



### REVITALIZING ALLIANCES: QATAR-GULF RECONCILIATION

By  
**Arhama Siddiq**  
Research Fellow

Centre for Middle East & Africa (CMEA), ISSI

Edited by  
**Najam Rafique**

January 14, 2021

*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



On January 5, 2020, the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani attended the 41st Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Summit in Saudi Arabia where a rapprochement deal was signed, which officially ended the three-and-a-half-year crisis that had threatened the core of the Gulf region. Upon landing in the country, he was embraced by Muhammad bin Salman, Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince. This gesture would have been inconceivable a year ago, and given that it was amidst COVID-19 social distancing decrees, only enhanced its significance.

A day prior to this, Kuwait's state news - the country which had been the main mediator - announced that both the border and the airspace between Saudi Arabia and Qatar would reopen on the eve of the GCC Summit.<sup>1</sup>

Tensions had come to a boil in June 2017, when Saudi Arabia along with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt severed all diplomatic, trade and travel ties with Qatar. Prime among the Quartet's accusations was Doha's collusion with Iran and radical Islamist movements. The bloc had proposed thirteen demands (these included downgrading links with Iran, closing down Qatar's state news network and termination of all Turkish military presence in Qatar), which Doha absolutely rejected stating that these undermined its national sovereignty.

<sup>1</sup> "Key U.S. allies ease years-long feud as Saudi Arabia lifts blockade of Qatar," *The Washington Post*, January 5, 2021.  
[https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/saudi-arabia-qatar-gcc-feud/2021/01/04/709dda8a-4ebf-11eb-a1f5-fdaf28cfca90\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/saudi-arabia-qatar-gcc-feud/2021/01/04/709dda8a-4ebf-11eb-a1f5-fdaf28cfca90_story.html)

## Al-Ula Statement

During the GCC Summit, a “solidarity and stability” agreement, named the “Al-Ula Statement” was signed, accompanied by statements from the blockading tetrad. Egypt, a non-GCC member was represented by its foreign minister.<sup>2</sup> Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan stated that this meeting was, “the turning of the page on all points of difference” indicating that ties would be restored to the pre-embargo levels.<sup>3</sup>

The Summit which was hyped as a fresh start for brotherly solidarity in the region was also attended by outgoing President Donald Trump’s Middle East advisor Jared Kushner. It was after his and departing US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’ regional visit in December 2020 that a breakthrough in Qatar-Gulf tensions came about.

The final GCC communique affirmed the keenness of its Supreme Council on the strength and cohesion of the GCC, and the unity of its members. The Qatar-Gulf reconciliation was hailed across both the regional and international board. Turkey and Jordan immediately released statements affirming their willingness to further aid in building mutual regional confidence. Iran’s Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif applauded Qatar for its success in the face of “pressure and extortion”, and stated that Iran should not be viewed as a threat and anticipated increased chances of harmony in the backdrop of President Trump’s approaching departure.<sup>4</sup> Pakistan’s Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi held telephonic conversations with his counterparts in Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain and stated that the spirit of cooperation in the GCC Summit would herald in more collaboration and teamwork.<sup>5</sup>

## Possible Reasons for Reconciliation

- Even before President-elect Biden had won the elections, he had been very vocal in his stance against the war in Yemen and the various human rights abuses linked with the Kingdom. Thus, this could be one reason for portending the urgency of a Qatar-Gulf reconciliation so that Gulf countries could provide a unanimous stance, particularly with regards to the Biden Administration potential nuclear negotiation with Iran.

---

<sup>2</sup> “The GCC al-Ula Statement: Perhaps a step, but not a solution,” *Middle East Institute*, January 6, 2021. <https://www.mei.edu/blog/gcc-al-ula-statement-perhaps-step-not-solution>

<sup>3</sup> “Gulf leaders sign agreement to end Qatar blockade,” *Deutsche Welle*, January 4, 2021. <https://www.dw.com/en/gulf-leaders-sign-agreement-to-end-qatar-blockade/a-56128295>

<sup>4</sup> “Welcome development’: Reaction to the Qatar-GCC agreement,” *Al Jazeera*, January 5, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/1/5/qatar-blockaded-lifted-how-did-the-world-react>

<sup>5</sup> “Pakistan welcomes easing of Gulf crisis over Qatar,” *Dawn*, January 8, 2020. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1600292>

- Another reason could be that blockading Qatar was only undermining US sanctions against Iran since the latter was profiting - an estimated \$100 million annually - from letting Qatar use its airspace as an alternative route.<sup>6</sup> Reconciliation is also mutually beneficial since Qatar can now use the same money as investment money for next year's FIFA World cup.
- The reopening of borders between Qatar and Saudi Arabia will also help fuel an economic recovery especially since both countries are already immersed in national rejuvenation projects. Given the tough business conditions as a result of COVID-19, expansion and growth in the form of new trading partners is now more important than ever.

### How Qatar Came Out Stronger

Ownership of the third biggest natural gas reserves in the world coupled with its reasoned response to the crisis, helped Qatar successfully weather the blockade. Instead, it came out of the predicament with a more self-sufficient economy as well as new trading links. The country focused on its local agri-businesses, and hence developed its own competitive food security. On the foreign policy front, it deepened its relations with Turkey and Iran – both of which has provided vital support throughout - without compromising on its ties to the US or other major players. Doha even took this period to build up its armed forces by purchasing an assortment of weapons systems from the West.

Moreover, despite the cut-off, Qatar also did not engage in any activities which could cause irreparable damage to regional relations in the future. An example is how it continued to supply gas to the UAE through the Dolphin Gas Project throughout the crisis.

Even now, Qatar has made it clear that the reconciliation agreement will not impact Qatar's bilateral relationships which are, according to Qatar's Foreign Minister, Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani, "mainly driven by a sovereign decision of the country . . . [and] the national interest".<sup>7</sup>

### Conclusion

It remains to be seen whether this agreement can tape over the fault lines which have deepened over the course of three years. Even as core tensions such as Qatar's continued relations with the Muslim Brotherhood continue to linger, it will be the direction going forward which will determine whether the Al-Ufa agreement is merely a confidence building measure or the start of something of regional substance and significance which can bring value to everyone.

---

<sup>6</sup> "Gulf States Agree to End Isolation of Qatar," *The New York Times*, January 5, 2021.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/05/world/middleeast/gulf-qatar-blockade.html>

<sup>7</sup> "Qatar says deal to end Gulf crisis will not change its ties with Iran," *Financial Times*, January 7, 2021.  
<https://www.ft.com/content/ea1e7058-960d-416c-93dc-f4f8c7945c12>