

Qatar crisis likely to alter GCC defence cooperation strategies

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Dubai

When the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) was established in 1981, bringing together Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, the pursuit of collective security was a driving force alongside the economic rationale of an alliance.

However, the Saudi-Emirati-Egyptian-Bahraini boycott of Qatar – the most serious fall-out between GCC states – has effectively brought the process of GCC defence cooperation to a strategic crossroads.

The US military has been a key supporter, catalyst and beneficiary of GCC defence cooperation since 1981, sometimes placing itself as a focal point around which to concentrate future defence cooperation and development.

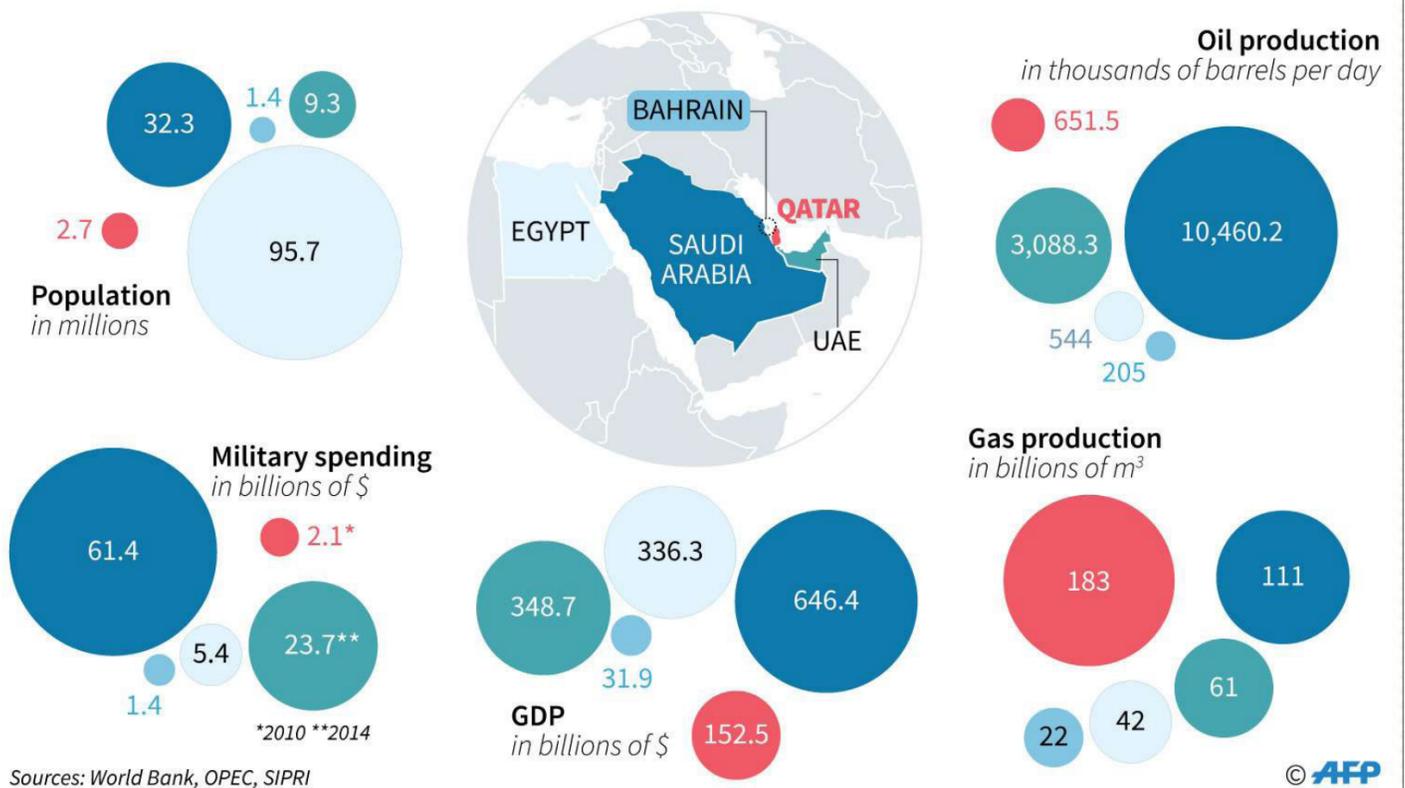
The US Air Force Central Command's (AFCENT) regional headquarters, at Al Udeid Airbase in Qatar, has been a key component of the regional defence capability architecture. Indeed, if the fallout with Qatar had not taken place in the way it did, AFCENT and its regional headquarters would have continued to spearhead US involvement in a more militarily integrated GCC. That role seems improbable if AFCENT remains in Qatar.

Progress in resolving the dispute with Qatar has been slower than expected and the possibility for a decisive breakthrough appears slim. During a talk to Chatham House in July, Anwar Gargash, the UAE state minister for foreign affairs, laid out the position of key GCC states vis-à-vis Qatar when he said: "You cannot be part of a regional organisation dedicated to strengthening mutual security and furthering mutual interest and at the same time undermine that security."

Qatar will find it difficult to completely substitute its security reliance on the GCC with an alliance with Turkey, Iran and other countries. It can hope to strategically rebalance but rebalancing needs time.

Qatar and its neighbours

Comparison with the 4 countries that have severed diplomatic ties with Doha



However, Qatari rapprochement – if it happens – may not necessarily guarantee a complete or immediate reset as far as defence cooperation is concerned. Indeed, it could take years of confidence-building following any Qatari rapprochement for trust to be restored with its heavyweight neighbours in the GCC.

