

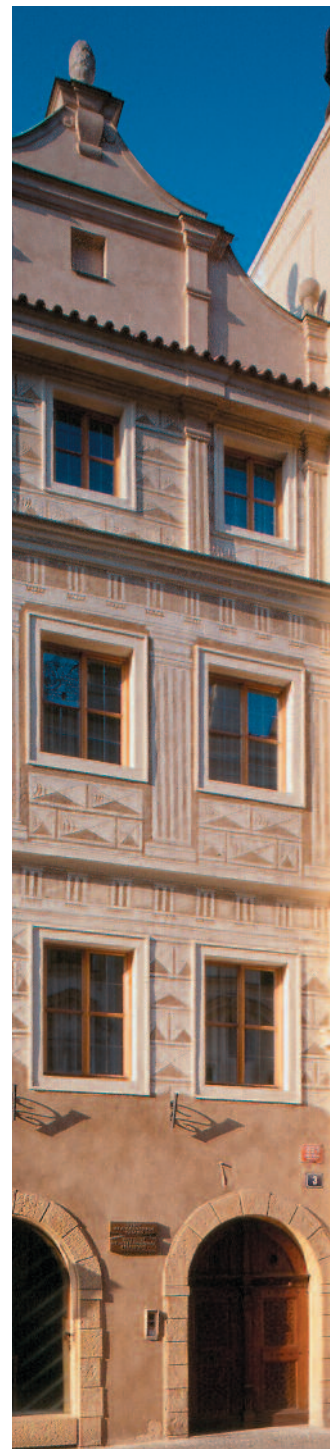
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Turmoil in Egypt: a Proxy Cold War¹ among the Gulf States?

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Arab states of the Persian Gulf have played a huge role in the unfolding developments of the Arab Spring, especially in Egypt. Based on many pieces of evidence, we can set up an analytical framework for investigating the transformations of Egyptian politics between 2011 and 2013, according to which the turmoil was basically a proxy cold war fought by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait on one hand, and Qatar on the other.

Although the Gulf agreement signed in April 2014 clearly shows the inevitability of the defeat of Qatar, Doha will remain an important player in the region, while the rebound of the Muslim Brotherhood is now unimaginable without the support of the tiny country.



Introduction

Almost every narrative which is used by analysts and journalists to describe and typify the unfolding process in Egypt holds a common element: they see the events as clear evidence of the continuous decrease of American influence in the country and in the broader region as well. It is obvious that the U.S. is not among those countries which roll the dices in the North African country: Washington lacks a clear strategy and the necessary means to shape the ongoing events in Egypt.

But if the world's number one economic and military power is currently not among those which determine the future of Egypt, then which ones are? Which countries have the greatest leverage over the events? What kind of external rivalry sets the agenda in Egypt?

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Many pieces of evidence indicate that the Gulf countries, primarily Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on the one hand, and Qatar on the other, have

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fought a proxy cold war with each other in Egypt between 2011 and 2013. They have undoubtedly been present in Egypt financially and logistically, supporting one side or the other, backing the parties

and subsidizing the Egyptian economy, and therefore their role is of major importance when one tries to foresee the future of the North African country.

This paper aims at analyzing the role and behavior of the Gulf states and their primary interests and goals in the Egyptian conflict. While the topic contains several methodological challenges – primarily because of its unresolved and constantly changing nature – we are trying to build up a unique narrative for the past three years in order to improve our understanding of what actually happened in Egypt.

Analysis

An alliance in need: the relations between Egypt and the Gulf before 2011

Before the 2011 revolution, the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Egypt shared a lot of common interests and security concerns. As they were part of the pro-Western, anti-Islamist Sunni block in the Middle East, the stability and security of

these countries were tied to the American presence in and support for the Middle East. Since the Islamic revolution of 1979 in Tehran, the Gulf countries were squeezed between two aggressive and hostile governments, the Iraqi and the Iranian government, both of which made territorial claims towards and ideologically criticized the Gulf regimes.² In spite of the clear fact that Saudi Arabia and Egypt, with their different political and ideological systems, competed against each other for dominance over the Sunni Arab world, we can say that a strong Egypt, as a moderate, heavyweight Sunni Arab country without any hostile intention towards the Gulf, was in the interest of the Gulf monarchies. The reason behind this is that a forceful Cairo would have been able to neutralize the dual threat of the Iraqi-Iranian rivalry. Unfortunately for them, though, the country was not able to play this role after the rapid shrinking of its regional influence in the 1980s.³ On the other hand, with its regional ambitions and decreasing leverage in the Arab world after Camp David, Egypt welcomed the friendly and generous intentions of the Gulf countries. At the same time, though, the Gulf countries were also suspicious of not just Shia groups and countries, but Islamists as well, since both Egypt and the Peninsula had experienced severe domestic crises because of their own internal religious oppositions.

