



## Cairo and the Qatar Crisis

by *H.A. Hellyer*

*Egypt did not orchestrate  
the diplomatic break  
but is happy to ride along*

**T**he continuing 2017 Qatar diplomatic crisis has shed renewed light on Egypt's relationship with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Cairo has aligned itself with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, positioning itself as an adversary of Qatar. But questions have emerged: what are Cairo's priorities with regards to the GCC as a whole, and, in particular, countries within that conglomerate of states?

Egypt's close ties to the GCC states dates back decades. There are millions of Egyptians who have found employment within the GCC over the past 40 years, and Egypt has benefited a great deal from the remittances these expatriates send home. At a time when the Egyptian economy is facing monumental challenges, the relative strength of all GCC currencies is much more favourable than it has been in years. This

has also given the Gulf region considerable sway in the Egyptian economy—as does the fact that Gulf firms make substantial direct investments into the Egyptian public and private sectors.

### The Qatar crisis, in context

Cairo's tensions with Doha predates the latest diplomatic row. Although this dispute is misleadingly called the "GCC crisis," it does not encompass the entire GCC, and Egypt remains a significant actor within this dispute. Cairo has been hostile to Doha particularly since 2013 for harboring elements of the Egyptian opposition, primarily Brotherhood figures deeply opposed to the regime led by President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi.

For reasons that needn't be repeated here, Doha has pursued a supportive stance of most Muslim Brotherhood organizations and offshoot groups in the region. This has put Doha at odds with the UAE, Egypt and Saudi Arabia in particular. For different reasons, these three countries are strongly opposed to the Brotherhood. However, simply viewing Doha as a backer of revolution and the rest as backers of the status quo oversimplifies their positions. Both the UAE and Qatar found common ground and supported the uprisings in Libya and in Syria. They also, along with Saudi Arabia, opposed the uprising in Bahrain.

Nor can it be neatly said that Doha supports Muslim Brotherhood-style Islamism and the others reject it—even though this would be more useful as an explanatory tool. Each state has pursued multifaceted stances since 2011 that depended on what they considered to be the most appropriate way forward. Had there been a slew of Arab leftists, as opposed to Brotherhood sympathizers, working in Doha's government and media apparatus in 2011, the country's perception of what direction to pursue might have been very different. Had the UAE not had such vocal domestic Libyan advocates calling for the overthrow of Qaddafi in 2011, their policy might have been different as well.

Be that as it may, the consequences of the 2011 uprisings meant that Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the

UAE and Bahrain all converged in 2017 in their aims vis-à-vis Qatar and the GCC. For Egypt, this meant recognizing Riyadh as the main powerhouse within the region that would define the parameters for “acceptable” policy decisions for the rest of the GCC. In practical terms, that wouldn’t necessarily require an absolute replication of Saudi policies—after all, Oman has managed to carve out its own distinctive approach within the regional bloc. But, and this is where it differed greatly from Qatar, it did so tactfully and under the radar. Qatar’s use of Al Jazeera, its state-owned media apparatus, to support the Brotherhood to criticize the Egyptian government’s policies has particularly angered Cairo.

#### **Egypt’s influence has waned**

Qatar’s approach continues to leave Egypt in a difficult spot. Unlike decades past, Cairo does not possess the same sort of regional influence or leverage that it once had. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi are the ones leading the charge against Doha, and Cairo is happily along for the ride. More broadly, Egypt plays a minimal role in the Syrian war and is not the mover-and-shaker it once was when it comes to the Arab-Israeli conflict. In general, Cairo’s foreign policy star has waned a great deal as different parts of the GCC region are grabbing a lot more attention and influence—whether for good or for bad is another question.

For this reason, when it comes to alliances with different GCC states, Cairo has been carefully side-stepping policies it disagrees with for as long as it can. Although Cairo is aligned with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, it doesn’t see eye-to-eye with either on President Bashar al-Assad and the critical issue of Syria. Cairo is certainly pleased with Abu Dhabi’s opposition to political Islamism—particularly Muslim Brotherhood and Salafist groups—but Saudi Arabia remains the home of purist Salafism.

In the myriad web that is Arab politics, it may be that little is particularly consistent—Egypt’s relationship with the GCC is perhaps unsurprising in that regard.

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