

Confidential

RUSSIA

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Yulia Sveshnikova reports from Kuala Lumpur:

THE CROSSROADS OF INTERESTS IN THE QATAR CRISIS

SUMMARY

The current crisis around Qatar formally began on June 5 when the Persian Gulf monarchies led by Saudi Arabia, as well as Egypt and a number of other states declared a diplomatic blockade and imposed sanctions against Doha. Its development has already led to the formation of a (situational) bipolar structure in the region and forces internal and external actors to revise their policies.

This article by Yulia Sveshnikova, an expert on the Middle East and PIR-Center's consultant, provides insights on the origin of the conflict and on the prospects for the emerging centers of power in the Middle East, Riyadh-Abu-Dhabi-Cairo and Doha-Tehran-Ankara, as well as on the specifics of Moscow's stance.

According to the expert, Ankara, Doha and Tehran, each for its own reasons opposing the pressure of Saudi Arabia, would like to count on the support of Russia that asserted itself in a new role in the Middle East by joining the Syrian conflict. As a possible scenario of evolution of the crisis, Yulia Sveshnikova suggests further polarization of the centers of power in the Middle East, with Moscow's role in the region growing.

On June 5, the Persian Gulf monarchies led by Saudi Arabia, as well as Egypt, Yemen, the provisional government of Libya and later the Comoro Islands, the Maldives, Mauritius and Mauritania declared a diplomatic blockade and imposed sanctions against the small but ambitious Qatar due to its "unsatisfactory" policy. The situation around Qatar has been evolving both independently and in the context of other events in the Middle East, such as a double terrorist attack in Iran and the response to it with a missile attack on the facilities of the *Islamic State (IS)* in Syria, the replacement of the Crown Prince in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), demands presented to Doha by the countries that joined the blockade, and diplomatic efforts of various parties, including Qatar itself.

It is obvious that the isolation of Qatar may be in the interests of Riyadh, as well as of Trump's administration willing to exercise pressure on Iran. However, it seems that President Trump failed to predict well the consequences of galvanizing their satellites in the Gulf, and the anti-Qatar coalition led by King Salman overestimated their ability to cope with the consequences and generally anticipate them.

Instead of expected strengthening of the anti-Iranian alliance, Tehran became the winner, claiming a leading role in one of the two emerging centers of power in the Middle East. Although the two alliances, Riyadh-Abu-Dhabi-Cairo and Doha-Tehran-Ankara, cannot be considered sustainable, the formation of a bipolar structure in the region as a result of this crisis already forces internal and external actors to revise their policies.

THE ORIGIN OF THE CONFLICT

The relations worsened following the publication by the *Qatar News Agency* of the statement of Qatar's Emir, Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, that Iran was an Islamic power, whose participation was necessary to address regional problems. However, experts still discuss the real causes of the split and the choice of the time to make it public. The demands given to Qatar offer some insights into the real causes. On June 22, Doha received a list of 13 demands, including the demands to stop funding all organizations recognized as terrorist by the U.S., and some media (apart from the Al-Jazeera TV channel, a few other media were named), close the Turkish military base, etc.

Some experts suggest that the crisis is actually connected with Saudi Arabia's efforts to reshape the Arab world in its own interests, up to the cessation of existence of some states and disappearance of their leaders from the political Olympus. While previously Kuwait managed to extinguish the fire in such cases, this time it may fail to do so, because the goal is not reconciliation, at least not on the conditions of Doha that seeks independence.

Putting pressure on Qatar with the same effect as in 2014 will not work. Although the Arab countries garnered Trump's support at the Arab-American summit in May, it quickly became clear that the plan was unviable. Support of Qatar by other states undermined the blockade, ensuring food supplies and smooth operation of *Qatar Airways* thanks to other parties. The presence of the largest-in-the-region US military base in Qatar deprives Washington of freedom of maneuver, despite the UAE's proposal to relocate the military facilities to its territory.

Next day after the blockade was imposed, Trump said that Saudi Arabia's move to isolate Qatar "perhaps will be the beginning of the end to the horror of terrorism." However, a few days later the U.S. administration found out that pragmatism and well-established arms trade with the countries of the region are more important than abstract manifestoes: Washington approved the first part of its arms deal with Doha, selling 36 *F-15QA* fighters worth \$12 billion. The parties also agreed to conduct

joint exercises of the Navy. As Qatar's Minister of Defense stated almost ironically, Doha hoped that arms supplies would ease the burden on U.S. forces in the fight against extremism, of which Qatar was foremost accused. Although supplies will not be immediate, leaving time for settling the inter-Arab crisis, such actions devalue the declared fight against terrorism, which was the central topic of the Arab-American summit held in May.