The need for a mutually beneficial cooperation manifested itself in two key events in the early 1990s – firstly, in the staunch Egyptian support of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in the Second Gulf War (for which the Gulf countries expressed their gratitude with a \$6.7 billion loan to Egypt)⁴ and, secondly, in the signing of the so-called Damascus Declaration,⁵ which “*established a nominal military alliance between the Gulf Arab states, Egypt, and Syria*”.⁶ Although this agreement did not become a reality, it clearly showed the recognition of the mutual security concerns by all the parties. The position of Egypt in the alliance network of the GCC even strengthened after the relations between Syria and Saudi Arabia deteriorated because of Damascus’ support for Iran and its presumable participation in the murder of the Lebanese ex-PM Rafic Hariri, who was considered a reliable friend of Riyadh.⁷

Although the Gulf countries are usually viewed as a somewhat homogeneous security block with particular geopolitical circumstances, they have different foreign interests and goals. The source of their disagreements can be tracked down to the lack of trust and the domestic, historical and social differences among them, and it can easily be seen in their different approaches towards Iran. While Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain and Abu Dhabi, all of which contain significant Shia communities,⁸ see Tehran as a clear threat to their national security, Oman, Qatar and Dubai, with their historical, cultural and commercial ties with Tehran, are less hostile to the Islamic Republic.⁹ As Iran is the cornerstone of the security environment of the Gulf, this disagreement has severe consequences in other fields as well. The divisions between the GCC countries became more visible with the 1995 soft coup in Qatar, after which the new emir Hamad bin

Khalifa Al Thani implemented a new foreign policy, which is very different from that of the other countries. This new agenda includes an opening towards Iran and Sunni Is-

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lamist forces (among others) in order to gain regional influence and strengthen the regime stability at home.

In the 1990s, the signs of this division inside the GCC came to the surface regarding Egypt as well. Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the influential Egyptian Islamic theologian,¹⁰

who was imprisoned by King Farouq and by Gamal Abdul Nasser as well, lived in Qatar since the early 1960s.¹¹ After the 1995 coup, the new Qatari leadership supported the establishment of the Al-Jazeera television network and the IslamOnline website, both of which became influential among the Islamic public. The name of al-Qaradawi is attached to both media (for example, he has a programme on Al-Jazeera called *Sharia and Life*); these platforms helped al-Qaradawi to reach publics all over the world.¹² Besides the Qatari generosity towards al-Qaradawi, the Gulf countries had stood completely behind Mubarak's regime before the revolution.

Reactions and check-diplomacy: the activity of the Gulf countries during the Egyptian revolution

After the outburst of the 2011 revolution in Egypt, it was clear from day one that the Gulf countries have different opinions about the events taking place. As was foreseeable, Saudi King Abdullah quickly expressed his country's support for Mubarak. On the 29th of January, he said,¹³ *"no Arab or Muslim can tolerate any meddling in the security and stability of Arab and Muslim Egypt by those who infiltrated the people in the name of freedom of expression, exploiting it to inject their destructive hatred. (...) As they condemn this, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and its people and government declares [sic] it stands with all its resources with the government of Egypt and its people."*

Such a Saudi approach was not surprising – the foreign policy of Riyadh has long been characterized by fighting against Islamists abroad, mainly through political and financial support.¹⁴ Moreover, the Saudi government has always seen the Muslim Brotherhood as an ideological foe, since the two sides' interpretations of Islam hugely differ.¹⁵ We could say that backing Mubarak against a revolution with a fear of the rise of the Brotherhood is natural from the Saudi point of view.

Other Gulf countries were also active regarding the Egyptian events. In February 2011, the foreign minister of the UAE issued an ambiguous statement about the revolution.

