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## The 44th GCC Summit in Qatar: A Brief Review

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### *Introduction*

Leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) will gather in Doha, Qatar, on Tuesday, December 5 for the GCC's 44<sup>th</sup> Supreme Council Summit. The GCC Supreme Council meeting is held among the rulers of the GCC member states, and its hosting rotates among the member states annually. The Doha Summit is the first to be held outside Saudi Arabia since 2018 and the first to be hosted in Doha since the Al-Ula Declaration was signed in January 2021 between Qatar on one side and Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on the other, thus ending the three-year Gulf crisis.

While the GCC Summit in Doha is expected to consolidate Qatar's rapprochement with the GCC after the Gulf crisis, it is most important that the summit showcases GCC members' commitment to more substantial and cohesive regional cooperation. To this end, this year's GCC Summit will likely involve discussion of deferred projects, which have been on hold because of the crisis. Yet, Gulf leaders must also brainstorm ways to coordinate efforts and overcome disagreements on political and strategic issues, especially regarding the ongoing war in Gaza. As

Qatar prepares to host the 44<sup>th</sup> GCC Summit, the following sections delve into details regarding its challenges and opportunities.

### *Intra-Gulf Relations between Two Summits*

The last time Doha hosted the GCC Supreme Council meeting was in 2014 for the 35<sup>th</sup> Summit, which took place under exceptional circumstances and within days of restoring diplomatic relations with Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. The 2014 diplomatic crisis among Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain on one side and Qatar on the other was the sharpest dispute among the organization's members since its inception. The three former countries accused Qatar of supporting the Muslim Brotherhood and of interference in the internal affairs of other member states. They also demanded the shutdown of the Al-Jazeera Media Network for its Arab Spring coverage.

The unprecedented dispute and the tense regional atmosphere resulting from the Arab Spring dominated the agenda of the 35<sup>th</sup> meeting. It focused on the strategic challenges facing the region and entailed substantial discussions of Arab affairs, including

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<sup>1</sup> All articles published under "Gulf Insights" series have been discussed internally but they reflect the opinion and views of the authors, and do not reflect the views of the Center, the College of Arts and Sciences or Qatar University, including the terms and terminology used in this publication.

fighting terrorism and restoring order to the Arab world after the Arab Spring and the unrest in Egypt, Syria, and Yemen. During the summit, it was clear that Gulf rulers were unwilling to make any commitments to ongoing regional projects because of continuing disagreements within the organization. Ultimately, the final communiqué put all topics from previous summit agendas on hold. Accordingly, the final communiqué reasserted GCC countries' unified position on fighting terrorism and assured the "full support of the Egyptian government and people in achieving stability and prosperity." Because of the lack of progress toward projects and ongoing tensions, the 35<sup>th</sup> Summit's main achievement was simply to bring the member states together once more to discuss mutually important topics.

However, the summit failed to unify Gulf rulers beyond the final communiqué, and the foreign policy paths of its members later increasingly diverged. The Summit's efforts at regional reconciliation have clearly done nothing to address the core differences between its member states. As a result, shortly after the 2014 reconciliation, the Gulf witnessed a second diplomatic crisis in mid-2017. This time, severing diplomatic relations resulted in four Arab countries—Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt, and the UAE—declaring a sea, land, and air blockade on Qatar. The blockade aimed to isolate Qatar from the Gulf and pressure its leadership to realign its foreign policies with the GCC

countries. It was not until the 41<sup>st</sup> meeting of the Supreme Council that the leaders of the six-member Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) signed the Al-Ula Declaration to end the Gulf crisis.

While progress of the GCC has historically been limited and slow, GCC leaders may benefit from the stability established by the declaration. In fact, the Al-Ula Declaration is more profound in its implications than the Riyadh Supplementary Agreement of 2014. Since the declaration, GCC leaders seem to be open to engaging in greater dialogue about their differences as well as mitigating regional tensions. Various high-level meetings and visits took place across the Gulf, focusing on confidence-building and ways to improve bilateral ties, with some resulting in strategic bilateral dialogues. Most recently, Qatar and Bahrain announced that construction work would begin on the deferred Bahrain-Qatar Bridge.

