

Turkey's love-in with Qatar

A marriage of convenience

CRU Report

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Abstract

This report assesses the impact of Turkish-Qatari cooperation between 2002 and 2020 on conflict and geopolitical competition across the Middle East, North Africa, and the Horn of Africa based on close examination of its drivers. The report notes that neither ideological nor economic drivers adequately explain the recent blossoming of Turkish-Qatari relations. Converging political interests and pragmatism offer a more compelling explanation. On the one hand, Turkey aspires to play a regional leadership role and uses its cooperation with Qatar to strengthen its soft power claim to leadership of the Sunni world. On the other hand, Qatar seeks to ensure its territorial and dynastical safety from Saudi Arabia and its allies – the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Bahrain (the Quartet) – by working with Turkey, the recent thaw of the Al-Ula declaration notwithstanding. Turkish-Qatari collaboration is therefore best seen as a pragmatic partnership enabled by compatible geopolitical perspectives, particularly regarding the Muslim Brotherhood.

In terms of regional conflict and competition, Turkish and Qatari cooperation has created another regional axis in addition to the Emirati/Saudi/US/Israeli and the Iranian/Iraqi/Syrian/Lebanese (mostly sub-state in nature) blocs. While there are ties between these blocs, fault lines dominate. Between 2002 and 2020, competition between these blocs has deepened existing rifts within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), projected Middle Eastern crises into the Horn of Africa, and prolonged conflicts in Libya, Somalia and Syria.

Qatar shares many more tribal, religious and societal features with the Gulf countries than with Turkey. Doha also no longer pursues the assertive foreign policy across the region that it once did. But Turkish assertiveness nevertheless provides Qatar with the protection it needs to maintain an autonomous foreign policy that can withstand Saudi and Emirati pressure. Although the Quartet recently made a start in restoring relations and Turkish-Qatari cooperation might diminish somewhat in intensity, the Persian Gulf will feature a Turkish military presence for some time to come.

1 Introduction

On 5 June 2017, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain and Egypt – *the Quartet* – severed diplomatic and economic ties with Qatar over its alleged support for terrorism, triggering the ‘Qatar diplomatic crisis’ and effectively blockading the country from their respective territories.¹ An alternative frame for the crisis is that it resulted from Qatar’s attempt to escape Saudi Arabia’s dominance and expand its own regional connections.² Doha’s policies to achieve this included support for Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Islamist and revolutionary groups in Tunisia, Libya, Syria, Egypt, and Somalia (mostly after 2011), an ideologically tolerant and energy resources-based collaborative stance towards Iran, and the development of military and political ties with Turkey, which positions itself as rival to Saudi Arabia as the leader of the Sunni community of the faithful. Yet, the 2017 crisis was more a trigger for the growth of Turkish-Qatari relations than its cause.³ For instance, it was *after* the crisis (by a day) that the Turkish Parliament ratified two treaties that enabled Turkish troops to deploy to Qatar and train Qatari forces.⁴

The fateful date of 5 June 2017 does mark a major juncture in regional geopolitics and, looking beyond the headlines, it is important to assess its depth and likely permanence even though the AI-Ula declaration of 7 January 2021 initiated a process of reconciliation between the Quartet and Qatar. With this in mind, the report analyses drivers behind Turkish-Qatari cooperation and the development of their relationship

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- 1 Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt urged Qatar to cut diplomatic ties with Iran, sever all ties to ‘terrorist organisations’ (specifically the Muslim Brotherhood, Islamic State, al-Qaeda and Hezbollah), shut down Al-Jazeera, close foreign news outlets funded by Doha, terminate the Turkish military presence and end military cooperation with Turkey, stop funding for individuals, groups and organisations that have been designated terrorists by the Quartet, hand over Doha-based ‘terrorists’ wanted by the Quartet to their countries of origin, end interference in sovereign countries’ internal affairs, cease all contacts with the political opposition in Quartet countries, pay reparations and compensation for loss of life and other losses caused by Qatar’s policies in recent years, and align itself with GCC policies as per the 2014 agreement with Saudi Arabia. See: Associated Press, *List of demands on Qatar by Saudi Arabia, other Arab nations*, [online](#) (accessed 15 October 2020).
 - 2 Roberts, D. B., *Qatar: Securing the Global Ambitions of a City-State*, London: Hurst & Company, 2017.
 - 3 Turkey did immediately come to Qatar’s aid by dispatching 100 cargo planes and a cargo ship laden with 4,000 tons of food within two weeks after the 2017 crisis. See: The Peninsula, [online](#) (accessed 9 July 2020). President Erdoğan also called the Quartet’s actions ‘inhumane’ and ‘un-Islamic’. See: BBC, [online](#) (accessed 9 July 2020).
 - 4 BBC Türkçe, [online](#) (accessed 9 July 2020); Başkan, B. and Ö. Pala, ‘Making Sense of Turkey’s Reaction to the Qatar Crisis’, *The International Spectator*, 2020, 55:2, pp. 65-78.

between 2002 and 2020. It also takes stock of the current nature of this relationship and how it affects various conflicts and crises across the Middle East, North Africa, and the Horn of Africa (focusing on Syria, Libya, and Somalia as key cases). The report concludes with recommendations that can further reduce regional tensions.⁵

⁵ Our thanks go to Associate Professor David B. Roberts (King's College London) and Professor Allen J. Fromherz (Georgia State University) for their review of the report. Its contents naturally remain the responsibility of its authors.

2 Evolving Turkish-Qatari Relations: 2002 to 2020

The evolution of the relationship between Turkey and Qatar from 2002 to 2020 can be broken down into four analytical periods that are demarcated by key domestic and regional developments.⁶ The first period of 2002 to 2011 was marked by the start of Muslim Brotherhood-inspired Justice and Development Party (AKP) rule in Turkey, which opened up new avenues for collaboration with both Qatar and other GCC countries. The outbreak of the Arab Uprisings in 2011 offered Ankara and Doha an opportunity to push a shared agenda across the region. Between 2011 and 2013 they supported and strengthened a range of Islamist and revolutionary movements to expand their connections and shift the regional geography. Yet, this generated significant resistance from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which was amplified by the chief architect of Qatari foreign policy until 2013, Emir Hamad al-Thani. His successor, Emir Tamim al-Thani, pursued a more conciliatory and less confrontational foreign policy from 2013 to 2017, which put the brakes on further development of Turkish-Qatari relations. The Tamim al-Thani also prioritised improving relations with the GCC over expanding Qatar's Muslim Brotherhood networks. But, emboldened by the US's anti-Iranian policy shift under the Trump Administration in 2016, the Saudis and Emirati tried to make Qatari foreign policy entirely subservient to their own in 2017. The unintended effect of the blockade was that Turkish-Qatari relations blossomed: as an opportunity for Turkey and as an insurance policy for Qatar. We examine each period in turn.

From 2002 to 2011: Building soft power friendship

From 2002 to 2011, Turkey and Qatar focused on mediating regional crises. Ankara's ambition to be on good terms with all its neighbours in the region was the starting point for Turkey's early engagement with Qatar. For Doha, its initial 'Hamadian' foreign policy (named after Qatar's emir) sought to enhance its prestige and position in the region by playing the role of 'Hakam' (mediator) in regional disagreements.⁷

From the perspective of Ankara, the initial deepening of Turkish-Qatari relations flowed logically from Ankara's 'no problems with neighbours' foreign policy in which economic,

6 For the period(s) preceding 2002: Bakir, A., 'The evolution of Turkey – Qatar relations amid a growing Gulf divide', in Krieg, A. (ed.), *Divided Gulf: The anatomy of a crisis*, London: Palgrave, 2019.

