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Current Gulf Crisis and its Impact on the Gulf Cooperation Council

An LKI Roundtable with Professor Sultan Barakat, Founding Director, Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies, Doha Institute of Graduate Studies, Qatar

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Three key takeaways from the round table with Professor Sultan Barakat -

- 1. Qatar is currently facing an extensive crisis in its regional relations, that has damaged both its economic and societal ties.**
 - 2. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has failed to solve the crisis between Qatar and its other members, primarily Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain. This reduces the GCC's role as a mediator, and the GCC may not survive the crisis.**
 - 3. The geopolitics of the Arab world are changing as a result of the crisis. It has led to a strengthening of Qatar's relationship with Turkey, and opened up the possibility of a future alliance between Qatar and Iran.**
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Introduction

- Professor Sultan Barakat, Founding Director of the Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies at the Doha Institute of Graduate Studies, Qatar, addressed a Foreign Policy Round Table on “The Current Gulf Crisis and its Impact on the Gulf Cooperation Council” on 16 November 2017 at LKI
- The round table, organised in collaboration with the Center for Humanitarian Affairs in Sri Lanka, was attended by LKI Board Members, the Ambassador for Turkey and Oman, and diplomatic representatives from Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Representatives from think tanks and international organisations were also present.
- The round table was moderated by Dr. Dinusha Panditaratne, Executive Director of the Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute (LKI).

Takeaways from the Professor Barakat's Lecture:

Scale of the Current Gulf Crisis

- The ongoing crisis in Qatar is rooted not only in the political realities of the Middle East, but also in an intellectual culture that is hostile to freedom of thought.
- The blockade on Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain began on 5 June 2017. Communications were severed overnight; flights between Qatar and the blockading countries were suspended.
- Qatari citizens resident in blockading countries were asked to leave within a matter of days; and the thirty years of market integration between Qatar and the other GCC members were broken.
- The blockade cut off 90% of Qatar's supplies, which came via the ports in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, or via the road network of Saudi Arabia.
- Qataris only experienced 24 hours of food shortages due to Qatar's well-designed food security policies which were adopted in partnership with Turkey, and to the efficiency with which Qatar Airlines transformed its fleet into cargo carriers.

- The largest economic impact of the blockade has been on the construction sector. An estimated US \$150 million needs to be spent every week towards the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, and delays add considerable costs to the system.
- Around 15,000 families were directly affected by the crisis. They include citizens in inter-country marriages, students that have had to abandon their studies, and Qataris working in blockading countries who have had to leave their jobs.

Accusations against Qatar

- On 22 June 2017, 13 conditions for the blockade to end were issued by the blockading nations. Qatar considered these demands to be unreasonable and unfeasible, and doubted the genuineness of blockading nations in imposing such conditions.
- The three main accusations against Qatar are: (1) its finance and support of terrorist organisations; (2) their intervention in the internal affairs of other countries; and (3) Qatar's relationship with Iran.
 - Qatar has been accused of supporting the Muslim Brotherhood. However, the Qatari position is that the Muslim Brotherhood cannot be equated to a terrorist organisation. Qatar should however, investigate its links to groups such as the Taliban, Al Nusra Front, and Al Qaeda.
 - Qatar has offered a safe haven to prominent politicians of opposition parties from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain, triggering allegations of Qatari intervention in the internal affairs of these countries.
 - Qatar disagrees with Trump's harsh rhetoric against Iran. Given the substantial gas reserve shared between Qatar and Iran, it is in Qatar's best interest to maintain political relations with neighbouring Tehran.
 - Previously, as a response to Saudi Arabian pressure against Iran, Qatar had withdrawn its Ambassador to Iran in 2014, only to receive demands by Saudi Arabia to issue stronger statements against Tehran.

