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Preface

The Middle East has been the birthplace of crisis throughout the history. Since the past several years, when the Arab Spring uprisings erupted in this region, a humanitarian crisis followed which mostly hit Syria.

Recently, several countries in this region severed their political, economic, and trade relations with Qatar. At the head of these countries are Saudi Arabia and UAE; the economic and political sanctions against Qatar will have significant impacts on Qatar. Although the reason behind this stance toward Qatar is said to be Qatar's relations with Iran and some terrorist groups, there are some behind-the-scene reasons as well. What are these reasons? What will be the impacts of this crisis on the region both in the short-term and long-term? In this regard, you would read in the first part of the Weekly Analysis of the Center for Strategic and Regional Studies (CSRS).

In the second part of the analysis, you would read about the recent summit of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The 17th meeting of SCO was held in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, where the Afghan President had also participated while heading a high-ranking Afghan delegation. What happened in this meeting? What were the achievements of Afghanistan in this summit? These are questions that you would read in the second half of the analysis.

The new diplomatic crisis in the Middle East and its impacts on the region



At the beginning of June 2017, the Persian Gulf witnessed the most unprecedented diplomatic crisis ever. The crisis emerged when Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt and United Arab Emirate one after another and within ten minutes cut their diplomatic ties with Qatar. These countries withdrew all their diplomatic staff and also ejected Qatari Ambassadors and citizens from their respective countries. Besides severing political ties, these countries also cut their economic ties and sea and airline traffic with the country and also closed their borders with Qatar.

This political crisis in relations with Qatar is not limited to the Persian Gulf, but it is spread in the Middle East. In other words, the crisis is now internationalized, and therefore various countries have demanded the settlement of the issue through negotiations. From Kuwait and Turkey to the UN, many players are demanding to play the role of mediator to resolve the crisis.

Why the crisis in the Persian Gulf emerged? What is the current situation? What are the probable consequences and impacts? These are the questions that are analyzed here.

The Middle East in international politics

Since the emerge of Islam, the Middle East is not only giving birth to the events but also has had a great impact on the Islamic countries. After a brief review of the past hundred years' history of the region, one can say that the Middle East is a complicated region at international level and besides Islamic world and regional countries; most of the times; some super powers have also been engaged in this region.

Currently, the Middle East importance in international politics is due to the following factors:

- The Arab-Israel issue;
- The Syrian crisis;
- The Syrian refugees;
- The emergence of ISIS in the Middle East;
- The attacks by ISIS-affiliated groups in European countries and the US;
- The energy resources of the region and the issue of many countries' security of energy;
- Political Islam and Islamism;
- The deal between Iran and the P5+1 countries on Iran's nuclear program;
- Being the cross point of the world's most part of the trades.

These factors along with some other factors have added to the importance of the region as well as attracted attentions.

The complex rivalries in the Middle East

In Middle East, the interests of countries at international, regional and state levels confront each other and, therefore, this region is a complicated one.

Generally, since the past several decades, the Middle East is home not only for the rivalry between the world's superpowers but also the countries in the region. This competition is not limited between Sunnite and Shiites but is also extended among Sunnite states as well. For instance, the cold war and rivalry between Iran

and Saudi Arabia, the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Turkey, competition between Egypt and Turkey and rivalry between Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

The countries' regional interests, strategic influence in the region, rivalry over leadership and religious oppositions are factors behind these rivalries in the Middle East.

Why did the Gulf crisis emerge?

Although it is not the first time that a number of Gulf countries cut ties with Qatar, before this in 2002, Saudi Arabia had withdrawn its Ambassador in reaction to the broadcasts of the Qatar-based Aljazeera TV station. In 2008, once again, the diplomatic relations between the two countries became improved, but in 2014, once again, the Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates severed their ties with Qatar. There are two categories of factors that played a role in the emergence of the current crisis in the Middle East: first, surficial and evident factors; second, behind-the-scene factors.

Surficial and evident factors: seemingly, the crisis emerged in April 2017, the Qatari government reached an agreement with some Shiite and Sunnite armed groups in Iraq. Based on the agreement, these militant groups have released 26 Qatari prisoners including members of the Qatari Royal family after 16 months and in exchange, based on the reports of Financial Times, Qatar has given \$700m to the Pro-Iranian armed groups¹. This situation may have ignited Saudi's wrath; but according to the Iraqi President, this money is still in Iraq's Central Bank and is not given to the armed groups.

The second reason was the Riyadh Conference in Saudi Arabia which had three parts: "the Gulf Cooperation Council and the US"; "Arab World and the US"; and "the Islamic World, the Arab World, and the US". The US president Donald Trump had also participated in this conference. It is said that Saudi Arabia has decided to act against Qatar after getting Trump's support. That is why Trump then wrote on his Twitter: "During my recent trip to the Middle East I stated that there could no longer be funding of Radical Ideology. Leaders pointed to Qatar—look!"

¹ <https://www.ft.com/content/dd033082-49e9-11e7-a3f4-c742b9791d43>

Therefore, after severing diplomatic ties with Qatar, Saudi Arabia released the list of the organizations and individuals whom Qatar had helped including the name of the Islamic World's religious scholar and Mujtahid and a great moderate scholar Youssef Qardawi.