7 Fromherz, A. J., *Qatar: Rise to power and influence*, London: Tauris, 2017.

cultural and societal relations with the countries of the Middle East took centre stage.⁸ This policy paid off as Turkey became the first country with which the GCC established a bilateral strategic dialogue mechanism in 2008. Moreover, a memorandum of understanding was signed between Turkey and the GCC regarding a Free Trade Agreement in the same year.⁹ The bilateral relationship between Ankara and Doha was firmly nested in the broader relationship between Ankara and the GCC at this time. From a GCC perspective, better (security) relations with Turkey offered enhanced insurance against the growing (perceived) threat from Iran. As a Sunni country featuring a capable government with a moderate Islamist orientation and a relatively positive Ottoman legacy, Ankara did not have the disadvantage of the US as a Western, Christian, capitalist power from outside the region.¹⁰

During the late 2000s especially, both Turkey and Qatar were considered models of Islamist modernisation in the Muslim World.¹¹ This image offered Ankara and Doha several opportunities to navigate the regional landscape to their advantage via high-profile mediation efforts and economic cooperation. In a sense, the outward-oriented soft power and conflict mediation-oriented foreign policies of Emir Hamad al-Thani and former Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu were a meeting of minds.¹² Qatar engaged in mediation efforts between Hamas, Fatah and Israel; between Libya, the US and the UK; between Saddam Hussein and the US; between the Lebanese state and Hezbollah; between Yemen and the Houthi; between the Government of Sudan and the Justice and Equality Movement; between Sudan and Chad, and between Morocco and Algeria.¹³ Turkey focused on the regional aspects of mediation between Israel and Palestine, Israel and Syria, Iraq and Syria, Lebanon and Iraq, as well as between Iran and the West.¹⁴

8 Van Veen, E. and E. Yüksel, *Too big for its boots, Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East from 2002 to 2018*, The Hague: Clingendael, June 2018.

9 Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [online](#) (accessed 9 July 2020).

10 See: Bakir (2019) *op.cit.*

11 Başkan, B., *Turkey and Qatar in the Tangled Geopolitics of the Middle East*, New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2016.

12 Roberts (2017) *op. cit.*

13 *Ibid*; Fromherz (2017), *op.cit.*

14 Altunışık, M. Benli, 'Turkish Foreign Policy in the 21st Century', *CIDOB International Yearbook*, 2011.

From 2011 to 2013: Shifting the regional political geography

From 2011 to mid-2013, Turkey and Qatar supported revolutionary and Islamist actors linked with the Muslim Brotherhood across the region in a bid to fill the power vacuums created by the Arab uprisings.¹⁵ The initial success of this policy in Egypt and Tunisia generated the first confrontation between Turkey-Qatar on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia-the UAE on the other.

Between 2011 and June 2013, Turkey and Qatar invested deeply in supporting revolutionary movements across the region that could bring Muslim Brotherhood-dominated governments to power based on the notion of 'majoritarian democracy with Islamic foundations'.¹⁶ The other Gulf states, however, viewed the Arab uprisings as a dangerous threat to the region's political geography and exerted themselves in maintaining the status quo of rule by authoritarian regimes, whether tribal or autocratic. But Qatar and Turkey enjoyed a head start in 2011 because they were more in sync with the spirit of the times and because they could capitalise on the networks created by their mediation efforts and economic cooperation in the 2000s. Role-shifting from 'arbitrator to actor, and from actor to activist', both Qatar and Turkey came to heavily support mainstream Islamist groups with political, financial and military means.¹⁷

In Ankara's thinking, the Arab uprisings were a logical step in the process of post-colonial 'normalisation' of the Arab world during which like-minded Islamist movements would eliminate national barriers and create a new regional order centred on a rising Turkey.¹⁸ From Doha's perspective, the Arab Uprisings offered an opportunity to emancipate itself from Riyadh and seek partners and connections outside of typical Gulf approaches to international policy by means of Muslim Brotherhood networks, while remaining within the GCC.¹⁹ Pulling closer to Turkey, empowering mainstream Islamist movements, and remaining on friendly terms with Iran constituted Qatar's key policy anchors.²⁰ However, Doha did not sufficiently take into account that this policy unsettled its neighbours.

15 Başkan and Pala (2020) *op. cit.*

16 *Ibid.*

17 Roberts (2017) *op. cit.*

18 Ahmet Davutoğlu, quoted in Başkan (2016) *op.cit.*

19 Based on an interview with Professor Allen J. Fromherz, Director of the Middle East Studies Center at Georgia State University (23 November 2020).

20 Roberts (2017) *op. cit.*

The combination of a shared outlook in favour of anti-autocratic revolutions and the practical opportunities of 2011 enabled joint Turkish-Qatari interventions.²¹ And indeed, the revolutions in Libya, Egypt and Tunisia saw Turkish-Qatari cooperation in support of Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated revolutionary movements with significant effect. At the same time, in other countries such support was more contingent on geopolitical constraints and moderated with diplomatic caution. For example, neither Turkey nor Qatar intervened in Yemen or Bahrain to avoid provoking Saudi Arabia.²² Moreover, Turkey and Qatar respected Saudi Arabia's interests as their neighbour and worked with it to overthrow Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria.²³

Even though Qatar and the UAE were the strongest advocates of the Arab uprisings in early 2011, they diverged in their stance and support, particularly in Libya and Egypt. The main reason is that Doha backed revolutionary Islamists whereas the UAE supported groups that were clearly anti-Islamist.²⁴ Their different templates for regional order after the Arab Uprisings were cast in even starker relief after the successful coup against Mohamed Morsi in Egypt in July 2013.²⁵ It took the heart out of the developing Muslim Brotherhood crescent from Turkey to Egypt.²⁶ When many Egyptian Muslim Brothers took sanctuary in Qatar, Doha faced serious pressure from the UAE and Saudi Arabia to extradite them. Ankara accused the West of aiding and abetting the coup by remaining silent but maintained good diplomatic relations with the Gulf countries.²⁷

'Following the Gezi protests in Turkey, the coup in Egypt, the resignation of Ennahda's leader in Tunisia, and wavering US support for the Syrian opposition, Turkey and Qatar found themselves in a weaker position in 2013 while Saudi Arabia and the UAE claimed victory. As Turkey and Qatar became weaker, they did not really have a lot of other options besides each other,' is how Shadi Hamid, senior research fellow at the Brookings Institution, summarised it.²⁸

21 Pala, Ö. and B. Aras, 'Practical Geopolitical Reasoning in the Turkish and Qatari Foreign Policy on the Arab Spring', *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 17:3, 2015.

22 Başkan (2016) *op. cit.*; Roberts, D. B., 'The United Arab Emirates' Secular Foreign Policy', *Foreign Affairs*, 2016.

23 Ulutas, U., Türkiye, Suudi Arabistan ve Orta Doğu'da değişim, *Al Jazeera*, 18 March 2014, [online](#) (accessed 2 September 2020)

24 Roberts (2016) *op. cit.*; Roberts, D. B., 'Qatar and the UAE: Exploring divergent responses to the Arab Spring', *Middle East Journal*, 71:4, Autumn 2017.

25 Baskan, B., 'Turkey between Qatar and Saudi Arabia: Changing Regional and Bilateral Relations', *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, 16: 62, 2019.

26 Jordan's King: Muslim Brotherhood Crescent Developing, 21 March 2013, [online](#) (accessed 21 October 2020)

27 Başkan (2016) *op. cit.*

28 Based on an interview with Shadi Hamid, Senior Research Fellow at the Brookings Institution on 3 December 2020.

Box 1 Competing visions of regional order in the Middle East and North Africa

Since 2011, Turkey and Qatar have promoted political Islamists across the region, notably in Syria, Libya, Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, and Somalia. While they are concerned about Iran's regional influence, both countries have opted to maintain a constructive dialogue with Tehran. In Doha's thinking, cordial relations with Iran could reduce Qatar's security and economic vulnerabilities that result from lying directly across the Persian Gulf, especially regarding the South Pars/North Dome gas field that makes Qatar the richest country on earth per capita. For Turkey, diverging interests in Syria and Yemen must be balanced with shared interests in Syria (e.g. Astana) and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

Saudi Arabia and the UAE, in contrast, seek to maintain authoritarian governance across the region, eliminate Islamist movements as a threat to their own hereditary tribal rule, and focus on forming a Sunni/Israeli/US bloc against Iran. But this is not carried out consistently. For example, while the UAE has taken the lead in counter balancing mainstream Islamists in Libya, Tunisia and Egypt, it also remains on relatively decent terms with Iran, while Saudi Arabia even backs the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Al-Islah Party in Yemen. Saudi Arabia has also refrained from establishing diplomatic relations and trade with Israel, unlike the UAE.

