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# The "crisis in the Gulf": understanding the roots

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**In order to understand the violent campaign launched by the governments of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt against Qatar, it is necessary to look beyond trivialities such as the ransom that the Qataris allegedly paid In Iraq (to Shiite groups, in order to free more than twenty hawkers hunting in Iraqi territory) and accusations that Qatar supports terrorism. Such accusations lose credibility because they are made by actors who have done exactly that for decades. We must return to the context before the Arab Spring and how it was affected by the Great Uprising.**

During the reign of Emir Hamad Ben Khalifa Al Thani, the emirate of Qatar adopted an approach that was not very different from that adopted by Kuwait after the latter declared its independence from Great Britain, in June 1961. The declaration had outraged the Republic of Iraq, which demanded that the emirate be returned to it as part of its territory. But Kuwait took advantage of the tensions between Iraq - led by Abd el-Karim Qasim (July 1958 to February 1963) - and Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt, to get the Arab countries to accept the independence Of Kuwait, which benefited, moreover, from the protection of Great Britain. To discourage the annexationist ambitions cultivated by its Iraqi neighbour, Kuwait subsequently adopted a policy of Arab neutrality, maintaining good relations with the two poles in what was called "the Arab Cold War", namely Egypt and the Saudi kingdom.

Similarly, as is well known, Qatar historically had a tense relationship with its Saudi neighbour, especially since it declared independence from Britain in 1971. After taking power, Emir Hamad pursued a policy that sought to compensate for the small size of the emirate by strengthening its ties with the two principal axes of regional conflict as they emerged after the large deployment of US troops in the Gulf: the United States and the Republic of Iran. Qatar has also succeeded simultaneously in hosting (and funding) the most important regional air base in the United States (Al-Udeid) and in cultivating cordial relations with Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah. The policy of good relations with opposing forces has also manifested itself in the establishment by Qatar of diplomatic relations with Israel, while supporting Hamas.

During the reign of Emir Hamad, however, Qatar did not limit itself to cultivating good relations with different forces as did Kuwait, which remained neutral and passive. Qatar also used its considerable wealth to play an active role in regional policy, notably by sponsoring the Muslim Brotherhood. The Saudi kingdom, which had sponsored the Brothers since their inception in 1928, had cancelled this support, especially because of their opposition to the US intervention in the crisis between Kuwait and Iraq in 1990. The weight of Qatar's political role increased significantly with the establishment of the Al Jazeera television network, which found a wide echo among the Arab populations by giving voice to Arab voices of opposition, in particular the Muslim Brotherhood.

## **The political course of Qatar in the face of the 2011 uprisings**

When the volcano of the Great Arab Uprising erupted in 2011, Qatar was able to play a major role because of both its sponsorship of the Muslim Brotherhood and the role of the TV channel Al Jazeera. As a result, the two poles of conflict that have dominated the Arab world since then - the old regimes (in the sense of the established ones) and the Islamist fundamentalist opposition led by the Muslim Brotherhood - also gained support from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). While Saudi Arabia supported the old regimes throughout the region - with the exception of Libya where it remained neutral and Syria where sectarian (in the religious sense) elements led to an alliance between the regime of Bashar Al-Assad and Iran - Qatar supported the uprisings, especially where the Muslim

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Brotherhood was involved, except in the case of another GCC member, Bahrain, for obvious reasons (a popular uprising took place in Bahrain in February 2011 and since then repression has been unceasing). The conflict between the emirate and the kingdom became evident from the beginning of the Arab Spring, Qatar's support for the Tunisian uprising contrasted with the political asylum granted by Saudi Arabia to the deposed president of Tunisia, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

The Obama administration saw Qatar as a means to avert the danger of a radicalization of the Arab uprising that would have threatened American interests. The United States therefore bet on both sides, sometimes supporting the old regimes along with the Saudis (as in Bahrain) and sometimes attempting to contain the uprising along with Qatar through the Muslim Brotherhood and its allies (as in Tunisia and Egypt). But Qatar's role in encouraging Washington to adopt a policy of seduction with regard to the uprisings aroused Saudi Arabia's indignation and scandalized the United Arab Emirates, which designated the Muslim Brotherhood as public enemy number one. The pressure exerted by the two Gulf countries intensified when the bet on the Muslim Brotherhood suffered a setback: in other words, when President Mohammed Morsi was overthrown (in July 2013) by the Egyptian army and the Muslim Brotherhood was violently repressed. It was during this period that Emir Hamad decided to resign in favour of his son Tamim, the current emir; Gulf pressure reached its first peak in 2014, to force the new emir to change course.

After this peak, it seemed that the Gulf conflict had come to an end. But the agreement of the three Gulf states to support the Syrian opposition against the Assad regime strained relations between Qatar (and with it the Muslim Brotherhood) and Iran. Later, Qatar participated in the military campaign against the alliance established between Ali Abdullah Saleh (in power from 1990 to 2012) and the Houthis in Yemen. This was in the context of the accession of a new king to the Saudi throne, which seemed to demonstrate that agreement was possible between the members of the GCC. This trend was reinforced by the Saudi Arabian search for a time of a Sunni consensus against Iran, including the Muslim Brotherhood. This coincided with the tension between Riyadh and Cairo. This course corresponded perfectly with the policy of the Obama administration.

Nevertheless, the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States has modified the equation. The new president is favourable to a policy of confrontation and opposition to both change and revolution in the Arab region. He is also very hostile to Iran and is defining himself as a close friend of Israel. According to a correspondence from its ambassador to Washington, some of his main advisers want to put the Muslim Brotherhood on the list of terrorist groups, in agreement on this point with the United Arab Emirates. This fundamental change in the equation has led the United Arab Emirates to reconcile with al-Sissi in Egypt. Together, accompanied by the emirates and Bahrain, they have launched the current frenzied attack on Qatar with a view to imposing a radical change in its policy.

This last episode reflects almost completely the retreat of the Great Arab Uprising and the counter-attack against the uprising launched by the old regimes throughout the region, supported in most countries by the Gulf axis and by Iran in Syria and Yemen. But a new wave of revolution will inevitably arise sooner or later (and its warning signs are already visible in Morocco and Tunisia). When it breaks out, no one will be able to contain it, and Riyadh and Abu Dhabi may well regret having eliminated the role of Qatar in this domain.

PS. On June 20, 2017, at a press briefing by State Department spokesman Heather Nauert, the Trump administration is having "doubts" about the reasons given by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and their allies, mainly because of the "support for terrorism" by Qatar, which triggered a serious air and naval blockade. Is a change in attitude by the US administration being announced? As Al Jazeera reports in English, it would be unwise to forget that the United States has the Al-Udeid military base. It is home to more than 100 operational aircraft and more than 11,000 US and allied military personnel. The BBC, on 15 June 2017, announced the purchase by Qatar from the United States of fifteen F-15 combat aircraft for a sum of 12 billion dollars. A little more than for the hawkers. Qatar's ambassador to the United States, Meshal Hamad al-Thani, welcomed the statements of the State Department, adding in a tweet: "We are confident in the ability of the United States to resolve this crisis."

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