

Dispute erupts in Trump administration over Gulf conflict

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Five days after Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states cut diplomatic ties with Qatar in a move that stopped just short of war, significant divisions have emerged within the Trump administration over the US position on the dispute.

Speaking in the Rose Garden yesterday, President Donald Trump declared that the action taken by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Bahrain was “hard but necessary.” He denounced Qatar for having been a “funder of terrorism at a very high level” and boasted that the Gulf countries and Egypt had consulted with him prior to their diplomatic offensive about “confronting Qatar.”

Trump’s belligerent comments came just an hour after Secretary of State Rex Tillerson issued a statement calling for the blockade on Qatar to be lifted and stressing that “these countries will immediately take steps to deescalate the situation.”

Trump’s remarks make clear that following Trump’s visit to Saudi Arabia last month, during which he sought to form a Sunni bloc to confront Iran, Riyadh felt emboldened to strengthen its regional position under the pretext of combating terrorism. Qatar has long attempted to maintain a somewhat more independent foreign policy, including through economic ties and joint exploration of energy resources with Iran and through its support for groups like the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas. This stance has infuriated Riyadh.

At the same time, like Saudi Arabia, Qatar has backed Islamist “rebel” forces in Syria, notably the al-Nusra Front, although it also maintains ties with the Assad regime. Until Riyadh broke diplomatic ties, Qatar was also part of the coalition conducting the brutal war in Yemen that has killed tens of thousands of civilians over the past two years.

The differences between Trump and Tillerson are bound up with competing US interests in the Gulf and the

surrounding region. Qatar is home to the largest US military base in the Middle East and the operational center of the US Central Command, which directs the US-led wars in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. Tillerson noted in his statement that the diplomatic blockade was “hindering” US military operations, although he did not detail what these were.

Pentagon spokesman Jeff Davis later commented that contingency measures were being prepared in the event the Saudi-led isolation of Qatar creates difficulties for the US military.

In Washington, comments from a White House official to the *Washington Post* aimed at papering over the disagreement between Trump and Tillerson only underscored it. Speaking about the blockade, the official said that Trump felt Qatar “deserves it,” before adding, “Tillerson may initially have had a view, then the president has his view, and obviously the president’s view prevails.”

Such disputes only add fuel to the fire of a deepening conflict that could rapidly escalate into a regional war. On Wednesday, UAE Foreign Minister Anwar Gargash threatened to impose an economic embargo on Qatar, while Bahraini Foreign Minister Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa told the Saudi newspaper *Mecca*, “We will not hesitate to protect our interests and the road is open to any options to protect ourselves from Qatar.”

Saudi Arabia and its allies stepped up the pressure Friday by placing 59 individuals and 12 Qatari-funded charities on a “terror finance watch list.” Others named on the list included a leading Muslim Brotherhood cleric residing in Qatar, individuals in Libya, and Shia groups based in Bahrain that Riyadh accuses of having links with Iran.

Qatar continues to deny the allegations of supporting extremism. Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani said in an interview with *Al-*

Jazeera, which is funded by the Qatari regime and based on Doha, “We are not ready to surrender, and we will never be ready to surrender the independence of our foreign policy.”

Late Thursday, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan approved a parliamentary decision to speed up the deployment of Turkish troops to back the regime in Qatar. A military assessment team is expected to arrive in Doha in the coming days to prepare the groundwork for a larger deployment. Ankara has also pledged to step in and provide Doha with food supplies if the Gulf states move to cut economic ties.

Turkey has the tacit backing of the European imperialist powers, above all Germany. In an expression of the deepening transatlantic rift, German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel attacked what he called the “Trumpification” of relations in the Middle East in an interview with German daily *Handelsblatt* earlier this week. On Friday, he met with al-Thani in Germany and urged that the blockade of Qatar to be lifted and a negotiated settlement reached.

Under these conditions, the most destabilizing factor is US imperialism, which is in the midst of an escalation of its military drive to secure geo-strategic hegemony over the energy-rich Middle East. In Syria, Washington has intervened under the pretext of combating ISIS terrorism to wage a war for regime-change so as to weaken its two main rivals in the region, Iran and Russia.

During his trip to Saudi Arabia, Trump denounced Iran as one of the main regional sources of terrorism, raising the prospect of war with Tehran. Apparently returning to this theme Friday, Trump demanded that more be done throughout the region to clamp down on “terrorism,” declaring ominously, “I won’t name other countries, but we are not done solving the problem.”

In Syria, the US has over recent weeks effectively begun to partition the country. An air strike on military vehicles and the shooting down of a Syrian government drone Thursday near the al-Tanf base in the southeast of the country marked the third time in as many weeks that the US military has attacked forces loyal to the Assad regime in Damascus. On May 18, Washington bombed a pro-government militia some 20 miles from al-Tanf and a similar strike was launched against Assad’s forces on Tuesday.

The US has justified these attacks on the grounds that the pro-government forces have allegedly violated a “deconfliction zone” proclaimed unilaterally by Washington in Syria’s south near the borders with Jordan

and Iraq. The al-Tanf base, where Special Forces have been training local militias for many months, is a key part of a strategy to prevent Assad’s forces and Iranian-backed militias from gaining control of territory in eastern Syria currently held by ISIS and thus opening up a ground supply route from Tehran through Syria to the Mediterranean coast and Lebanon. These US-led efforts are assuming increased urgency as Kurdish-dominated fighters organized in the Syrian Democratic Forces advance into Raqqa in Syria’s northeast.

US imperialism’s aggressive move to form a Sunni alliance to push back Iranian and Russian influence in Syria and the broader region is creating the conditions for a much larger military clash that could rapidly draw in the major powers.

Indicating the deepening tensions over the al-Tanf area, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov labeled Tuesday’s attack on pro-government forces as “an aggressive act that violated the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic and—deliberately or not—targeted the forces which are most effective in fighting terrorists on the ground.” According to Iranian TV, Lavrov described the “deconfliction zone” as illegitimate and said Moscow would refuse to recognize it.

Lavrov pointed out that the Syrian troops that came under attack were defending a route connecting Syria and Iraq that ISIS fighters were trying to destroy. The foreign minister went on to allege that the attack had resulted in ISIS gaining its objective.

Moscow, which intervened in the Syrian conflict in 2015 to prop up the government of President Bashar al-Assad, continues to fly aircraft close to the “deconfliction zone” in support of pro-government forces fighting ISIS. This raises the immediate danger that future US strikes on Assad’s forces like those carried out this week could trigger a direct clash between the two nuclear-armed powers.



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