**Saudi Qatar Rift and Its Implications to the Horn of Africa**

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The Golf Cooperation Council comprised of the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia (SA), Oman, Qatar and Kuwait, and Yemen is facing dark moments in its history. Swiftly, Saudi Arabia, United Arab of Emirates, Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, Yemen, The Maldives and others cut ties and imposed embargos on Qatar.

The Saudi led coalition is ordering Qatar to stop supporting terrorism, halt military cooperation with Turkey, shut down Al Jazeera and most importantly, cut ties with Iran. The total list of the demand is 13, however, the 4 are the key demands that Qatar must satisfy to rejoin the group.

The implication of the fallout to the Middle East is unpredictable. However, to the countries in the Horn of Africa and Red Sea region namely, Yemen, Somalia, Djibouti, South Sudan, Sudan, Ethiopia, Egypt and Eritrea the reverberations will resonate.

The fast-moving juxtaposition is reshaping the future-security, trade, bilateral and regional relations of these countries for some time. It is therefore, of utmost importance to take note of what these developments mean to all the countries in focus.

These developments also point to a unique stage in world history. Since the end of World War II, and particularly after the fall of the Soviet Union which ended the cold war in 1991, the US dictated the agendas of the region.

After the Arab Spring that rocked the leaders of the Mid-East; pseudo-human-rights agenda Obama administration pursued and, US nuclear agreement with Iran created a rift between the US, Saudi Arabia, Israel and others. US role in the Middle East became hazy and that made traditional US allies like Saudi Arabia nervous about US policy-pivot to Iran. This, in large part was the reason, for the first time, the Saudi’s and others were forced to carveout geopolitical agendas independent from US.

The Saudis war against Yemeni Houthis is biproduct of the fallout. A coalition of eight Sunni Arab nations led by Saudi Arabia started bombing campaigns against Yemen allegedly to stop Shia Iran. This quasi-independent move by the Saudis has led to cascading set of events that will cement the geopolitical realities of the region for the foreseeable future.

These developments demonstrate the beginning of departure from the unipolar US led regional agendas to multipolar regionally driven national interest based agendas.

For the first time, countries in the region are making strategic decisions and alliances based on their national interest independent from US. The Saudis war in Yemen is ambitions effort to assert regional influence. The Saudis did not intend to break relations with the US. They just wanted to ensure their dominant role.

To that end, the Saudis lobbied the Trump administration which coincidentally was eager to sell arms, appease Israeli interests and ensure aggressive anti Iran stance.

Whilst the May 20th Donald Trump visit to Saudi Arabia is significant for the kingdom, it was equally as significant for the countries in the coalition such as Egypt. During the visit President Abdel Fattah Sisi of Egypt was accorded prominent access and exposure.

This is significant to Egypt because US and Saudi Arabia represent significant strategic, economic and security advantages. Strong ties with the Saudis and the Trump administration gives Egypt upper hand in the region particularly over its rivals Ethiopia and Sudan.

These developments raise many significant questions. Who are the winners or losers? What does winning mean in this case? How will it impact the future of the region? Is it good for the stability and peace of the region? How about the economy and security of the Red Sea etc.?

These are significant life changing questions for countries in the region with global implications. However, the mainstream fake-news international corporate media chooses to ignore these realities to perpetuate old and dead narratives that suit their dying agendas. It is therefore important to present perspectives reflective of the realities because these are strategic moves with long term impact to countries in the region.

**Saudi Arabia, Egypt Opposing Interests**

During the Bush administration’s war on terrorism, on every turn, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Ethiopia sided against Eritrea. Counter to Egypt’s national interest, Hosni Mubarak allowed Ethiopia to dictate regional terms and supported the regime-change agenda that US and Ethiopia pursued against Eritrea.

Saudi Arabia followed the same path against Eritrea. After Djibouti claimed Eritrea attacked its troops, Saudi-led Arab league conducted emergency session and condemned Eritrea without fact-finding effort. In a concerted effort Eritrea was vilified as a destabilizing actor and sanctioned.

Both Saudi Arabia and Egypt worked against their national interests by acting against Eritrea. They bet on the regime change agenda and assisted US and Ethiopia because they assumed Eritrean demise to be imminent. The fall of Eritrea was supposed to give rise to Ethiopian dominance of the region and perpetuate US hegemony of the Red Sea with client states Saudi, Egypt and Ethiopia as bulwarks.

The agenda failed. The no-war no-peace agenda that was designed to suffocate Eritrea backfired and the opposite came true. Today, the minority regime in Ethiopia is in tatters. Ethiopia is beset by civil unrest and rebellion throughout. As a result, the country is on lockdown on a declared indefinite state-of-emergency.

Ethiopia’s playbook depended entirely on US Ethiopia relations whereby the minority regime served as boots on the ground for US efforts in the region and as center of African diplomatic hub where the US can reach-out to all its Africa related diplomatic maneuvers.

What US Eritrea-regime change agenda failed to account for was the resilience, patience and strategic geopolitical moves by Eritrea. As Egypt went through rapid changes, Eritrea kept cultivating relationships with Egyptian authorities based on economic, strategic, regional and bilateral security interests that placed the Red Sea on the forefront.

