

Widening Gulf among Gulf Arabs: Implications for South and Southeast Asia

The simmering rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Qatar has now assumed the proportion of a major rift that has dichotomised the region. The impact of the resulting conflagration threatens to engulf the Middle East and perhaps the world. It has the potential to bring to the fore all intra-mural differences within the Islamic world. The issue will require adept and skilful handling to defuse, and, currently, such leadership at the regional, global and multilateral levels is lacking. Should the situation exacerbate, tiny Qatar may suffer in the short run but, eventually, the larger and stronger Saudi Arabia may end up paying a higher price.

Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury¹

Ever so often, President Donald Trump of the United States (US) has demonstrated that he is unafraid to rush in where angels fear to tread. His much trumpeted (no pun intended) attendance of the Riyadh Summit is a case in point. The Saudi hosts were as extremely pleased when he sold them a massive cache of armaments worth US\$110 billion (\$152 billion), sought to marshal support against so-called Iran-inspired terrorism and cheered the Saudi-led coalition in the Yemen civil war. The reception accorded Trump was incredibly

¹ Dr Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury is Principal Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He is a former Foreign Advisor (Foreign Minister) of Bangladesh. He can be contacted at isasiac@nus.edu.sg. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.

lavish, and the visitor thrilled at the accompanying pomp and circumstance. While the Summit of 55-plus Arab and other Muslim leaders was unfolding, so were the fissures among the Gulf allies of the US. Team Trump, unexposed to date to the intricacies of foreign politics, appeared blissfully unaware of the gathering desert gale beyond the rim of the saucer. No sooner were the red-carpets for the Summit rolled back, the storm erupted with unprecedented ferocity and threatened to blow away the idea of a common front against Islamist terrorism, supposedly being fomented by Tehran, that the US had been touting and believed that it had achieved!

The issue came to the fore, when, on 5 June 2017, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain and Egypt severed diplomatic and other links with Qatar, with the Maldives and Yemen following suit. The immediate reason provided was Qatar's 'espousal of terrorism', in particular support to the Muslim Brotherhood, the 'nemesis' of the current Egyptian government, as also of some of the feudal Gulf rulers. As with such issues, deeper causes lie beneath. This article will attempt to discern the key ones. Some may be recent while others date back in history, and delving into the past will better enable the understanding of the current crisis.

The tribes, mainly the Bedouins of the Gulf Sheikhdoms, have obvious commonalities in terms of culture, language, religion and the general way of life. It is difficult to tell them apart, state-wise. However, their Chieftains, anxious to protect their individual rules, are eager to protect their distinctiveness as separate states, each distinct from the others. Rather than being separate nation-states, they are in reality states without being separate nations. There is an enormous theoretical confusion as to what constitutes a state in the Gulf region. Currently, it appears to be territory controlled by a distinct ruler, be he 'King' (as in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, though the Saudis have discovered that the 'Custodian of the two Holy Mosques' in Makkah and Medina is a far more effective title for their monarch vis-à-vis the Muslim world), or 'Sultan' (as in Oman), or 'President' (as in the UAE and Yemen), or 'Emir' (as in Qatar and Kuwait). Each ruler comes into office through a complex method of choice by consensus (the principle of 'primogeniture' does not obtain), represents a particular family whose interest he (it has never been a 'she' to date and nor is likely to be in a long time) and generally commands loyalty and obedience from all citizens by injecting compensatory payments into the society through welfare projects. Hence, democratic ideas or

ideals have never taken root. Their world view does not extend much beyond the satisfaction of some of their basic needs. Unlike in some western political thinking, the King is not anointed by God. Yet, the Saudi monarchy is heavily dependent on the support of the conservative Wahabi clerics of the land, with whom an understanding of mutual accommodation is said to have been reached. Hence, the turning of the King's 'Nelson blind eye', it is believed, to the propagation of Wahabi extremism abroad.

Expatriates are often employed to fill the huge gap in governance capacity in the Gulf countries. Indigenous intellectual wherewithal has not yet been developed to play this role, though funds have recently seen the relocation of some world famous institutions of learning to these parts. Since only the small coterie of ruling households need to be manipulated to exercise power, policy-making is often subject to external influence. Not only are their populations, hugely outnumbered by foreign workforce, not identifiably distinct, their borders are also often ill-defined. These are no more than mere 'lines on the sand' drawn by former colonials, mainly the British, that are utterly ignored by the ever shifting tribes. Their enormous wealth in contemporary times, based on natural gas and oil, are exogenous, due to outside factors rather than on endogenous local human initiatives. They are largely unable to develop these without external assistance. Unfortunately, in centres of foreign power, as among the Arabists in the British Foreign Office decades ago, the compelling affection for these parts, the lure of the romance that once attracted them to this region is fast fading. What survives is the demands of perceived national self-interest and the pulls of 'realpolitik'.

