Competing Visions for the Arab Future

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Brief Analysis

The worldview embraced by Qatar holds that political Islamists deserve support, but Saudi Arabia and the UAE have coalesced in opposition to this fundamental premise.

On June 5, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates launched an unprecedented blockade of Qatar, accusing the state of a panoply of crimes. This quartet then presented Qatar's leaders with a list of thirteen near-impossible-to-meet demands. These included submitting to audits of foreign spending, shuttering the state-run media outlet Al Jazeera, and paying reparations for damages caused by Qatar's foreign policy. In the words of Emirati minister of state for foreign affairs Anwar Gargash, the quartet wanted "isolation, not escalation."

Following a period of rhetorical sparring across the Gulf, positions are now more entrenched, publics are embittered, and a solution appears more likely to be measured in years rather than months. In cutting through the swirling arguments, embellished accusations, falsified speeches, and childish media exaggeration, one finds a core conflict wherein the two sides support fundamentally antagonistic visions for the Middle East and North Africa.

The 'Hamadain' Vision

Hamadain, or "two Hamads," refer to former Qatari emir Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani and his confidant and long-term ally prime minister Hamad bin Jassim al-Thani. Qatar's vision can be seen through the actions, policies, and proclivities of these two men, who long dominated Qatar's politics and international relations.

Although neither Hamad remains in power, both having stepped aside in 2013, the tenor of their policies endures. In June 2013, Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani formally took over when his father abdicated, but Hamad's policies had been imprinted into the nation's fabric, and altering them significantly would have been difficult for the young Tamim, not to mention any other successor. Indeed, Hamad was no ordinary leader. He transformed Qatar from an obscure backwater to a state of real international influence. Rejecting the approach of the state's veritable "founding father"

was never really in the cards.

Many regional elites, however, suggest a simpler explanation: that the Hamadain are still essentially in charge in Qatar or, at the very least, exert a profound effect on the current leadership. Aside from occasional rumors of continued influence by Hamad bin Jassim over the Qatari sovereign wealth fund -- another of his former portfolios -- or occasional meetings by Hamad bin Khalifa with visiting dignitaries, scant evidence exists to corroborate such an argument.

The Qatari policies in question -- those established by the Hamadain and still broadly pursued by Tamim -- center on the role of Islamists in regional politics. In short, the Hamadain see backing individuals and groups involved in political Islam, although not indiscriminately, as a reasonable approach to politics. Such a Qatari orientation became particularly evident in its moves in Libya, Egypt, and Syria following the Arab Spring. Many would also argue that Qatar pursued such policies throughout the previous decade.

Indeed, Qatari elites would not deny that the state has often channeled support to entities associated with the likes of the Muslim Brotherhood. Too much evidence backs such a claim for it to be refuted. Instead, the Qatari refrain in recent years -- growing insistent during the current intra-Arab spat -- is that Qatar seeks to support "the people" in whatever given scenario and not a political group per se. Qatari support for former president Mohamed Morsi in Egypt, whose brief rise in 2012-13 did appear to reflect some popular support for Islamism, demonstrates a certain logic to this assertion.

According to the Hamadain worldview, if Qatar could be the handmaiden to ascending Islamist parties around the region, these parties would accrue a certain debt to the Gulf state. Qatar could then cash in this influence, whether for beneficial investment arrangements or political and diplomatic support in regional forums. Equally, the promise of a tiny state like Qatar, insignificant in the region's history, affecting such profound regional change proved too much to resist.

Qatar positioned itself based on not only political calculation but also the genuine reasoning that Islam should play a role in Arab politics. In this way, religious citizens would feel their perspectives were being taken into account. Absent a political outlet, according to the Hamadain logic, the religiously inclined might seek other, more harmful outlets for their growing frustration.

The 'Muhammadain' Vision

Embodying the counterargument to the Qatari vision are two of the Arab world's most powerful and decisive leaders, Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman -- known as MbS -- and Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed al-Nahyan. These two Muhammads believe Islam should not be politicized but rather be a personal matter without a direct or institutionalized role in governance. This view stems from their interpretation of the impact of political Islam on Arab countries, including their own, in recent history.

For the UAE, a conflictual relationship between leaders in Abu Dhabi and the local Islamist group al-Islah developed from the 1970s onward. Authorities had long feared that such an entity was positioning itself to exert ever more power and influence, an aspiration the group denied publicly, claiming instead to serve a purely social role. However, as far as Muhammed bin Zayed was concerned, such claims were debunked by the Islamist rise during the Arab Spring, validating long-held fears and concerns.

