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The Muslim Brotherhood and the Crisis in the GCC: Roots, Issues and Implications

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After the Arab Uprisings of 2011, the position of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Middle East changed dramatically, especially in the Persian Gulf subregion. For decades, the Muslim Brotherhood was a close ally of the Gulf monarch families because it provided a common narrative against Naser's Pan-Arabism. The Muslim Brotherhood was also legitimising the monarch families' right to rule. In the post-Arab Uprisings era the organisation is seen as a rival of those families and a challenge for their legitimacy to rule as it calls for political changes.

The only exception was Qatar, which supported the Muslim Brotherhood financially, militarily and politically in Egypt and elsewhere. Because of that Qatar found itself at odds with the other Gulf Cooperation Council members, most notably Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain. Furthermore, the Qatar-based Al-Jazeera network spread the Brotherhood's agenda, which was based on the call for changes due to the fact that the three abovementioned states deemed the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organisation. All these incidents led Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain to recall their ambassadors from Doha.

Not only the Muslim Brotherhood was under pressure. It became clear that other Islamist organisations in the region had suffered from some setbacks that had affected their overall stance and performance throughout the Middle East (i.e. Hizb an-Nahda in Tunisia, Hamas in the Palestine Autonomy, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt). What is emphasised by analysts is that this conflict between Qatar and Saudi Arabia was a battle for regional leadership, not the first one and surely not the last (the war in Syria, the Islamic State, etc.).

The aim of the paper is to present the history of the mutual relations between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Arab Gulf states, describe causes which led to the conflict, the divisions created by the conflict and the consequences of the crisis for the organisation.

Keywords: Muslim Brotherhood, Gulf Cooperation Council, Saudi Arabia–Qatar conflict, Arab Gulf states, International Relations, Persian Gulf

Divisions and conflicts are viewed as an inseparable feature of international organisations. These tensions result from the opposing interests of the member states of these organisations and different perceptions of threat to their national interests.

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We could observe it in the European Union (EU), where disputes over the Greek government-debt crisis, the European migrant crisis or the EU sanctions against Russia appeared.

In the history of the Gulf Cooperation Council (*Madżlis at-Ta'awun li-Duwal al Chalidż al-Arabijja*, GCC) the divisions were caused by territorial claims (the dispute over Zubarah and the Hawar Islands between Bahrain and Qatar), different national policies towards Iran (with a more hostile attitude of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates – the UAE) and a more open attitude of Oman and Qatar), border clashes (between Saudi Arabia and the UAE over territorial waters) or different perception of threats for subregional security and stability. The latter caused the crisis in 2014 and was related to the role and position of the Society of the Muslim Brotherhood (*al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn,* MB) in the Persian Gulf states.

It brought the GCC to the brink of disintegration – three states (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates) withdrew their ambassadors from Qatar and started making threats to seal off Qatar's only land border, impose sanctions and close their airspace to Qatari planes. But the real threat that appeared was that this rift would lead to the disintegration of the organisation and the reduction of its power in the Middle East.

The aim of the paper is to present the history of the relations between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Arab Gulf states, to describe the causes of the conflict, the divisions created by the conflict and the consequences of the crisis for the organisation.

The main thesis is that after the Arab Uprisings, the GCC members viewed the role of the Muslim Brotherhood in the region in a different way. The Muslim Brotherhood's position led to a conflict of interests between the GCC members, which played the role of a disintegrative factor, undermining the position of the GCC internationally.

In order to verify the thesis, the following research questions have been posed: (1) What are the reasons behind the good and the strained relations between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Arab Gulf states? (2) What divisions has the crisis created? (3) Has Qatar stopped supporting the MB as a result of this crisis?

The verification of the thesis and the answers to the above research questions will help to explain the real reasons behind the crisis and their impact on intra-GCC relations and on the organisation itself.