All these render understandable the fact that, in the Gulf countries, foreign policies are often conditioned by intuitions or by instinct rather than by intellect or by any predominant value. The motive is self-preservation, not so much of the nation that cannot be defined, but of the families, authorities or coteries that run the state. Policies are rarely products of public debates or general deliberations. Consequently, decisions are often not rounded, chiselled, refined or fine-tuned by any form of sophisticated dialectics. The intelligentsia, the media, and the common man (or woman) are usually non-participants in the decision-making process. The crucial documents are far from being "open covenants openly arrived at". The primary purpose of any foreign interaction is to obtain some immediate tangible benefits. If they give at all, it is only in the hope to receive more. Subtle measurements of pros or cons or cost-benefit ratio are, more often than not, totally absent.

In this current spat in the Gulf, the country that appears to be at the receiving end of the ire of the key local powers, Saudi Arabia in particular, is tiny Qatar, long seen as the ‘enfant terrible’ of the Gulf. Of its population of 2.6 million, 90 per cent are foreign workers and only 313,000 are Qataris (2015 figures). It is extremely wealthy, with the gross domestic product per capita at US\$69,000 (S\$95,500).² Like David of the Biblical era, it has often, in the past, stood up to the Goliath of Saudi Arabia. Long seen as a maverick, this kind of unconventional Qatari politics, running with the hare and hunting with the hound, skilfully navigating between Iran and the Arabs, or between Israel and the Palestinians, are owed largely to a former Foreign and Prime Minister, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jabor al Thani. He was a person of amazing courage and vitality, and was said to “detest the arrogance of the Saudis, the indolence of the Kuwaitis, the haughtiness of the Americans, and the deceitfulness of the Egyptians”.³ Like Otto von Bismarck, he dangerously juggled with his actions, playing one side against the other. In 1995, he was key to replacing an ageing, conservative Emir, Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad, with his son, the modernising Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa, the present Emir, Sheikh Tamim’s father. Hamad bin Jassim and his ilk have since passed from the formal Qatari political scene, and their successors who wish to continue with the same policies are increasingly displaying the lack of capacity to do so.

Take the relationship with Iran, for instance. During the period of Emir Hamad bin Khalifa and his right hand Hamad bin Jassim (1995-2013), relations with Iran grew. They saw the Iranian connection as a means of reducing Saudi regional clout, which they disliked. In 2006, when Qatar sat in the United Nations Security Council, it voted against Resolution 1696 which called upon Iran to stop its nuclear enrichment programme. In 2010, the two countries signed an agreement to combat terrorism and promote regional security. On the economic side, Qatar and Iran share the North Dome/South Pars, the world’s largest natural gas field. Somehow, the game of balancing is not being performed with the dexterity that is required on such occasions by the successors of the two Hamads (the previous Emir and his prime minister).

² These figures, and others pertaining to numbers of foreign workers in Qatar, are taken from: Jure Snoj, *Population of Qatar by Nationality – 2017 Report*, in: Priya Dsouza Counsultancy, *Making sense of Qatar*, 7 February 2017. URL: <http://priyadsouza.com/population-of-qatar-by-nationality-in-2017/>.

³ Iftekhhar A. Chowdhury, *Current Situation regarding deposed Emir: Return of the Pained Parent?*, unpublished manuscript, 24 December 1995.

As for the so-called Qatari support to the Muslim Brotherhood, which is Egypt's gripe, Doha denies it. It has, however, provided safe haven to a fire-brand Brotherhood cleric, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who has also been given citizenship. Al-Qaradawi has a sizeable following among Qatari elite, and Doha simply says he cannot be asked to leave because he is a Qatari citizen. The Qataris make the point that mere Muslim connections do not make organisations 'terrorists'. They also stress the usefulness of such linkages, as with the Afghan Taleban (which has an office in Doha), with whom they have successfully negotiated the release of some hostages. While the 'Arab Spring' was as much a threat to the Doha rulers as to others in the Gulf, Qatar set up Al Jazeera, the liberal channel that often counters western narrative by its counterpoise of a regional Arab version and voice. At the same time, while keeping links with the Hamas, Qatar, for years, has had connections with Israel, and also houses the Al Udeid Air Base for the US which is the latter's hub for operations in Iraq and Afghanistan as the headquarters of its central command. It is the largest US military facility in the Middle East. The Qataris have spent US\$1 billion (\$1.38 billion) of their own on this base. While Qatar has been able to carry on its shrewd balancing tactics, there was a significant spat in 2014 when Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE recalled their ambassadors from Doha on allegations that Qatar interfered in their domestic politics, and it was nearly eight months before the differences could be breached. Sheikh Tamim, who succeeded his father, Sheikh Hamad, in 2013, displayed conciliatory predilections, reciprocated by the new Saudi King, Salman, and things seemed to be on the mend.

