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Qatar and Bahrain, relations, challenges, opportunities, and prospects

In the short term, relations will probably develop slowly, but strategic relations can only be reached after the full success of the development of necessary mechanisms, procedures and negotiations at the committees' level.



Apart from the previous unofficial ties, bilateral relations between Qatar and Bahrain were established for the first time in 1971. The details of the disputes since 1936 were sometimes complex, borderline, and personal.

Despite previous disputes, since the mid-1990s, the border dispute between Qatar and Bahrain over the islands of “Hawar”, “Janan” and “Zabarah” has been raised.

In 1996-1997, Bahrain boycotted the Gulf Cooperation Council meeting in Qatar and two Qatari citizens were arrested in Bahrain on espionage charges.

With the increase in disputes, armed confrontations, and the inability to resolve, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) settled the disputes on March 16, 2001 in favor of both parties.

The closeness of Manama and Doha and the “win-win” approach in full normalization can help promote the unity of the GCC

Bahrain has accused Qatar of offering Qatari citizenship to some Bahraini families, despite an April 2014 agreement on non-interference in the internal affairs of GCC member states. In March 2014, Bahrain recalled its ambassador from Qatar, and on November 16, it returned its ambassador to Qatar and the two sides reached an understanding.

On June 3, 2017, the Twitter account of Bahrain’s foreign minister was hacked in a cyberattack, and on June 5, 2017, Bahrain severed ties with Qatar for reasons such as being too close to Iran.

In January 2023, the Crown Prince of Bahrain and the Emir of Qatar had a phone call, and on April 13, 2023, Bahrain and Qatar officially resumed diplomatic relations in Riyadh, two years after the Arab blockade on Qatar was lifted.

Manama and Doha agreed to officially resume diplomatic relations almost six years after the break, and in February 2023, the first meeting of the Bahrain-Qatar follow-up committee in Riyadh discussed the necessary mechanisms to end the pending private cases. In November 2023, the two sides were in contact, and on December 5, 2023, the King of Bahrain arrived in Qatar and was welcomed.

On June 12, 2024, and one year after announcing the resumption of diplomatic relations, the King of Bahrain ordered the appointment of an ambassador to Qatar and the Emir of Qatar appointed the ambassador plenipotentiary to Bahrain. Recently, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Qatar welcomed the Ambassador of Bahrain in Qatar and discussed the aspects of bilateral cooperation and ways to strengthen the cooperation and joint coordination for promotion to wider horizons.

Opportunities

Reconciliation between Manama and Doha is analyzed in the wider geopolitical context, more pragmatic and diplomatic approaches in the Middle East. The region is more than ever focused on economic integration, investment and trade agreements between each other, strengthening the GCC unity after the Al-Ula summit in January 2021.

Both sides have taken steps to “strengthen unity and integration based on the GCC charter” and stable relations between GCC members are vital to achieving the 2030 vision agenda.

In the Qatar-Bahrain follow-up committee, legal and security issues are being discussed and the mutual desire to develop bilateral relations and strengthen the unity and integrity of the GCC by respecting the principles of equality between countries, national sovereignty and independence, territorial integrity and good neighborliness is emphasized.

Diplomatic and economic cooperation agreements, strengthen the process of convergence between the countries of the GCC and the gradual return of relations.

Bilateral cooperation and trust-building measures can also facilitate the increase in trade and investment.

Bahrain can benefit from energy, investment, trade and tourism relations with wealthy Qatar. Bahrain opened its airspace to Qatar in 2021 and restored visa-free travel. Following the resumption of direct flights between Doha and Manama in May 2023, the number of flights has increased and has an impact on business and tourism.

The “Bahrain-Qatar Bridge” project was first announced in 2008 with the aim of improving trade and travel. This \$3-5 billion project will connect Bahrain to northwest Qatar. In November 2023, during the meeting of the Prime Minister of Qatar and the Crown Prince of Bahrain in Manama, the follow-up committee of Qatar and Bahrain took “necessary measures” in the revival of the “Friendship Bridge” joint project.

The project is one of the most important strategic and development projects with a length of 40 kilometers and is equally owned by the two countries. It will reduce the land travel distance between Bahrain and Qatar to half an hour, and with significant changes and the proposed railway connection, it can further connect trade and investment, transport operations, and increase the efficiency of the six GCC countries through 4 to 5 years.

Commercial exchanges in the last quarter of 2023 have increased by 136 percent compared to the same period of 2022, and have reached 33 million dollars. It is expected to return after the stability of relations.

The United States welcomed the restoration of diplomatic relations between Bahrain and Qatar (two close partners of the United States and main non-NATO allies), and Russia considered the agreement to be the basis for improving conditions in the region. Also, the reduction of tension between Iran and Bahrain has helped to improve positively the relations between Qatar and Bahrain.

Challenges and threats

The leaders of Qatar and Bahrain have different and sometimes conflicting ideological approaches. Platforms for border disputes, facilities, citizenship, and tribal conflicts between the two countries still exist. Bahrain and Qatar (the smallest Gulf countries in terms of size) have the most territorial and border disputes among the Gulf countries. The border disputes, the width of the territorial sea the continental shelf of the maritime areas of the two countries, and the tension between them, disrupt the integrity and stability of the Gulf Cooperation Council.

Tensions that are rooted in history, Bahrain's suspicion of Qatar's intentions regarding citizenship issues, and Al Jazeera's approach, can still create tensions. Doha enjoys good relations with Tehran, while Manama sees Tehran as its biggest external threat. The two countries have very different positions regarding the normalization of relations with Israel, the "Abraham Agreement", the Palestinian issue, support for terrorism and human rights violations.

Perspective

The resumption of diplomatic relations is an important step in the restoration of relations after the return of ambassadors between the two sides, but some of Bahrain's islands are only two kilometers away from the Qatari mainland. Therefore, despite the creation of mechanisms to resolve disputes, any incident on borders, territorial waters, tribal citizenship and media disputes can ignite sensitivities. Despite the tense past, the closeness of Manama and Doha and the "win-win" approach in full normalization can help promote the unity of the GCC and multilateral national interests.

Previously, hostile relations lost important economic opportunities. But large projects such as the Bahrain-Qatar bridge can have a significant positive effect on strengthening the economic ties between the two countries and on the expansion of security and political relations. However, in the short term, relations will probably develop slowly, but strategic relations can only be reached after the full success of the development of necessary mechanisms, procedures and negotiations at the committees' level.

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