Qatar, Saudia and the US: A Coalition or Collision?

Change in the leadership of Qatar has been followed by certain significant geo-political changes not only in Qatar, but also in the Middle East and beyond, leading to a relationship of ‘near-confrontation’ between Qatar and Saudia on the one hand, and Qatar and the US on the other. This change was a surprise move, especially coming at a time when the energy-rich Gulf state appeared to be at the peak of its political influence in the Arab world. Now, three months after a new Emir stepped in, Qatar’s political clout has shrunken considerably with different factors contributing directly and indirectly to this ‘downfall.’ When one closely looks at the changes which occurred in Egypt and Syria during this period he may question the future of Qatar in playing the role as a ‘major regional power’.

Although Qatar and Saudi Arabia, backed by the US, have been mutually contributing to topple Assad’s regime in Syria, they were and still are far from pursuing complementary strategic objectives. As a matter of fact, both want to dominate the Middle East and the Gulf region. This being the case, how come they be categorized as ‘allies’? The aggressive policies pursued by the former Emir of Qatar were taken to be prejudicial to the critical interests of both Saudi and its close ally, U.A.E. Nonetheless, Qatar-Saudia rivalry reflects only one side of the problem. Qatar-USA ‘alliance’ is also playing an equally significant role in pushing Qatar away from pursuing its hegemonic ambitions. The US and its allies in Europe are now clearly more interested in placing the responsibility of regional leadership on Saudi Arabia.

The new emir expressed in explicit terms, in his first speech as the new Emir, that he would continue to follow the ‘path’ set by his father, it is very unlikely that he would be able to do so. Certain changes have already come to surface indicating Qatar’s abrupt withdrawal from the international scene. It seems that the new Emir has been forced by circumstances to ‘pay more attention’ to domestic affairs than pursuing an aggressive foreign policy. However, the sudden withdrawal is not merely because of the so-called ‘new policies of the new Emir’, it is mainly because of increasing rivalry between the US and Qatar, and consequent aggressive policies of Saudi Arabia against Qatar. As a matter of fact, it was Qatar which vehemently supported, backed by the US and Saudia, the Islamist groups—the so-called harbingers of “Arab Spring.” It spent billions to install them in power – observers estimate that Qatar paid more than $17 billion to Arab Spring countries – especially the deposed president Mohamed Morsi. But somehow it is in retreat now.

The war in the African nation Mali offers the latest example on how the U.S. and Qatar go on two separate ways. Whereas the US Secretary of Defense, Leon Panetta, was in London on January 18 “commending” the French “leadership of the international effort” in Mali, Qatari Prime and Foreign Minister, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassem al-Thani, told reporters he did not believe “power will solve the problem,” and advised instead that this problem be “discussed” among the “neighboring countries, the African Union and the (U.N.) Security Council,” and announced to join the Doha-based “reconciliation and peaceful solution instead of military intervention” dialogue. Similarly, recently, Qatar has, replaced Syria, which has been on the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism since 1979, as the sponsor of Hamas, whose authorities have relocated from Damascus to Doha, while being labeled at the U.S. lists as the leaders of a “terrorist” group. Those leaders have been admitted publicly a number of times that Hamas is a Palestinian branch of the Brotherhood. Much to the surprise of the U.S., Qatar signed a military defense agreement with Iran in 2010, indicating the former’s ‘warming up’ closer ties with the latter.
Thus the Qatari Islamist connections threaten the U.S. authority in the region to be seriously undermined, or at least to hold the U.S. responsible for the resulting strife, which would result in a deep-seated regional anti-Americanism.

**On the other hand, the American 'unconditional' support for Saudia in extending its influence in the region tells the remaining story of the Qatari downfall.** Since the team change in Qatar, money has stopped flowing freely to the Brothers, whether in Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Libya or elsewhere. This has left the field open to the Saudis and United Arab Emiratis, both of which, banking upon the support of the US/CIA, rushed in to support the new Egyptian regime.

It's clear that Saudi Arabia, 'representing' the US, trumped Qatar in Egypt. The Qatari press is still suffering the "target confusion" syndrome as it can't stop wailing about the overthrow of Morsi’s 'democracy'. On the other hand, Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz was quick to commend the situation, even before the Egyptian military announced their statements on the removal of the president. King Abdullah congratulated the army for "fulfilling the will of the people." Today, Qatar's men who had Egypt under their grip for a whole year are now on the country’s most wanted list, following the orders of the south Cairo prosecutor to apprehend the leadership of Brotherhood.