A brief history of the relations between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Arab Gulf states

The history of the relations between the MB and the Arab Gulf states began in the 1950s and 1960s, when different ideologies were playing a crucial role in the Middle East.[1] The ideological threats of Nasserism, Ba'athism, communism or Shiism were

[1] Saudi branch of Muslim Brotherhood unofficially was established in 1937. The annual pilgrimage traffic to Mecca and Medina made Saudi Arabia attractive field for recruiting potential members, J. B. Alterman

perceived by the Arab Gulf states as a common threat and a uniting factor. These ideological threats were real. If we take a look at the overthrown monarchies in Iraq (1958), Yemen (1962) and Libya (1969), we will see that all of the coups were organised and executed by nationalist military officers. This means that ideological motivation was one of the factors leading to the coups in the region. Well aware of this and of the rising popularity of the MB's ideology after the Arab Uprisings, the Arab Gulf states reacted in a way that left no space for compromise or discussion.[2]

It is such motives – posing a threat to the Egyptian government of President Gamal Abd an-Naser (1918–1970) – that were behind the repressions against the Muslim Brotherhood. Because of this threat of Arab nationalism (Nasserism), many members of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood were seeking refuge in the Gulf.

The Muslim Brotherhood was a natural ally of the Arab Gulf states in countering Nasserism, which was mostly secular. This was one of the dimensions of the so called Arab Cold War (*al-Harb al-`Arabbiyah al-bārdah*) – between secular nationalists on one side and more traditional, religious states on the other. Political Islam and nationalism were treated as a weapon and became the main motive behind this conflict. The Muslim Brotherhood started to play a vital role in the Gulf, especially in the system of education. One of the main areas of activity of the MB in the Gulf was Qatar. Qatar's connections with the organisation became visible and well-known throughout the period when Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who was granted Qatari nationality, was the spiritual guide of the Brotherhood. He has a programme on Qatari television Al-Jazeera – *Sharia and Life*, with an estimated audience of 60 million. The Qatari television broadcasts the voice of the opposition from many Arab states, such as criticism of the Egyptian regime under President Mubarak and later Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi as well as of the states that were supporting them, for example: Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.[3] Qaradawi also founded the College of Sharia at Qatar University and became its dean. Alongside other MB members, the Brotherhood's spiritual guide was also responsible for creating the education system and bureaucracy in Qatar in order to make it more independent from Saudi Arabia.Like Saudi Arabia, Qatar is a state where the Wahhabi religious doctrine is in force. However, Qatar wanted to cut these religious connections to become less susceptible to Saudi religious policy. For this reason Qatar decided to take advantage of the MB ideology or at least tried to combine Qatari Wahhabism with the MB's ideas to become religiously independent in a safe way.

Education, especially in the Arab states, is one of the pillars of power. In Saudi Arabia it is dominated by Wahhabi clergy, so they can influence school curricula and shape the youth's views not only on religious matters. Qatar wanted to have imams

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and W. McCants, 'Saudi Arabia: Islamists rising and falling in Religious radicalism after the Arab Uprising', in J.B. Alterman (ed.), *Religious Radicalism after the Arab Uprisings*, London/Washington 2015, p. 150.

[2] G. Steinberg, 'The Gulf states and the Muslim Brotherhood', in *Pomeps studies*, no. 25, 2014, p. 19.

[3] G. Steinberg, 'Islamism in the gulf, The gulf states and the Arab uprisings', in A. Echague (ed.), *The Gulf states and Arab uprising*, Madrid 2013, p. 66.

and scholars who would not be imposed by its bigger neighbour. But even if they in fact had been under the Saudi influence, there would not have been a lot of space to fill for both Saudi Wahhabis and the MB because in 2008–2009 only 257 students were taught in the College of Sharia, and most of them were not Qatari.[4] In the emirate, there are few institutions that can be influenced by the Brotherhood. The ground for the non-state organisation to proselytise is not large. There is even no office of grand mufti in Qatar that the MB could influence. However, the situation is totally different in Saudi Arabia, where education and religious offices are much more developed than in Qatar. What is more important, Emir Hamad al-Thani left no space for the MB to gain support through social activities, creating jobs, building houses, augmenting pensions and increasing wages. This shows that the MB could only have a small impact on Qatari policy so mutual links between the movement and the emirate led to general sympathy for the MB in the Qatari establishment.[5]