He confirmed his country's *"confidence in the ability of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces in running the country's affairs in these delicate circumstances in such a way that would realize aspirations and hopes of the Egyptian people"*.¹⁶ Comparing the statements of Abdullah and the UAE foreign minister, we can clearly see that they were driven by different ideas: the Saudi king's quote does not accept the revolution as a way for the Egyptian people to stand up for their "aspirations and hopes", but he rather sees it as a quasi-provocation and a deception of Islamist forces. However, the words of the UAE's foreign minister are also supportive towards the military, so we cannot say that the federal state was completely on the side of the revolution.

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At the same time, the official comment of the Qatari Royal Council was very distant from this view. According to the BBC,¹⁷ the emir called the resignation of Mubarak *"a positive, important step toward the Egyptian people's aspirations of achieving democracy and reform and a life of dignity"*. The tone of the Qatari message was more like that of a Turkish or a Western statement rather than that of an authoritarian leader.

After the resignation of Mubarak, the cracks on the longstanding Saudi-Egyptian alliance became visible. Before the elections took place, the Saudis promised to send financial help to Egypt, but later in 2012 there were some intense diplomatic disputes between Cairo and Riyadh regarding the mistreatment of Egyptian pilgrims on Saudi soil and the arrest of Ahmed el-Gezawari, an Egyptian lawyer, in Saudi Arabia because of his alleged possession of a banned anxiety drug.¹⁸ In fact, the Saudi ambassador had to be recalled for a short period of time because of the overwhelming public anger in Egypt against the Kingdom.

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The situation got more interesting after the 2012 elections. The results were welcomed by the GCC, but at that time there was no major government that would publicly criticize the victory of Morsi.¹⁹ It was quite meaningful that after losing the elections, Ahmed Safiq, Mubarak's ex-PM, almost immediately flew to the UAE.²⁰ However, Qatar's emir was among the first leaders who congratulated the first democratically elected president of Egypt. The words quickly transformed into money: during Morsi's year as president, Doha poured almost \$8 billion into Egypt, becoming one of the most important supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood's government. Egypt was

not the only country in which Doha subsidized some factions of the Islamic opposition: the Syrian and the Libyan “brothers” received help from Qatar too.²¹

Though the Saudi government was not highly enthusiastic about the events, they tried to maintain a stable relationship with Morsi. The new Egyptian president flew to Riyadh in July 2012 to negotiate with the Saudi leadership. *“Whoever [...] the Egyptian president [is], the Saudis know they have to deal with Egypt and have good relations with Egypt”*, said a Saudi commentator.²² This observation, however, is contradicted by the fact that Riyadh did not open its checkbook for Egypt during the Morsi presidency.²³

The true feelings of the Saudi leadership about the Muslim Brotherhood came to the surface after the removal of Morsi by the military. After the takeover, King Abdullah congratulated the interim head of state Adli Mansour. The words of the UAE foreign minister on this topic were also telling: *“the great Egyptian army was able to prove again that they are the fence of Egypt and that they are the protector and strong shield that guarantee [sic] Egypt will remain a state of institutions and law”*.²⁴ Bahrain also shortly

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followed its neighbors in supporting the military.²⁵

After the coup, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the UAE (primarily Abu Dhabi) agreed to give Egypt an aid package worth \$12 billion, includ-

ing a huge shipment of crude and diesel oil worth \$200 million. Interestingly enough, the Saudi government has been accused of giving the Egyptian army, namely General el-Sisi, \$1 billion in order to help him smite the Brotherhood.²⁶ The General is not a stranger to the Saudi government: long ago he worked as a military attaché in Riyadh.²⁷ The Saudis also wanted to neutralize the role of the United States when they promised the military that they would replace any aid cut off by Washington.²⁸

The motives and goals of the parties

After looking over these facts we can clearly see that the Gulf countries are divided over Egypt: Qatar is supporting the Muslim Brotherhood, while Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates are backing the military. With their generous financial support, the Gulf countries became the main financiers of both sides. While the U.S. provides only \$1.5 billion to Egypt annually, the Morsi government received \$8 billion from Qatar, and the new military leadership will get \$12 billion from other Gulf countries.²⁹ The difference between these numbers is meaningful.