The ensuing divide in the Sunni world of the Middle East between Turkey/Qatar and Saudi Arabia/UAE has not only created a risk of direct conflict between these states, but also benefited Iran and Islamic State.

Source: Roberts (2017) *op. cit.*; Steinberg, G., *Regional Power United Arab Emirates: Abu Dhabi Is No Longer Saudi Arabia's Junior Partner*, Berlin: SWP, 2020; Pala, Ö. and A. Bülent, 'Practical Geopolitical Reasoning in the Turkish and Qatari Foreign Policy on the Arab Spring', *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, No:3, 2015, p. 298; Kinninmont, J., *The Gulf Divided: The Impact of the Qatar Crisis*, Chatham House, 2019; Haberturk, [online](#) (accessed 19 December 2020); Bakir (2019), *op.cit.*

From 2013 to 2017: Living apart together

From mid-2013 until the 2017 crisis, Doha focused on improving its relations with the GCC countries while Turkey's pro-Islamist revolutionary stance remained unchanged. Qatari efforts to restore a sense of good neighbourliness did not, however, bear fruit. Partially in consequence, Turkey and Qatar drew somewhat closer over this period.

Although Turkey's relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE had soured after the 2013 coup in Egypt, they did not collapse. Instead, the Syrian civil war gave their relationship

a positive charge as they worked together in support of a range of armed Syrian opposition groups. From both a Turkish and a Qatari perspective, Saudi Arabia was a valuable ally. Two developments between 2015 and 2017 are worth highlighting. First, Ankara worked to enlist greater Saudi support for nationalist Islamist groups in the Syrian civil war in 2015–2016 (especially Ahrar Al-Sham).²⁹ This brought about friendlier relations between Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Second, Turkey considered joining the ‘Sunni Alliance’ against Iran, which King Salman was building in 2015.³⁰ While Turkey decided not to get fully involved since this would complicate its fight against Kurdish separatism and securing Iranian gas,³¹ it did maintain good economic and political relations with both Saudi Arabia and the UAE. This only changed in 2016 following the failed coup attempt in Ankara. Turkey sharply revised its foreign policy orientation and aligned with Russia and Iran after labelling the US the coup’s ‘main orchestrator’ and the UAE its ‘financial backer’.³² In fact, Ankara and Tehran swiftly reconciled their views on regional issues (e.g. via the Sochi process of 2017) and increased economic cooperation.³³ Since then, different views on the regional political order, tensions over Turkish incursions in Syria, and Ankara’s tilt towards Iran have further degraded relations between Ankara, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi.

As to Qatar, its key foreign policy architect between 2013 and 2017 was the new Emir, Tamim al-Thani, who had ascended to power in 2013. He realised that Qatar’s foreign policy had antagonised its direct neighbours and sought to be more diplomatic. Despite the change in tone, substantial disagreements nevertheless persisted on how to deal with the Muslim Brotherhood. While the movement had dissolved itself in Qatar in 1999 in organisational form, it remained active in the UAE and to some extent in Saudi Arabia.³⁴ Subsequently, the Emiratis convinced the Saudis that Qatar needed to be reined in.³⁵ The 2014 withdrawal by Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt and the UAE (since called *the Quartet*) of their ambassadors from Doha was an unmistakable sign that Qatar’s policy of expanding its connections outside the GCC mainstream,

29 Yüksel, E., *The Strategies of Turkish Proxy Warfare in Northern Syria*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2019.

30 Ibish, H., Saudi Arabia’s New Sunni Alliance, *New York Times*, 31 July 2015, [online](#) (accessed 2 September 2020).

31 King Salman’s priorities: Revamping Alliances to Stop Iranian expansion, Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, 2015, [online](#); Mat, F., *The new international openings towards Iran introduce a possibility of economic cooperation between Ankara and Tehran, two regional powers so far divided*, Osservatorio balcani caucaso, 2016, [online](#) (accessed 18 November 2020).

32 Süleyman Soylu açıkladı: Darbenin arkasında ABD var!, *Yeni Şafak*, 17 July 2016, [online](#); BAE’den Cuntaya 3 milyar dolar, *Sabah*, 14 July 2017, [online](#); Darbe girişiminin arkasında Mısır ve BAE var’ Vatan, [online](#); Hearst, D., EXCLUSIVE: UAE funnelled money to Turkish coup plotters, 29 July 2016, *Middle East Eye*, [online](#) (accessed 3 September 2020).

33 Sinkaya, B., ‘Turkey Iran relations after the JDP’, İstanbul: *La Turquie aujourd’hui*: 26, 2019.

34 Roberts (2016) *op. cit.*

35 *Ibid.*

including with the Muslim Brotherhood, could negatively and directly affect its own national security.³⁶ To assuage concerns, the new emir paid several visits to GCC states to assure them that Qatar had no intention of interfering in their internal affairs.³⁷

Likewise, the Emir took a reconciliatory stance towards Egypt after the 2013 coup in order to restore diplomatic credibility and break Qatar's isolation.³⁸ Emir Tamim al-Thani also sought to change Qatar's international image in respect of any (perceived) support for 'radical organisations' such as Al-Qaeda and its affiliates. In his first address to the UN General Assembly in 2013, he said that 'the State of Qatar aims to be a hub for dialogue and discussion among various parties to conflicts and not to be a party to such conflicts.'³⁹ Finally, Al-Thani sent 1,000 troops to Yemen in support of Saudi and Emirati forces in mid-2015 to curry favour with Riyadh.⁴⁰ On balance, he significantly downscaled Qatar's regional foreign policy – especially in Syria and Libya – while Turkey maintained or increased its involvement in these countries.⁴¹

Yet, Qatar's efforts to regain the trust of Saudi Arabia's rulers fell short of their intended outcomes. Riyadh's attitude remained suspicious and hostile. Although Emir al-Tamim was willing to be less confrontational, the two sides had drifted too far apart for an amicable make up. The 2017 shift in US policy on Iran – from accommodation to confrontation – also played a key role in that it emboldened Saudi Arabia to demand further concessions from Qatar.⁴² In brief, the Quartet was not appeased and increased the pressure on Doha to comply more strictly with its own foreign policy objectives. However, Qatar had no intention of putting its autonomous foreign policy in jeopardy by capitulating to the demands of Saudi Arabia and the UAE.⁴³

36 *Guardian*, [online](#) (accessed 24 August 2020); Ulrichsen, K. C., 'Qatar and its rivals in Syria's conflict', in: Hinnebusch, R. and A. Saouli, *The War for Syria*, London: Routledge, 2019; Roberts (2017) *op.cit.*; Boyce, G., 'Qatar's Foreign Policy', *Asian Affairs*: 2013, 44:3, pp. 365-377.

37 Bařkan (2016) *op. cit.*

38 For instance, the Emir congratulated Egypt's interim president Adly Mansour and committed not to renege on financial pledges made during Morsi's Presidency. See: Pala and Aras (2015) *op. cit.*; Bařkan (2016) *op. cit.*

39 'Address by Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, Amir of the State of Qatar', United Nations, 24 September, 2013, [online](#)

40 Egypt Independent, [online](#) (accessed 13 August 2020).

41 F. Gregory Gause III, *Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War*, Brookings Doha Center, No: 2, 2014, online: <https://www.brookings.edu/research/beyond-sectarianism-the-new-middle-east-cold-war/> (accessed 27 July 2020).