However, the relations between the Gulf states and the MB started to deteriorate in the 1990s. There were a number of reasons for that. First, the fact that the MB supported president Saddam Hussein during his invasion of Kuwait (1990), one of the member states of the GCC. At first sight this seems to be quite surprising because the dominant ideology in Iraq was secular and nationalist Ba'athism, while in Kuwait it was conservative, Islamic ideology. Such a stance of the Islamic movement was the result of a meeting of its members with the president of Iraq in 1990. Both sides concluded that 'the presence of foreign forces on the Saudi land came to destroy Iraqi forces in order to serve the Zionist scheme and to enable Israel to absorb citizens from the Soviet Union so it can strike against the intifada'.[6] In brief: Saddam Hussein was seen by the *Ikhwan* as a hero opposing the Western forces. This led to a crisis between the Kuwaiti branch of *Ikhwan* and its main leadership. The Kuwaiti *Ikhwani* even suspended their membership in the international movement.

Second, the members of the Brotherhood in Saudi Arabia combine the Brotherhood's modern doctrine with the traditional Wahhabi ideology, leading to the emergence of the Islamic Awakening movement (*Al-Sahwa al-Islamiyya*), the main Islamist opposition in the Kingdom since the 1990s.[7] Many members of the MB who came to the Kingdom in the 1960s were scholars, mostly employed in state administration and at universities. They accepted the state's legitimacy and were accepted by the state. But this changed in the 1990s, leading to vital divisions between *Al-Sahwa* and Wahhabiyya. While religious differences are not so prominent, politically the Wahhabi movement is more

[4] D. Roberts, 'Qatar's strained Gulf relationships, in: The new politics of intervention of Gulf Arab states', *LSE Collected Papers*, Vol. 1, 2015, pp. 23–25.

[5] A. Khlebnikov, 'The new ideological threat to the GCC: implications for the Qatari-Saudi Rivalry', in *Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 17, No. 4, 2015, pp. 22–23.

[6] A. Pargeter, *The Muslim Brotherhood: from opposition to power*, London 2013, p. 117.

[7] G. Steinberg, 'Islamism in the Gulf', A. Echague (ed.), *The Gulf States and the Arab Uprisings*, Madrid 2013, p. 61.

pragmatic and accepts almost every decision of the king. Meanwhile, *Sahwis* express more liberal Islamic views, criticising Wahhabi orthodoxy and calling for democratic changes within the Islamic framework.[8] Islamists and intellectuals closely associated with the Sahwa movement established Saudi Arabia's first political party, the Islamic Umma Party (Hizb al-Umma al-Islami) on 10 February 2011. The party demands an elective parliament and the appointment of a prime minister distinct from the king and accountable to the parliament. They gathered nearly 9 000 signatures within a few weeks of the petition being posted online.[9] Despite the fact that almost all party co-founders were arrested on 18 February, it is noticeable that *Al-Sahwa* with the Islamo-liberal opposition have gained enough political capital to threaten the ruling political and religious elites.

Third, since the Arab Uprisings in 2011, the Arab Gulf states started to fear that after a successful revolution in Egypt and Tunisia, where the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party and the an-Nahda party won the parliamentary elections, the idea of the revolution would be exported to the Gulf countries. Indeed, the Brotherhood and its affiliates used the regional wave of popular mobilisation to gain social support and limit the political power of the Gulf's ruling families. The organisation joined public resistance demanding political reforms (elections for Shura), stepping down of some politicians (the prime minister in Kuwait) or the implementation of constitutional amendments. People in the GCC are ready for the reforms and ready to face challenges that these are going to bring. But the GCC states want to return to the times before the Arab Uprisings or even earlier. That is why the Arab Gulf states (except Qatar) poured money into Egypt to support the regime of General al-Sisi in his struggle against the *Ikhwan* and backed factions opposed to the Brotherhood in Libya and Syria.