SUPPORTERS

Instead of forming a monolithic group, the Qatar crisis demonstrated lack of unity and instability of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Qatar was not left alone on the other side of the barricades, enjoying a moderate support from Oman (that did not take part in the Saudi campaign in Yemen and, similarly to Qatar, maintained its ties with Iran) and from Kuwait that offered to become a mediator. Jordan moderately limited, but did not break off its diplomatic relations with Qatar.

Apart from apparent split in the Arab circles, the most significant support was extended by Turkey, Iran and, partly, by Russia. The three states offered food aid to Qatar. At the same time, Moscow in the person of President Putin tactfully stated "Russia's principled position in favor of resolving crisis situations by political and diplomatic means."

Most of food is delivered to Qatar from the Middle East across the border with Saudi Arabia, just as supplies for ongoing projects such as the underground, port, medical center and stadiums for the 2022 World Cup. In this sense, Iran and Turkey turned out to be the best partners for addressing the logistic problem and already deliver food to Qatar on a daily basis. In addition, Iran also provided its airspace to serve *Qatar Airways* flights.

For Iran, seriously suspecting that the anti-Qatar operation was launched with broader intentions of preventing the strengthening of Tehran's regional influence (as a counter to Saudi Arabia and its allies), supporting Qatar has become a logical step.

First, the crisis escalated immediately after President Trump's visit to Riyadh with a view to strengthen the anti-Iranian coalition.

Second, the promises of the Minister of Defense and now the Crown Prince of KSA Mohammad bin Salman to move the war to Iran and the subsequent double attack on June 7 in Iran are viewed as links in one chain and, together with the ultimatum of the anti-Qatar coalition, as an attempt to incite a heated conflict with the involvement of Tehran.

Turkey also could not stay away from the crisis: one of the demands to Doha was to cease support of the *Muslim Brotherhood* that is perceived by Ankara as a tool for implementing its *Neo-Ottoman project*. The demand to liquidate the Turkish base in Doha also was taken to heart by Ankara. Nevertheless, President Erdogan spoke about the situation diplomatically, saying that the actions of the GCC member states "are inhumane and contrary to Islamic values," and adding that demands to close the Turkish base violate the norms of international law.

For Turkey, where they remember the attempted coup on July 15, 2016 and therefore are sensitive to similar plans for neighbors, the support of Qatar was also an emotional gesture. The Qatari Emir was the first foreign leader to call Erdogan after the riot was neutralized. Moreover, the pressure on Doha reminded Ankara of its own disagreements with Riyadh over Egypt and Tunisia.

However, it is wrong to say that the Doha-Tehran-Ankara situational axis would become a strategic one, as each side sees in the crisis opportunities to pursue its own interests or at least to mitigate damage. Already at the beginning of the year, the laying of a military base in Qatar and the development of military cooperation between two countries were interpreted by Turkey as an attempt to counterbalance the growing influence of Iran. Now Turkey, supporting Qatar, indirectly found itself in the same boat also with Tehran.

WHAT DOES QATAR HAVE IN COMMON WITH IRAN?

Talking to the Iranian president on June 24, the Emir of Qatar said that the relations between the two countries had always been deep and continuously evolved. This, of course, is slyness: there is no thoroughness in their relations, while their evolution is situational. Qatar is a member of the GCC, established in response to the emergence of a new Iranian regime one year after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Territorial disputes and the intervention of KSA in the affairs of Qatar in the 1990s forced the small state to seek ways to strengthen its independence, and cooperation with Iran became one of those ways.

Unlike the other CGG members, Qatar views Iran as a necessary element in regional security architecture. In 2010, the countries signed an agreement on combating terrorism and expanding cooperation in the field of security. Qatar became the only state to speak out against the UN Security Council anti-Iranian resolution 1929, and earlier, as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, it also opposed the very first resolution against Iran. Doha's unwillingness to support the anti-Iranian coalition after the attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran in January 2016 sent an alarming signal to Riyadh about the weakening of allied relations in the GCC: Qatar neither stopped nor reduced its contacts with Iran.

Not the economic component is the main driver of the Iran-Qatar relations. Tehran's relations with Doha are based on different values, political and narrow-focused ones, when it is necessary to form a situational alliance and "make friends against someone."

