



## PERSPECTIVES

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# The Interests Behind the Saudi-Qatar Rapprochement

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Behind the ending of the dispute between the two Gulf States stands an intense fear of Iran as well as American pressure to renew diplomatic ties. Israel must bear in mind that ties with the Gulf States are not etched in stone.**

The year 2021 began with refreshing news: after three years of a diplomatic and economic boycott of Qatar accompanied by a land blockade, Saudi Arabia and Qatar will be signing an agreement that will bring the dispute to an end. The agreement was reached with the help of the American negotiating team of Jared Kushner, Avi Berkowitz, Adam Buehler, and Brian Hook.

The dispute between Saudi Arabia and Qatar stemmed from several factors: Qatar's support for Iran, with which it shares the largest natural gas field in the world; its support for the Muslim Brotherhood, nemesis of the Saudis; and its support for anti-Saudi propaganda media outlet Aljazeera. These factors went hand in hand with a historical element: the refusal of the Thani family, which rules Qatar, to join the Saudi kingdom despite the fact that in Qatar, as in Saudi Arabia, the Hanbali school of religious law and its Wahhabi branch hold sway.

The quarrels between Riyadh and Qatar did not begin three years ago but many years earlier. However, the Saudis were unable to contain Qatar's opposition until the advent of Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, who discovered that Qatar was aiding the Houthi rebels in Yemen and decided to crack down. The ending of the dispute points to the reunification of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), an organization comprising the states of the Arabian Peninsula (excluding Yemen).

Over the past three years, messages have been passed between the Saudi and Qatari leaderships (mainly through the governments in Kuwait and Oman) in an effort to calm the tensions between the two states—both of which were aware that the dispute was weakening them in the face of Iran’s expansionism. The efforts of the Trump administration officials brought these contacts to fruition.

Former Qatari PM and FM Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim Thani praised the agreement with the Saudis, which opened the land border between the two countries, and wrote:

The crisis arose and has continued a long time, and now it has reached its end. I do not want at this time to go into the reasons and the details of the crisis—the longest and most difficult in the history of the Gulf Cooperation Council. We welcome the end of the crisis from the depths of our hearts and call on everyone to learn the lesson that such crises must be avoided in the future. If we want to avoid crises in the future we must look thoroughly and unflinchingly at the reasons for this crisis; the psychological wounds that were caused to the society of the Gulf, which undermined future trust; and especially the political frictions and the great economic damage that it wrought.

This agreement, like the crisis that preceded it, stands under the heavy shadow of Tehran and was affected by some important developments. First, Joe Biden’s imminent entry into the White House is expected to change US policy toward Iran substantially. Second, Iran has started enriching uranium to 20%, a significant step in the direction of the bomb. Third, Saudi Arabia has failed to fend off the pro-Iranian militias in Yemen and Iraq and avert the threat they pose to the kingdom and to its strained economic position. And finally, during the three years of the blockade, Iran provided aid to Qatar.

The Iranian media reported on the Saudi-Qatari agreement without commentary or quotes from top Iranian officials. Those officials are in no hurry to respond, even though, given Iran’s deep intelligence penetration of the Gulf States as well as close ties with the Qatari leadership, they undoubtedly knew about the Saudi-Qatari contacts. Clearly, then, the agreement was reached with Iranian consent. One reason for Tehran to accept the easing of the Saudi-Qatari tensions could be fear of a US action against Iran during the last two weeks of the Trump presidency.

Meanwhile, Iran seized a South Korean tanker on dubious grounds for the sole purpose of showing the world that no actor can bend Tehran to its will. This show of force is an indication of the kind of reception Iran is preparing

for Biden as it seeks to forestall—even at this stage—any intention he or his negotiating team might hold to pressure Tehran into altering the terms of the 2015 nuclear agreement.

The question of interest to Israel is whether the Saudi-Qatari thaw and possible reduced tensions between Riyadh and Tehran would allow Saudi Arabia to keep progressing toward mutual recognition with Israel without rousing too much anger among the Iranian leadership and in its proxy militias in Yemen and Iraq. It is too early to answer this question because the Iranian stance stems from several factors that cannot yet be assessed: the state of negotiations with the Biden administration on the conditions for a US return to the nuclear agreement; the future of US sanctions on Iran; Saudi activity in Yemen; Iran's economic situation and the stability of the regime, and so on.

The people and the leadership in Israel will need to understand, however, that Jerusalem's new ties with states of the Arabian Peninsula, including the UAE and Bahrain, are not etched in stone but subject to changes caused by the vicissitudes in those states' relations with Iran. It must be borne in mind that the Middle East—and that includes Israel's own politics—is built on sand dunes that change their shape according to the prevailing winds.

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