Last but not least, Saudi-Qatari divisions regarding the MB and in general, regarding foreign policy, which is a struggle for supremacy between two states in the region. In the early years of reign of Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, Qatar tended to differentiate its foreign policy from Saudi Arabia. The main approach which Qatar took in international relations was based on impartiality, mediation and soft power. Qatar was trying to act as a neutral party in the region, keeping good relations with conflicted parties such as Israel and Iran/Hezbollah, Fatah and Hamas, Iran and the UAE. A significant shift occurred in 2011, when Qatar started to use hard power instruments more bravely. It was actively involved in military operations such as the NATO mission in Libya in 2011 and provided support to the Syrian opposition fighting against President Bashar al-Assad.

In these circumstances the tensions between Qatar and the Kingdom started to appear more often than before. In 1992 border clashes between the two states caused

[8] M. Al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State. Islamic Voices From a New Generation*, Cambridge 2006, p. 84.

[9] J. B. Alterman, W. McCants, op.cit., p. 159.

the death of two Qatari guards, in 2002 Saudi Arabia withdrew its ambassador over the content aired on Al-Jazeera. Probably the most important point of contention was the differently conducted foreign policy towards the states in the region, i.e. Iran and Syria. Saudi Arabia is the main opponent of Iran in the region in the struggle for supremacy, while Qatar's policy is based on mutual agreements with Iran, both in politics and economy. This policy pursued by Qatar is often seen as an attempt to limit Saudi hegemony in the region. Both states support the insurgents in Syria, but while the Islamist opposition is dominated by the local MB and backed by Qatar and Turkey, Saudis and Jordan support the Free Syrian Army in the hopes of avoiding an Islamist takeover after the fall of the Assad regime. The policy pursued by Qatar is aimed to show and demonstrate that this micro-state is unwilling to accept Saudi hegemony in the region. The only reason that the struggle for supremacy has not led to an open conflict was the shared – Saudi and Qatari – fear of Iranian hegemony in the Middle East. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia cannot alienate Qatar totally because this would give the emirate a reason to ally itself with Iran.[10]

The abovementioned roots of the Arab Gulf states' stance towards the Muslim Brotherhood show the actual cause of contention among the GCC states and the reasons behind their different approaches to the Islamist opposition. This has inevitably led to tensions over how to handle the Brotherhood and reached a boiling point on 5 March 2014, when Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain announced the withdrawal of their diplomats from Qatar, accusing Qatar of meddling in the domestic affairs of the GCC members. Two days later, the Muslim Brotherhood was declared by Saudi Arabia a terrorist organisation that must be dealt with through police and counterterrorism efforts.

From confrontation to conciliation

It is worth pointing out that the crisis was preceded by other rifts between the GCC states. One of them was Oman's rejection of the Saudi proposal to turn the GCC alliance into a greater union (2011 and 2013). Oman was afraid that the union might pose a threat to its sovereignty and refused to join the initiative. It expressed concerns that minor states might be only a tool in the hands of its Saudi neighbour. But even more irritating for Saudis was the role that Oman played (that of the host) during secret negotiations between the United States and Iran leading to the warming of relations between those two states and signing a nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1 (the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia, China and Germany). It has strengthened Iran's position in the region by lifting the sanctions imposed by the EU and the United States and at the same time weakened the position of Saudi Arabia in the rivalry between the two states (*security dilemma*).

[10] G. Steinberg, op.cit., p. 67.

Another rift took place in 2012, when Saudi Arabia was trying to form a GCC security pact that would unite the member states against any external threat and allow for better coordination of internal security issues. The pact did not come into effect, because Kuwait did not ratify it. Its concern was that the agreement would allow a member state to request another member states to extradite their citizens if they are regarded as acting against the requester's security interests.