42 Maloney, Suzanne, *Under Trump, U.S. policy on Iran is moving from accommodation to confrontation*, Brookings, 2017, [online](#); Novak, Jake, *Trump may have pushed Saudi Arabia and Iran closer to war*, CNBC, 7 Nov 2017, [online](#) (both accessed 29 November 2020).

43 Based on an interview with Shadi Hamid, senior research fellow at the Brookings on 3 December 2020.

In this same period, Turkey and Qatar succeeded in incrementally improving bilateral relations, for example by forming a High-Level Strategic Council and signing a 10-year military agreement in 2014, even though their relationship was less intense than during the 2011–2013 period.⁴⁴ Qatar discreetly continued to create a security policy backup while Turkey kept expanding its small outpost in the Persian Gulf.

From 2017 onwards: Another special relationship?

From 2017 onwards, Ankara capitalised on the rift in the GCC by expanding its military presence and political influence in Doha. Qatar in turn refused to appease the Quartet and relied predominantly on Turkish military patronage to maintain a more autonomous foreign policy. As the fault line in the Gulf deepened, Syria, Libya and Somalia became battlegrounds for proxy confrontation.

After the 2017 diplomatic crisis, Turkey and Qatar rapidly upgraded their relationship. The establishment of two Turkish military bases in Qatar appreciably increased deterrence against a Saudi invasion (as happened in Bahrain in 2011 and Yemen in 2015), which was especially relevant since US security guarantees no longer fully reassured Doha despite the presence of the vast Al-Udeid airbase.⁴⁵ The Turkish military presence made it far easier for Qatar to resist the Quartet's demands and maintain a more independent foreign policy. For example, Doha refused to attend the annual GCC meeting in 2018.⁴⁶ Economic relations between Turkey and Qatar also grew appreciably in many sectors – including defence, business and tourism – rising to a total trade volume of US\$1.4 billion (2019).⁴⁷ Moreover, Qatar directly supported the Turkish economy during the 2018 devaluation of the Turkish lira and increased its foreign direct investment.⁴⁸ By the end of 2019, Qatar's \$20 billion worth of investments offered the Turkish economy much needed succor.⁴⁹ During the Covid-19 pandemic, Qatar signed a \$15 billion swap agreement (mid-2020), which extended a further helping hand to lighten Turkish economic burdens.⁵⁰ One could argue that Qatar is reimbursing Turkey for its protection via investment and direct financial support.

44 Başkan and Pala (2020) *op.cit.*

45 Ahaber, [online](#) (accessed 24 August 2020); Fromherz (2017) *op. cit.*

46 *The National*, [online](#) (accessed 24 August 2020).

47 Turkish Statistical Institute [online](#) (accessed 26 July 2020).

48 TRT World, [online](#); Cupolo, D., Qatar triples swap line with Turkey, *AI-Monitor*, 20 May 2020, [online](#) (both accessed 18 August 2020).

49 Another \$7 billion of Qatari investments to flow into Turkey, *Daily Sabah*, 3 December 2019, [online](#); Turkish central bank triples Qatar swap line to \$15 bn, *Reuters*, 20 May 2020, [online](#) (accessed 19 November 2020).

50 Turkish central bank triples Qatar swap line to \$15 bn, *Reuters*, May 2020, [online](#) (accessed 29 November 2020).

The Turkish military base in Doha was initially destined to be a modest training facility since its capacity was limited. It served more as symbol of agreement than representing a functional military asset.⁵¹ Nevertheless, the course of events after 2017 stimulated Ankara and Doha to upgrade the base's capacity, and change its character (from a Turkish to a joint Turkish-Qatar base) and its deterrence posture. More specifically, the Turkish military presence in Doha – its first major military facility outside of the country⁵² – was tasked with upgrading the Qatari Armed Forces through joint training and high-profile joint military exercises. To that end, Turkey deployed some mechanised troops on a permanent basis and supplemented these with air and maritime assets 'on demand'.⁵³ Even though Ankara has argued that the end-state of Turkish military presence in Doha is to contribute to regional peace and stability, the Gulf States perceive it as Turkish military power projection.⁵⁴ Indeed, as Turkish-Iranian relations improved after 2016, Ankara's military build-up in Qatar can largely be seen as serving to deter Saudi Arabia and the UAE from attacking Doha. 'This alignment was a comfortable arrangement for Qatar because Doha keeps its powerful ally [Turkey] at a geographical distance and uses it to balance against Saudi Arabi and Iran,' according to Professor Allen J. Fromherz.⁵⁵

51 Derived from an email exchange with David. B. Roberts on 9 December 2020.

52 Dalay, G., Türkiye neden Katar'da askeri üs kuruyor?, *Al-Jazeera Turk*, 17 June 2015, [online](#).

53 Fırat, H., New Military Base in Qatar to inaugurate in Autumn, *Hürriyet Daily News*, 14 August 2019, [online](#); Turkey launches first training ship for Qatar, *TRT World*, 9 October 2020, [online](#); Ergon, U., Türk jetleri tatbikat için Katar'da, *Hürriyet*, 22 April 2018, [online](#); Kübra, M., Türkiye ile Katar arasında askeri - savunma iş birliği, *Defencehere*, 1 September 2020, [online](#) (accessed 19 November 2020).

54 Aktaş, Y. and M. Tosun, Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan Katar dönüşü gazetecilerin sorularını yanıtladı, *Anadolu Agency*, 26 November 2019, [online](#) (accessed 19 November 2020).

55 Based on an interview with Professor Allen J. Fromherz, Director of the Middle East Studies Center at Georgia State University, 23 November 2020.

3 Key drivers of Turkish-Qatari cooperation

Much of the current literature on Turkish and Qatari cooperation pays attention to the importance of shared ideology because the ruling elites in both countries are deemed to be strong backers of the Muslim Brotherhood movement.⁵⁶ The founders of Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) came from the *Milli Görüş* movement, which is part of a larger Muslim Brotherhood network. Muslim Brotherhood-oriented concepts and ideology have influenced foreign policy decisions of the AKP throughout its rule, although with varying intensity.⁵⁷

While the AKP is firmly ensconced in the Muslim Brotherhood's 'ecology of thought', Qatar's rulers are Wahhabis – as are Saudi Arabia's. The largest state mosque in Doha is named after the founder of Wahhabism, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab.⁵⁸ Qatar is also a constitutional tribal monarchy, ruled on the basis of sharia law. So, what explains Doha's pro-Brotherhood attitude and policies? For a start, Qatar's 'Wahhabism of the sea' – in contrast with Saudi Arabia's 'Wahhabism of the desert' – is much more tolerant of the Shi'a faith and of Muslim Brotherhood exiles who have been welcomed by Doha since the 1950s and 1960s.⁵⁹ Moreover, the exiled Muslim Brotherhood community in Doha – the Mecca for regional exiles (Kabaa al Madiyoom) – is not politically active in Qatar and is not perceived as a risk to the security and stability of the kingdom.⁶⁰ Lastly, there are deep personal connections between the Qatari elites and Muslim Brotherhood leaders. For example, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, an Egyptian theologian and spiritual leader of the Brotherhood, became the Islamic scholar of the Al-Thani Family. More generally,

56 Başkan (2016) *op. cit.*; Vidino, Lorenzo and Kamal Helbawy, *Pioneer of the Muslim Brotherhood in the West, GW Program on Extremism*, Washington: The George Washington University, 2020 [online](#) (accessed 27 July 2020).

