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## Shift in Middle East Interactions: the case of Egypt and Qatar

Baraah Al-Hamdo

With the US President Joe Biden's access to the White House in January 2021, some Arab countries made numerous decisions that brought about changes in their foreign policy orientations, and partly broke the political stalemate that had prevailed in the Arab region.

The 41<sup>st</sup>. summit of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) was held in the Saudi city of Al-Ula on 5 January 2021, where the pre-summit stage had witnessed several contacts, talks, and discussions, especially between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, with a desire from both parties to resolve the conflict that had fractured the Gulf house and resulted in successive clashes, affecting the region as a whole, where it lasted for three consecutive years following the blockade of Qatar.

Due to the fact that Saudi Arabia is Egypt's strategic ally, there was a breakthrough in the relationship between Qatar and Egypt in coincidence with solution of the Gulf conflict, which might be interpreted as an international trend to reconsider the Middle East problems, most prominently the Egyptian and Saudi dispute with Qatar.

However, it seems that the United States has been behind the ongoing events in the region, where the US warning and even threatening rhetoric may be considered the biggest driver of the series of changes that the region has witnessed and the map of alliances and interactions that it is currently witnessing.

In the context of these changes, the Egyptian-Qatari relations experienced a remarkable development, despite the media bets that ruled out such rapprochement after mutual media accusations that went on for several years following the 2013 coup in Egypt. In fact, the Gulf reconciliation was an opportunity for the Egyptian ruling regime to revive its contacts with Qatar once more, especially after signing the Al-Ula Statement.

Rapprochement between Cairo and Doha started with mutual positive messages with the aim of restoring diplomatic relations and turning over the page of differences between them. The first official meeting between the two countries was held in Kuwait on 23 February 2021, where the joint mechanisms and procedures for implementing reconciliation on the ground were discussed. Then

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came the visit of Qatar's Minister of Foreign Affairs to Egypt for the first time in March, bringing with him a "written message" from Prince Tamim bi Hamad to Sisi, expressing keenness to strengthen and support bilateral relations between the two countries.

In this context, it can be said that Egypt's need for reconciliation with Qatar is due to economic rather than political reasons, as Cairo suffers from a decline in foreign investment, where the situation has worsened due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. In such situation, boosting relations with Qatar can contribute to alleviating the economic crisis that Egypt is suffering from, especially with the presence of more than a quarter of a million Egyptians living and working in Qatar, where increasing their remittances can contribute to supporting the Egyptian economy, in addition to the Qatari investments.

Although the Qatari investments, both governmental and private, faced many challenges during the past seven years, yet they did not stop. For example, the Qatari Diar Real Estate Investment Company maintained its projects totaling \$3 billion; and Qatar Petroleum that contributed worth of \$4.4 billion to the launch of the Egyptian Refining Company in 2019.

Therefore, Egypt is the principal beneficiary of reconciliation with Qatar, as the restoration of diplomatic relations can open more Qatari economic support and investment in real estate, tourism, energy, banking, and perhaps at the level of the military industry through the Barzan Holdings, owned by the Qatari Ministry of Defense.

### Implications of Egyptian-Qatari rapprochement on the region

The Egyptian-Qatari rapprochement had positive repercussions, not only on the two countries, but on many of the region's files in general, given the fact that both countries play a prominent regional role through which they can coordinate between various regional axes that have defined the map of recent alliances.

In this regard, Egypt and Qatar have played active roles in the "mediation" between Hamas on the one hand, and "Israel" on the other, during the Israeli recent aggression on the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Gaza Strip, for reaching a ceasefire. In fact, the Palestinian issue has been an essential point in the convergence of Cairo and Doha and enhancement of direct contacts between them.

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Observers believe that the reason for Egypt's return to playing a major role in stopping escalation in Gaza is mainly due to Cairo's concern about the UAE foreign policy, where Abu Dhabi ignored the Egyptian regional role in the relationship with Israel. According to observers, this made Egypt return to the Palestinian file strongly, backed by the Qatari support in this regard, with the aim of emphasizing its presence and its effective influence in the issue.

There was also talk about the Qatari role in mediation between Egypt and Ethiopia on the issue of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), especially in light of Doha's good relations with both Addis Ababa and Khartoum.

Furthermore, the list of Egyptian-Qatari understandings has also included the Libyan crisis, given their influence inside Libya, especially amid media reports of conflicting political and military orientations between Egypt and the UAE towards the Libyan issue, where Cairo has announced full support for the Libyan National Unity Government with the aim of achieving security and political stability.

Although there are many issues of common concern, at the political, security, and military levels, between Cairo and Doha, and the impact of these issues, not only on the relations of the two countries, but also on many regional interactions, there are still outstanding issues.

These outstanding issues include: the attitude towards the Muslim Brotherhood, the talk by the Egyptian media about a list of Egyptian political opponents in Qatar, and the media file, whether the Egyptian media's fierce attack on Qatar during the past seven years, accusing Doha of supporting and financing "terrorism", or the Egyptian attitude towards Al-Jazeera, where the Egyptian regime accuses the well-known Qatari news organization of provoking crises in Egypt; in addition to the Qatari-Turkish relations, and how the Egyptian regime views them.

However, the Egyptian regime that manages its foreign relations with the logic of bargaining, blackmail and deals, can completely bypass the backgrounds of the past stage in case it finds that the other party may provide it with a material gain, whatever its size may be; the same policy that the Egyptian regime has adopted with the Emirati and the Saudi regimes that had supported the 2013 coup against the elected government.