These disputes show that every year there are disagreements over the role and position of the member states or security issues on which they have differing views. Any initiative undertaken by one state is perceived by another with suspicion and concern that it may be taken at the cost of another state.

The GCC crisis over the MB led to a shift in divisions and changed the internal balance of power in the organisation. The GCC split as follows: 1) Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain, which withdrew their ambassadors from Qatar; 2) Qatar, which supported the MB; 3) Oman, keeping its distance from the situation; 4) and Kuwait, which attempted to mediate between Saudi Arabia and Qatar. It is worth taking a closer look at the role and steps undertaken by the Arab Gulf monarchies during the crisis.

Two states – Saudi Arabia and Qatar – played a major role in the crisis. The former was in the offensive against both the Brotherhood in the Kingdom and Qatar's supportive policy towards the MB, while the latter adopted, albeit selectively, the conditions imposed by the Saudi side. Saudi Arabia declared the MB a terrorist organisation, which meant that police and counterterrorism efforts had to be taken against *Ikhwan*. The Saudis arrested the most active oppositionists and imposed a ban on the sale of MB books. This forced the Brotherhood in the Kingdom to maintain a low profile and led to cancellation of some of their gatherings in order not to radicalise the atmosphere. Some supporters of the MB lost their jobs, for example, Tareq al-Suwaidan (al-Risala TV for criticising the killing of Brotherhood protesters) and Muhammad al-Arifi, who was forbidden to teach at the King Saud University. At the same time, Saudi Arabia was still supporting (financing) the new Egyptian authorities in their struggle against the Brotherhood.[11]

Meanwhile, Qatar faced significant pressure from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE. It was accused of interfering with domestic affairs of its neighbours. Apart from the withdrawal of three ambassadors from Doha, Qatar was threatened with closing the Saudi-Qatari land border and even with being expelled from the GCC. As a result, Qatar asked several senior leaders of the MB to leave its territory. Among them was Mahmoud Hussein, the secretary general of the MB, and Amr Darrag, a former MB cabinet minister in Mohammed Morsi's government in Egypt and an important figure in the Freedom and Justice Party, the Brotherhood's political wing.[12] Since July 2013

[11] J. B. Alterman, W. McCants, op.cit., p. 164.

[12] P. Kingsley, 'Qatar Asks Senior Muslim Brotherhood Leaders to Leave Country', *Guardian*, 13 September 2013.

(*coup d'etat*), Qatar has been seen as a heaven for the MB after it had been ousted from Egypt. After being expelled, *Ikhwans* decided to flee to Turkey as President Recep Tayep Erdogan perceives the Muslim Brotherhood as a bridge to build relations with the Arab world. However, it is obvious that not all Islamists were ousted from Qatar as there can still be found interviews with wanted Egyptian Islamists residing in Doha.

Saudi Arabia received support in its struggle against the MB from Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates. Since the 2011 uprising in Bahrain, when the country's authorities requested police aid from the Gulf Cooperation Council, two states have provided assistance – Saudi Arabia (1000 soldiers) and the UAE (500 soldiers). These close Saudi-Bahraini relations seem to be important when we take into account Bahrain's decision to withdraw its ambassador from Doha. The political situation in Bahrain is unstable given its Shia majority and the island nation's proximity to Iran,[13] so it needs to be additionally secured by a more powerful neighbour. However, the efforts undertaken by the Bahraini authorities to label the Brotherhood as a terrorist organisation have put its leadership at odds with its domestic ally against the Shia opposition. Especially the political arm of the local Brotherhood branch, known as the Islamic Minbar, sided with the ruling family against Shia opposition. A few weeks later, Bahrain's foreign minister Khaled bin Ahmed Al Khalifa said that his government was not labelling the Islamic Minbar a terrorist organisation. He explained that the IM respected the rule of law and did not act against the security of the country. Bahrain had to find a balance in this difficult situation between maintaining the support of the local Brotherhood offshoot without upsetting its Saudi allies. Otherwise Bahrain could lose a key domestic ally, which would leave the regime more vulnerable to the Shia opposition.[14]