But what is the reason behind the Gulf countries fighting each other in Egypt? Why are they spending their money on such a chaotic situation where anything could happen? Why is Egypt so important for the Gulf countries that they are willing to pay billions of

dollars to protect their interests in it? The main motives can be summarized in the following points:

- *Qatar's foreign policy:* It is easy to see that since Sheikh Hamad overthrew his father in 1995 and became the emir of Qatar, his most important foreign policy aim was to differentiate Qatar from its neighbors and to gain as much regional leverage as he could.³⁰ In spite of the conservative low-profile checkbook diplomacy of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE, Qatar implemented a harsh, loud and proactive foreign policy, which included finding new allies and building new relations. According to the Qatari leadership, Sunni Islamist movements³¹ could become useful allies for the country against Doha's huge Saudi neighbor if they seize power in Middle Eastern countries; on the other hand, supporting such groups as the Muslim Brotherhood could be a popular step at home; it could be important for the Qatari regime's legitimacy, as the Qatari public feels displeasure about the government's alliance with the U.S.³²
- *The domestic problems in the conservative Gulf countries:* Since the beginning of the Arab Spring, the Gulf monarchs have been more suspicious about internal groups criticizing the regimes and not without any reason, since such powerful anti-establishment movements had been unprecedented for decades.³³ This tendency was avoided in Qatar, while in other countries the voices calling for a more transparent governance made the authorities implement serious measures. In Saudi Arabia many of the organizers of the 2012 Saudi petition calling for a constitutional monarchy were imprisoned, and the 2012 protests of the Shia minority in the Eastern Province of the Kingdom were answered with "*a combination of heavy security and negotiations*".³⁴ At the same time, in the United Arab Emirates 70 people were jailed in 2013 on the grounds that they were participating in an Islamist group, and another 30 people (including Egyptian citizens) were arrested for unauthorized fundraising for the Muslim Brotherhood in the UAE.³⁵ It is easy to see that these countries consider the strengthening of the Muslim Brotherhood as a regional phenomenon which threatens their domestic security; therefore they are willing to fight against it. What we can see here is a different perception of national security by the Gulf states.
- *The role of Iran:* According to some analysts, the mutual sympathy between Morsi and Tehran was the most important reason behind the army overthrowing the president. In February 2013 the visit of Ahmadinejad in Cairo and his promise to defend Egypt against any attack³⁶ were very suspicious for the Generals and for the Gulf states as well. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Abu Dhabi saw Morsi as a new ally of Tehran who had to be eliminated. On the other hand, the primary motivation of Qatar, which has more ties with Iran but sees Tehran without any illusions, is to pacify the unfriendly relationship between the Islamic Republic and the other Middle East countries. Having a Sunni Arab leader who is friendly with both Iran and Israel at the same time would have been a positive step regarding this factor.

- *Relations with Hamas:* Since the late 1990s, Qatar has been regarded as a supporter of Hamas.³⁷ Supporting Hamas is a rather questionable move in the Sunni Arab countries due to the Palestine organization's good relation with Tehran. However, as Hamas started to stand beside the Syrian rebels, Iran cut its funding for it (which amounted to \$20 million a month),³⁸ which made the Palestine organization search for new financiers. Since Hamas and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood have an outstanding relationship, it was evident that the Morsi-led Egypt would be a fine ally for it.³⁹ This change was rather comfortable for Qatar as well, since Doha competed with Iran for influence over Palestine for years. With the overthrow of Morsi, however, Hamas probably lost its new supporter, which puts pressure on the Palestine organization to move closer to Tehran again. This would cause serious harm to Qatar's leverage in the Gaza Strip.

Conclusion

With all these aspects in mind, an analytical narrative can be set up for Egypt which would interpret the events as a proxy cold war by the Gulf states against each other in

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the period between 2011 and 2013.⁴⁰ In general, this rivalry has two main motives: on the one hand, we can see different perceptions of regime security and "national" interest among the different Gulf governments; on the other

hand, a traditional power play can be observed between the tiny but ambitious Qatar and the huge but conservative Saudi Arabia (and its allies). This rivalry started before the Egyptian revolution and before the Arab Spring as well. Throughout this strife Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait became the main known financiers of the two sides in Egypt; therefore their rivalry determines the future of the Egyptian unrest.

But by 2014, it looks like the competition is basically over because of two dominant factors. Firstly, the domestic and international position of the Egyptian army is currently far better than that of the Muslim Brotherhood, and so for the time being we cannot expect a comeback of the organization.

