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THE MIDDLE EAST

Egypt and Qatar: Frenemies?

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Qatar may have dialed back its support for Islamist movements, but that doesn't mean it's going to be best friends again with Egypt and the Gulf states.

Much has been said in recent days about the perceived thaw in Egyptian-Qatari relations. However, let us delay hoisting up the white flag; Qatar hasn't quite reversed course in its foreign policy—at least not yet.

What lies at the heart of the dispute between Cairo and Doha? In a word: the Muslim Brotherhood. However, there is a much deeper regional conflict at play and it is nothing short of a fight over the character of the Middle East itself, where monarchs and tyrants, Presidents and self-anointed caliphs are struggling to claim the mantle of winner in the post-“Arab Spring” shakeup of the region.

Back when the term “Arab Spring” was first attributed to the uprisings that swept the region beginning in December 2010, Qatar saw an opportunity to forge a new foreign policy strategy that would set it apart from its sister Gulf states and, if its gamble paid off, firmly establish Doha as one of the first patrons of the victors in the “new” Middle East. In essence, Qatar abandoned its traditional foreign policy role as diplomatic mediator for a time, in favor of a more interventionist role by supporting ascendant Islamists in transitioning states (outside of the Gulf, of course).

Chief among these Islamists was the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, but other beneficiaries of Doha's patronage could be found among the opposition factions in Syria (not coincidentally, those which the other Gulf States were attempting to suppress), and in Libya, where Qatari Al-Jazeera proved that the revolution would in fact be televised.

Qatar's support for the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood manifested itself in two invaluable resources: an injection of much needed cash and the use of its satellite television channel as a mouthpiece for its cause. Qatar gave and lent

Egypt's erstwhile Islamist President Mohammad Morsi approximately \$7 billion dollars almost immediately after he ascended to the Presidency. What's more, aside from granting Muslim Tele-Islamist and Brotherhood figure, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a permanent pulpit for over a decade, Al-Jazeera became the main purveyor of Brotherhood propaganda throughout the region. These moves did not just rankle Egypt, it cause Qatar to fall out with almost all of its GCC allies and put the U.S.-Qatari alliance on uneven footing.

For the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)—the political and economic alliance between Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman established in May 1981—supporting Islamists throughout the region is very simply a matter of undermining the security of fellow members, since these transnational movements and their beliefs called into question the very legitimacy of the Gulf monarchies.

Gulf dissatisfaction did not come without consequence. On March 5, 2014, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates announced in a joint statement that they were withdrawing their ambassadors from Qatar. Egypt, which at this point had ousted Morsi and was now being run by former Army General Abdel-Fatah al-Sisi, followed suit and withdrew its ambassador. Washington too was displeased with Qatar's behavior over the past several years, which it saw as perplexing if not outright provoking. Qatar has on one hand been a true partner to the U.S. in facilitating regional cooperation and counterterrorism ventures primarily through its basing arrangements with the Americans. In fact, the al-Udeid Air Base houses both the forward operating base of the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) as well as the Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC) responsible for all American air operations in the region, including of course Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet on the other hand, Doha was supporting and funding groups throughout the region that are openly antagonistic to the United States and the West at large.

In the meantime, the Saudis, Emiratis, and Egyptians went about designating the Muslim Brotherhood and its regional affiliates as a terrorist organization, further drawing a line in the sand on the issue of support for Islamists. It looked for a time like Qatar was drifting further away from its traditional allies and closer to the enemies of those same allies. Then came ISIS/ISIL, now styling itself the Islamic State.

Recognizing a need to present a united front against the emergent IS, Riyadh and Washington began openly discussing the need to mend fences. In the end, backroom cajoling on the part of the Americans and outright pressure on the part of the Gulfis began to bear fruit in the ongoing quest to bring Qatar back to "right side." First in September, Qatar expelled some of the leading Brotherhood officials who were in exile from Egypt. Then it reportedly scaled

back its funding of certain extremist groups, which the GCC openly opposed. Finally, after weeks of shuttle diplomacy on the part of the Saudis and the Emiratis, the “Riyadh Complementary Arrangement” was achieved in November, signaling an end to the diplomatic schism between the Arab Gulf States that had festered for more than a year. Accordingly, the Saudi, Emirati, and Bahraini governments announced the return of their ambassadors to Doha as the GCC.

But what about Egypt? Saudi Arabia has taken it upon itself to repair relations between Cairo and Doha, facilitating the “opening a new page between the two countries.” Sisi has already met with an envoy of the Emir of Qatar on two occasions and it looks like progress is being made. Bowing to pressure from its neighbors, Qatar announced that it is suspending its broadcast of Al-Jazeera Mubashir Misr, the “only significant Egyptian news outlet remaining that had broadcast video of the Brotherhood’s antigovernment demonstrations or otherwise conveyed its views.” For its part, Egypt may return the gesture with its own concession, perhaps by choosing to deport rather than jailing three Al Jazeera journalists, who were arrested last December on charges of “conspiring with the Brotherhood to destabilize Egypt.”

Nevertheless, it would be naive to assume that these former enemies are on the road to being best friends. As Alanoud Alsharekh, a visiting scholar at the Middle East Institute in London’s School of Oriental and African Studies, suggested to the Wall Street Journal, “Twisting Qatar’s arm in this manner to have it fall in line is not going to be without consequences...You can’t enforce your political will on a neighboring country the same way you do with your own people.”

First off, Qatar’s support for Islamists goes beyond providing refuge for a few exiled Brotherhood leaders and airing Sisi’s dirty laundry live from Cairo. Second, Qatar holds differing views from the majority of its GCC sister states on many key ongoing regional issues like the civil war in Syria, the instability in Libya, the future of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and relations with Iran, just to name a few. The specter of the Islamic State may seal some of the cracks in the GCC’s 33-year alliance but not indefinitely. If the GCC does not seek to identify ways of reconciling its conflicting worldviews, this rift is likely to resurface sooner rather than later.

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