As Ethiopia boasted about the Nile Renaissance Dam, Egypt grew increasingly worried that the dam could ultimately impact the flow of the Nile to Egypt. This threat led Egypt to reassess its national interest and ultimately changed how it dealt with nations in the region.

Immediately after he came to power, President Abdel Fattah El Sisi strengthened ties with South Sudan, Uganda and expanded relations with Eritrea. For Egypt, Eritrea is of utmost strategic significance. Hence, correcting Mubarak’s strategic blunder and creating mutually beneficial bilateral relations with Eritrea is imperative.

As for Saudi Arabia, after the Kingdom started it’s bombing campaign in Yemen, Eritrea’s strategic importance became indispensable. The border between Saudi Arabia and Yemen is straightly aligned across Port Massawa on the Red Sea,

Unfriendly Eritrea could hamper Saudi efforts in Yemen. Hence, the Saudis were forced to reassess their relationship and security priorities and as a result bolstered ties and signed agreements with Eritrea based on mutual interests that focus on the security of the Red Sea.

Peaceful Red Sea where all stake holders play key role based on mutual interests is critical. The Red Sea is a critical waterway for global trade and security. Relationship between Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Eritrea are natural and should have been automatic. However, US geopolitical agendas overshadowed the relationships to the detriment of the interests of the countries at play.

The moves by Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Eritrea are based on national interests and the unintended consequence is that it killed US and Ethiopia’s Eritrea agenda.

**Ethiopia**

Ethiopia’s minority regime is the biggest gambler and as such loser of the region. The TPLF, EPRDF minority regime bet on US support to assert complete dominance of the region. The regime believed US support to be invincible and everlasting. It also believed the only country on its way to full dominance is Eritrea. Hence, all its efforts are dedicated to destabilizing Eritrea.

Ethiopia, aided by successive US administrations and as a host nation to African Union, has been exploiting the AU to direct African political agendas of the region to suit its Eritrea agenda.

Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) is made up of eight-member states from the Horn, East Africa and the Nile Basin. IGAD was set up to serve the interests of the region. But Ethiopia has managed to control, (IGAD has been chaired by Ethiopia since 2008) and exploit it to forward agendas that favor its interests at the expense of others.

After Qatar announced it has withdrawn troops because Djibouti downgraded its relations with Qatar, Ethiopia saw it as opportunity to try to assert its position. As usual, Ethiopia tried to use IGAD to force African Union involvement and failed. Excerpt of IGAD’s Communique,

“The IGAD Council of Ministers held its 57th Extra-Ordinary session on the 2ndJuly, 2017 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, under the chairmanship of H.E. Dr. Workneh Gebeyehu, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and Current Chairperson of the IGAD Council of Ministers.”

Ethiopia spent billions on diplomacy, human, material, military and economic resources against Eritrea and failed. Its efforts may have created temporary challenges but it never stopped Eritrea. To the contrary, Eritrea is on a much better diplomatic, political, strategic and economic platform while Ethiopia is on a downward spiral.

**Sudan**

Like Ethiopia, Sudan is on slippery political, diplomatic, economic and military grounds. Sudan occupies major real state on the Red Sea and as member of the Nile Basin countries, Sudan strategic role is critical. However, since he came to power in a coup in 1989, Omar Al Bashir has played significant role in weakening Sudan’s position. Every time Bashir felt western-pinch, he acquiesced to demands that weakened Sudan’s important strategic role.

In 2005, Bashir signed the agreement that split Africa’s largest country to two. In 2011, Bashir assisted NATO and played important role in the bombing of Libya and contributed to the chaos. Very recently, Bashir’s compromised and supported US role in South Sudan (SS) to get out ICC and of US sanctions. Bashir always makes his moves from shaky grounds and not necessarily for the national interests of Sudan.

Friendly Sudan is a lifeline for the minority regime of Ethiopia. Ethiopian regime uses Sudan as buffer zone from rebels and most importantly Ethiopia wants Sudan on its side against Eritrea and Egypt. To that end, Ethiopia gave Bashir large chunk of its fertile land as border settlement.

Bashir’s codependency on the minority regime in Ethiopia is based: A) Because AU headquarters based in Ethiopia. Addis Ababa gives Bashir the platform to fight isolation and the ICC with Ethiopia’s lobbying help. B) Second reason is US Ethiopia relations that the regime exploits to blackmail Bashir with hopes of US policy change on Sudan.

As a result, Bashir consistently supports Ethiopia’s position as in the case of the Renaissance Dam. Ethiopia and Sudan have signed various bilateral and security agreements.

The symbiotic relationship between Ethiopia and Sudan makes Egypt uneasy particularly as it relates to river Nile. Egypt and Sudan share a huge border and their relations have been tensed as a result. They constantly accuse each other for meddling.

Hence, there are no neutral actors as it relates to the Saudi led gulf coalition against Qatar. Sudan tries to appear neutral and states that it stands by the Kuwaiti mediation efforts. However, Sudan’s aim is to weaken Egypt’s position and role.

