

Reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Qatar: Implications for the War in Syria

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The sudden reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Qatar has enormous implications for the War in Syria and beyond, with the potential to divide the Mideast and North Africa between rulers Abdullah and Thani in a more far-reaching way than Sykes and Picot did nearly 100 years ago.

Saudi Arabia and its Bahraini and Emirati clients ended their Cold War with Qatar last Sunday and reinstated their ambassadors to Doha. They had previously been unprecedentedly withdrawn eight months ago in March to protest Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood, which the Kingdoms saw as a threat to their rule. A few days before this major announcement, another Mideast rift had been supposedly patched up between the [Al Nusra Front](#) (rumored to be affiliated with Qatar) and ISIL (which has alleged links to wealthy Saudis) to work together in overthrowing the Syrian government, which may have portended Qatar and Saudi Arabia's own reconciling. *Now that Doha and Riyadh have reached an agreement to resolve their rivalry, they'll likely divide the Mideast and North Africa amongst themselves to avoid any future conflict of interests, with Qatar getting influence west of Egypt and Saudi Arabia reigning to its east.*

Cairo As The Cut-Off Point



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Egypt will likely be the dividing line between Qatari and Saudi influence. During the presidency of Mohammed Morsi, the country was run by the pro-Qatari Muslim Brotherhood, and the former president himself is now being charged with high treason for allegedly passing on state secrets to Qatar. A month before his July 2013 overthrow, he radically altered his country's policy towards Syria by cutting ties with the legitimate government and pledging financial support for the insurgents. Considering his Muslim Brotherhood affiliation, he likely envisioned supporting the same forces that Qatar is backing in the war, which would obviously have been seen as an expansionist threat by the Saudis.

These policies were abruptly changed when al-Sisi overthrow Morsi and placed him into

prison. Since then, Egypt has gravitated closer to Saudi Arabia and its allies, receiving \$20 billion in aid and investments from them. Not only has there been talk of Egypt working closer with the Riyadh-led Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC, which member state Qatar stands at arm's length in), but it's also discussing its participation in an "anti-militant alliance" with Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE. It should be noted that both Egypt and the UAE reportedly bombed militant positions in Libya a few weeks ago, showing that they're serious about combating the Islamists there. Saudi and GCC support for secular Egypt, which may seem perplexing on the surface, can be explained quite simply, since they're more worried about an expansionist Muslim Brotherhood government there than they are about a defensive secular one that is opposed to Qatar's influence.

The Qatari and Saudi Domains

Qatar:

Within this arrangement, Qatar and Saudi Arabia divide their influence west and east of Egypt, respectively. Considering Qatar's 'domain', it may at first seem to have little of value, seeing as how Libya is a collapsed state at the moment. However, Qatar has strong influence among the militias there and the country still has the largest oil reserves in Africa (which continue flowing). Regardless of how the conflict is settled, it is very probable that political Islamists tied to Qatar will have some role or another in the government, thus elevating Doha's regional influence through association. *In neighboring Tunisia, although the Muslim Brotherhood-linked Ennahda Movement lost out to the secularists in October's parliamentary elections, the Islamists are still a legitimate and institutionalized political force there, meaning that they could potentially gain a second wind and win in a future election.*

Over in Algeria, Europe's second-largest gas supplier and one of Africa's largest oil producers, long-running and ageing president Abdelaziz Bouteflika is once again in the hospital, raising questions about what will happen after his passing. *He is the only leader Algeria has known since the end of the decade-long civil war that was fought against the Islamic Salvation Front, a political Islamic organization whose victory in the 1991 elections set off the conflict. Keeping in mind Algeria's history, Qatar may attempt to support and reactive the lever of political Islam in a post-Bouteflika environment to gain commanding control over this geostrategic country, just as it tried to do in Egypt after Mubarak.*

Saudi Arabia:

East of the dividing line, things are literally more conservative. Saudi Arabia and its associates want to safeguard their monarchies in the face of political Islam, so as long as Qatar keeps its Muslim Brotherhood partners out of the Gulf States, there won't be any problem. The GCC may formally admit fellow monarchy Jordan into the club, which would then strengthen the group's royal identity. In Syria, Qatar and Saudi Arabia's proxies will likely join forces to strengthen the anti-government movement and eliminate unproductive infighting. Although it's uncertain what the country would look like if the legitimate and popular government was illegally overthrown, one possible scenario would be internal fragmentation into warlord-presided 'emirates' where Saudi Arabia and Qatar would divide the spoils. When it comes to Iraq, the country is rapidly fracturing into three de-facto independent entities comprising the Kurds, Sunnis, and Shias, with the US, Saudi Arabia, and Iran exerting influence, respectively.



Despite the appearances of a détente between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, it might be premature to say that all problems have been resolved. The future of GCC member Oman after the passing of Sultan Qaboos Bin Said Al Said could open a new rupture between the two, since he's ruled the country since 1970 and hasn't publicly designated a successor.

The Omani Wildcard

Many media outlets have been speculating about this in the past week, not only because the elderly Sultan has been in Germany since July for medical treatment, but also because Oman was hosting informal talks related to Iran's nuclear program. If there's a smooth transition of power and another Sultan ascends to the throne, then the Saudis won't have an issue, but if things get more complicated and Islamic political forces agitate for representation (backed by Qatar), then the whole Riyadh-Doha reconciliation would collapse. Any kind of destabilization there could possibly result in a Saudi military intervention, either in the shades of Bahrain where it helped prop up a fellow monarchy, or a 'reverse Bahrain' where it would intervene against an Islamist government to restore the monarchy to power.

Save for unexpected developments in Oman, though, it looks like Qatar and Saudi Arabia have neatly divided the Mideast and North Africa between themselves, and the Muslim world might be witnessing the making of a new and wider iteration of Sykes-Picot, and just as equally undemocratic.

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