

## POLITICS & DEFENCE

### ALARMS AND INCURSIONS

The fragile stability of the Gulf Arab states was rocked by the armed clash which took place at the end of last month between Saudi Arabia and Qatar. In an incident on their common but disputed border, three people were killed and, instantly, a major political crisis was created between the two members of the GCC six-country grouping.

*"This, it seems, is the root cause of the trouble".*

The incident at Al Khafus, was the first serious inter-Arab violence in the region since the end of the Gulf War. It came hard on the heels of the deadlock in the Iran-UAE talks over another regional territorial dispute, the row about the ownership of the Gulf islands of Abu Musa and the Two Tunbs. Al Khafus is a small Qatari border post on the only road leading south from Qatar, along what was formerly Qatar's frontier with the United Arab Emirates. The road from Qatar via Al Khafus now leads directly into Saudi Arabian territory and this, it seems, is the root cause of the trouble between the two countries.

#### Versions

Both countries have given widely differing versions of the Khafus encounter. An official Qatari source said that a Saudi Arabian military force attacked the Qatari border post of Khafus on 30 September, killing two Qatari soldiers and with a third being taken prisoner. The Qatari 'prisoner' was subsequently released. The attack, according to Qatar, also inflicted "heavy material losses" on the Qatari post and its equipment.

*"An exchange of shooting between bedouin"*

Saudi Arabia rejected the Qatari version of events and said the clash occurred within Saudi territory, when nomadic bedouins from the two countries exchanged fire. The official Saudi statement said the Qatari report, "has no basis of truth whatsoever and the truth of the incident can be summed up in that there was an exchange of shooting between bedouin at a spot inside Saudi territory, resulting in the death of two Qataris and one Saudi. Another Saudi was injured as a result of the shooting, which was started by the Qataris".

Although there is a complete lack of independent information on the clash, nomadic bedouin sources in Saudi Arabia also contest the Qatari version. They say that a leading sheikh of the Al Murra tribe, Emir Mohammad bin Shraim, and a party of his followers, armed as usual in the desert tradition, had gone to the area to investigate a Qatari camp set up inside Saudi territory as an extension of the border post.

*"From this petty episode has flowed an abrasive political wrangle of major proportions"*

#### Lack of evidence

There is no evidence either way as to whether this expedition was a purely private venture by the Al Murra party or an officially inspired or instigated action.

There is also no clear account of what happened next. Whatever the exact course of events, Emir Mohammad and the two Qataris were killed in an exchange of fire which broke out between the two parties. From this petty if regrettable episode has flowed an abrasive political wrangle of major proportions.

#### Confusing geography

The disputed area around Khufus has been claimed by both Qatar and Saudi Arabia since British domination of the Gulf region ended in the early 1970s. It is a site with a confused and confusing political geography, where boundaries have not been clearly delineated and ownership has not been plainly established. In 1965, six years before Qatar became an independent state, the British drew up a cartographic definition of the southern border of Qatar and both Saudi Arabia and Qatar signed an agreement accepting the ruling.

#### Access

Previously, Qatar had a common border with the United Arab Emirates, giving it direct overland access to the Emirates and other southern Gulf states. But two years ago, under intense pressure from Riyadh, the UAE ceded a slice of its territory to Saudi Arabia, giving the kingdom it first access to the shores of the Gulf south of Qatar and depriving Qatar of its only land exit route that did not pass through Saudi territory.

***"Until two years ago, all of Saudi Arabia's Gulf coastline had been north of the Qatar peninsula"***

**Resentment**

Before that, all of Saudi Arabia's Gulf coastline had been north of the Qatar peninsula. Last year, Saudi Arabia completed a major highway through the disputed area. Doha regards this road as an attempt by the Saudis to unilaterally define a border area whose ownership, the Qataris say, is still subject to negotiated settlement. Qataris who travel south to Abu Dhabi and other southern emirates now have to pass through official Saudi Arabian checkpoints, a process which many Qataris still resent.

***"A grave precedent in Qatar - Saudi relations"***

**Suspension**

This resentment may account for the severe and somewhat precipitate reaction of the Qatar government to the incident at Khafus. Following an emergency meeting of the Council of Ministers, called by Crown Prince Hamad bin Khalifa, the government announced its suspension of the 1965 border accord. In an accompanying statement, the Council described the issue as a "grave precedent in Qatar-Saudi relations, and the relations that bind the Gulf Cooperation Council member states". The Saudi response was equally stiff. A statement from Riyadh said "...the government...announces its absolute rejection of the Qatari unilateral decision to suspend the (1965) agreement. The Kingdom considers the border agreement concluded between the two countries in 1965 binding on the two sides, none of whose articles could be breached".