In Saudi Arabia, MbS seeks to circumscribe a variety of checks on his power, whether from institutions, religious sectors, or other royals. In September, some seventy prominent Saudis were thus detained, several of whom were conspicuously popular Islamist figures. In October, MbS vowed to "return" Saudi Arabia to moderate Islam, an astonishing choice of words. However, even granted the discretion to enact a needed transformation in Saudi Arabia, MbS cannot jettison the role of religion in the kingdom. Nevertheless, he seems likely to relegate it, wherever

possible, to a more personal, less politicized place.

Much of the ire of the Muhammadain vision, as it relates to politicized Islam, centers on the Muslim Brotherhood. The corresponding view is that, from its roots in early twentieth-century Egypt, the Brotherhood set forth a pernicious set of ideas and approaches that have contributed to the intellectual enfeeblement of discourse across Arab societies.

Indeed, they perceive a transformative effect wreaked by the entire intellectual edifice of Brotherhood thought on Arab sociopolitics. According to this thinking, modern radicalization and extremism in the region are rooted in the dogmas of early Brotherhood thinkers. They draw a near-direct line from foundational scholars of Brotherhood thought such as Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb to Osama bin Laden, current al-Qaeda head Ayman Zawahiri, and more recent generations of jihadists, extremists, and terrorists.

In other areas, the Muhammadain view holds that normal discussion of the Israeli-Palestinian problem has been consistently polluted by Islamist-driven politicization. This approach, they believe, has led to continued misery for Palestinians, the demonization of Israel, and a social space that incubates conspiracy theories. Meanwhile, they also contend, the injection of politics into Islamic dogmas in Arab education systems has hamstrung critical thinking for generations of students.

Ultimately, the Muhammadain view, citing the theocracy in Iran as a Shia example, sees the reflexive mixing of politics and Islam as reliably leading to the immiseration of populations.

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These competing visions reflect broad-brush approaches to politics, not constructed, watertight arguments. For their part, Hamadain proponents complain that moderate Islamists have seldom been given a chance and that the extremists, who are often tangentially linked to "decent" moderates, do not reflect wider, more mainstream opinions. The problem is that these laments echo socialist or communist pleadings that "real" communism has never actually been implemented and that, were such implementation to occur, the promised ideal society would indeed emerge. Moreover, the links between the Brotherhood's ideological roots and a range of modern-day extremists are readily apparent. Despite protestations that supporting some kind of moderate Islamic government is feasible, no bright line exists separating such people and parties from slippage to extreme policies.

As for the Muhammadain vision, while Western governments will inevitably welcome a separation of institutionalized religion from politics where practicable, the popularity of such a vision in the Middle East is unclear. Similarly, removing religion from politics does not, to say the least, automatically improve leaders and their policies: countless autocrats in the region have been broadly secular in their orientation.

This Time, It's Personal

Whatever their internal inconsistencies, these simplified visions represent two clashing and incompatible perspectives for future governance in the Middle East and North Africa. To varying degrees, they have existed side by side for decades. But today, the faction led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE has concluded that enough is enough. Rulers of these states see their own region on a precipice. Broad, if often unhappy, regional stability was ripped asunder by the Arab Spring, which empowered proponents of political Islam. The resulting chaos can be traced in no small part, from the Muhammadain viewpoint, to Hamadain inclinations, which in turn lead directly back to Qatar.

Having opposed the Hamadain worldview for decades, UAE leaders have been emboldened by the rise of the like-minded MbS in Saudi Arabia. He has undertaken a variety of previously unthinkable policies, from selling off a stake in the prized Saudi asset Aramco to engaging in a highly offensive and risky war in Yemen to detaining dozens of

leading intellectuals and princes to admitting that Saudi Arabia has a problem with intolerant forms of Islam.

At least among Abu Dhabi elites, personal animus toward Qatar issues from the notion that regional politicians have too long abused Islam for their own benefit -- an arrangement in which Doha has been complicit. Moreover, U.S. support and a strong domestic economic bargain have, until now, protected Qatar from accountability. Left to their own devices, leaders in Abu Dhabi might well seek to maintain the isolation for years on end.

However, MbS operates in a different fiscal universe from his counterparts in Abu Dhabi. The financial pressures facing the kingdom will likely coax him toward accommodation. Many of his extraordinary policies -- the sale of the Aramco stake, the launch of the half-trillion-dollar new city project known as NEOM (which stands for "Neo-Mustaqbal"), and even the detentions of senior princes and bureaucrats, rooted in an anti-corruption push -- are driven substantially by financial calculation, not only ideals. Given this strong pragmatic element, MbS could well eventually allow Qatar to buy its way out of regional isolation through investment in his Saudi Vision 2030 plan, as long as the country makes key concessions regarding its support for political Islamists.

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