That is till now. After the Trump visit to Riyadh and the US-Arab-Muslim Summit there, Emir Tamim returned to Doha and made a congratulatory call to Iran's President Rouhani on his election. Thereafter, he reportedly castigated the anti-Iran rhetoric at the Summit and emphasised the need to engage rather than isolate Iran. He was also supposed to have said to the media that the Saudis were placing great store by Trump who was in deep trouble at home and unlikely to hold office for too much longer. Whether all these were rather sensible and quite logical pronouncements was not the issue, but sensing the political incorrectness of the remarks in the regional context, the Qataris stated that the media was hacked by an 'unknown entity' (An AFP story suggested Russian hackers' involvement to undermine US foreign policy⁴) and all these were erroneous attributions. It was too late. Saudi heckles were raised,

⁴ "Middle East Rift: Russian hackers planted false story that led to Qatar crisis said US officials", *Dawn*, 7 June 2017.

and Riyadh and its allies swiftly terminated all diplomatic and transport links (important as major airline carriers were involved). They may also have been emboldened by Trump's public endorsements at the recently-concluded Riyadh Summit. The Saudi allies initiated a blockade of Qatar by land, sea and air. This can have disastrous consequences for Qatari citizens and residents. The Muslim world was immediately divided. Even African countries like Mauritania and Gabon got into the fray, coming down on the side of the more powerful Gulf protagonists, Saudi Arabia and its allies. In the region, apart from Oman whose Sultan even stayed out of the Summit (a rational choice for him), only Kuwait remained neutral and now is trying its hand at mediation. No surprise that Iran sided with Qatar but President Recep Erdogan of Turkey, the other major non-Arab actor in the region, plumped for Doha.

The American reaction to the unfolding events in the Middle East was a textbook study of chaos and confusion in addressing a significant global issue. Given the immensity of US stakes in the region, its own interests would dictate a constructive posture, not only to protect sensitive American assets but also to be in consonance with the position that the US has been successful in forging a unified coalition against terrorism in the Riyadh Summit. As it should be the case in such situations, both Secretaries of State and Defense, Rex Tillerson, and James Mattis, urged calm on both sides. US Ambassador to Doha, Dana Shell Smith, in a tweet, cited "the great partnership" between the US and Qatar in countering terrorism. However, their political master, President Trump, issued a series of tweets, obviously without consulting any serious aides, and paying no heed to what his surrogate colleagues had stated, openly supporting Saudi Arabia and pointing to Qatar as a sponsor of radical ideology. This must have been to the bewilderment of Qatar, which is an ally of the US, hosting the largest US military base in the region, critical American equipment, and 10,000 US troops, and to whose president had promised the sale of weapons during the Riyadh Summit. This must come as a warning to global actors as to the unreliability of US stated positions on global issues in current times, a fact of life they must come to learn to live with. In the world of diplomacy, American support should be something much sought after and must not come, or be given, so casually and cheaply.

What are the implications of events in the Middle East for the South and Southeast Asian states, in particular the Muslim majority ones? Unsurprisingly, they are caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. Gulf Arab states are important to them, as also Iran. First, in

spiritual terms, Islamic values initially emanated from this region which houses Islam's holiest shrines. At a time of burgeoning religiosity, the governments of Muslim-majority states in South and Southeast Asia can only ignore this fact at their peril. Secondly, in material terms, they provide employment to millions of migrant labour from these countries, who transmit back billions of dollars to their home countries buttressing their economies. Thirdly, the sovereign wealth funds of the Gulf provide crucial and much needed foreign investments to many of their countries. Finally, their oil and gas satisfy the energy needs of many of these rapidly developing states. Stability in the Gulf, Iran included, would be in their interest, and the contrary could bring incalculable miseries.