The collapse of power of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt triggered the countdown for the end of Qatar’s influence. This has impacted the Islamist movements in other countries like Tunisia and Libya as well. A similar sort of power change took place in Syria where Qatar was backing the armed-rebellion against President Bashar al-Assad up. The political influence that Qatar was enjoying with the opposition recently weakened, and now it's Saudi Arabia that has the upper hand in the Syrian dossier. For example, Ghassan Hitto (the so-called “Prime Minister in waiting” of the Syrian opposition coalition), the Syrian expatriate and technocrat from Texas, was seen by most informed observers as the darling of the Muslim Brotherhood and Qatar in Syria to the extent that some ‘coalition members’ declared Hitto to be a consensus candidate pleasing both the opposition’s Islamist and liberal factions.

However, the imposition of Hitto as the political face of the foreign-backed opposition was also seen by many inside the opposition and around the world, mainly by Saudia and the US, as a **power-play by Qatar to control the direction of the conflict in Syria and establish Doha as the real center of power in a post-Assad Syria**. But his resignation in July and subsequent election of Ahmed Assi al-Jarba to head the umbrella coalition of US-supported proxy groups revealed further cracks in the edifice of Qatar’s imperialistic assault on Syria. This connection between Hitto, the Muslim Brotherhood and Qatar was the source of much tension within the opposition as well. The New York Times reported that after facing a number of challenges, Hitto was seen by some rebels and activists as being out of touch with Syrians. The concerns were being voiced that Qatar was wielding too much influence in the movement through him. What became out of the course of Hitto’s short tenure as the public face of the foreign-backed opposition was that he was less a political leader than a proxy of Qatar.

But the newly elected head of the opposition National Coalition, Ahmed Jarba, and interim opposition premier Ahmed Tomeh, selected earlier this month, are both close to Riyadh. Essentially then, Hitto must be understood as a placeholder, a man whose responsibility was not to lead, but simply to act as a foothold for the al-Thani regime and the Muslim Brotherhood within the leadership of the opposition. But his resignation has indirectly raised Saudi Arabia to ‘imminence’ in the Syrian conflict. If Hitto was understood to be a proxy of Qatar, Jarba can be correctly characterized as a proxy of Saudi Arabia and the US. Jarba is a chief of the Shammar tribe, one of the Arab world’s most powerful clans with members stretching from southern Turkey to Saudi Arabia. He was jailed early in the revolt against Assad. After being released from prison in August 2012, he fled to Saudi Arabia “where his tribal connections put him into close touch with senior members of the Saudi intelligence services,” reported McClathy News.

Qatar’s strategic retreat is mainly because of the growing political distance with the US. The rhetoric of ‘new Emir new policy’ is thus merely to disguise Qatar’s weak international position. It would be appropriate to consider it in terms of change in strategy and a timely retreat if not an entirely new policy on the part of Qatar to achieve its goals. The analysis presented here shows explicitly that the so-called coalition of Qatar and Saudia led by the U.S. has fewer seeds of coalition and more ‘germs’ of collision.

Although Qatar’s profile has been regionally reduced since the Egyptian coup, but it still has economic weight, regionally and internationally, to exert influence in the region. But Qatar’s relations with Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, and primarily with the US are currently not good. **The dispute over Egypt is big, and it is very big over political Islam, as Qatar continues to defend the Muslim Brotherhood while other Gulf monarchies support the new government in Egypt.** A Gulf official is reported to have said that some Gulf countries are also upset over suspected Qatari support for Gulf opposition groups, pointing out it as a ‘red line’ for the monarchies. However, the fact can’t be denied that today Qatar can only count its losses with the fall of the Brotherhood in Egypt, and lose of
political ascendancy in Syria, leading many to assess the impact of this situation in terms of possible divorce between Qatar-sponsored projects of implanting political Islam in the region. The ‘Wahabi’ version is now seemingly becoming a more acceptable form of Political Islam to be introduced in the ‘troubled’ states of the Middle East.

Salman Rafi Sheikh is a research-analyst of International Relations and Pakistan’s foreign and domestic affairs. Exclusively for the online magazine New Eastern Outlook.