57 Veen and Yüksel (2018) *op. cit.*

58 Başkan (2016) *op. cit.*

59 Note that the Shi'a-Sunni divide is largely non-existent in Qatar. Both Hamad and Tamim al-Thani built close personal ties with Iran's political elites to insure themselves against attacks linked to the presence of the US's Central Command in Doha. Fromherz (2017) *op. cit.*; Roberts (2017) *op. cit.*

60 Even though the movement has expanded its influence in places like Qatar's education ministry and Al-Jazeera. Based on an interview with Professor Allen J. Fromherz, Director of the Middle East Studies Center at Georgia State University, 23 November 2020; Roberts (2017) *op. cit.*, p. 184.

kinship ties have also facilitated a shared view on critical issues such as the unity of the Muslim community, conciliatory approaches towards Iran, and support for Hamas.⁶¹

Ultimately, Qatar's state structure and ideology are more like the Wahhabi dominated Arabian Peninsula than Turkey's pro-Islamist majoritarian democracy. The Al-Thani family has no ideological objection to the Muslim Brotherhood and sympathises with aspects of its approach but does so without being part of the Brotherhood ecology itself.⁶² Moreover, it is not strongly committed to maintaining Doha as an active political base for the Brotherhood's activities outside of Qatar, at least not in the more recent past. As a result, the ideological ties between Ankara and Doha are relatively weak. Instead, the key drivers of Doha's positive relationship with the Brotherhood are good personal connections, a generally tolerant religious attitude, and the fact that the Brotherhood is not perceived as a threat.⁶³

Box 2 Wahhabi and Muslim Brotherhood ideologies

The ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood offers an alternative to Wahhabi ideology for the governance of Islamic societies. Simply put, Wahhabism justifies authoritarian and dynastic rule with reference to the obligation of the faithful to obey their ruler. According to Wahhabism, leaders receive their sovereignty from God and must be obeyed so long as they do not breach Islamic morality. In exchange, Wahhabism is the state religion supported by the royal family and is at liberty to maintain conservative social arrangements through religious dogma. Note that ultimately political power tends to trump religion in for example Saudi Arabia or the UAE.

On the other hand, Muslim Brotherhood ideology (*Hassan al-Banna; Sayyid Qutb*) aims to build a modern majoritarian – or even theocratic – form of democracy based on Islamic principles. Hassan al-Banna advocated for a political ideologisation of Islam by means of Islamic governance, institutions and structures. On the other hand, Sayyid Qutb tended towards radicalisation and laid the foundation of the idea of jihad by means of violence. Historically, the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood has challenged the more hereditary and conservative aspects of Wahhabi/Saudi rule by inspiring reformist movements across the region. It is for this reason that the Arab uprisings represented

61 Roberts (2017), *op. cit*; Başkan, B., 'Making Sense of Turkey's Foreign Policy: Clashing Identities and Interests', *The Muslim World*: 2016.

62 Based on an interview with Shadi Hamid, Senior Research Fellow at the Brookings Institute on 3 December 2020.

63 Roberts (2019) *op. cit*.

an existential threat to Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Consequently, the Muslim Brotherhood group has been designated a terrorist organisation and banned in both countries, as well as in Egypt.

Source: El Karoui, H., *The Islamist Factory*, Institute Montaigne, 2018, [online](#); Mulcaire, C., *Hasan al-Banna and the Political Ideologization of Islam in the 20th Century*, E-International Relations, 2016, [online](#); Meijer, R., *The Muslim Brotherhood and the political: An exercise in ambiguity*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2013; Reuters, 3 May 2019, [online](#) (accessed 3 September 2020).

In a similar vein, several reports suggest that economic cooperation between Turkey and Qatar plays an important role in shaping their relationship.⁶⁴ However, a brief examination of trade data since 2002 suggests that Turkey's trade volume with Saudi Arabia and the UAE has been consistently and significantly higher than its trade with Qatar. In the two years following the 2017 Qatar diplomatic crisis, Turkey's trade volume with Saudi Arabia declined from \$15 billion to \$8 billion and remained at the level of \$5 billion with the UAE. However, the trade volume with Qatar reached just about \$1.4 billion – i.e. roughly one-sixth of trade with Saudi Arabia and one-third of trade with the UAE (see Figure 1 below). Furthermore, Turkish-Qatari trade today sits at a level already achieved in 2008. Taking these observations together suggests that the Turkish-Qatari partnership does not have strong economic drivers.

From an economic point of view, we should also note an important factor that helps explain Qatar's need for an autonomous and Iran-friendly foreign policy. Qatar shares the world's largest gas field with Iran (North Dome/South Pars).⁶⁵ While their joint possession and exploration does not create many operational dependencies on a daily basis, they do generate broader supply chain, and longer-term production and commercial, dependencies that are coordinated and optimised through Iran and Qatar's membership of the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF).⁶⁶ Being seen to contribute to sanctions against Iran, or facilitating strikes against it, would be likely to trigger retaliation. As Qatar is much more dependent on the North Dome gas field than Iran is on the South Pars field, any rupture in its relations with Iran would threaten the source of revenue that makes Qatar the richest country in the world on a per capita basis.⁶⁷

64 Kūçūkaşçı, E. S., *Entente Cordiale: Exploring Turkey Qatar Relations*. TRTWorld Research Center, 2019, [online](#); Schmid, D. and J. Subervie, *Turkey/GCC economic relations*, Ifri, 2014, [online](#) (accessed 19 November 2020).

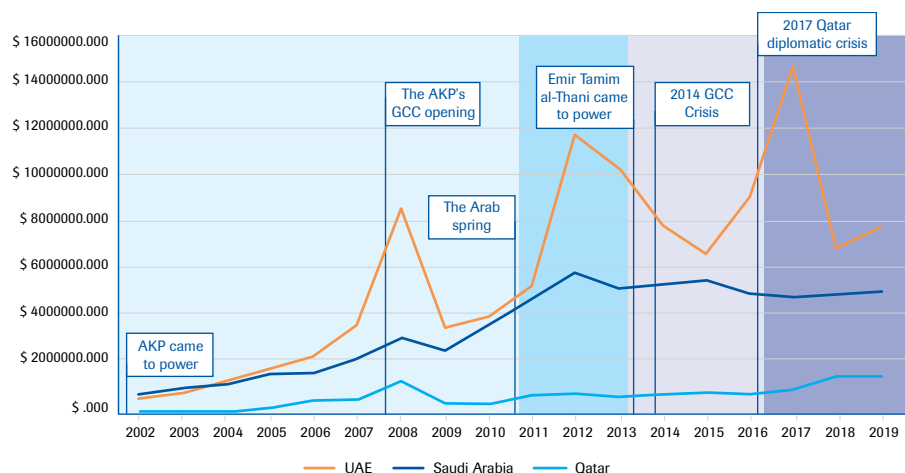
65 North Field, [online](#); Regencia, T., Qatar-Gulf rift: The Iran factor, Al-Jazeera, 6 Jun 2017, [online](#) (accessed 29 November 2020).

66 GECF History, [online](#) (accessed 29 November 2020).

67 Fromherz (2017) *op. cit.*; Richest Countries in the World 2020, Global Finance, 3 August 2020, [online](#) (accessed 26 November).

It is in large part for this reason that Doha 'has avoided assimilation with Saudi foreign policy to limit the risk threats against its offshore gas and oil fields from Iran'.⁶⁸

Figure 1 Turkey's trade volume with Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar from 2002–2019⁶⁹



Ideological and economic considerations aside, it is worth noting that the Brotherhood's organisational network and political infrastructure also serve as an important capacity enhancement for Turkey and – especially – tiny Qatar. As it is, both countries have weak institutional capacities to pursue their foreign policies. A 2012 Turkish think tank report notes that the country had only 26 Arabic-speaking diplomatic personnel in 2011, of whom only six were working in the Middle East.⁷⁰ With a population of just 300,000, Qatar has also struggled to provide enough staff for its roughly 100 diplomatic representations around the world to pursue its foreign policy aims effectively.⁷¹

Taking the absence of ideological and economic drivers together, it appears that Doha has largely aligned itself with Ankara for pragmatic reasons. In other words, to protect itself from worse than the Quartet embargo.⁷² After the Qatar diplomatic crisis of 2017, Qatar had little choice but to strengthen its pragmatic hedging policy under Turkish leadership. Today, Doha is largely dependent on Turkey (and, paradoxically, the US)

68 Fromherz (2017) *op. cit.*

69 Turkish Statistical Institute [online](#) (accessed 26 July 2020).

70 Bahadır D.O. – Mustafa Kutlay, *Turkey's power capacity in the Middle East: the limits of the possible, (Türkiye'nin Ortadoğu'daki güç kapasitesi: mümkünün sınırları)*, USAK reports, No:12-03, (April 2012): 19, [online](#).