Secondly, the Saudis are clearly moving forward to win the rivalry with Qatar. The signs of the coming of this future triumph are numerous. At the end of June 2013, right before the army's crackdown on Morsi and the Brotherhood, a new emir, namely Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, came to power in Qatar. Many suggested that the new lead-

ership would turn the wheel of the country's foreign policy to a less activist manner, which was partly true:⁴¹ though Doha condemned the Egyptian army's crackdown on Morsi's supporters,⁴² the tone of the official Qatari comments on Egypt has clearly changed. After the ouster of Morsi, the emir congratulated the interim president Adli Mansour; at the same time a foreign ministry spokesperson said that "*Qatar will continue to respect the will and choice of the Egyptian people*".⁴³ The shift from the country's previous position is obvious.

Afterwards, however, it turned out that the change was not fundamental, since the Qatari government, along with Al-Jazeera, continued to support the Muslim Brotherhood.⁴⁴ The Gulf countries lost their patience with the tiny country, and therefore on the 5th of March, 2014, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates withdrew their diplomatic envoys from Qatar, putting huge pressure on Doha.⁴⁵ As the tension rose, many articles suggested that even the option of invading the tiny country was on the table of the Saudi decision-makers.⁴⁶

In such a turbulent situation, Riyadh had the upper ground, and therefore Doha had to withdraw. On the 17th of April, 2014, Doha agreed to a deal with the GCC countries in which the Qatari government agreed to stop backing the Muslim Brotherhood and refrain from any actions which would undermine the "interests, security and stability" of its neighbors.⁴⁷

The victory of the conservative Gulf countries had its impact on the development of Egyptian politics as well. The time frame of the Qatari power-shift is telling in itself. The Muslim Brotherhood lost its most generous ally on the 25th of June, 2013; eight days later the Saudi-backed Egyptian army announced the end of Morsi's presidency. Because of the overlap of the two events, we cannot establish any certain causality between them; it is possible that as the new Qatari emir turned away from the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Sisi felt secure enough to overthrow Morsi; but we can also imagine that since Doha knew that the army would crack down on the Muslim Brotherhood, it tried to publicly distance itself from the soon-to-be fallen president. And, of course, it is also plausible that such causality does not exist in this case at all, and everything we can see here is accidental.

Nevertheless, we can be sure about one thing. Without the financial and moral support of Qatar, the Muslim Brotherhood's chance to rebound is shrinking. Doha is currently in a delicate situation. On the one hand, they want to move away from the imprisoned Morsi; but on the other, they cannot break all their ties with the Muslim Brotherhood at once.

In conclusion there is some evidence that suggests that Doha can play a very important role with a wide set of soft power tools; nonetheless, when it comes to power politics, its fragile geopolitical situation and its vulnerability to its only inland neighbor, Saudi Arabia, make it impossible for the tiny country to make a stand. The proxy cold war

which was fought by Doha and Riyadh in Egypt looks to be over, with not much of a chance for Qatar or the Muslim Brotherhood to rebound.

Final recommendations

The most important question of the near future in regard to this topic is whether Qatar will respect the agreement signed in April 2014. Doha's commitment to it is rather questionable, and therefore analysts and political decision makers should keep track of any related development.

The Muslim Brotherhood's ability to survive is also doubtful. The complete annihilation of the Egyptian branch would have a serious effect on the whole region, and therefore researchers should pay close attention to any piece of information connected with the organization.

The internal dynamics of the conservative bloc of the Gulf should also be investigated more thoroughly. Although the dominant role of Saudi Arabia is beyond any doubts, the regional influence of the smaller Gulf states is also rising, especially that of the United Arab Emirates. The political and economic elite should look for any signs which would imply that the federal state is attempting to build an image of itself as more independent from Riyadh.

Finally, analysts should examine the signs of future improvements or further deterioration of the Saudi-Qatari relationship outside Egypt. The conflicting interests of the two states undoubtedly have an effect on the regional dynamics, and therefore one cannot understand the Syrian conflict, the Iranian nuclear talks or the Middle Eastern politics itself without considering this aspect.

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Endnotes

1 This phrase was used by Simon Kerr in: Financial Times (2013) "Fall of Egypt's Mohamed Morsi is Blow for Qatari leadership", *Financial Times*, 3/7/2013. Online: <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/af5d068a-e3ef-11e2-b35b-00144feabdc0.html?siteedition=intl#axzz2cR1g8FTw>.

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