



# THC ANALYSIS - 41<sup>ST</sup> SUMMIT OF THE SUPREME COUNCIL OF THE GCC

JANUARY 3RD, 2021



## Introduction

The 41st GCC Summit will take place on Tuesday January 5th in Riyadh and for the first time in recent years will see leaders of Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE all participate in the day-long meeting. The Summit itself is mired in intrigue and speculation that some form of reconciliation will be struck amongst certain opposing members, ending almost four years of the so-called Qatar blockade.

Originally scheduled to have taken place in Manama in early December, the Summit was moved to Riyadh in what sources say is an attempt by King Salman to assert his will to seek a “truce” between Qatar and the main (GCC-based) blockading nations of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain. That King Salman is the protagonist in this move represents a more tempered view of the situation in Riyadh (particularly vs Abu Dhabi) and a wider perspective that the GCC will need to achieve new levels of unity under a Biden-Administration.

The GCC as an organisation has long struggled to achieve a level of unity between members laid out as its founding vision in 1981. Persistent tensions between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain, culminated in the blockade of Qatar in June 2017, and questioned the very legitimacy of the GCC as an organising body.

The dispute itself saw blockading countries sever diplomatic relations with Qatar and ban Qatari-registered aircraft and ships from their airspace and waters. At the root of the dispute was a view that Doha enabled Iran’s subversive regional activities and that it had long funded the Muslim Brotherhood and other radical Islamist movements. The blockading countries presented a list of 13 demands



U D I  
BAHRAIN

Riyadh

Medina

SAUDI ARABIA

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Mecca

Jeddah

sub al Khal

– including shutting down Al Jazeera – in return for reinstating diplomatic ties as well as air and sea routes. Qatar refused and as such the blockade is still in place today.

## **Truce with Qatar - why now?**

It is understood that Saudi Arabia has long been amenable to a reconciliation with Qatar, a move further motivated by the anticipated changes in U.S. regional policy once President-elect Biden is inaugurated. Among these expected changes are a new U.S. administration that is minded towards engagement with Iran as a means to contain it vs the current administration which has doubled down on sanctions against the Islamic Republic, conducted targeted assassinations against government and military officials and engaged in heated rhetoric.

A thaw in relations with Qatar and enhanced GCC unity is privately seen in regional capitals as an increasingly important requirement as Gulf states position themselves with the incoming Biden Administration. Should a breakthrough occur before the end of President Trump's term, the resolution of the Qatar blockade will be welcomed both by his Administration and President-elect Biden. The U.S. has viewed the dispute as a distraction and an issue that has undermined U.S. efforts to contain Iran. It is estimated that the air embargo, prompting Qatar to more frequently use Iranian airspace, has injected over \$100 million/year into the Iranian economy through overflight fees, working against U.S. sanctions.

A significant determinant of success lies in the mediators (Kuwait and Oman) ability to persuade all sides – but especially Qatar – that GCC states

should face the future as a unified force rather than be distracted by factions and infighting. It has been suggested that the postponement of the Summit from its regular December date to January was to give mediation efforts more time to seek a resolution in time before for a change of occupant in the White House.

## **Riyadh's role**

Riyadh's role in pushing this latest round of mediation cannot be understated. Although already amenable to a truce with Qatar, King Salman is thought to have understood the political gain for the Kingdom in forcing a resolution as it seeks to get off on the right foot with President-elect Biden who has long railed at Riyadh's human rights failings. Riyadh will be keen to demonstrate that it can be a reliable regional partner to the new administration and a capable peacemaker.

## **Concessions**

Just what concessions both sides may put forward to achieve some form of resolution remains unknown. Complicating negotiations is the differing level of tensions against Qatar, with the UAE's leadership known to hold particularly deep resentment and concern towards Qatar vs the morphing, more tempered views held in Riyadh. That said, it is thought that Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain are collectively willing to further "water down" their demands of Qatar, which still include putting an end to its funding of Islamist movements and restraining its media, among others. It has also been suggested that Saudi Arabia could be ready to re-open its airspace to Qatar as a gesture of goodwill.

## Real peace or agree to disagree?

Diplomatic sources have stated off-the-record that they expect some form of truce to be declared at the Summit, although it will be limited in scope. A comprehensive resolution on the major disputes between the nations is not expected, more likely is some form of joint agreement setting out terms of engagement that at worst will promote non-interference in each other's affairs and at best define a path towards enhanced cooperation in the future. Any breakthrough is not expected to resolve the underlying issues between the two sides, at least not in the short to medium term.

## Conclusion

The upcoming Summit is significant, and its outcomes will have ramifications for the region. Recognising the dramatic and rapidly changing make-up of regional alliances, as well as an expected change of approach from a new incoming U.S. administration, the January 5th Summit will be dominated by efforts to bring Qatar back into the fold of a more unified GCC. Whether or not this is really achievable is open to question – sentiment and suspicions between both sides run deep – but at the very least some form of truce appears to be in the offing. No matter how fragile a truce may be in the near term, certainly engagement and progress will be welcomed in Washington and may well adjust the future political calculus of the region.

*NB: The content of this material represents a commentary only on events as they appear to THC, that have already been published in the media and other sources and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the authors themselves and do not represent any advice on the matters contained within, or ancillary to, the material. Furthermore, the content of this material is only intended for clients to whom this material has been sent by THC. It is not to be forwarded or disseminated more widely and THC will accept no liability whatsoever for any losses that may be incurred by intended recipients, or any other third parties, who may have relied upon the contents.*







## TAQARABU HYBRID COMMUNICATIONS

DUBAI  
502, Blue Bay Tower, Marasi Drive  
Business Bay Dubai, UAE

+971 4 425 7967  
[info@thc.xyz](mailto:info@thc.xyz)

LONDON  
3rd Floor  
86-90 Paul Street  
London EC2A 4NE

+44 203 290 6076  
[marc.mercer@taqarabu.com](mailto:marc.mercer@taqarabu.com)

[www.thc.xyz](http://www.thc.xyz)