The two countries also have a common emotional factor. In Iran, the *phantom of Saddam Hussein* won't disappear in the shadow of history due to frequent recollection of the Iran-Iraq war, and now the phantom emerged also in the Arab part of the Gulf. After the reports on concluding the agreement on the U.S. arms supplies to Riyadh (during the May summit an agreement was reached on arms procurements worth \$110 billion), Qatar expressed concerns about the emergence of a "second Saddam" in the Middle East. It is not accidentally that the historical memories of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 are fresh in Qatar. In the 1980s, Iraq bought modern weapons from the United States and chemical weapons from European countries under the pretext of isolating Iran, but the result was an invasion of a small Arab country. So today's anti-Iranian hysteria in the light of new arms procurements by Riyadh causes unpleasant premonitions in Qatar, and Iran shares this concern.

Apart from that, Sunni Qatar and Shiite Iran have enough contradictions. The Syrian issue is one of serious problems due to Qatar's support for Syrian rebel groups, including those involved in *IS* activities, e.g. the former *Al-Nusra Front* (later known as *Fateh al-Sham*). Doha allocated significant funds for such support already during the reign of Sheikh Hamad Al Thani (1995-2013), together with Riyadh during a part of this period.

The anti-Iranian focus of the KSA and its allies in this case is attractive to Doha that forms the presumed third center of power in the region (when viewed separately from Tehran's). Cooperation with Tehran is an attempt to prevent the concentration of all regional power in Riyadh by creating a counterweight.

In Iran, in its turn, they believe that Riyadh's move against Doha and the latter's response will force the other GCC members to reflect on their future. After all, if Saudi Arabia is ready to sacrifice its Arab brothers for the sake of its own plans, they should not dismiss Tehran, as they still may need to rebuild their relations with Tehran to rebuff Riyadh.

At the same time, Iranian support is based not on sentiments, but on an attempt to capitalize on the current situation. It is very unlikely that anyone in Tehran seriously thinks about the possibility of strategic alliances with Doha.

MOSCOW'S NON-INTERFERENCE POLICY

Moscow is unwilling to interfere in the intra-Arab contradictions, but it objects to the growing instability in the region. Why should Russia support one side (Qatar) against the other (Saudi Arabia) in this conflict, when both pursue a policy of spreading their influence in the region, exploiting groups considered terrorist by Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs? Moreover, Moscow has a certain level of cooperation with both sides, despite the existing discrepancies. As an external, not a regional player in this situation, Russia is unwilling to go in the wake of status quo changes in the Middle East and therefore often says only that the problems should be addressed through diplomacy. At a meeting with his Qatar peer, Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov stressed that Russia, as a matter of principle, did not interfere in the affairs of other states and in their bilateral relations.

The Qatar crisis can serve as a driver of the Russian-Iranian and Russian-Turkish relations. Ankara, Doha and Tehran, each for its own reasons opposing the pressure of Saudi Arabia, would like to count on the support of Moscow that asserted itself in a new role in the Middle East by joining the Syrian conflict. By extending some support to Qatar, Moscow, in its turn, might hope to reinforce its ability to negotiate with Doha on the Syrian issue.

The initiators of this crisis seem to fail to predict well its consequences. Obviously, the support of the *Muslim Brotherhood* itself, their branches and other groups was not the cause of the current crisis, nor were Qatar's relations with Iran. But the attempt to pursue its own independent policy using all available means could be the cause. This crisis can ruin the already fragile balance in the relations among the Gulf states that do not agree on many issues. It has already strengthened Iran's positions in the long term and is unlikely to contribute to any reduction in the activity of terrorist groups.

Whether the crisis will last for a long time is unclear, but when it is over, other contradictions will come to the surface, and the illusiveness of the idea of creating a NATO analog in the Middle East will become even more clear. The KSA-UAE-Egypt alliance should not be perceived as absolutely strong, despite their determination to bring the conflict with Qatar to the public space. In other important spots of the region, e.g. in Libya and Yemen, the interests of Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Cairo sometimes diverge.

Perhaps Washington could put an end to the crisis, if they manage to convince Riyadh to soften the pressure on Doha as part of a scenario that makes it possible to *save face*. Otherwise, most likely, we will see further polarization of the centers of power in the Middle East, with Moscow's role strengthening and Iran making its contribution.

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As always, specialists of *Trialogue Club International* and its partner organization PIR Center are open for exchange of opinions on key international issues.

In **2017**, membership fees are as follows:

Period	Individual	Corporate
01.01.17 – 31.12.17 (1 year)	50 000 roubles	80 000 roubles
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Sincerely,

**Chairman,
Trialogue Club
International**

Evgeny Buzhinskiy