In the UAE, members and supporters of the MB use the regional wave of popular mobilisation to gain public support. They joined public petitions calling for political reforms, including the elections to the Federal National Council and the Shura Council. This was the spark that set off the crackdown on the MB when the government accused activists of plotting to overthrow the regime and arrested hundreds of demonstrators. In November 2014, the UAE introduced a new anti-terror law, which officially designated the MB and its civil society organisations in the West as terrorist organisations.[15] The UAE authorities explained that the MB's doctrine posed a threat to the principle of dynastic rule. For this reason, the UAE and Saudi Arabia do not only support the al-Sisi regime financially but also back up factions opposed to the Brotherhood in places such as Syria and Libya.

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[13] K. S. Diwan, 'The future of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Gulf', *Washington Post*, 10 February 2015.

[14] I. Hatlani, *Bahrain Between its Backers and the Brotherhood*, http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2014/05/20/bahrain-between-its-backers-and-brotherhood/hb88, 31.01.2016.

[15] K.Diwan, op.cit.

And last but not least, there is the role that Kuwait played in the conflict. Its ruler, Sheikh Sabah IV Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, played a positive role in stopping defragmentation within the GCC. He did not explicitly adopt any of the two positions – for or against the Brotherhood. It took a few months and summits before agreement was reached. After many talks, the quarrelling sides found a common ground on the basis of the security agreement signed by the GCC interior ministers in 2012. The agreement commits the Gulf states 'to cooperate with each other to hunt down those who are outside law or the system, or who are wanted by states, whatever their nationality, and to take necessary action against them'.[16] On this basis Kuwait demanded that Qatar end its support for Egypt's MB and cease support for the MB dissidents in the Gulf. As a result, in late September 2014, leading MB figures in Qatar were asked to leave the country. In October 13, Qatari Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani met Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz in Riyadh to propose the end of the rift between two states.[17] The reconciliation was finally achieved on 16 November, and Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE agreed to return their ambassadors to Doha.[18]

An interesting perspective was presented by Bernard Haykel, a Princeton scholar of Islam and the Gulf, who described Qatari policy as a success in early 2013, because it had won the royal family plaudits at home and turned the MB into a force multiplier for Qatari policy. However, since the Morsi regime collapsed in 2013 and three Arab ambassadors were withdrawn from Doha in 2014 the tide began to turn.[19] Qatar started to pay the price for its policy as protesters in Tunisia, Libya, West Bank and Egypt showed their anger and burned Qatar's flags in the streets. In the end, after a few years, the advantage that the MB seemed to be for Qatar turned out to be a hindrance to it.

A few conclusions

The GCC crisis was vital for both the organisation and individual states. It showed the meaning and influence of external conditions on the relations between the six Arab Gulf states. It showed the differences between the national interests of the GCC member states and, most of all, their different threat perception. As it was mentioned in the hypothesis, the crisis had disintegrative impact on the relations between the Arab Gulf states. These remarks are listed in few points below:

First of all, despite the fact that there were no military threats for the three Arab Gulf states, the steps that they undertook were based on anti-terror laws. This proved that the Brotherhood was seen as a serious threat by the rulers of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE, especially after the initial successes of the organisation in North Africa.

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[16] K.S. Diwan, op.cit.

[17] S. al-Atiqi, *Brotherly love in the GCC*, www.carnegieendowment.org/sada/?fa=57089, 8.01.2016.

[18] A. Khlebnikov, op.cit., p. 21.

[19] Bernard Haykel, *Qatar and Islamism*, Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre (NOREF) "Policy Brief", February 2013, p. 2.

The GCC member states were afraid that a similar scenario might occur in the Persian Gulf. This fear led to serious tensions lasting almost a year; in consequence, the plan of Saudi king Abdullah to reunify the Council and transform it into a Union seems to be much more distant than a few years ago.