It was Qatar that was feeling the squeeze as the blockade by neighbours began. Iran was quick to support Qatar but the immediate terror attacks in Tehran on 7 June 2017, which left a dozen dead and many more injured (the responsibility for the attacks, a rarity in Iran, was claimed by the Islamic State, ISIS, though Tehran pointed fingers at Saudi Arabia), could have been the price it paid for it. Turkey offered food and water, and in a step reminiscent of the days of Lawrence of Arabia and the Ottoman Empire, announced a willingness to place troops in Qatar though the modalities and numbers were unclear. Interestingly, both the major non-Arab Muslim majority nations in the region chose in favour of Qatar. This altered as one looks further eastward where Saudi influence is greater by far.

Take the Maldives in South Asia, a tiny overwhelmingly Muslim majority state of only 341,000 (Maldives does not allow for the practice of any other faith in its territory), grappling with extremism itself in a big way, cut off ties with Qatar, the only South and Southeast Asian country to take such a decisive step. It accused Doha of spreading terrorism. Last year, it had also severed relations with Iran, ostensibly for the same reasons. It would be worth mentioning that Saudi Arabia opened an embassy in its capital, Male, in 2015 – foreign diplomatic missions are few in that country – and has begun negotiations on investments. For the largest Muslim majority country, Pakistan, taking sides was more problematic. Of course, its relations with Saudi Arabia, which provided Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif refuge in his troubled times, remain strong as ever. Pakistan is even providing its retired army chief, General Raheel Sharif, to lead the Saudi-sponsored coalition troops in Yemen. However, it also has around 150,000 migrant workers in Qatar with prospects for many more as Qatar hosts the Football World Cup Final in 2022, and has signed a 15-year deal with Doha last

year to purchase up to 3.75 million tonnes of liquefied natural gas, sorely needed for its energy sector.⁵ It also has a sizeable Shia minority, and would be chary of affronting Iran. Bangladesh generally likes to steer clear of any intra-Islamic disputes. The current Hasina-led government, though largely secular, is showing caution with regard to dealing with Islamic forces and is wary of alienating them needlessly, with electoral issues in mind. While Saudi connections are strong, Dhaka, which already has 280,000 workers in Qatar, is looking to expanding the numbers hugely as the World Cup event nears. India, though not a Muslim majority country, has links with both Saudi Arabia and Iran, and also 680,000 workers in Qatar.⁶ As of now, the Narendra Modi government in India seems unwilling to bring to bear any kind of diplomatic influence on the issue. One is unsure if it can, even if it wishes to.

In Southeast Asia, Indonesia, the largest Muslim country in this region, has indicated its readiness to play a mediating role. This would also imply a desire to remain neutral. In fact, Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi received a phone call from his Iranian counterpart, Javad Zareef, who briefed him on the issue. Indonesia had welcomed King Salman of Saudi Arabia on his 'grand tour' of Southeast Asia in March this year. The other major Muslim nation, Malaysia, also hosted King Salman on the much publicised visit. The government of Prime Minister Najib Razak is battling a domestic issue with regard to its state fund, 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB), in which Riyadh has also become very closely involved. At the same time, in March 2017, Malaysia signed a defence agreement with Qatar. Still, on balance, it might have more to lose by siding with Qatar. This is indicative of the conundrum that the flaring up of the Gulf issue has placed on many such counties of comparable milieu. The visit of the Saudi King had also taken him to wealthy, oil-producing Brunei, often known as the 'Qatar of Southeast Asia'. This country, with close cooperation with both the Gulf Arab countries and Iran, would prefer to remain uninvolved. While Brunei is strict in its enforcement of the Islamic sharia, it has affinities that can be said to be natural with the only two Wahabi countries in the world, Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

The still unfolding crisis in the Gulf is keeping the region and the world on tenterhooks. It could be that, while the intra-mural differences between the Gulf countries were simmering for a while, the kudos received from President Trump has emboldened Saudi Arabia to act

⁵ See: "Non-Arab Muslim countries caught in middle of Qatar row", *Straits Times*, 7 June 2017.

⁶ Jure Snoj, *op. cit.*

now. Any potential US role to play the peace broker seems to have been demolished by some of the uncalled-for Presidential tweets. The United Nations Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, is a widely respected figure, and he does possess formal ‘good offices’ mandate, but he must be mulling over the effectiveness of bringing these to bear upon so seemingly intractable a crisis. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation, a collection of Muslim majority states, continues to remain largely ineffective. Kuwait is endeavouring mediation but, to date, with unremarkable results. Indeed, the crisis is occurring at a time when there is no global leadership of the requisite capability to tackle serious global problems. This is a very complex region where truth comes in different facets, and each facet has a modicum of truth in it. Screws may be tightening on Qatar right now, but if the issue spins out of control, the most preeminent Muslim country in the world, with the highest stake in guarding its reputation as a leader of global Muslims, could have much more to lose.

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