In a broader context, GCC states are also witnessing a regional de-escalation, with Iran and Saudi Arabia agreeing to reestablish diplomatic relations earlier this year. At the same time, Saudi, Emirati, and Turkish relationships are also witnessing a breakthrough, with emergent signs of commitment to greater cooperation. For almost a decade, the competing regional agendas of Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran have fueled instability in the region, triggering intraregional and inter-regional conflicts. Over the course of this decade, regional disagreements

among the Gulf States over their foreign policy positions and security threats have overshadowed the progress of the integration process itself, driving a security-concentrated regional agenda with little concentration on the economic and social aspects of regional cooperation, particularly the full implementation of the Unified Economic Agreement.

The change in the regional atmosphere will likely balance the GCC's focus between its external and internal agendas. In principle, the GCC is likely to benefit from this new political atmosphere and to redirect its energy toward more intraregional cooperation. Hence, the meeting is expected to deliver GCC-focused agenda outcomes by reviving deferred regional projects and restoring public trust in the organization.

### *A Promising Agenda*

Many media reports have indicated that a Pan-GCC visa is on the table for approval by Gulf leaders during the summit. GCC Secretary General Jassim Al-Budaiwi first announced the Unified GCC Tourist Visa Project at the 40<sup>th</sup> meeting of Their Highnesses and Excellences the Interior Ministers of the GCC. The announcement also indicated that the visa is expected to come into effect between 2024 and 2025 across the member states.

The proposed unified visa system for the region grants access to travelers

under a single entry visa, streamlining the procedures for intraregional mobility. The project is inspired by the application of the *hayya* visa during the 2022 World Cup tournament 2022. The *hayya* visa under special measurements allowed visitors from across the region and the world to enter certain Gulf states and enjoy the tournament.

The project is likely to simplify travel logistics across the region and strengthen the tourism sector in the member states. The move is also projected to address the longstanding logistical hurdles to further economic cooperation among member states. Most importantly, it is considered a breakthrough away from the competition between member states, which has dominated the region for the last decade.

### *A Challenging Disagreement*

Despite the promising agenda, disagreements remain a major threat to the summit's success. The war raging in Gaza since October 7 is likely to overshadow the summit and split opinions within the organization. The unfolding humanitarian catastrophe, which has fundamentally divided the world between supporting Israel or Hamas, has much more profound implications for the GCC. For the last few years, the GCC member states were at odds over the normalization of individual states' ties with Israel, yet these disagreements remained passive

and had no clear focus. However, the Gaza war brings this disagreement to the fore, forcing GCC leaders to reach a common agreement regarding their relationship with Israel, at least for the final communiqué.

More specifically, Qatar is leading international efforts toward a ceasefire in Gaza and has opened communication channels with Hamas and Israel. Qatar is seeking to strengthen its position as a reliable and strong mediator—a position not fully appreciated by the Emirati and Bahraini leadership. In contrast, Bahrain and the UAE, which signed the Abrahamic Accords with Israel in 2020, are taking a much softer position in condemning the Israeli attacks in Gaza. It is understandable that neither country wishes to risk their longer-term relationship with Israel or to threaten their position in leading the construction of a new Middle East.

Still, there is international pressure from GCC allies and from the public for the member states to take a clear and unified position on the Gaza war. Questions will also arise about the extent of the member states' support for Qatar's position as an international mediator, especially with respect to its relationship with Hamas. It is thus unlikely that the summit's final communiqué will present a bold position on the war due to the varying approaches of the member states.

### *Conclusion*

The 44th Supreme Council Meeting to be hosted in Doha faces great pressure from the public to present a fresh agenda. Since the Gulf crisis, public lack of trust in the GCC has persisted, and it has lost most of its public support. However, regional stability will likely inspire Gulf rulers to further establish intraregional cooperation and to move forward with suspended projects. Nevertheless, Gulf leaders must not fall into a stalemate over conflicting views of the Gaza war and must instead work to mitigate any arising disagreements.

### **About the author**

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### **About the Gulf Insights series**

The "Gulf Insights" series is published by the Gulf Studies Center on a weekly base with the aim to promote informed debate with academic depth. The Gulf Insights are commentaries on pressing regional issues written by the GSC/GSP faculty, staff PhD and MA students, as well as guest scholars, and they can be between 1,200 to 1,500 words.

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