

BRIDGING THE GULF: ON GULF RECONCILIATION SUMMIT

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

The Gulf reconciliation summit, in Al-Ula, Saudi Arabia, where the kingdom and its allies decided to end their blockade of Qatar, has brought to an end, for now, their long feud. In 2017, Saudi Arabia, under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt imposed the blockade and severed diplomatic ties, accusing the tiny Gulf country of supporting terrorism. They also issued 13 demands for it to be lifted, which included shutting down the Qatar-funded TV network, Al Jazeera, closing a Turkish military base and reducing diplomatic relations with Iran. Qatar did not budge despite the heavy economic cost. When the Saudi and Emirati airspaces were closed, Iran offered Qatar global connectivity. Al Jazeera is still live. And, Qatar has invited more Turkish troops, bolstering its ties with Ankara, which is eager to play a bigger role in West Asia. Moreover, it played an important role in the U.S.-Taliban deal and continued to host talks between Taliban representatives and the Afghan government. If the original Saudi plan was to isolate Qatar and make it kneel, it has backfired. And in the last weeks of the Trump administration, MBS and his allies seem to have realised their strategic folly.

Qatar has made few concessions to reach the reconciliation. The 13 specific demands were replaced by a broad agreement on non-intervention in other countries' internal affairs and cooperating to ensure regional stability and security, which can be open to different interpretations for different sides. After the summit, Qatar's Foreign Ministry has said that the country had no intention of altering ties with Iran and Turkey. In practice, the Saudi side stepped down from its demands and made amends with an unshaken Qatar as a new President is going to assume power in the U.S. The Saudi U-turn could be the result of a genuine tactical rethink. The rift in the Gulf helped Iran and Turkey, Riyadh's main rivals, while it failed to scuttle Qatar's standing. Iran, reeling under U.S. sanctions, also got some financial relief from Qatari payouts for using its airspace. By lifting the air and sea blockades, the Saudis and the Emiratis could deny Iran of those funds and also try to put up a united Arab regional front as Joe Biden is preparing to renegotiate the Iran nuclear deal. The Saudis may also be hoping that bridging the Gulf between two American allies would help them warm up to the Biden administration. While ending the feud is welcome, it cannot be overlooked that this unnecessary crisis was born out of an ill-thought-out Saudi-Emirati strategy of coercion. It reflects poorly on them. They should learn from the mistakes and build ties based on mutual interests and cooperation, not on threats and coercion.

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