As such, regardless of whether Qatar withdraws from the GCC, is suspended or expelled or even if an unexpected rapprochement were to occur, the direction of GCC defence cooperation will need to be revised.

GCC defence cooperation cannot be left in limbo too long and hindering factors such as the fallout with Qatar will need to be worked around. Keep in mind the GCC maintains a policy of unanimous consensus between members to

endorse resolutions on cooperation activities, so any paralysis the fallout creates is not sustainable.

Behind the scenes, GCC militaries have spent years working on integrating air forces as well as coastal and critical infrastructure protection, much of which is offshore. However, the United States recently called off major military exercises with the GCC that had been held annually since 1999 due to the dispute with Qatar. Other programmes have also been affected.

The United States would like to see a resolution of the Qatar boycott

● The serious fallout between GCC countries has the process of GCC defence cooperation at a strategic crossroads.

but if that does not occur soon, the US military will need to look at alternative formulas to stay engaged with its other important partners.

The United States will eventually be forced to reconsider the utility of Al Udeid as its regional headquarters for AFCENT. The Americans may opt to retain Al Udeid for other purposes but its air operations centre would need to be relocated if AFCENT is to effectively spearhead US contributions to future GCC-level or GCC-based defence with its larger and more important allies in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, among others.

US Defence Secretary James Mattis has noted the interest of several countries keen to host US bases, including for AFCENT, but the UAE would appear the strongest and most suitable host. AFCENT relocating its operations centre to the UAE would bolster US-UAE ties while

lending great support to wider US defence objectives in the region in the long term.

Another consequence of the Saudi-led bloc's fallout with Qatar may be for Riyadh and Abu Dhabi to become more open with their approach to regional defence cooperation, more readily bringing in non-GCC countries, such as Egypt and Jordan, as core partners.

GCC defence cooperation may thus evolve from its inward-looking GCC-focused past to a more outward-looking GCC-led outlook on defence and security cooperation. Such an evolution is arguably in incubation mode with the Saudi-led Arab bloc and we may see more focus placed on such a strategy in 2018.

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More testimony alleging bribery over Qatar's World Cup bid at New York trial

The Arab Weekly staff

London

The former president of Colombia's football federation, Luis Bedoya, testified in the trial of three senior South American football officials that he was approached over potential bribes to back Qatar's 2022 FIFA World Cup bid.

Bedoya, speaking under oath in US District Court in New York, said he had been told by Argentine Mariano Jinkis of the Full Play sporting company that up to \$15 million in bribe money was on the table to be split among six South American football officials. Full Play has been implicated as an alleged intermediary to pay bribes to FIFA officials.

Bedoya testified that Jinkis had been accompanied by an "important person from Qatari television" but said he could not recall the figure's name.

Full Play is a sports marketing company that Qatari businessman Nasser al-Khelaifi, chairman of France's Paris St-Germain football team and chief executive of beIN Media Group, had been in talks to buy.

Although none of the six South American football officials were on the FIFA selection committee, it is believed their support could have influenced South America's three voters – Julio Grondona of Argentina, Nicolas Leoz of Paraguay and Ricardo Teixeira of Brazil.

Bedoya said the arrangement to receive the money was deemed too "complicated" to be seriously considered. A previous witness at the trial, Argentine sports marketing executive Alejandro Burzaco, alleged that Qatar paid millions of dollars in bribes via Full Play.

There have been increasing calls to move the 2022 World Cup from Qatar amid allegations of bribery and questions over workers' conditions.

FIFA's new Human Rights Advisory Board issued a report in early

November calling on football's world governing body to strengthen workers' rights in Qatar.

"We highlight the long-term commitment requirement from FIFA to build systems at the operational level that can proactively identify and respond to the most severe human rights risks," the report said.

However, international human rights groups said the report did not go far enough. Human Rights Watch (HRW) warned that migrant construction workers in Qatar, including those building stadiums for the 2022 World Cup, were working in life-threatening heat and humidity.

● Up to \$15 million in bribe money was allegedly on the table to be split among six South American football officials.

"Fans should not have to sit in stadiums that workers were enslaved or even died to build. With the clock ticking, FIFA needs to move beyond reports and take concrete steps to make things right," said HRW Global Initiatives Director Minky Worden.

The criticism, along with the bribery trial, has had a negative effect on World Cup sponsorship deals as international companies shy away from working with FIFA.

With less than eight months until the 2018 World Cup in Russia, FIFA is still looking for partners, a sign that corporate interest in working with the global football body is lacking. FIFA declared its sponsorship programme sold out more than 18 months before the 2014 World Cup in Brazil.

"It's not surprising it's been and still is a toxic brand," Patrick Nally, a sports sponsorship executive who previously worked with FIFA, told the New York Times.

"The word FIFA globally has got just the worst image in the world. If anything, those four letters stand

for absolute total corruption and it's so unattractive," he added.

The scandals intensified calls for FIFA to act to restore its reputation by removing Qatar as hosts.

"Sports is about human ethics and values, seeking rapprochement across the world, the coexistence of people from different backgrounds. The scandal and suspicion over the former FIFA management's practices and the receipt of bribes – some of which are still under investigation, have impacted how the whole tournament is being viewed," said Saudi writer Mohammed al-Shaikh.

In a column in the Saudi-owned Al Arabiya news website, Shaikh explicitly called for the tournament to be moved from Qatar, which is the target of a Saudi-led boycott by four Gulf countries.

"Rational minds in Qatar should stop and think about what this crazy escapade is costing the country. Who is responsible for the consequences of this scandal?" he asked.

The Arab Weekly staff and news agencies.