Third, the crisis occurred due to some hacks. First, the Qatari government's news agency was hacked by some unknown individuals and the Qatari Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani's unsaid remarks were released. Quoting the Qatari Amir the web page wrote: "Iran is a regional and Islamic power, which cannot be ignored and it is unjust to stand against it. It is a significant and major power in the stability of the region."

The behind-the-scene factors: the Aljazeera News Network, Qatar's support from Islamist groups particularly Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, the Independent Qatari Politics and its active role in the Middle East and the region are behind-the-scene factors. The followings are some of the points that have evoked Saudi Arabia:

- The strong support of the Aljazeera from Arab Spring uprisings;
- Programs against the Sisi coup d'etat in Egypt;
- The release of hacked emails of the UAE Ambassador to pro-Israel administrations;
- Giving refuge to the leaders of Muslim Brotherhood in Qatar and strong support from Sheikh Yousif Qardawi;
- Counting Hamas as a resistance force;
- Having better relations with Iran compared to other Arab countries;
- And playing the role of a mediator in some cases in the Middle East, etc.

Its impacts on Qatar and the region

New coalitions; although in the short-term, the current diplomatic crisis will not give birth to the new alliances in the region, however, if the crisis continued, there is this probability. The current crisis will bring Turkey and Iran closer to Qatar. Overall, the crises in the Middle East is in the best interests of Russia and Iran. Therefore, using the current opportunity, while Qatar is economically

sanctioned by Arab countries, Iran is sending food to Qatar in an effort to increase its soft power in this country. Although after King Salman had seized power, relations between Turkey and Saudi Arabia were improved, in the current crisis Turkey is in favor of Qatar. That is why the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan repeatedly stated that Qatar's economic blockade in the Ramadan month was in violation of Islamic values.

Energy security: Qatar is at the head of "LPG" gas producers in the world. Although many believe that the current crisis will not affect the oil and gas prices, if the crisis prolonged, it is likely to affect the oil and gas markets. This situation will put an impact on both Qatar and the countries that import gas from this country.

Economic impacts on Qatar: the anti-Qatari movement is not limited to severing diplomatic ties only, but also cutting the economic ties is an important part of it. Qatar, which was importing most of its food staff from these Arabic countries particularly the Saudi Arabia, is now sanctioned. Although due to Iran, Turkey and some other countries' assistance, the situation has not become very tenuous; it will have major consequences for Qatar if the crisis continued for a longer period of time. In the meanwhile, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and UAE have cut their airline traffic with Qatar, and Qatari airplane is taking the air paths of other countries to travel to the Africa, Europe and the US which will increase the expenditure to Qatari airplanes.

Humanitarian crisis: the ejection of Qatari citizens from several Arab Countries for three days up to 14 days and even not allowing them for Umra Pilgrimages as well as preventing Qataris from going to the Maka city would ignite people's wrath.

Islamists and its affiliated groups: the Islamists will also be affected if Qatar signed a deal with some Arab countries headed by Saudi Arabia about them. However, given the remarks of Qatari Minister of Foreign Affairs and officials the probability of such a deal is very low.

The 17th SCO summit and its impacts on Afghanistan



Astana, the Kazakhstani capital, hosted the summit of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) leaders on 8 and 9 June 2017. The Afghan president Ashraf Ghani had also participated in this meeting.

Besides delivering his speech in the summit, the Afghan President met the Presidents of China, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, as well as the Prime Ministers of India and Pakistan, Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Secretary General of SCO at the sidelines of this conference.

SCO is a regional governmental organization, and as an important country in the region, Afghanistan is an observer in this organization since 2013 and has applied for full membership as well.

Here you would read about the background of SCO, its recent meeting in Astana, the meetings of President Ghani at the sidelines of this conference and the impacts of this conference on the issues linked to Afghanistan.

Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)

Five countries in the region (China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan, and Tajikistan) founded “Shanghai-5” in 1996 to strengthen mutual trust, demilitarize borders, and fight terrorism, extremism, drug trafficking and the separatism. Later, when in 2001, Uzbekistan joined the “Shanghai-5”, it altered to “Shanghai Cooperation Organization”. The charter of SCO was signed on 15 June 2002 in Saint Petersburg, Russia.

The primary objectives of this organization are to strengthen mutual trust between member states, promote active cooperation in various fields, undertake joint effort towards maintaining peace and stability in the region and move towards a democratic, just and logical international political and economic order.

²

Currently, the organization has eight permanent members (China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, India, and Pakistan)ⁱ and four observers (Afghanistan, Iran, Belarus, and Mongolia). Besides that six other countries (Azerbaijan, Armenia, Cambodia, Nepal, Turkey and Sri Lanka) are the dialogue partners of this organization.

The recent SCO meeting in Astana

Besides other issues, the current situation in the Middle East, Northern Africa, Ukraine and Afghanistan was also discussed in the 17th summit of SCO.

