

MIDDLE EAST

How the Saudi-Qatar Rivalry, Now Combusting, Reshaped the Middle East

The Interpreter

By MAX FISHER JUNE 13, 2017

The crisis convulsing the Persian Gulf, entangling the United States and now threatening to pull in Turkey and Iran, can be traced to a dilemma facing a man who had just deposed his own father.

When Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, the crown prince of Qatar, took power in a bloodless coup in 1995, he seized a barely independent nation about the size of Connecticut, with one-seventh its population. It had been dominated since independence in 1971 by its far larger and more powerful neighbor, Saudi Arabia.

He believed Qatar could find security only by transforming itself from Saudi appendage to rival. But how?

The audacious plan he put in motion set off something of a regional cold war, in time remaking not just the politics of the oil-rich Persian Gulf, but also those of the entire Middle East, culminating in last week's crisis.

It would be as if Cuba sought to break from American influence by becoming a global superpower overnight, competing with the United States across Asia and Europe.

Qatar's strategy seemed to finally collapse this past week, with Saudi Arabia and its allies imposing a blockade. But Qatar has its own allies. The consequences of this

rivalry may still be unfolding.

Solving a Problem

In the years before Sheikh Hamad took power, a few incidents deepened his desire to break from Saudi domination.

In 1988, his father had established diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, a Saudi adversary, giving Qatar a taste of an independent foreign policy.

In 1992, a clash with Saudi Arabia along their short but disputed border left two Qatari soldiers dead. Two years later, when Yemen fell into a brief civil war, Qatar and Saudi Arabia backed opposing sides.

Autonomy, Sheikh Hamad learned, could be both feasible and desirable.

Marc Lynch, a political scientist at George Washington University, put Sheikh Hamad's view as: "Why be under the thumb of the Saudis if you don't have to be?"

The Qatari emir also had ambitions to prove himself more than a Saudi vassal.

"A lot of it does come down to personality," Mr. Lynch said. "When the new emir comes in, he really does have a chip on his shoulder."

A Rise to Rivalry

Few countries have ever grown from client state to regional power. Qatar managed it in just a few years.

"From the late 1990s on, Qatari foreign policy is a combination of: 'What can we do to get ourselves on the map?' and 'What can we do to annoy the Saudis?'" Mr. Lynch said.

Qatar cultivated ties with Iran and established trade relations with Israel. It became host to a large American air base, in part to guard against Saudi bullying.

It established the satellite news channel Al Jazeera, using it to project soft

power, promote allies and needle the Saudi royal family.

It also made use of its history as a once-remote haven for Islamist exiles. If foreign governments had to deal with the Muslim Brotherhood, the Palestinian group Hamas, Chechen separatists or even the Taliban, they often went through Qatar.

Then, in the 1990s, technological and economic developments created a global market for liquefied natural gas, which can be loaded onto ships, bypassing pipelines that would run through Saudi territory. Qatar controls some of the world's largest gas reserves, so its economy expanded from \$8.1 billion in 1995 to an astonishing \$210 billion in 2014.

Sheikh Hamad and his foreign minister jetted from one Arab capital to another, offering their services as mediators and generous donors.

The United States found Qatar's diplomacy useful, if sometimes annoying, using it as a base for Afghan peace talks. It relied on its Qatari air base for the war in Iraq and, later, strikes in Syria.

In 2002, Saudi Arabia withdrew its ambassador to Qatar, nominally over Al Jazeera's criticism of the Saudi government.

"It takes until 2008 for Saudi Arabia to really digest the notion that Qatar is a fully independent state," said David B. Roberts, a professor at King's College London.

The Saudi ambassador returned to Qatar in 2008, and the two neighbors might have found equilibrium if not for what came next.

'Open Proxy Warfare'

The Arab Spring, which saw uprisings across the region in 2011, provided Qatar with an opening.

For all its rising influence, Qatar had never been able to crack Saudi regional dominance. Now, with Saudi-aligned autocrats under threat, it saw opportunity.

It backed antigovernment movements, both secular and Islamist, with Al Jazeera airtime, diplomatic support and, later, money and sometimes weapons, hoping to install friendly new governments. When Islamists showed the most promise, Qatar threw its support behind them.

To Saudi Arabia, the uprisings imperiled both the regional order and, potentially, its own rule; populist Islamist movements had long challenged it at home.

Every time a vacuum opened, both gulf rivals would rush to fill it first. “From 2011 to 2013, they’re in open proxy warfare across the region,” Mr. Lynch said.

