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THE CURRENT: What does Saudi-Qatar reconciliation signal for the Biden administration?

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PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita.

This week, Saudi Arabia and Qatar announced an end to the diplomatic and economic rift that's existed since Saudi and other Arab countries, including Bahrain, the UAE, and Egypt imposed a blockade on Qatar in 2017.

With us to explain the resolution and what it means for regional stability as well as U.S. relations with the region is Bruce Riedel, a senior fellow with Center for Middle East Policy and director of the Intelligence Project here at Brookings. Bruce, thanks for talking to us today.

RIEDEL: It's my pleasure.

PITA: What can you tell us about what led to the rupture between Qatar and its Gulf neighbors to begin with?

RIEDEL: Qatar and its neighbors, particularly Saudi Arabia as well as Bahrain, have had a very frosty, sometimes hostile relationship going well back to the 1990s. Qatar and Bahrain have a territorial dispute over some islands between them. Qatar and Saudi Arabia are the only two Wahhabi countries in the world, meaning they are the only two countries which embrace the form of Islam that is practiced most notably in Saudi Arabia, which is fairly extremist fundamentalist. Qatar has been for years and years something of the most outspoken country in the Gulf. It famously hosts the Al Jazeera radio and television network system, which provides a very in-depth research and analysis on TV and radio of events in the region. And unlike most of the radios and TVs in the region, it is not government-controlled and does not only provide a government line. This has led it to often the report stories that the neighboring states would have preferred never were reported and this has been a real point of contention between Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

Back in the beginning of this millennium, Saudi Arabia withdrew its ambassador from Qatar for a period of time, then they went back, and then they would do it again. And then of course in 2017, probably because of the strong support Saudi Arabia was getting from the Trump administration, they decided to put a blockade on Qatar and issued 13 demands for what the Qataris needed to do, one of which was, of course, to close down Al Jazeera. There were other things they wanted done, individuals they wanted turned over from Qatar to Saudi Arabia or Bahrain. Basically, they wanted to overthrow the monarch – at the time, the emir in Qatar. So it's very ironic that today he's sitting in Saudi Arabia, once again back inside the club.

PITA: Sure. And it seems like many of those original demands that were put forward, like shutting down Al Jazeera, for Qatar to break off its relationships with many of the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated parties across the Middle East, it seems like many of those demands didn't get met. So, what led to the resumption of relations between these countries and to calling off the blockade at this time?

RIEDEL: You're absolutely right. At this point, unless there's something we don't know about, it looks like Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the Emirates, along with Egypt, just folded, just gave up. Qatar got everything it wanted, which was essentially an end to the blockade. In return it currently, so far, has not had to do anything at all. I think there's a number of reasons why it happened this way.

First of all, the blockade wasn't working. It's been more than three years; the Qataris found ways around everything that the Saudis and others were trying to do to them. So, it simply wasn't working. But secondly, I think the Saudis are looking to the end of the Trump administration. Every American president since Franklin Delano Roosevelt has been friendly to Saudi Arabia, but none has been as friendly as the Trump administration. No other American president made Saudi Arabia his first foreign port after becoming president. And Joe Biden has already made it clear that he intends to reassess the relationship with Saudi Arabia. So, I think the Saudis saw an opportunity here to rally the Gulf Cooperation Council, the group of the six Gulf monarchies, together and try to build some unity out of that, hoping that would strengthen their hand in dealing with the Biden administration after its inauguration. It also has one other big benefit. The Qataris, because they couldn't overfly Saudi territory, had to overfly Iranian territory to get in and out of the Gulf. That provided the Iranians with a sizable amount of money that the Qataris were paying for overflight clearances, and I think given the intensity of the anti-Iran feelings in Saudi Arabia and the Emirates and Bahrain, shutting down that source of income for the Iranians was a lucrative benefit of giving up the blockade at this time.

