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Qatar: The End of a Blockade, The start of a New Era

Mahjoob Zweiri and Farah Al Qawasmi

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Introduction

When the news broke out locally that a few of the most influential countries of the Gulf, as well as Egypt, imposed a land, sea and air blockade, panic prevailed. However, the panic slowly contracted as the State of Qatar worked on first containing, then stabilizing the economic effects of the blockade, as well as bringing the society together during this strange and unfamiliar Gulf political dispute. During the three and a half years of the blockade, Qatar demonstrated a shift and an improvement in its internal and foreign policies, and quickly expanded its economic activities locally and internationally. This report will present the reader with Qatar's resilience strategy, its strengths and its weakness, as well as its opportunities and threats. The report will also conclude with a number of policy recommendations that could be useful for local stakeholders, seeing that the blockade is officially coming to an end, and seeing the potential of unraveling major opportunities to the state and its society.

Implications of the Blockade

On 5 June 2017, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, the Kingdom of Bahrain, and Egypt imposed a blockade on the State of Qatar. The conflict, and the extent of the implications of the blockade was new to the Gulf Region, as the region

had never witnessed such a political dispute since the Gulf War that took place between Kuwait and Iraq in the early 1990s. The insinuations of the blockade had several political, social and economic consequences mainly targeted at the Qatari state and society.

On a political level, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain started off by withdrawing their ambassadors from Qatar, and the latter followed through by doing the same. This was not the first time such action was taken, as a similar incident took place in 2014. However, not only were the ambassadors withdrawn at the start of the conflict, but Saudi Arabia immediately suspended the Qatari troops from the [GCC led coalition](#). Following on from that, all of the Gulf citizens residing in the GCC countries involved in the dispute were advised to return to their home countries, mainly within 14 days from the start of the conflict. This effected the Gulf societies the most, as employees, students and most importantly, families of mixed marriages were forced to leave behind their lives, and return to their home countries, not knowing when and if they would ever be able to resume their lives as they were. Immediately after the breakout of the Gulf dispute, many officials of the blockading countries came out to the public making allegations towards Qatar and Al Jazeera Network. In addition to that, residents of those countries were criminalized and punished with a prison

sentence or a fine if they [publically displayed any sympathy towards Qatar](#).

There was an evident ongoing war taking place on several media outlets especially those in Qatar and the UAE. Amongst the main allegations presented against Qatar, was Qatar's support to Islamic groups that are considered [terrorist movements by the Gulf States](#). In addition to that, there were multiple allegations made against the Qatari based Al Jazeera and the network's approach, its broadcasting of regional news, and the influence that it exerts on the region. In response to Al Jazeera, news networks such as Sky news, which is co-owned by Abu Dhabi and the UK, made outrageous allegations via a [documentary accusing Qatar of having supported the 9/11 attacks](#). This type of media coverage was intended to scrutinize Qatar in the eyes of the other Gulf countries, as no constructive or fair media coverage was allowed to be broadcasted. Attacking Qatar on the media was not only directed to political figures, but it also involved prominent social figures. Popular Saudi Arabian and Emirati singers with a large Gulf fan base were asked to release songs criticizing Qatar and its political actions in the region. The song "Teach Qatar", which written by Turki Al Shiakh, a prominent Saudi Arabian Politician, was immediately taken down as part of the reconciliation attempts post blockade. However, this song received diverse feedback as some Saudi Arabians condemned it while others tried to justify the reason behind releasing it. However, when a Qatar national was asked about her song, her reaction could summarize the feelings of most of the citizens from the countries involved in the blockade as she said, "[They can delete whatever](#)

[they want to but it will still remain in memory](#)."

Out of the three effects that the blockade had on Qatar, political, social and economic, the economic effects were feared and observed the most. As a nation of small size that relays heavily on imported goods, the closing of its main trade routes, through Saudi Arabia's air and sea methods, or the UAE's Jebel Ali port, which previously acted as some of Qatar's main trade access routes, hindered Qatar's import and export activities. The immediate closure of Qatar's main import and export routes surfaced a problematic reality for Qatar, which was its lack of self-sufficiency. However, the intended outcomes of the blockade on Qatar were not achieved, as Qatar demonstrated strong resilient socio economic and political strategies.

Although the small state of Qatar was perceived as vulnerable to the GCC conflict, however it [managed its vulnerability by expanding the regional and international partners, managing their oil and gas resource sales, and diversifying its economy](#). As an immediate response to the blockade obstructing the importation of necessity consumables, Qatar quickly developed alternative trade routes with Turkey and Iran for the supply of vital goods. The state of Oman also acted as an [alternative trade route](#) to Qatar as it ensured playing a peaceful and neutral role in the conflict, similar to the state of Kuwait.