India and Pakistan gained permanent membership in this meeting which indicates the increasing significance of the organization. The Syrian crisis was also discussed and its settlement through negotiations was highly emphasized upon. The Ukraine issue and Iran’s nuclear program were also other important issues discussed in this conference.³

² Shanghai cooperation organization web: “about SCO” at: http://eng.sectsc.org/about_sco/

³ Shanghai cooperation organization web: “Press release on the results of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Heads of State Council Meeting”, 09 June 2017, see it online:

All the leaders in this meeting reiterated that the only way out of the existing conflicts and tensions in the region was through diplomatic means and in this regard they expressed their commitments. Also, the participants supported the efforts of the Afghan people and government to establish a stable government and fight against “terrorism”, extremism, and narcotics.

Afghan efforts to get Regional Cooperation

Since 2012, Afghanistan participates in the meetings of this organization as an observer state. Most recently, a high-ranking Afghan delegation headed by President Ghani took part in its summit. The Afghan National Security Advisor Hanif Atamar, the Afghan President’s Senior Advisor in Infrastructure Affairs Humayoun Qayomi, the Afghan President’s Special Representative in the Commonwealth countries’ affairs Shaker Kargar, and the senior advisor Shah Zaman Maiwandi accompanied the President in this trip.

Addressing the leaders of SCO, the Afghan President said at the summit: “I am here to announce the increase in cooperation in the fight against terrorism. Practical measures need to be taken against the terrorism that threatens the countries in the region including Afghanistan.” He added that Afghanistan was at the frontline of the fight against terrorism and that currently 20 “terrorist” groups were fighting against the Afghan government and was costing Afghan lives—something that Ghani repeatedly say in international tribunes. Ghani also stated that “We expect SCO to work on the strategy to fight against terrorism and drug smuggling.” He also suggested in the meeting that, based on a specific mechanism, the regional countries must define are supporting “terrorism” and the trans-regional terrorism

He also stated that Afghanistan had good economic, trade and transit relations with Turkmenistan and the relations with Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan, and Azerbaijan are improving. He also added relations between Afghanistan, Iran, and India are advancing and that the Chabahar Port was one of

the transit and trade initiatives between the three countries. He said, “Our main objective is to connect the Central Asia to South Asia and, in this regard, Pakistan must also play and improve its role.”⁴

Impacts and achievements for Afghanistan

SCO is the most important organization in the region and, hence, the recent meeting has some achievement for Kabul and would have certainly impact Afghanistan:

First, at the sidelines of this conference, President Ghani met some leaders and officials of various countries. The most important of these meetings was the meeting between Ghani and the Chinese President Xi Jinping. In this meeting, the Chinese president said that China is ready to cooperate with Afghanistan in supplying the necessary equipment to the Afghan security and defense forces to fight against “terrorism”. Moreover, he said that China is ready to hold a trilateral meeting between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China.

In addition China and Afghanistan signed two cooperation agreements for reconstruction of railway network from Shirkhan Port to Herat and implementation of the electricity project on Kabul-Kunar River.⁵

Second, currently the relations between Kabul and Islamabad are in the most tenuous state, and the two countries accuse each other of giving sanctuaries to terrorists. However, the leader of the two countries met on the sidelines of this conference and discussed various issues. In this meeting, the two sides agreed to use the mechanism of quadrilateral coordination group and bilateral meetings for strong and specific measures against “terrorist” groups. The Indian Prime Minister also said that, in coordination with its allies the US and Afghanistan, India is ready to support Afghanistan in maintaining peace and stability.

⁴ The Afghan Presidential Palace, «رئیس جمهور غنی در هفدهمین اجلاس سران سازمان همکاری‌های شانگهای اشتراک و سخنرانی کرد» [The Afghan President participated and delivered his speech in the 17th SCO meeting], 19 Jawza 1396:

<http://president.gov.af/fa/SHNGAI/17>

⁵ Presidential Palace, President Ghani Meets With President Of People’s Republic Of China, June 9, 2017, read online:

<http://president.gov.af/fa/news-0608>

Third, Afghanistan's full membership in this organization is another important issue. India and Pakistan gained permanent membership in this meeting which further facilitates Afghanistan's membership in this organization. In the meanwhile, the Afghan President also met the Secretary General of SCO. The SCO Secretary General said, "We have a particular attention towards Afghanistan, and this organization wants peace and security in Afghanistan because Afghanistan has the appropriate capacity for a bright future." He also emphasized on the expansion of relations between Afghanistan and the member countries of this organization.⁶

Fourth, the Kabul process was also supported by the participants in the 17th summit of SCO, and they considered the Kabul process to be an important step towards peace and stability in Afghanistan.

Fifth, the Presidents of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan also stressed on the economic and trade cooperation between their respective countries and Afghanistan. The Uzbek President suggested the formation of a joint economic commission to expand trade between the two countries.⁷

The end

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Note: Please let us know your feedback and suggestions for the improvement of Weekly analysis.



⁶ Read about the Afghan President's meeting with the SCO's secretary general in Persian here:

<http://president.gov.af/fa/news/92>

⁷ Read about president Ghani's meeting with the Uzbek President here:

<http://president.gov.af/fa/AFUZ/9>