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The Gulf Crisis – Developments and Tracks

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The Gulf crisis started on June 5, 2017, after Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt severed their relations with Qatar, under the pretext of Doha's relation with Iran, and alleged support for terrorist groups.

This crisis had great repercussions that went beyond the Gulf region, reaching Asia, especially on Pakistan; Africa, particularly in the Horn of Africa due to its geographical proximity to the Gulf, as well as in the Middle East region, particularly the Libyan crisis, Egypt and the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Iranian and Yemeni crises.

Therefore, reports about any real efforts to resolve the crisis would have qualitative implications on these files.

First: Crisis Tracks

There are a set of indicators for de-escalation and others for escalation, as follows:

1) De-escalation indicators

De-escalation indicators include the following:

- On November 12, 2019, the first practical indicators for de-escalation emerged when Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain announced intention to participate in the Arabian Gulf Cup "Gulf 24", held in Qatar on November 24, which represents a qualitative leap in efforts to resolve the Gulf crisis.

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- On the same day, the Emirati academic and former adviser to the UAE Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Abdul-Khalil Abdullah, said that a solution to the Gulf dispute is imminent. Abdullah's comment came a few days after statements of Kuwaiti Assistant Foreign Minister, Ahmed Nasser Al-Sabah, about a likely breakthrough in the Gulf crisis; and a few hours after a speech delivered by the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, at the Qatari Shura (consultative) Council, where he announced that Qatar is ready for dialogue to solve differences between Gulf Cooperation Council states.
- A Saudi newspaper, Elaf, reported on November 13 that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt would instruct their countries' media outlets to avoid attacking the State of Qatar in, particularly in political and sports programs.
- On November 14, reports were circulated that Trump had assigned the US ambassador to Riyadh, John Abi Zaid, and other diplomats at the State Department and White House officials to coordinate matters away from the spotlight to achieve a Gulf-Gulf reconciliation.
- During November 2019, there were increased and intensified meetings, including internal Gulf meetings, such as the visit of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to UAE for meeting with Mohammed bin Zayed; a visit paid by Saudi Deputy Minister of Defense Khalid bin Salman to Oman for meeting with Sultan Qaboos, and the visit of Kuwaiti Foreign Minister to Saudi Arabia for meeting with King Salman. There were also Gulf-Arab meetings such as the visit paid by Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi to the UAE for meeting with Mohammed

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bin Zayed; as well as other extensive meetings between international parties and various Gulf countries.

- Changing the venue of the upcoming Gulf Cooperation Council Summit, to be held in Riyadh instead of the UAE on December 10.
- The Wall Street Journal revealed that there was a secret visit paid by the Qatari foreign minister to Riyadh in September 2019, that Qatar has not denied so far.

2) Indications of escalation:

Among escalation indicators are the following:

- Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan paid a visit to Qatar on November 25, 2019, and announced establishment of a new military base in Qatar, which further agitated Saudi Arabia and the UAE; and accordingly Riyadh received a delegation from the Kurdish militias of Syrian Democratic Forces in the Kingdom.
- Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad announced on November 21 that his country would host a mini-Islamic summit, including Qatar, Turkey, Indonesia and Pakistan alongside Malaysia, and will hold its first meeting on December 19. The presence of Qatar and Turkey at the same summit carries a negative indication that may be reflected on efforts to solve the Gulf crisis.

Notes and conclusions

The crisis solution efforts this time – through Omani and Kuwaiti mediation appear different, given two things,

- Trump showed support for these endeavors unlike previous times,

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- Practical steps were taken on the ground in preparation for the solution.
- Escalation indicators may be merely intensification of the use of pressure cards in coincidence with negotiations and preparations for settlement of the crisis.
- The current endeavors relate to calming the crisis, resolving some of its files, and restoring relations to a minimum, that is, partially resolving the crisis.
- The upcoming Gulf summit may be the first official step to resolve the crisis, and not the decisive step, so that the two sides of the crisis will need more complementary steps to solve it.
- The previous Saudi-Emirati preconditions had been aimed at destroying the active roles that Qatar plays, so that Doha would remain without a real foreign policy, such as Bahrain, which Qatar has not and will never accept.
- The crisis of the siege on Qatar has already created negative repercussions and a state of intrinsic distrust that will persist even after settlement of the crisis.
- The size of the Emirati-Qatari differences greatly exceeds the Qatari-Saudi differences, which means that even with settlement of the crisis, the Qatari relations with its current opponents will not be at the same level; as they may be at their minimum level with the UAE, while they are likely to improve significantly with Saudi Arabia.

