

# IN ANCIENT AL-ULA, FORGING A NEW FUTURE

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: GCC

On January 5, the leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) met at the ancient town of Al-Ula in Saudi Arabia to end the bitter discord that three of its members — Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain, along with Egypt — have had with their partner, Qatar.

On June 5, 2017, the Arab Quartet, as they styled themselves, subjected Qatar to an onerous diplomatic boycott and a total land, sea and air embargo. They accused Qatar of destabilising the region with its support for Islamist groups. They then presented Qatar with 13 demands including severing ties with the Muslim Brotherhood, diluting relations with Turkey and Iran, and shutting down the Al Jazeera network, in order to normalise ties. Viewing these demands as an encroachment on its sovereignty, Qatar rejected them. This led to the boycott which was accompanied by shrill invective against Qatar on national media, which included threats of violence and even regime change. Now, three and a half years later, the boycott has ended.

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Ten years ago, the Arab Spring uprisings across West Asia had thrown up popular demands for reform — an end to authoritarian rule and the restoration of Arab “dignity” through freedom and democracy. Four leaders fell under these pressures, which also gave rise to two new developments: one, Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated parties came to power in Egypt and Tunisia; and, two, Saudi Arabia decided to divert demands for domestic reform by highlighting a threat from Iran. Asserting that Iran had hegemonic designs across the region, the Kingdom shaped opposition to Iran on sectarian basis and confronted it in theatres of its influence – Syria and later Yemen.

The Brotherhood, with its grassroots mobilisation and a political platform that marries Islamic principles with Western-style democracy, poses a serious challenge to the existing monarchical order that provides no scope for popular participation. Hence, Saudi Arabia and the UAE watched with horror the Brotherhood’s electoral successes, culminating in Mohammed Morsi being elected President in Egypt in 2012. Fearing that a successful Brotherhood administration would become a model for their countries as well, the two GCC allies supported the Egyptian army’s coup against Morsi in July 2013.

Qatar, a GCC member, has over several years been a maverick in GCC counsels. Besides supporting its independent television channel, Al Jazeera, that often criticises regional leaders, it is a major supporter of the Brotherhood. Though explained as an expression of its independent foreign policy, the reason goes deeper: the former Emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, and his son, Sheikh Tamim, the present ruler, aspire to play a major role in regional affairs, overcoming with their wealth the disadvantage of Qatar’s small size.

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In pursuing their regional role, they have been sensitive to U.S. interests. Thus, after the events of 9/11, when the U.S. was convinced of the need for wide-ranging reform in the region, it believed that the Brotherhood, with its blend of Islam and democracy, could achieve change. Hence, Qatar’s backing for the Brotherhood from the early 2000s and later, specifically of Morsi, was in line with U.S. interests.

U.S. President Donald Trump’s visceral hostility towards Iran and total support for Saudi Arabia

gave the quartet the opportunity to change Qatar's ways: through the boycott of June 2017, they sought to pressurise their partner into submission. This approach failed: with its huge resources, Qatar could weather the financial assault, while the backing of Turkey, Iran and two GCC partners, Kuwait and Oman, ensured that the movement of goods and people was maintained.

Turkey, led by an Islamist party, became Qatar's strategic partner, and even challenged Saudi regional leadership on doctrinal and political bases. Recently, when the UAE and Bahrain "normalised" ties with Israel, both Qatar and Turkey affirmed their support for Hamas, the Islamist party in power in Gaza. The two countries are also partners in Libya, ranged against the group backed by Egypt and the UAE in the ongoing civil conflict.

The most likely reason for the reconciliation at Al-Ula is the incoming Biden presidency in the U.S.: it is expected that, besides reviving the nuclear agreement with Iran and easing sanctions, Joe Biden could focus on Saudi Arabia's dismal human rights record and the war in Yemen. Hence, the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman was anxious to project his conciliatory approach to the incoming administration by patching up with Qatar.

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The reconciliation has evoked no enthusiasm from the other sponsors of the boycott. The UAE and Egypt feel particularly threatened by the Brotherhood; they sent low-level delegations to Al-Ula and their media comment has been tepid. Both have made clear, as has Bahrain, that future ties with Qatar will depend on its conduct. No one, however, believes that Qatar will dilute its backing for the Brotherhood, delink itself from Turkey, or even tone down commentary on Al Jazeera.

The UAE has its own reasons for hostility towards Qatar. It has far greater concerns relating to the threat from the Brotherhood than other GCC members due to the influence of its domestic Brotherhood-affiliated Al Islah party. Again, its leaders are also keen to emerge as major players in regional affairs on the back of close links with the U.S. They therefore see Qatar as a rival hindering their aspirations.

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The Al-Ula conclave could herald some major shifts in regional alignments. There could be a nascent Saudi-UAE competition, with the UAE ingratiating itself with the U.S. and supporting its interests in diverse theatres – Yemen, the Horn of Africa and the western Indian Ocean. Turkey and Qatar, possibly with Iran, could then seize the opportunity to re-engage with Saudi Arabia and Egypt, thus shaping an alternative regional coalition that would perhaps be closer to Russia and China than to the U.S. As Mr. Biden takes charge in the U.S., the Al-Ula conclave could trigger the emergence of a new regional order in West Asia.

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