There was evidence of several layers of strategic planning to ensure resilience to the blockade in Qatar. As mentioned above, Qatar first ensured alternative trade routes to secure the provision of vital goods. This quickly contained the panic that prevailed and

allowed the government to slowly and effectively come up with a strong response plan. Parallel to securing trade routes, Qatar started a large campaign in research and development targeted at the food industry, and investment in dairy and agriculture. Abdulrahman Al Khayarin, CEO of Widam, stated that the market responded positively to the blockade by increasing the production local products. They did that by investing a great amount of their resources in expanding local farms, and importing all the necessary means to the expansion.

In addition to utilizing their relationship with their current regional allies to substitute for losses of the blockade, Qatar expanded its relationship with neighboring and international countries as well. During 2018, Qatar initiated new agreements for the sales of their most important asset, liquefied natural gas (LNG). These contracts included deals with countries in south East Asia, Vietnam and Bangladesh, ramping up the sales of LNG.

On a local level, many were concerned that the already slowing down sector of construction would further face disruption during the Gulf dispute. Many construction companies relied heavily on importing raw material by land, sea and air from the neighboring [UAE and Saudi Arabia](#). Qatar responded to the need for construction material by easing the requirements of importing goods through trade channels with Turkey and other neighboring states. In return, local construction companies started seeking trade agreements with other countries and suppliers, as well as increasing the production of local raw materials.

All in all, Qatar's economic resilience strategy quickly responded to domestic and foreign expenditures and needs. Whether it was through greater government spending in the compulsory development of existing public and private local sectors, or whether it was seen in the form of ministry budget cuts and articulate foreign investments, Qatar was able to face and contain economic obstacles of the blockade. During the blockade, Shaikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani, the Emir of the State of Qatar, made several media appearances addressing the Qatari Society on the blockade and its effects on Qatar. In one of his last speeches, Shaikh Tamim stated [overcoming the blockade](#) with effective national programs, the expansion of the food, agriculture, health and educational sectors, as well as improving government spending and prioritizing certain national projects. Shaikh Tamim ensured his society that the state of Qatar has stood against the intended economic magnitude of the blockade, are working towards self-sufficiency, and are closer to achieving the state's 2030 national vision.

Qatar and the Region after the blockade

The 41st GCC summit, that took place on 23 December 2020, and concluded on 5 January 2021 might have put an end to the GCC blockade on Qatar, but certainly did not highlight or address the root causes that lead to political rift that occurred between the Gulf States. Although the Gulf States, led by Saudi Arabia, had put down a number of political demands to end the dispute, Qatar did not compromise its past or current political stances towards

countries such as Iran and Turkey, or its support to regional Islamist Movements. In fact the demands were not revisited during the summit and were not brought up afterwards in any public statement made by either side of the conflict.

Having said that, there are a number of factors that can be drawn from the Gulf blockade, followed by policy recommendations to the state of Qatar. The main factor that has been observed by the regional and international community is that Qatar, as well as the rest of the Gulf States were able to reinforce their economies during the blockade. Although there was great dependency by Qatar on its neighboring states, the blockade has allowed it to gain more dependency economic, but to also continue pursuing independent foreign policies. This could potentially present great opportunities to the Gulf as a whole as each stronger independent state can create a [stronger unified gulf cooperation](#). Therefore, it could be extremely advantageous for Qatar and its neighboring states to revisit the concept of a Gulf Integration without compromising each other's foreign policies. This could enhance a modern agreement that goes in line with recent political developments in the region, as well as agreeing on mutual political, social and economic goals and priorities.

In addition to that, and in order for Qatar to continue achieving its goals, it is highly recommended for the state to continue prioritizing their local projects and expenditures, and diversifying their local and international investments. This strategy proved to be one of the most successful strategies in assisting Qatar in overcoming the

challenges that came along with the Gulf dispute. Although the blockade slightly slowed down one of Qatar's main fields, which is construction, it is predicted that the construction field would slow down further prior to the World Cup. Therefore, it would be essential for Qatar to diversify its economy, creating investment opportunities for both their private and public sectors.

Finally, it is worthy to note that Qatar's foreign policy and its relationship with different international states played a massive role in reducing the impact of the blockade. Therefore, seeking political and economic allies to Qatar is essential in its state sovereignty, independence and overall strength.

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