**Withdrawal**

A day after the initial armed clash took place Qatar reported that Saudi Arabia had seized the Qatari border post and expelled its occupants. An official Qatari military source was quoted as saying "...the fresh assault on the post this evening completes the intended (Saudi) objective, which was to evacuate the post of its personnel and to seize it". The next move by Qatar was its decision to withdraw its contingent of 200 troops from the GCC's Peninsula Shield force, currently stationed in Kuwait. The Peninsula Shield force, headquartered at Hafr al Batin in north-eastern Saudi Arabia, is the GCC's attempt to establish a viable Arab military force in the region. The Qatari unit is only a small part of

the strength of the 10,000 man force, but the withdrawal is a serious setback to the GCC's regional defence plans.

***"Sheikh Sa'ad al Abdullah has been leading an Arab mediation and damage limitation effort"***

The dispute has shocked the GCC partners of the two countries', as well as Egypt and Syria which are linked with the GCC in the alliance against Saddam Hussain. Kuwait Crown Prince Sheikh Sa'ad al Abdullah al Sabah has been leading an Arab mediation and damage limitation effort and has personally visited Saudi Arabia's King Fahd and Qatar's Amir, Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad al Thani in an attempt to contain the situation. Sheikh Sa'ad has said he is confident that a solution to the dispute can be reached. But it has been reported that Qatar Crown Prince Hamad bin Khalifa told Sheikh Sa'ad that his country is determined to see Saudi troops withdraw from Al Khufus before any serious talks could take place between the two countries.

Washington has expressed its cautious concern about the dispute. A U.S. official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the United States had urged both sides to take their differences to the GCC

In the meantime, old rivals Iraq and Iran have not neglected the opportunity the Qatar-Saudi quarrel has given them to fan the flames of inter-GCC tension. Although Qatari troops fought (and acquitted themselves well) alongside the Saudis in the action against Iraq in the Desert Storm operations, Baghdad has taken Qatar's side in the border dispute. The official Iraqi news agency described the clash at Al Khufus as "Saudi armed aggression" on Qatar.

***"Iran wanted to have a role in most Gulf issues"***

Iran also elected to support Qatar's side against Saudi Arabia. Tehran said it was willing to sign a joint defence agreement with Qatar. Commenting on the Iranian offer, Kuwait's foreign minister Sheikh Salim al Sabah said this behaviour "was to be expected" of Iran, because it wanted to have a role in most Gulf issues. He noted, however, that the Qataris knew the Iranian motive behind the offer. President Rafsanjani also sent a message to the Amir of Qatar, but its contents have not been disclosed.

***"There are presently no less than forty points of dispute concerning frontiers, involving most of the states of the Gulf region"***

#### Change

The seeds of such desert border disputes lie as much in the region's rapid change from shifting tribal fiefdoms to modern statehood as the failure of the new states to establish agreed frontiers. Diplomats note there are presently no less than forty points of dispute concerning frontiers and sovereignty involving most of the states of the Gulf region; some dormant, some simmering and others very much on the front burner. "Straight lines across seemingly empty deserts look pretty on a map but rarely reflect the reality of the ground for nomads whose constant circulations take little account of national sovereignties", a western diplomat said. For more than a thousand kilometres, from the eastern end of the UAE northwards to the Kuwait border the "Times Atlas of the World" marks no frontiers between Saudi Arabia and its Gulf neighbours.

The marches of the Al Murra bedouin traditionally extends to territory in both Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Observers familiar with the area and conditions at the site of the incident, some 250 km south of Dhahran, incline to the view that the shooting was simply an ill-considered affray involving tribal and local territorial sensitivities but which has opened up old resentments and animosities. Diplomats and other Gulf watchers are nevertheless puzzled that the incident has been allowed to assume its present political dimensions.

***"It was never anticipated that the situation would erupt in bloodshed"***

Although relations between Qatar and Saudi Arabia have been strained in recent months because of the tension over the border, it was never anticipated that the situation would erupt in bloodshed. Arab and western diplomatic sources in the Gulf do not believe the affair will escalate further into more serious violence.

However, an open fracas between Qatar and Saudi Arabia and the mounting conflict between Iran and the UAE over the three Gulf islands, less than two

years after the costly Gulf War, does nothing for domestic and international confidence in the stability of the region.

## **In Brief**

### General

\* THE GCC HAS WELCOMED THE SIGNING OF A BORDER AGREEMENT between Oman and Yemen which it described "as an example to follow in solving disputes among Arab and Islamic governments".

The Saudi English daily 'Arab News' described the agreement, which was signed at the beginning of this month, as "a bright spot among numerous territorial disputes that have plagued the region since British colonial times".

\* HARVARD UNIVERSITY HAS APPOINTED SAUDI BUSINESSMAN Khalid Ali al Turki chairman of its newly established Advisory Council for the Center for Middle Eastern Studies. The council has been set up to advise and guide the centre on ways of strengthening its various academic research and teaching programmes. Al Turki, who is based in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, is the founder and president of Dhahran Ahliyyah schools, a trustee of the International College of Beirut and an overseer of Middlebury College, Vermont, where he helped establish the university's school of Arabic.

### Bahrain

\* PRESSURE FOR DEMOCRACY IS MOUNTING IN THE GULF. AGENCY reports that Bahraini officials are saying the ruling Al Khalifa family is expected to announce its plans for a 30 member council in late November or early December.