

The Saudi offensive against Qatar and the global intensification of geopolitical conflict

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Backed by Egypt and its closest Gulf State allies, Saudi Arabia has launched a diplomatic and economic offensive against Qatar, a tiny, energy-rich neighbor. This offensive is aimed at forcing the emirate to fall fully in line with the Saudis' belligerent stand against Iran and other of its predatory policies, including unstinting support for Egypt's military regime.

US President Donald Trump gave the Saudi autocracy and its plan to forge a Sunni-Arab military coalition against Iran Washington's full-throated support when he visited Riyadh last month.

This support, as even many Western news reports on the Saudi-Qatari confrontation acknowledge, has "emboldened" Saudi Arabia. Yesterday, it, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Yemen announced a series of measures against Qatar that stop just short of war.

They include: severing all diplomatic relations, travel, and economic ties with Qatar; denying Qatari aircraft, including all Qatar Airway flights, the right to use their airspace; closing their ports to all Qatari vessels; and shutting down all broadcasts by Qatar-based al-Jazeera.

Saudi Arabia and its closest Gulf State allies are also closing their borders to Qataris and ordering all Qatari citizens currently in their countries to leave within two weeks.

These measures threaten to roil the emirate's economy. A peninsula state whose only land border is with Saudi Arabia, Qatar is heavily reliant on food shipments from Saudi Arabia. News agencies report that long lines have formed at supermarkets in Doha as residents—fully 80 percent of the 2.3 million people living in Qatar are non-citizen foreign workers—scramble to stock their shelves and refrigerators.

In 2014, the Saudis and several of their allies suspended diplomatic relations with Qatar because Riyadh was rankled by the emirate's opposition to the military coup

that overthrew Egypt's elected president, Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi.

The current dispute is of a qualitatively different character, as exemplified by the Saudis' imposition of an economic blockade that threatens to strangle Qatar's economy.

Qatar, not without reason, has charged that Saudi Arabia is seeking to subject it to "guardianship," i.e., to reduce it to the status of a vassal state.

The Saudis are accusing Qatar—as they have long accused Iran—of supporting "terrorism." They claim it is backing the opposition to the royal family in Bahrain, the anti-Saudi Houthi rebels in Yemen, and the opposition to Saudi rule in the country's largely Shia Al-Qatif region. Qatar has vehemently denied these claims.

Riyadh is also charging that the emirate is in league with ISIS in Syria. In fact, the ruling families of both sheikdoms have played a major role in the US regime-change war in Syria, helping finance, organize and arm various reactionary Islamist forces, including many of those that came together in ISIS.

The Saudi's overriding objective is to force Qatar to distance itself from Iran, which it considers its principal rival for regional influence.

Qatar has developed extensive economic ties with Iran, including in the co-development of the massive South Pars Persian Gulf natural gas field. Until its ejection yesterday, Qatar was a reluctant member of the Islamic Military Alliance, the international coalition Riyadh formed ostensibly to fight terrorism, but which more and more openly has assumed the shape of a Sunni Arab alliance for waging war on predominantly Shia Iran.

Last weekend, in an attempt to placate the Saudis, Qatar reportedly ordered several leaders of Hamas, the Palestinian Islamist group that has ties to Iran, to leave the country. But the Saudis are treating this as too little, too late.

It cannot be excluded that the Saudis will threaten Qatar with military action in the coming days or weeks. They are already waging war, with US logistical support, in Yemen, causing an ever-widening humanitarian disaster, and in 2011 they led a military intervention in Bahrain so as to stave off the popular overthrow of its autocratic regime.

Israel has welcomed the Saudi offensive against Qatar, calculating that it will weaken Tehran. Like the Saudis, the Zionist establishment views Iran as its principal strategic rival.

Trump and the cabal of generals who head his administration have repeatedly made clear that Washington has Iran in its cross-hairs. And whilst serious differences persist within the US political establishment over the Iran nuclear accord, the Democrats, no less than the Republicans, support America continuing to enforce sweeping economic sanctions against Tehran and threatening it with military action.

That said, nothing suggests Washington wanted, let alone encouraged, Riyadh to move against Qatar.

Qatar is the forward headquarters of the US Central Command and thus a pivotal staging area for the US wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, and the cockpit for war-planning against Iran. Bahrain, which is part of the Saudi's anti-Qatar coalition, is the home base of the US Fifth Fleet.

The escalating conflict between Washington's Gulf allies, complained the *New York Times*, "presents a fresh and unwelcome complication for the United States military."

That the Saudis, with the support of Egypt's US-backed military regime, acted independently of Washington in no way takes away from America's primary responsibility for the growing aggressiveness of the Saudi regime, let alone the wars and sabre-rattling that threaten the people of the Middle East.

On the contrary, the Saudi offensive against Qatar should serve as a salutary warning as to the reckless and incendiary role of US imperialism. In its drive to offset the decline in its economic power through aggression and war, the US is arming and "emboldening" all sorts of right-wing, crisis-ridden regimes. Any one of these, in the pursuit of its own reactionary interests, including mere survival, could lash out at its rivals, provoking a crisis that quickly develops into a military conflict, drawing in the US and other world powers, daggers-drawn.

No less significantly, the sudden clash between Qatar and Saudi Arabia points to the explosive geopolitical

tensions that run through the region and are ever more enmeshed in the conflicts between the major imperialist and great powers.

The series of predatory wars Washington has waged in the Middle East since 1991 has shattered whole societies, killing millions, rendering millions more refugees, and engulfing ever greater areas in war and destruction. Their cumulative impact has been the effective collapse of the state system French and British imperialism imposed on the region at the end of World War One and the fueling of a new struggle for the redivision of the Middle East.

The developments in Syria reveal most clearly that the repartition of the Middle East has already begun. While nominally a joint struggle against ISIS, the war in Syria has drawn in a host of great and regional powers—including the US, Russia, France, Germany, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Israel—each pursuing its own strategic interests. For US imperialism, Syria is a key front in its military-strategic offensive against Russia and Iran.

And it is not just Syria, but the entire region that is in flames. Given the Middle East's economic significance as the world's most important oil-producing region, and its pivotal geographic position as the hinge between Europe, Asia and Africa, all of the imperialist and great powers are increasingly compelled to intervene to assert their respective interests.

The US views its drive against Iran through the prism of its world strategy. This includes the need to prevent China from leveraging its plans to develop Eurasian economic corridors to forge a strategic partnership with Iran, and the need to prevent European capital from beating out corporate America in capturing Iran's markets and oil concessions.

As Trotsky explained in the run-up to the second imperialist world war of the last century, the only alternative to the war maps of the great powers is the map of the class struggle. The only answer to the incendiary struggle of the rival capitalist ruling elites for natural resources, markets and strategic advantage is the mobilization of the international working class against war and the outmoded capitalist social order.



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