Second, Qatar used the MB as a card in its competition with Riyadh for regional leadership. Qatari support for the MB enhanced its regional status with the Brotherhood's ideology, which is more popular in the region than Wahhabism. This policy is focused on achieving greater international recognition and creating an image of Qatar as a state that is open-minded and tolerant to different ideologies. Such a policy helps Qatar to be secured from the Brotherhood's involvement in politics on its own territory. In consequence, it gives Qatar a good position as a mediator between Islamists and governments of the countries where the race for power and conflicts between both sides take place (Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Syria) as well as between them and the West. This helps Qatar build its regional leader position.[20] But on the other hand, it can be said that the GCC showed the ability to influence the individual member states. At the same time, this revealed how far Qatar can execute an independent foreign policy at the expense of the interests of the majority of member states – particularly Saudi Arabia.[21]

Third, the crisis has ended in favour of the anti-MB forces, which means that the current environment is hostile toward the organisation, including difficulties in gaining political support in the conservative monarchies of the Arab Gulf and challenging the Salafi competitors facing the MB. Throughout 2000s the Brotherhood was accused by the Salafis of political opportunism and their Islamic doctrine was undermined. *Ikhwans* lost power in North Africa and currently seem to be under censorship.

Last but not least, the crisis has revealed the limited ability of the GCC to coordinate a concerted response to growing security threats in the region. The best evidence was the fact that in the past the Arab Gulf states had been resolving family matters behind closed doors. This time the issue was publicised. The crisis also showed that there is no concrete system to regulate and govern the relations between the member states within the GCC. There is no mechanism to resolve disputes between its member states when disagreements arise. This might lead to another crisis of confidence in the future. A clear system should be created, one that would combine interests of the GCC members and connect their foreign policies. The conflict also showed that the GCC does not form a united front but is rather a divided group where each country has maintained its own independent position on major issues.

[20] A. Khlebnikov, op.cit., p. 22.
[21] S. al-Atiqi, op.cit.

The Muslim Brotherhood – a useless ally?

Despite all these tensions, the Brotherhood should be treated as a game changer in the GCC's cooperation on terrorism and Iran issues. That is why anti-MB policy does not have to be a permanent feature of the Arab Gulf states' strategy. A few months after the crisis and the death of Saudi king Abdullah (2015) followed by the coronation of King Salman, a wind of change can be felt. Let's take a look on where it blows:

- A few months after the crisis ended, the new Saudi king Salman bin Abdul Aziz and his principal deputies, Crown Prince Muhammed bin Nayef and Defense Minister Mohammed bin Salman, met the representatives of Hamas, which is a group closely affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. As a result of the meeting, Saudis released eight Hamas members jailed for illegal political activities in Saudi Arabia.
- In Yemen, Nayef al-Bakr, a Brotherhood-oriented Al-Islah Party member, is to receive the position of governor in the southern city of Aden, which Saudi-backed forces recaptured from Houthi tribe.
- King Salman met the representatives of Tunisia's Ennahda Party – Rachid al-Ghannouchi, of Al-Islah – Abdul Majeed al-Zinadni and of Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood – Hammam Saeed.[22]

In conditions of total hostility towards the MB, these steps would not be possible. Looking for an explanation of this behaviour, some pointed out the fact that the new Saudi king Salman seems to be friendlier to the MB than his predecessor, Abdullah. But more likely it seems to be the consequence of the circumstances in which Saudi Arabia has found itself, which include: the rising threat from the Islamic State and rising power of Iran after the P5+1 nuclear deal (the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, France, China plus Germany). In these circumstances, Saudis need to recruit as many Sunni political allies across the Middle East as possible. A possible cooperation between Saudi Arabia and the Muslim Brotherhood might include Syria and Yemen, where the organisation is politically effective. It could be a good offer for the Brotherhood as well – because it is losing ground beneath its feet.

[22] H. Ibish, 'Saudi Arabia's new sunni Alliance', *The New York Times*, 31 July 2015.