the Trump line on the other, demonstrating the crippling impact of the Brexit era.

Russia has so far shown little interest in becoming the next off-shore balancer in the region as some had predicted. From the Russian standpoint, Saudi

Arabia intends to use this crisis to consolidate its GCC hegemony, a detrimental scenario given the vicinity between Moscow and Tehran and the opposite sides taken by Saudi Arabia and Russia in the Syrian war. The rising powers of Asia, such as China and India, enmeshed by their simultaneous dependence on Saudi oil and Qatari gas, have meanwhile proven, once again, their reluctance to go from economic partners to full-fledged strategic players in the region.

All things considered, the GCC crisis may indeed be conceptualized as a competition between assertive princes, aligned in pro and anti-Islamist camps in the context of a rising, conflictual regional multipolarity fueled by the declining resolve of global powers. What the crisis will mean for the wider region in the near future remains to be seen but at present – considering its domestic, regional and international dimensions – the ingredients are pointing to a recipe for further chaos and instability.

*16 July 2017*

### Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

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