PITA: Okay, so what is this going to mean going forward for those relationships within the Gulf and across the region, more broadly? One of the other questions that this brings up is what sort of effect this might have on the long running humanitarian crisis in Yemen?

RIEDEL: First thing I would say is, let's see how long this lasts. I don't think the blockade is going to be reimposed anytime, but there are already some hints here that there is not as much enthusiasm for this change in some of the other Gulf States than there was perhaps in Saudi Arabia. The king of Bahrain, for example, did not go to the summit meeting in Saudi Arabia, at which all of this was announced. The crown prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed bin Zayed, did not go to the meeting either; he sent basically the ruler of Dubai in his place. There are little hints in this that not everything is going to be quite as rosy as it's being portrayed, principally by the Saudis today. So, I would watch out for some hiccups down the road.

I would hope that this would mean that the Saudis are also thinking about some of their other policies in the region, such as the war in Yemen. The war in Yemen is a humanitarian catastrophe. The United Nations says the war in Yemen is the worst humanitarian problem of our lifetimes, with literally tens of thousands of Yemeni children are suffering from malnutrition and in some cases starving to death. The war is a mistake by the Saudis. It has only increased Iran's strategic posture in the region, and hopefully this is a hint that the Saudis might be rethinking that and might be looking for a way out. We could also hope that maybe the Saudis will also start thinking about some other human rights policies and release some of the political prisoners that they've been holding, including some of the women who pioneered the right to drive in Saudi Arabia who've been put in very harsh conditions in the last few years.

It's too early to say, but I think Joe Biden's coming is already leading the Saudis to start rethinking some of their traditional policies and the end of the blockade is the first harbinger of what may be additional changes coming in Saudi policy.

PITA: With that in mind, does that mean that this is good news for the Biden administration, although everything may not be roses, as you said? What sort of implications is going to have with some of their priorities, particularly regarding Iran and potential resumption of some negotiations there?

RIEDEL: This is good news for the Biden administration. This blockade only divided the Gulf states, making it easier for Iran to take strategic advantage of it. It also wasted an enormous amount of effort and money on propaganda against each other; often the propaganda bordered on the ridiculous. So, cooling these things down and restoring some unity in the Gulf is definitely to the advantage of the Biden administration, and getting it done before they came into office makes it even better, so they don't have to expand political capital of their own trying to get this thing to happen. I would hope this would not mean that the Biden administration doesn't go ahead with their reassessment, but there are other Saudi policies – the war in Yemen, as I mentioned, human rights abuses, the murder of Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul – all of those needs some accountability as well. So, Joe Biden and his team have quite a large to-do list in front of them. And as you mentioned, Iran is very much at the center of that. The Biden administration, I'm sure, is going to want to restore that relationship with Iran that we saw at the end of the Obama-Biden administration, where Iran was prevented from acquiring a nuclear weapon by the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the JCPOA, which Trump basically withdrew from. At the end of the Obama administration in 2016, then-Secretary of State John Kerry had a very good working relationship with his Iranian counterpart, was in touch with him on the phone quite often, which helped to de-escalate problems in the region. I think that the Biden administration will seek to pursue those goals, despite the fact that many of the states in the GCC, particularly Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE will be very unhappy with any kind of return to the nuclear deal, with return to communications, with Iran. Bear in mind though, that some GCC states will be very supportive of reopening dialogue with Iran: Kuwait, which was a key player in ending the blockade behind the scenes is one; Oman is another; and of course Qatar, which shares the world's largest underwater gas field in the world in the Persian Gulf with Iran, would very much like to see improvement in relations between the United States and Iran as well.

So, there's a there's a lot to do here. They're going to face some opposition in the region, but they'll also find some very strong support for moving towards a better relationship with Iran from some states in the region.

PITA: Alright, well, we'll see what comes of this. Bruce, thanks very much for talking to us and explaining this today.

RIEDEL: It's really, my pleasure. Thanks for having me.