

Al Ula Accord, Gulf Cooperation Council and Qatar

January 27, 2021

A declaration was signed in Al-Ula, Saudi Arabia, on Tuesday for the restoration of full relations between Qatar and the nations that had cut ties in 2017. India shares excellent relationships with all the countries in the GCC, which is in its extended neighbourhood. Such encouraging developments will further promote peace, progress and stability in the region.

In news: The Al Ula Accord: Saudi Arabia to lift Qatar embargo, easing the Gulf crisis

Placing it in syllabus: International Relations

Dimensions

- What is the accord about?
- Why were the relations between GCC and Qatar Strained?
- How will the new accord alter West Asian Politics?

Content

What is the accord about?

- The **Al-Ula Accord** was signed on 5 January 2021 at the conclusion of the **41st GCC Summit** in Al-Ula, Saudi Arabia.
- The leaders of the **Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)** met to end the bitter discord between its members and Qatar.
- **Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt** (known as **Arab Quartet**) signed an accord with Qatar during a summit of Gulf Cooperation Council leaders, bringing the regional split to an end – at least on paper.
- **Saudi Arabia and three other Arab states agreed to fully restore ties with neighboring Qatar.** This ends the Arab

Quartet's diplomatic boycott and a total land, sea and air embargo of Qatar.

The **GCC comprises Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE**. Oman and Kuwait had remained neutral during the split, with Kuwaiti officials providing mediation for Al-Ula Accord.

Why were the relations between GCC and Qatar Strained?

Ten years ago, the **Arab Spring** uprisings across West Asia had thrown up popular demands for reform.

The uprisings demanded an **end to authoritarian rule** and the **restoration of Arab "dignity"** through freedom and democracy.

Four leaders fell under these pressures, which also gave rise to two new developments:

1. Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated parties came to power in Egypt and Tunisia
2. Saudi Arabia decided to divert demands for domestic reform by highlighting a threat from Iran. Saudi Arabia shaped opposition to Iran on a sectarian basis and confronted Iran's influence in Syria and Yemen.

Muslim Brotherhood

- It is an **Islamic religious and political organization** dedicated to the establishment of a nation based on Islamic principles.
- It has a wide grassroots mobilisation. Its political platform has **developed into an intermix of Islamic principles with Western-style democracy**.
- This poses a **serious challenge to the existing monarchical order in the Middle East** that provides no scope for popular participation.
- The Muslim Brotherhood's electoral successes culminated in **Mohammed Morsi being elected President in Egypt** in

2012.

- Hence, Saudi Arabia and the UAE watched with horror the Brotherhood's electoral successes
- Fearing that a successful Brotherhood administration would become a model for their countries as well, the two GCC allies supported the **Egyptian army's coup against Morsi in July 2013.**
- By contrast **Qatar had opposed the coup** and Egypt's ensuing return to authoritarian rule.

Qatar's Role

- Qatar is a GCC member. It has been a **non-conformist in GCC councils.**
- It pursued an **independent foreign policy** driven by its own national interest.
- It is the world's **largest exporter of liquefied natural gas** and is a small peninsula whose only land border is with Saudi Arabia.
- The **Arab Quartet nations accused Doha of meddling in their internal affairs**, supporting hardline Islamist groups and building ties with Iran. **Qatar denied the charges.**
- In 2017, Saudi Arabia, under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt imposed the blockade and severed diplomatic ties with Qatar
- They also issued 13 demands which included shutting down the Qatar-funded TV network, Al Jazeera, closing a Turkish military base and reducing diplomatic relations with Iran.
- In this situation **Qatar had turned to Iran and Turkey (regional rivals of Saudi Arabia and the UAE) for support.** It relied on Iranian airspace for overflights.
- This troubled Saudi Arabia and the US administration which had initially backed the boycott.

How will the new accord alter West Asian Politics?

Step Toward GCC Unity

- The Accord represents a **significant shift in regional relations** after three-and-a-half years of political deadlock.
- The most significant thing about **the agreement is that it is signed by all six GCC states plus Egypt**
- The reopening of Saudi airspace and borders to Qatar brought Doha back inside the GCC tent. The signing of the Al-Ula Accord is the first step on a journey to restore GCC unity.
- But it does not signal the end of tensions within the GCC.
- Experts expect the **confidence-inspiring steps** to result in announcements on mutual cooperation agreements, business deals and cross-border investments in the coming weeks and months
- But it's unclear how far the reconciliation will go or how long it will last.

Trade relations might take time to restore

- The accord **does not specify the exact status of trade and diplomatic relations** between each country. Nor does it describe the sentiment behind the scenes.
- The easing of the rift is unlikely to restore the old trade relationships soon, at least not fully.
- Qatar had to change its trade routes to India, Turkey and Oman to replace goods from the UAE and Saudi Arabia, which were among the most important sources of imports.

The disagreements over policies & behaviours that sparked the fallout still remain:

- Qatar realizes that its independent foreign policy, and good relations with the USA and Iran and Turkey, are an asset.

- Days after the signing of the solidarity and stability agreement – the Al Ula accord – the Qatari Foreign Minister, Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani, made it clear that Doha would continue to pursue an independent foreign policy driven by its own national interest.
- **Qatar categorically refused to accept the demand for downgrading ties with Iran and Turkey.**
- The UAE and Egypt feel particularly threatened by the Brotherhood. They sent low-level delegations to Al-Ula and their media comment has been tepid.

Rise in Qatar's Strategic importance in the Middle East:

- The accord could further **bolster Qatar's strategic importance and foreign policy options.**
- Qatar has consistently batted in favor of reduction of tensions between the US and Iran.
- After the signing of the agreement, it **has offered to intervene between Saudi Arabia and Iran and Saudi Arabia and Turkey.**
- Both Turkey and Iran had also welcomed the Al Ula accord, and expressed optimism that it would pave the way for stability in the Middle East
- **Qatar has invited more Turkish troops**, bolstering its ties with Ankara, which is eager to play a bigger role in West Asia.
- Moreover, it played an important role in the **U.S.-Taliban deal** and continued to host talks between Taliban representatives and the Afghan government

Effect of Geopolitics of Middle East

- The geopolitics of the Middle East are extremely complex. Qatar is unlikely to drastically alter its approach vis-à-vis Turkey and Iran. In fact it would like to **view itself as a peacemaker rather than just a mere bystander.**

- The fact that Qatar was able to deal with the economic implications of the blockade has only strengthened its position
- The Al-Ula conclave could herald some major shifts in regional alignments.
- There **could be a nascent Saudi-UAE competition**, with the UAE ingratiating itself with the U.S. and supporting its interests in diverse theatres – Yemen, the Horn of Africa and the western Indian Ocean.
- **Turkey and Qatar, possibly with Iran, could then seize the opportunity to re-engage with Saudi Arabia and Egypt**, thus shaping an alternative regional coalition that would perhaps be closer to Russia and China than to the U.S.
- As President Biden takes charge in the U.S., the Al-Ula conclave could trigger the **emergence of a new regional order in West Asia**.

Mould your thought: The Al-Ula Accord does not signal the end of tensions within the GCC. Critically evaluate.

Approach to the answer:

- Introduction
- Mention achievements of Al-Ula Accord
- Mention why the accord brings stability in GCC
- Issues that still remain to be sorted out
- Conclusion