

Qatar Makes Peace With Its Gulf Neighbors

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Brief Analysis

A late-night agreement in Riyadh appears to have resolved the diplomatic spat between Qatar and its GCC partners, opening up the possibility of more diplomatic coordination and greater unity.

Yesterday, Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani of Qatar was shown kissing the cheek of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia during a meeting of Gulf leaders in Riyadh, a goodwill gesture underscored by the announcement that the Saudi, UAE, and Bahraini governments will return their ambassadors to Doha. Both moves signal the likely end of a dispute that has festered for more than a year and erupted into the open in March when the envoys were withdrawn. The Saudi Press Agency also announced that Gulf Cooperation Council governments had reached what it called the "Riyadh Complementary Arrangement," suggesting that they acknowledge the need to at least patch over differences preventing a united front against the "Islamic State"/ISIS and other challenges.

Although Qatari officials have been saying for weeks that the disagreement is over, differences between the fellow GCC members have been apparent even in recent days. For example, Bahrain and the UAE had announced they would boycott a world handball championship being hosted by Qatar in January, while a meeting of foreign ministers planned for next month's GCC summit in Doha was cancelled. And the day before the Riyadh meeting, the UAE -- which has been the most vociferous in complaining that Qatar is supporting the Muslim Brotherhood opposition in other GCC countries -- released a long list of MB-affiliated groups that it declared to be terrorist organizations.

Yesterday's reconciliation was a consequence of mediation by Emir Sabah al-Ahmed al-Sabah of Kuwait. King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa of Bahrain was also in attendance, while the UAE was represented by Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed al-Nahyan of Abu Dhabi and Sheikh Muhammad bin Rashid al-Maktoum, the ruler of Dubai. The only GCC member absent was Oman, whose ruler, Sultan Qaboos bin Said, is undergoing medical treatment in Germany and is also believed to oppose any further financial and economic union between council states -- a possibility implied in the Saudi Press Agency report, which mentioned moving "toward a bold and cohesive Gulf

entity."

The details of the agreement were not revealed. Qatar expelled some leading Brotherhood officials in September and has denied funding extremist groups, but it often seems to enjoy its reputation as a maverick, epitomized by its hosting of the Aljazeera satellite television channel, which has often infuriated Arab governments. Despite hopes to the contrary, thirty-four-year-old Sheikh Tamim appears to be little different from his father, who abdicated last year. Both men aligned with Muhammad Morsi's Brotherhood administration in Egypt and opposed the military takeover led by current president Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, who is backed by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. And despite ousting some MB members, Sheikh Tamim has given no indication that he will fully abandon his policy of supporting Islamist groups.

Nevertheless, when faced with the prospect of GCC leaders declining to attend the December 9-10 Doha summit, Sheikh Tamim appears to have blinked first. Assuming the summit will now take place, it remains to be seen whether the ninety-one-year-old King Abdullah, who regards the GCC as a very important institution and has been exasperated by Qatar's policies, will make an appearance.

The summit has a full agenda apart from its perennial denunciations of Israeli policies and Iran's long-running occupation of three UAE islands in the Persian Gulf. In Syria, the air forces of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Qatar have already joined the U.S. military campaign against ISIS, and removing Bashar al-Assad from power remains a key objective for each government. To varying degrees, GCC members are also worried by Iran's propensity to exert influence in their territories, as well as the progress of the ongoing nuclear talks.

For the immediate future, then, greater confluence of policy seems likely between GCC states, which seem to recognize the need to display a more united front. This will create opportunities for the United States to push faster against the Assad regime and harder against ISIS. Notions of increased financial and economic union in the GCC will likely remain a mirage, though, at least for the current generation of leaders.

Simon Henderson is the Baker Fellow and director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program at The Washington Institute. ♦

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