Second: Motives for Resolving the crisis

There are new motives that have emerged on the scene for resolving the Gulf crisis, pushing towards reaching a solution, most notably:

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- The presence of efforts related to Gulf normalization with Israel. Therefore, the latter as well as the United States may have played a significant role in pushing both parties, especially the Saudi and Emirati side, to back down and de-escalate the crisis with Qatar to achieve this goal.
- The Iranian threat is a common factor for most of the Gulf states, albeit at different degrees. While it is at its highest level with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, it is slightly less with the UAE, Qatar and Kuwait, and fades completely for Oman. However, the Gulf crisis, which was motivated by Qatar's relations with Iran, as its opponents claimed, has participated in boosting these ties, particularly on the political and economic levels.

The new motive for reconciliation among Gulf countries here is that Iran and the countries that represent its spheres of influence are currently witnessing a state of strong protests, threatening the Iranian influence that Tehran has been establishing over years, and even threatening its regime itself at home. In this case, the Gulf reconciliation will be a way to overcome Iran or at least compel Iranian government to sit for negotiation upon their own terms.

Third: Contents of Proposed Settlement

There are five main files that represent the focus of discussions and negotiations between the two conflicting parties to the crisis:

- The Gulf-Gulf relations.
- The Qatari-Arab relations, especially the Arab Spring countries and Egypt.
- The Turkish-Qatari relations, especially the Turkish military base.

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- The relation with Iran and engaging in American alliances against Iran.
- The Al-Jazeera TV and its coverage of internal regional events.

Among the most important files that Qatar is unlikely to abandon is its relation with Turkey. At least, it is difficult to make major concessions in this regard, especially as relations between the two countries have reached a new level of strategic alliance. However, the debate here is focusing on the Turkish military base in Qatar, especially after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's latest visit to Qatar, where he visited the Turkish base, sent messages from there, and announced establishment of another base in Qatar. In this regard, it seems that Qatar also wanted to send certain messages to its opponents that the Turkish military bases in Qatar and the nature of Qatari relations with Turkey are not subject to negotiation.

As for the rest of the files, there may be a degree of de-escalation, but on a gradual basis; and it seems that the first stage has already begun, especially in the Gulf-Gulf relations, amid a relative media calm between the two parties recently.

As for the file of Egypt and the Muslim Brotherhood, Qatar had a previous precedent in this file in 2014, when it asked some Brotherhood leaders to leave Doha, and in December of the same year, Al Jazeera Mubasher Misr TV was closed. These measures were part of a settlement with Qatar at the time under pressure from the Gulf states. Considering the recent secret visit paid by the Qatari Foreign Minister to Saudi Arabia, the Brotherhood file is likely to witness

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some changes, but this will not be in the primary stage, especially amid continued Egyptian-Qatari escalation at present.

In light of the Saudi attrition in the Yemeni crisis, amid a partial UAE withdrawal and talk about a Saudi-Houthi de-escalation, it is unlikely that Qatar will re-engage in this crisis militarily.

On the Libyan crisis, where the Gulf tension reflected negatively on the issue, where each side intensified its military and logistical support to conflicting Libyan parties, the settlement of the Gulf crisis may reflect positively on the situation in Libya, amid increasing international and American pressure to solve the crisis.

It seems that occurrence of a change in the Iranian file is most likely, taking into account that Qatar has not gone so far in its relation with Iran, which makes it likely to take a step back.

Also, it is unlikely that Qatar will close Al-Jazeera; but it is most likely to conduct some changes in the network's policy.

The Egyptian file, the Muslim Brotherhood, and other files are likely to come later.

Recommendations

- Qatar should not abandon its relations with Turkey, as its alliance with Ankara has become a security and geostrategic necessity, especially Turkey's military bases, for fear of occurrence of a more disastrous and dangerous crisis in the

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future – if this crisis has ever been resolved – which makes the Turkish presence in Qatar stand as a deterrent factor in this regard.

- Saudi Arabia should realize the necessity of backing down from some policies, especially if these policies not only threaten its role and status, but also threaten its survival and stability, such as the Yemeni file. Riyadh must also realize that it is not necessary to stand side by side with the UAE in all issues, even those that do not serve the common interests.
- The UAE must be aware that no country can play a role that significantly exceeds limits of its power and potential; and in such case its retreat will be inevitable at a certain stage, whether voluntarily or involuntarily.
- Kuwait and Oman should continue the policy of positive neutrality to preserve stability of the Gulf through mediation for ending differences whenever they appear.