

# Turkey prepares to send troops to Qatar in conflict with Saudi Arabia

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After a coalition of Persian Gulf sheikdoms led by Saudi Arabia presented an ultimatum to Qatar on Monday and blockaded its economy, the Turkish parliament approved two military deals with Qatar, enabling deployments of the Turkish military to Qatar. Turkish forces will also train the Qatari gendarmerie.

As part of an agreement signed between Ankara and Doha in 2015, Ankara is already building a military base in Qatar, where between 500 and 600 Turkish troops are to be stationed. The facility is reportedly able to house up to 3,000 troops.

The bill was brought to the parliament by Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), right after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan criticized the Saudi sanctions on Qatar. Speaking at an iftar dinner on Tuesday, June 6, Erdogan said, "I want to say clearly that we disapprove of the sanctions on Qatar."

The bill passed with 240 votes in favor and 98 against, with support from deputies of the AKP and the fascist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP).

The pro-European Union (EU) Republican People's Party (CHP) criticised the bill for its "timing," however. The CHP parliamentary group deputy chairman, Levent Gok, stated that his party was ready to support the government in every way its policies benefit the people. He asked, "Was it, however, really necessary to bring the Qatari deal forward, from the rank number 100 to the first row?"

The Turkish government has given a clear sign that it is siding with Qatar against diplomatic and trade sanctions and the threat of military intervention by five Arab countries: Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Yemen. They have accused Doha of supporting terrorism and having a "soft" attitude toward Iran. The Gulf sheikdoms had

previously recalled their ambassadors from Qatar in 2014, over its support for the Muslim Brotherhood.

As in 2011, when the Saudi armed forces invaded Bahrain to put down mass protests shortly after revolutionary struggles of the working class in Egypt toppled Hosni Mubarak, Saudi Arabia could not if it had tacit support from Washington, ultimately intervene militarily in Qatar. The Turkish decision makes clear that such an intervention could involve Saudi Arabia in a direct military confrontation with Turkey, however.

Turkey's apparently good relations with Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf sheikdoms have badly deteriorated since Washington and the European powers backed a military coup in Egypt that toppled President Mohamed Mursi. Mursi is a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, which is backed by Turkey and Qatar.

The Saudi move against Qatar is an extension of US aggression against Iran, aiming to whip the small sheikdom, which has economic ties to Iran, into line with Trump's Mideast policy. On Tuesday, Trump wrote on Twitter, "So good to see the Saudi Arabia visit with the King and 50 countries already paying off. They said they would take a hard line on funding extremism, and all reference was pointing to Qatar. Perhaps this will be the beginning of the end to the horror of terrorism!"

During his first foreign trip in May, Trump went to Riyadh and gave Saudi Arabia his full support, accusing Iran of supporting terrorism and adding that Arab states should not let "terrorists find any sanctuary on their soil."

Following Saudi Arabia's aggressive move against Qatar, however, US Defense Secretary James Mattis called his Qatari counterpart Khalid bin Mohammad Al Attiyah. Mattis reaffirmed that there was no change in

military cooperation between the United States and Qatar, whose Al-Udeid airbase is home to the forward headquarters of US Central Command and some 10,000 American troops. Nonetheless, a conflict has clearly erupted over Persian Gulf policy between Turkey and the Trump administration.

The danger of a major regional war in the Middle East is rapidly growing, amid deep tensions between Washington and the European powers over Trump's policies, including in Iran, the NATO intervention in Syria, and the Saudi-Qatari dispute. As it moves to check Saudi Arabia, Ankara is relying on at least tacit consent from the European powers.

German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel has already accused the US president of stirring up conflicts in the Middle East and risking a "new spiral in arms sales," saying that isolating Qatar "is the completely wrong policy and certainly not the policy of Germany."

It appears that Turkey is coordinating its policy with the newly-elected French president, Emmanuel Macron, who is a close ally of Berlin. Macron called Qatar's leader, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, the day after Saudi Arabia issued its threats and, according to press reports, said that France aimed to maintain stability in the Persian Gulf and speak to all parties involved. Macron also telephoned Erdogan on the same day in order to discuss the crisis in the Persian Gulf.

The European powers have repeatedly come into conflict with Washington as they seek to re-establish trading relations with Iran. France's energy company Total wants to exploit the massive South Pars natural gas field, the world's largest, which is shared between Iran and Qatar.

Turkey and Qatar were also reluctant to participate in the last international embargo imposed by Washington on Iran, in 2008, which Turkey repeatedly violated. For now at least, both Turkey and Qatar are opposed to severe sanctions or possible military action against Iran, which would have at a minimum a devastating impact on their own economies.

On Wednesday, the same day that twin attacks targeted the Iranian parliament and the shrine of Ayatollah Khomeini in Tehran, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif visited Ankara to exchange views on the latest developments in the region. "There are concerning developments in the region for us. We need to have a close exchange of ideas with Turkey

regarding these incidents," Zarif told reporters, before meeting with his Turkish counterpart and Erdoğan.

Iran's Revolutionary Guards accused Saudi Arabia and the Trump administration in the terrorist attacks, stating, "This terrorist attack happened only a week after the meeting between the U.S. president and the [Saudi] backward leaders who support terrorists. The fact that Islamic State has claimed responsibility proves that they were involved in the brutal attack."

On the same day, Reza Nourani, head of the National Union of Iran's Agricultural Products, stated that Iran was prepared to provide Qatar with whatever food products the Arab country needs. "Considering the outbreak of tension in Qatar's relations with Arab states, it is possible [for Iran] to satisfy all demands of Qatar for agricultural products," he said.

According to the Iranian daily *Tasnim*, negotiations between Iran and Qatar are underway and "a decision on food exports will be finalized by next week."



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