71 Roberts, D. B., *Reflecting on Qatar's "Islamist" Soft Power*, Washington: Brookings Institution, 2019.

72 Kinninmont (2019) *op. cit.*

for military protection to safeguard its space for pursuing an autonomous foreign policy. For Turkey, partnering with Qatar has been an opportunity to shift the balance of forces in the Gulf as far as its bid for soft power leadership of the Sunni world is concerned. While this claim has been accepted in some East Asian Muslim countries (example.g. Malaysia and Pakistan), it has been challenged by Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt.⁷³

73 Young, M., *In an interview, Soli Özel explains the multifaceted nature of Turkey's ambitions in the Middle East and North Africa*, Carnegie Diwan, 2020 [online](#) (accessed 18 August 2020); Sabah, [online](#) and Asia Times, [online](#) (accessed 21 October 2020).

4 Turkish and Qatari cooperation on security and defence

Being a tribal city-state with weak military capacity, Qatar's pre-eminent security concern has, for a long time, been Saudi Arabia. Starting with the Wahhabi desire to control the entire Qatari peninsula in the late 18th century, even the 1965 border agreement did not provide adequate assurance of independence since Saudi Arabia established *de facto* sovereignty over Qatar's rulers by enforcing foreign policy alignment.⁷⁴ The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait diminished the deference of Qatar's emirs to Saudi policy preferences as it demonstrated Saudi weakness in the face of Iraqi assertiveness. Border skirmishes with Saudi troops in 1992, 1993 and 1994, and coup attempts blamed on Riyadh in 1996, pushed Doha to strive for greater autonomy.⁷⁵ Emir Hamad al-Thani brokered new protective arrangements with the US (Doha hosts the Al-Udeid airbase), the UK, France and Turkey.⁷⁶ The newer arrangements with Turkey – in the form of the *Defence Industry Cooperation Agreement* of 2007 and the *Military Training Agreement* of 2012 – fit the model of a small state increasing its security via military collaboration with more significant powers.⁷⁷ The *Turkey-Qatar Military Cooperation Agreement* of March 2015 on intelligence sharing as well as force deployment further upgraded the military partnership.⁷⁸

Turkish military deployments to Qatar began in mid-2015 as part of an initial plan to set up an advisory command group within the Qatari General Staff and to build a military base consisting of roughly 500 to 600 Turkish soldiers. Turkey's deployments were, however, modulated downwards by Qatar's ruler to avoid provoking the Quartet, in line with Tamim al-Thani's more conciliatory approach towards Saudi Arabia from 2013 onwards. In consequence, the Turkish military presence was kept to about 100 soldiers without a command group in the Qatari General Staff until the outbreak of the

74 Roberts (2017) *op. cit.*

75 *Ibid.*

76 *Ibid.*

77 Cochrane, Paul, *Revealed: Secret details of Turkey's new military pact with Qatar*, Middle East Eye, 2016, [Online](#) (accessed 27 July 2020).

78 Gürçan, Metin, 2015, *What are Turkish Troops going to do in Qatar?*, Al-Monitor, [online](#) (accessed 27 July 2020).

2017 crisis.⁷⁹ Post-2017, Turkey has upgraded the capacity of the military compound – the ‘Turkish-Qatar Combined Joint Force Command’.⁸⁰

Military procurement and the development of military industry has been another area of cooperation between Turkey and Qatar. Since 2017, especially, Qatar has committed itself to purchase a broad range of modern combat equipment from Turkey, including 100 modern tanks, 585 armoured combat vehicles,⁸¹ 25 modern self-propelled howitzers, and six armed unmanned armoured vehicles (UAVs). Qatar has also provided loans for Turkish defence ventures facing financial difficulties and in 2018 invested \$100 million in BMC, a government-backed armoured vehicles manufacturer, buying a 49,9 per cent stake in the company.⁸² Consequently, the Qatari Armed Forces, ranked 90th of 138 countries in terms of military strength in 2020,⁸³ became the fourth biggest importer of Turkish military equipment, worth c. \$139 million, just below the US and Germany. This represents a 1,336 per cent increase from 2018 (3rd quarter).⁸⁴

79 Based on an interview with a senior Turkish military officer involved in the Qatar deployment.

80 Güler, S., Turkey-Qatar force command serves stability of region, *Anadolu Agency*, 25 November 2019, [online](#) (accessed 8 December 2020).

81 In due course, Turkey established two military bases and deployed more than 3,000 Turkish soldiers with a projected ceiling of 5,000. See: Anadolu Agency, [online](#) and TRMILITARYNEWS, [online](#) (accessed 10 July 2020).

82 Bekdil, B. E., *How a small investment is set to earn a Turkish businessman \$4.4.BN from tank sales*, *Defence News*, 2019, [online](#) (accessed 10 July 2020).

83 Globalfirepower, [online](#) (accessed 10 July 2020).

84 Sözcü, [online](#) (accessed 10 July 2020).

5 Turkish-Qatari approaches to conflict and crisis across the region

Broadly speaking, Qatar sought to take advantage of new opportunities, partnerships and deals in anticipation of Muslim Brotherhood-inspired groups emerging successfully from the Arab uprisings.⁸⁵ For this reason, Qatar provided financial assistance to Brotherhood-linked armed groups during the uprisings and openly sponsored Islamist and revolutionary political parties associated with such groups. Furthermore, Qatari individuals and government representatives are reported to have been in regular contact with Al-Qaeda and its affiliates in Syria, Iraq, Somalia and Yemen in order to exert geopolitical influence, play an intermediary role between terrorist organisations and the West, maintain Qatar's immunity to terrorist attacks, and/or show Doha's sympathy.⁸⁶ Finally, global economic rivalry with its fellow Gulf states also triggered confrontation between Qatar and its neighbours, for example in Somalia.⁸⁷

In turn, Turkey aimed to change the course of some Arab uprisings – mostly in Syria, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt – by providing military, political and economic support for Islamist and revolutionary groups – armed as well as political. After 2016, this policy evolved into a more security-focused approach, which deploys the Turkish military to compensate for the weaknesses and limitations of Ankara-friendly local actors. Turkey effectively mobilised a mix of proxies and direct military intervention in Syria and Libya to achieve its foreign policy objectives via military superiority.⁸⁸ Ankara also engaged in covert cooperation with the pragmatic elements of Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham – Al-Qaeda's affiliate in Syria.⁸⁹ In Somalia, Turkey's initial developmentally- and economically-oriented role acquired a more geopolitical and security-focused character after the 2017 Qatar

85 Fromherz (2017), *op. cit.*

86 The US Department of Treasury Press Release, 2013, [online](#) and Fromherz (2017) *op. cit.*; Roberts (2019) *op. cit.*

87 Based on an interview with Professor Allen J. Fromherz, Director of the Middle East Studies Center at Georgia State University (23 November 2020).

88 Yüksel, E., 'Turkey's approach to proxy war in the Middle East and North Africa', *Security and Defence Quarterly*, 31 (4), 2020.