In Tunisia, for instance, each supported opposing political parties.

Elsewhere, their rivalry fueled violence. In Libya, each backed armed groups that would later fight a civil war. In Syria, they sought to outbid each other in financing rebels, including extremists.

In Egypt, Qatar backed the Muslim Brotherhood, whose candidate won the country’s first real presidential vote in 2012. The next year, when the Egyptian military took power in a coup, Saudi Arabia and its allies awarded the new rulers a \$12 billion aid package.

These interventions, in addition to shaping the Arab Spring, helped realign the region’s geopolitics.

Turkey, for its own reasons, joined Qatar in backing the uprisings, forming the basis of Qatar’s first real alliance.

Sunni monarchies like the United Arab Emirates, fearing uprisings at home, consolidated behind Saudi leadership and against Qatar.

The rivalry even extended to Washington, where Qatar spent lavishly on lobbying and think tank donations. The United Arab Emirates did the same, seeking to keep pace with Qatar’s influence in the United States.

An Uneasy New Order

“In 2013, you have more or less a rout of the Qatari position,” Mr. Lynch said.

Qatar’s Arab Spring allies suffered devastating setbacks. Sheikh Hamad, in poor health, abdicated the throne and was succeeded by a 33-year-old son with less experience. The country’s brief tenure as a regional power ended.

Still, Qatar retained the autonomy and network of connections that had been its original goal.

Saudi Arabia tolerated Qatar’s autonomy, to focus on another regional proxy war, against Iran. This also served the interests of the United States, which relied on both Saudi Arabia and Qatar in fighting the Islamic State and wanted their rivalry stabilized.

The 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran, which Saudi Arabia opposed, further complicated the issue. It left Saudi Arabia more concerned by Qatar’s links to Iran, however limited, but less willing to pressure Qatar, which the Saudis knew would inflame tensions with Washington over the Iran deal.

The rivals were left in a tenuous, uneasy balance.

A Saudi Gamble

Though Qatar had stepped back, its campaign taught Saudi Arabia a lesson: An uncontrolled Qatar posed a grave threat.

Saudi Arabia, joined by other gulf states and Egypt, finally found its opportunity to reimpose dominance with last week’s blockade.

This would also force fence-sitters to choose sides, at a moment when Saudi Arabia is stronger. Riyadh is still working to re-establish regional dominance, under growing pressure from Iran.

But Saudi Arabia appeared to quickly win the greatest prize of all: American backing.

President Trump, who received a rapturous welcome in Riyadh last month,

welcomed the blockade of an American ally, a stunning policy reversal that seemingly happened overnight. On Twitter, he seemed to imply that the blockade had been his idea.

But forcing hands can be risky.

Iran has offered food aid to Qatar, betting that it can expand its influence there and perhaps with two other gulf states, Kuwait and Oman, that seek a balance between it and Saudi Arabia.

Morocco, initially neutral, announced on Monday that it would send food aid to Qatar, according to Moroccan reports.

The most significant move could come from Turkey, which has sided vocally with Qatar. Its Parliament approved a measure allowing Turkey to deploy up to 3,000 troops to its base in Qatar, where 100 are currently stationed.

Aaron Stein, an analyst at the Atlantic Council, a think tank based in Washington, said Turkey had recently patched up relations with Saudi Arabia, seeking a middle ground, “but there are limits to that.”

Turkey’s state-dominated media, which has few pro-Saudi voices, has championed the defense of Qatar, an ally, as a nationalist cause.

Though Turkey is a NATO member, over the past year it has joined Iran in aligning its regional strategy with Russia’s. Moscow’s position could gain in the crisis as American allies quarrel.

Though few expect the standoff to escalate to violence, it remains far from clear how it will be resolved. This may be the end of the two-decade Saudi-Qatar rivalry, or it could bring just another layer of instability and crosscutting alliances to a region that already has plenty.

Correction: June 15, 2017

A capsule summary on Tuesday for an article about the decades-long rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Qatar omitted the context in describing the population of Qatar. The country’s population was one-seventh that of Connecticut’s in 1995 when its crown

prince seized power; that is not a current comparison. (Qatar now has about 2.6 million people and Connecticut about 3.6 million.)

The Interpreter is a column by Max Fisher and Amanda Taub exploring the ideas and context behind major world events. Follow them on Twitter *@Max_Fisher and @amandataub*.

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