**Qatar’s Withdrawal and Djibouti’s Ploys**

No matter how it is portrayed the Saudi led effort against Qatar is regime change agenda at work. The Saudi’s were not keen on Qatar’s role in many countries and unhappy with Al Jazeera News Network. They saw it as nuisance and impediment to their dominant role in the region.

Egypt is also one of the countries that consistently complained about Qatar’s subversive roles, support of extremist groups and consistent anti-Egypt propaganda using its media. Egypt and Qatar’s relations have been tense going back to 1997.

For long, Qatar played instrumental role on events that determined the fate of Libya, Syria and others to the detriment of the future of these countries. Qatar was on quest to assert dominant role in the region and beyond. In the name of peace and security Qatar has been involved in Africa and Middle East extensively. The Doha Document for Peace in Darfur (DDPD) was agreed and signed in Doha in 2011. The Eritrea Djibouti mediation effort is an example of Qatar’s involvement in the region.

On June 14, 2017 Qatar withdrew its peacekeeping troops from Djibouti siting Djibouti has downgraded relations. This move stirred international hysteria largely based on Djibouti’s lies. Djiboutian authorities outright lied to the world that Eritrea is occupying land that Qatar vacated which they were forced to recant as there were no evidence.

Djibouti’s motives are clear. Djibouti depends on Ethiopia for its income of port dues. Djibouti has vested interest on the conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia because it perceives Eritrean ports as competition and thus a threat. The rift between Qatar and the Saudi led coalition provided an opportunity for Djibouti to escalate the situation, pull France and Ethiopia but failed because African Union rejected Djiboutian lies and Ethiopian ploys.

Djibouti’s aim was to drag the African Union and deploy IGAD led peacekeeping forces. Djiboutian Foreign Minister Mahamoud Ali Youssouf told Reuters during a summit of African Union leaders in Addis Ababa,

“We proposed to the African Union that it take over the disputed side and fill the gap. We need the African Union to act very quickly.”

Ethiopia and Djibouti are trying to spin the events with lies. The reality however,1) Qatar has officially informed UN that it withdrew its forces because Djibouti expelled its ambassador.2) Qatar also informed the UN it is still committed to the mediation.

**Eritrea’s Indispensable Position**

Within the context of the current geopolitical developments in the region, considering the determined hostilities she faced, Eritrea is the biggest winner and benefactor.

Eritrea was slated for isolation, regime change and to become a failed client-state for Ethiopia. Sudan, Egypt, Yemen, Djibouti, Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia were once on the same side serving greater US interest and worked to destroy Eritrea.

Eritrea was forced to endure untold hardship, economic strangulation and incessant undeserved ridicule that aimed to demonize her to justify punitive measures. However, Eritrea overcame it quietly and brilliantly for two reasons:

A) Eritreans fought these challenges collectively as one. Eritrean resolve is hardened by decades of experience that no ploy can nudge. As result, the sanctions, the isolation agenda and all the vilification campaigns failed to change the situation on the ground because Eritreans understand their national interests and did not budge.

To the contrary, most of the countries that worked against Eritrea are facing tumult and instability. Absent of new direction, Ethiopia is doomed to become a failed state. Yemen is a failed state. Egypt is on difficult path. Sudan is facing further breakup and instability etc.

B) For Eritrea, the Red Sea is the most important lifeline as it is for Egypt Saudi Arabia Sudan and others. Eritrea’s position is based on the premise that all the actors that share the Red Sea waters to play their due role by cooperation.

Eritrean resolve and strategic approach was steady, methodical, strategic patient and effective. And it paid off because for the first time, the nations sharing the Red Sea waters are working in concert for their national interest not the interests of Western powers. The cooperation agreements between Eritrea, Egypt and Saudi Arabia provide welcome start for regional growth and partnerships to benefit the region.

**Concluding Remarks**

The implications of Qatar Saudi rift to the Horn of Africa is quite evident. The alliance between Sudan, Ethiopia and Djibouti vs Egypt’s alliance with Saudi Arabia has created renewed tension.

At some point Sudan and Ethiopia must come to terms with the realities on the ground accept it and work with it. For this to happen, the minority regime in Ethiopia needs to embrace Eritrea and Egypt’s concerns and address it peacefully which is not on the DNA of the regime.

Saudi Arabia and Egypt are determined to ensure Qatar’s position is weakened. To that end, they want to see all the countries in the region side with them. Sudan is being urged to take a firm stand on the situation.

Ultimately, Sudan must take side. Not siding with Saudi Arabia will have serious consequences for Bashir who is surrounded by the coalition. Siding against Saudi Arabia, Egypt and allies will threaten Bashir.

And if Bashir choses to side with Egypt and the Saudis, the Ethiopian regime will be isolated. The minority regime in Ethiopia is the odd man out. Ethiopian regime has played all its cards and lost. The people of Ethiopia have rejected the regime. Hence, the rightful owners of Ethiopia must take power and make peace with countries in the region.

If the regime in Ethiopia insists to hold on to power, Ethiopia faces extremely dangerous instability. These are the realities facing the region. For regional peace to prevail all the actors including Sudan must work to change the political dynamics in Ethiopia.

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