89 Yüksel (2019) *op. cit.*

diplomatic crisis.⁹⁰ Converging political interests in these countries led the formation of a *de facto* Turkey-Qatar front in Syria, Libya and Somalia.

In Syria, Turkey carried out four military incursions, of which two-and-a-half have sought to undo the gains of the Kurdish People's Democratic Party (PYD) – Operations Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch and Peace Spring.⁹¹ These four operations have carved out sizeable areas in northern Syria where Turkey has effective control and armed Syrian opposition forces function as Turkish proxies. Qatar, on the other hand, was a staunch backer of the Syrian opposition under Emir Hamad al-Thani. When Emir Tamim al-Thani came to power, however, Qatari involvement in Syria was reduced. Nevertheless, Doha maintained political support for the Syrian opposition and continues to prevent the Syrian regime from rejoining the Arab League.⁹² In contrast, the policies of Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have become more pro-regime since 2018, with the UAE normalising relations by reopening its embassy in Damascus (late 2018) and encouraging the Emirati private sector to invest in Syria.⁹³ In turn, Saudi Arabia has explored supporting the PYD in northeast Syria.⁹⁴

At the outset of the Libyan civil war, Qatar provided financial, military and diplomatic support to revolutionary Islamist groups via the networks of a prominent Libyan imam, Al-Salibi.⁹⁵ This involved backing Abdulkarim Belhaj, a former leader of an Al-Qaeda affiliated group and the new leader of the Islamist al-Watan party.⁹⁶ Turkey joined NATO's operation in support of the Libyan opposition (as did the UAE and Qatar) and provided political support for the National Transitional Council. During the second Libyan civil war, Turkey and Qatar sided with the UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA), which has been engaged in a civil war with Marshal Haftar's self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA) since 2014. In this regard, Turkey and Qatar initially sponsored different GNA revolutionary and Islamist factions with varying intensity.

90 Meester, J. and W. van den Berg, *Turkey in the Horn of Africa*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2019.

91 Van Veen, E., E. Yüksel and H. Tekinç, *The Kurdish Question and Turkey's new Regional Militarism*, The Hague: Clingendael, September 2020.

92 Cafiero, G., *Qatar Says No to Rapprochement with Syrian Regime*, Gulf International Forum, 2019, [online](#), (accessed 19 November 2020).

93 TIMEP Brief: *Normalization of the Syrian Regime*, The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, 2019, [online](#); Santucci, E., *The Caesar Act might alter the UAE's normalization policy with Syria*, Atlantic Council, 2020, [online](#); CNBC, [online](#) (all accessed 19 November 2020).

94 Saudi Arabia says it's given \$100 million to northeast Syria, *CNBC*, 17 August 2018, [online](#); Saudi funds US-backed PKK terror force in northern Syria, *Yenisafak World*, 29 May 2018, [online](#) (accessed 21 October 2020).

95 Roberts, D. B., 'Understanding Qatar's Foreign Policy Objectives', *Mediterranean Politics*, 17:2, 233-239, 2012.

96 Roberts (2016), *op. cit.*

In contrast, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt backed the LNA as part of their broader efforts to prevent pluralistic forms of governance from emerging throughout the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and to maintain authoritarian rule. But after the UAE and Russia empowered the LNA to launch a major offensive against the GNA in April 2019, Turkey started to provide more active military assistance, based on a November 2019 Memorandum of Understanding on security and intelligence cooperation.⁹⁷ In exchange for a delimitation agreement on maritime jurisdiction areas in the Mediterranean,⁹⁸ Turkey deployed conventional combat enablers and irregular fighting elements to Tripoli in support of the GNA. After intense fighting, a permanent ceasefire was brokered and the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum was launched in October 2020.⁹⁹ Both Turkey and Qatar have been trying to reap the benefits of this emergent post-conflict environment by institutionalising their cooperation with the GNA. Both recently signed a security agreement with Tripoli to enhance the military capabilities of the GNA.¹⁰⁰

Somalia has become another area of economic and political rivalry between Turkey/ Qatar and Saudi Arabia/UAE. Being rentier states with excess revenues, the Gulf countries view the ports of Somalia as suitable investment opportunities to create political influence, patronage and trade benefits. Between 2011 and 2017, Qatar and Turkey concentrated on providing political and investment support to the Federal Government of Somalia, while the UAE and Saudi Arabia focused on the self-declared Republic of Somaliland and semiautonomous Puntland. After the Qatar diplomatic crisis, the Turkish role in Somalia acquired a geopolitical and security character by deploying a training mission of 200 personnel in support of the Somali National Army against extremist groups such as al-Shabaab (an al-Qaeda affiliate) and Islamic State in Somalia.¹⁰¹

Qatar, on the other hand, has pursued a multi-pronged policy. Formally, it provides development support to Somalia. Informally, it also supports local extremists affiliated with Al-Shabaab to target UAE and Saudi investments, with Qatari individuals such as

97 Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the Republic of Turkey and the Government of National Accord of the State of Libya on Security and Military Cooperation, *Resmi Gazete*, 27 November 2019, [online](#) (accessed 19 November 2020).

98 Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the Republic of Turkey and the Government of National Accord of the State of Libya on Delimitation of the Maritime Jurisdiction Areas in the Mediterranean, *Resmi Gazete*, 7 December 2019, [online](#).

99 Libya ceasefire: UN relaunches inclusive political forum, amid growing 'sense of hope', the UN, 26 October 2020, [online](#) (accessed 19 November 2020).

100 Libya signs with Turkey and Qatar cooperation deal to boost military build-up, *Marsad*, 17 August 2020, [online](#) (accessed 19 November 2020).

101 Meester (2019) *op. cit.*; Kasapoglu, C., 'Türkiye Bölgesel Güvenliği İleri Üslerle İnşa Ediyor, in Türkiye'nin Güvenlik Stratejisi', *Anadolu Ajansı Yayınları*, Ankara: 2018, p. 36-42; Herschelmann, K., Turkey to train a third of Somali Army, *Janes*, 6 August 2020, [online](#) (accessed 22 November 2020).

businessman Khalifa Kayed al-Muhanadi serving as middlemen.¹⁰² This is evidenced, for example, by the 2019 bombing of Bosaso, a port managed by the UAE in Puntland, which was claimed by a group affiliated with IS in Somalia.¹⁰³ Reportedly, since about early 2018, Turkey has also joined Qatar's efforts to create new proxy groups that prioritise undoing the gains of the UAE in Somalia.¹⁰⁴ In response, the UAE has recently built a military base in Berbera to help protect Somaliland against terrorist attacks.¹⁰⁵ As both sides start using covert operations to secure their gains and undo the other side's, economic rivalry is transforming into a low-intensity proxy war.

Box 3 Turkish and Qatari approach to conflict and crises across the region

In **Syria**, Turkey and Qatar initially called on Assad to enact structural political reform, including integration of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood into a unity government. When this failed, from 2011 until mid-2013, Turkey and Qatar backed the nationalist Free Syrian Army (FSA) and Muslim Brotherhood-aligned Islamist revolutionary groups of the Syrian National Council (SNC). Once these groups became marginalised, Turkey and Qatar extended their support to more extreme groups. For example, in 2017 former Qatari Prime Minister Hamad bin Jassim bin Jaber al-Thani admitted the likelihood of Qatari support to Jabhat Al-Nusra, an Al-Qaeda affiliate. When Emir Tamim al-Thani came to power, Qatari involvement in Syria was reduced. Qatar withdrew its military liaison officers from Syria in 2014 and instead provided aid to local councils of the Syrian Opposition. However, Qatari dealings with Islamist groups did not fully stop. This is evidenced by the mediator role that Qatar played between the US and Jabhat Al-Nusra during the release of hostages in mid-2014. But while Qatar scaled down its military involvement in Syria, Turkey stepped up its military activities after 2015 by incorporating armed opposition groups as proxies and deploying its own military force to establish safe zones in northern Syria.