Survival of the GCC and its Geopolitical Consequences

- There are signs the GCC will not survive the current crisis, as indicated by the postponing of meetings. Saudi Arabia is likely aware that both Kuwait and Oman are unlikely to agree to Qatar leaving the GCC; and for any major GCC decision, there must be a consensus from all countries.
- Qatar has traditionally viewed itself as a small country squeezed between big neighbours, and believed that it was best to remain neutral with neighbouring states (and instead, focus on strengthening alliances with global superpowers).
- The consequences of a post-GCC world for Qatar include an inevitable opening up to Iran. Qatar's geographic connection to Iran would facilitate the efficient transfer of goods and supplies. A joint defence and construction venture between Qatar and Iran is more likely if the blockade continues.

- Qatar has also strengthened its economic and defence ties with Turkey. Trade from the onset of the crisis in June is equal to trade in the whole year before the crisis. A previously planned Turkish base in Qatar has now been accelerated.
- By not retaliating or escalating the crisis, Qatar has been winning international diplomatic support.
- Muslim-majority nations, including Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Nigeria, have remained neutral in the Gulf crisis, affirming that the issue should be resolved through mediation by Kuwait.

Key Points from the Round Table Discussion:

On the Politics of the Arab World

- The expectation was that Saudi Arabia's leverage in: (1) expatriate labour, (2) financial transfers to countries such as Pakistan, and (3) as a source of energy, would induce many countries to join the blockade. However, this reality did not materialise.
- Iran exports almost 100% of its oil and gas through The Strait of Hormuz. Saudi Arabia is reducing the volume of oil being sent through Hormuz, using alternative channels via Jeddah and the Red Sea because of Iranian control of the Hormuz. The UAE has also recently opened a pipeline to bypass the strait.
- In the Emir of Qatar's recent speech to the Shura Council (the Qatari Parliament), he stated that Saudi Arabia must respond to Qatar's introduction of elections to the Shura Council. Professor Barakat noted that Saudis aspire to a constitutional monarchy with an elected parliament, which Qatar is already moving towards.

On Western Interests and Interactions in the Middle East

- There are three broad interests that the US has with regards to the Middle East: (1) combating Iranian influence in the Middle East, (2) resolving the Israel-Palestine conflict, and (3) promoting US domestic job creation, through agreements with Middle Eastern nations.
 - Regarding Iranian influence, the US sees Saudi Arabia as a vital partner for dismantling the Iran nuclear deal.
 - Regarding the Israeli-Palestine conflict, the US perceives Hamas as an actor that is impeding the peace process, and is concerned about Qatar's support for Hamas.
 - US job creation is achieved through the defence industry and military contracts with Middle Eastern countries. Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and other countries in the Middle East have signed contracts with the US to gain favour and ultimately buy support.

- Qatar has twice provided a safe haven for Western countries; during the incident of the Al Udeid air base, and in the establishment of Al Jazeera.
 - The Al Udeid air base was originally located in Saudi Arabia. However, after the rise of Bin Laden, Saudi Arabia asked the US to leave (due to US military presence on Islamic holy ground). Qatar welcomed the US and paid for the infrastructure of Al Udeid, on the condition of the longevity of the air base.
 - Al Jazeera was originally a joint project by Saudi Arabia and the BBC, until the Al-Yamamah scandal broke out (wherein the UK was caught supplying weapons to Saudi Arabia). Saudi Arabia was alarmed and pulled support for the channel, before Al Jazeera released its first report on Al-Yamamah. Qatar intervened and provided the BBC with the freedom of press to operate independently in Doha.

On Conflict Resolution

- The GCC could be dismantled, since group meetings have been postponed twice. Silence from the group indicates that an internal resolution is unlikely to take place.
- Traditionally, during a time of internal crisis, the King of Saudi Arabia has played the role of mediator. However, current King Salman has shown an unwillingness to play the role of moderator.

Suggested Readings:

Barakat, S. (2017). *A Gulf crisis: How did we get here?* [online] Al Jazeera. Available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/06/gulf-crisis-170611063706500.html> [Accessed 25 November 2017].

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Spyer, J. (2017). *Tehran Is Winning the War for Control of the Middle East*. Foreign Policy. [online] Available at: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/11/21/tehran-is-winning-the-war-for-control-of-the-middle-east-saudi-arabia> [Accessed 25 November 2017].

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