



Agreement in the GCC in Light of Joe Biden's Victory

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In early January, the “quartet states” (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt) announced the opening of borders and the restoration of full relations with Qatar, ending the blockade which started in 2017. The mitigation of the dispute is intended to show that the monarchies in the Persian Gulf are not the main factor destabilising the region. It is motivated, among other things, by declarations by the new U.S. administration to return human rights and democratic values to its foreign policy agenda, and to revisit the nuclear deal with Iran.

The Origins and Aftermath of the Blockade. At the 41st Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) summit, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Egypt and Qatar signed the Al-Ula Declaration (its full text has not been published), which triggered a gradual normalisation between GCC members after the blockade which started in 2017. At the time, the quartet states, accusing Qatar of financing terrorism, severed relations with that country. The politics of Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, emir of Qatar, was the reason for this. He maintained good relations with Iran and Turkey (the most important regional rivals of Saudi Arabia and the UAE), supported the Arab Spring protests, which threatened local monarchies, and supported members of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). The quartet made a list of 13 demands, the fulfilment of which was to enable the restoration of relations with Qatar. In addition to ceasing support for terrorist organisations, limiting relations with Iran and ending military cooperation with Turkey, the list also demanded the expulsion of MB members and the closure of Al-Jazeera, co-financed by the emir. Qatar did not comply with any of the demands. Diversification of sources of supply of its necessary products (the principality has a land border only with Saudi Arabia), increasing the possibilities of local production, and tightening cooperation with Turkey and Iran allowed it to maintain a stable economic situation. [The Qatar economy also turned out to be the most resilient in the GCC to the challenges caused by the coronavirus pandemic](#), which also influenced the decision by other states to normalise relations.

The end of the blockade was also enhanced by the lack of international support for it, including from other Arab states, and the benefits gained from closer cooperation with Qatar by Iran (launching new direct shipping routes to Qatar, and a five-fold increase in exports to this country between 2016 and 2017) and Turkey (which [strengthened its military presence in the Gulf region by building a base in that country](#)). Qatar's partners remain the most important regional rivals of the quartet countries. The hostility of the UAE and Egypt towards Turkey has been increasing since the Arab Spring, which resulted in the initiation of the [Ministerial Committee for Turkish actions in the Arab states in October 2020](#). The UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt also support the party of the Libyan conflict opposed to that supported by Qatar and Turkey. And, together with Bahrain, they recognise the MB as a terrorist organisation. In addition, they see Iran's involvement in the Middle East as a key threat to their security. In this situation, maintaining the blockade of Qatar, which only contributed to the strengthening of the position of Turkey and Iran in the region, was counterproductive.

The Agreement and U.S. Policy towards the GCC. The most important factor that decided to end the blockade of Qatar was the change of the U.S. administration. During Donald Trump's presidency, his criticism of the nuclear deal with Iran, along with U.S. and Saudi security and business interests (the U.S. was the second largest investor in Saudi Arabia in 2019) [contributed to rapprochement between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia](#). The rulers of the quartet's countries therefore hoped that the U.S. president would support

their actions in relation to Qatar, which would further increase pressure on the state. Although Trump initially criticised Qatar's ties to terrorist organisations, he remained neutral in the dispute once the principality had signed an anti-terrorist financing cooperation agreement with the U.S. in July 2017. It was also influenced by Qatar's close relations with the United States. The country hosts an American military base, in which approx. 11,000 U.S. soldiers are present. Jared Kushner, the chief Middle East advisor and Trump's son-in-law, supported Kuwait in mediation between the parties. For the administration of the outgoing president, the end of the blockade of Qatar was an opportunity to announce the latest diplomatic success in the Middle East.

Trump's unprecedentedly close relationship with Muhammad bin Salman (MBS), Saudi Arabia's crown prince, has come under criticism from the Democratic Party. Its members denounced the transactional nature of the U.S. relationship with the kingdom. Particular controversy was caused by the lack of criticism of MBS by the U.S. administration after [the assassination of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi](#). The justification for this lack of criticism was Saudi Arabia's expenditure on American weapons and the presidential veto on the bill blocking the sale of arms worth \$8 billion to the kingdom and the UAE. This initiative by the U.S. Congress, motivated by the involvement of both monarchies in the conflict in Yemen and accusations of air strikes on civilian facilities, was supported by both Democratic and Republican politicians. In February 2020, Democrats submitted a bill that would protect Saudis living in the U.S. and criticised Saudi authorities. In its political statement of the same year, the party declared the end of support for the coalition led by Saudi Arabia in Yemen.

Trump's attitude to Saudi Arabia was also condemned by Joe Biden during his election campaign. His statements and the Democrats' demand to end support for the kingdom over human rights violations indicate that the U.S. will move away from the transactional policy towards the GCC states. This is indicated by the decision to suspend the sale of advanced weapon systems worth approximately \$22.8 billion to Saudi Arabia and the UAE (including 50 F-35 aircraft for the UAE). Another threat to the interests of the quartet states arise from Biden's announcements that U.S. engagement in the Middle East will decrease, and that the U.S. will return to the nuclear deal with Iran (JCPOA). The rulers of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain are opposed to this deal being restored in its 2015 form, when it was initially signed. They call for the inclusion of the countries in

the region in the negotiations, and the extension of the agreement to include further restrictions on the Iranian ballistic missiles programme and Iran's support for paramilitary organisations in the region. After the agreement was signed in Al-Ula, Qatar's Minister of Foreign Affairs Muhammad bin Abd al-Rahman al-Thani called on the GCC states to hold talks with Iran.

Prospects. The agreement with Qatar is the reaction of the quartet states to the shift in U.S. policy towards authoritarian Arab regimes. It is very likely that the new administration will link monarchs' observance of human rights with U.S. support for the security of Gulf trade routes and the arms trade. The goal of the quartet countries is to create an impression of coherence within the GCC, and to show that Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Bahrain are willing to compromise. This is intended to reduce the chances of the U.S. returning to the agreement with Iran in its original format, and to increase the plausibility of the inclusion of Arab monarchies in the creation of a new agreement, enriched by the issues of the Iranian ballistic missiles programme and its involvement in the region. Israel and France put forward similar demands. The latter supports the agreement with Iran, yet its close relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE (the second and fifth largest buyers of French weapons, respectively) and the perception of Iran as the main factor destabilising the Middle East may cause it to take into account the demands of Arab monarchs, including on the EU forum. In December 2020, President Emmanuel Macron supported the inclusion of Saudi Arabia in the negotiations on the agreement.

The stability of the normalisation between the quartet countries and Qatar is threatened by their extremely different and inflexible attitudes towards the MB, Turkey and cooperation with Iran. To prevent a recurrence of a crisis, and to be actively involved in mitigating the dispute between the Arab monarchies and Iran, the EU could consider appointing an envoy for the Persian Gulf with the task of developing a strategy for the Union's policy towards this sub-region. This would help to strengthen the EU's position in the Gulf by proposing a common policy to replace current (mostly bi-lateral) relation-building between individual EU Member States and the GCC countries. The strategy would consider the importance of the GCC countries in diversifying European sources of energy supplies. It would also aim to define the role of the EU in the Gulf in the face of the process of limiting the U.S. presence in the Middle East, which is unlikely to be halted by the Biden Administration, and to strengthen multilateral cooperation in the region.