In **Libya**, Qatar pursued an assertive foreign policy in the early days of the civil war. Doha backed revolutionary movements, rallied the Arab League's support for a no-fly zone over Libya, and took part in the NATO-led mission with Turkey.

102 Bergman, R. and D. Kirkpatrick, With Guns, Cash and Terrorism, Gulf States Vie for Power in Somalia, *New York Times*, [online](#) (accessed 22 November 2020).

103 *Ibid.*

104 Tawfik, N., *After New York Times Leaks, Qatar Tampers with Somalia's Security Again*, European Center for Counterterrorism, 2019, [online](#) (accessed 20 November 2020).

105 Salama, M., Turkey's rivalry with the UAE in Somalia is raising tensions in the Red Sea, *Middle East Eye*, 12 April 2018, [online](#) (accessed 22 November 2020).

When the second round of civil war broke out in 2014, Turkey increased its support for the Islamist and pro-Turkish Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli, while Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt stood behind Khalifa Haftar's self-styled anti-Islamist Libyan National Army (LNA) in eastern Libya. Under Emir Tamim al-Thani's leadership, Qatar kept funding mainstream Islamist groups in Libya as demonstrated by the capture of Tripoli in the summer of 2014 during which the Qatar-backed Dawn coalition played a decisive role. After the 2017 GCC embargo, Qatar decreased, but did not cease, its financial backing for GNA-linked factions. Turkey, on the other hand, deepened its military support for Tripoli after GNA territorial losses in April 2019. For instance, Ankara provided modern combat enablers and deployed fighters from the Syrian National Army in support of GNA operations. Since then, Turkish military intervention has secured and consolidated the GNA's position at the expense of the UAE- and Egypt-backed LNA. GNA military achievements under Turkish auspices further encouraged Qatar to maintain its support for Tripoli.

Somalia is another state where Turkey and Qatar have worked together. While Turkey's initial interventions in Mogadishu in 2011 were largely economic and humanitarian, they acquired a more geopolitical character after the 2017 Qatar diplomatic crisis. Since then, Turkey has deepened its engagement in the fields of security and trade in Somalia by building close links with the Office of the President. In 2012, Qatar backed Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated former president Hassan Sheikh Mohamud and since 2017 has extended loans to his successor, Mohamed Abdullahi Farmaajo. However, after the 2017 crisis, the UAE and Saudi Arabia also stepped up their support for Somalia's breakaway areas, the self-declared Republic of Somaliland and semiautonomous Puntland, undoing much Turkish/Qatari influence. In response, Ankara and Doha adopted a proxy warfare strategy by making use of Muslim Brotherhood networks. These networks go back to 2013 when a Qatari individual, Abd al-Rahman bin Umayr al-Nu'aymi, was accused by the US Treasury of providing money and material support, as well as conveying communications to al-Qa'eda and its affiliates in Somalia for more than a decade. Reportedly, since early 2018, Turkish, Qatari and Iranian intelligence officers have joined efforts to create new proxy groups – in part via Muslim Brotherhood networks. In this manner, Turkey and Qatar have sought to destabilise the local governments of Somalia that are backed by the UAE and Saudi Arabia. It also appears that Qatar was behind the 2019 Bosaso bombing in a port managed by the UAE and Dubai Ports, although President Farmaajo denied this allegation. Since then, Qatar has been working with the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliate Al-Islah party to create a military wing that recruits former members of Al-Shabaab.

Source: Steinberg (2020), *op.cit.*; Roberts (2017), *op.cit.*, Krieg, A. and A. Boven, *Qatar's Pragmatic Syria Gamble*, The National Interest, 2017, [online](#); Washington Post, [online](#); Yüksel, E., *Strategies of Turkish Proxy Warfare in Northern Syria*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2019; Van Veen and Yüksel (2018) *op. cit.*; AlJazeera, [online](#); Başkan and Pala (2020) *op. cit.*; Middle East Eye, [online](#); Guido (2020), *op.cit.*; Schmitt (2019), *op.cit.*, AlJazeera, [online](#); Middle East Monitor, [online](#); Meester, J. and W. van den Berg, *Turkey in the Horn of Africa*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2019; Jay, M., *Is the Partnership Between Qatar and Somalia beginning to fray*, Middle East Online, [online](#); Yusuf, Zakariya and Abdul Khalif, *Somali and the Gulf Crisis*, ICG, 2017, [online](#); Tawfik, N., *After New York Times Leaks, Qatar Tampers with Somalia's Security Again*, European Center for Counterterrorism, 2019, [online](#); Mohamed, Hussein and Abdi L. Dahir, *Suicide Bombing Targets Major Turkish Military Base in Somalia*, The New York Times, 2020, [online](#); Pala and Aras (2015) *op. cit.*, Ozer, Sarp, *Turkey, Libya, Qatar agree to ink military deal*, Anadolu Agency, 2020, [online](#); The U.S. Department of Treasury Press Release, 2013, [online](#) (all accessed 28 July 2020).

On balance, the 2017 blockade of Qatar did not substantially alter Qatar's approach towards conflict and crises across the region, let alone bringing it in line with the Quartet's foreign policy preferences. Instead, the blockade pushed Qatar to accept Turkish security patronage in exchange for Doha's support on selected regional issues.

6 Conclusions

Zooming out, the recent Al-Ula agreement allows two important observations. The first is that triggering the initial crisis was a serious miscalculation on the part of the Quartet. Led by the Saudis, the Emiratis and Bahrainis have had to concede as much, although with different levels of enthusiasm. The second is that none of the issues leading to the 2017 crisis have been resolved. They will linger if not addressed in one way or another. Combined with the analysis contained in the rest of the paper, these observations allow a few conclusions to be drawn.

To begin with, the Turkish-Qatari relationship will persist. Given that the 2017 break was not the first GCC crisis, Qatar will want to continue pursuing a foreign policy independent from Saudi Arabia. Surprised by the aggressiveness of the 2017 rupture, Qatar is unlikely to substantially reduce its relationship with Turkey, let alone undo the establishment of Turkish military bases on its soil, even though the relationship may diminish in intensity for some time. As Turkish-Qatari relations are not predicated on deep ideological or economic links, they can adjust flexibly to changing circumstances.

Moreover, Saudi reconciliation with Qatar, however superficial it might be at this stage, is likely to open the door for a Saudi-Turkish rapprochement a bit wider.¹⁰⁶ Especially if Doha decreases the extent to which it serves as base for the Muslim Brotherhood while Riyadh accepts that Turkey will continue hosting the Brotherhood, this particular issue could gradually stop being a bone of contention in the Gulf. Tensions between Turkey and the UAE might increase, but that may be a lesser concern in both Ankara and Riyadh, especially as the Turkish base in Qatar does not pose a military threat to the Gulf countries.

Finally, a Saudi-Qatari reconciliation combined with a Turkish-Saudi one, will bring the temperature down in a number of conflicts across the various regions where the Saudis and Emirates were confronting Turkey and Qatar. Especially the (future) use of radical groups and proxies in places like Somalia and Syria is likely to diminish, which is good news for the prospects for peace. It could even create the possibility for a dialogue on preventing radicalization – a shared Gulf-Turkish-European interest – including the premise that enabling moderate Islamist parties to legally function based on a modicum

¹⁰⁶ Indicatively, Qatar already offered its services as mediator between the other Gulf states and Iran.

See: www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-01-18/qatar-says-it-s-time-gulf-arabs-start-talks-with-iran (accessed 20 January 2021).

of political pluralism akin to a Tunisia- or Kuwait-style model is a better way of doing so than suppressing them. Such a dialogue is in fact something the EU could initiate or support, based on its own concerns about radicalization abroad and at home.

The Al-Ula declaration has initiated a transition phase that will remain fluid until the policies of the Biden administration towards Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran have gained practical traction. In the meantime, it has opened the door for Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar to start building a more triangular relationship.