

Saudi ultimatum to Qatar brings Middle East to brink of wider war

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The 10-day ultimatum delivered last week by Saudi Arabia and its allies—Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain—to Qatar has dramatically escalated their confrontation with the tiny Persian Gulf state, raising the prospect of military conflict.

The Saudi monarchy has issued demands that are designed to be rejected, so as to create the pretext for further punitive steps beyond the diplomatic, travel and trade blockade imposed earlier this month. Not only is Qatar required to crack down on alleged terrorist and criminal groups, and shut down its Al Jazeera news network, but also to severely downgrade relations with Iran, expel Turkish military forces, toe the diplomatic, military and economic line dictated by Riyadh, and pay unspecified reparations for the supposed damage caused by its policies. All of this is to be monitored by means of intrusive audits for the next 10 years.

Not surprisingly, Qatari officials have rejected the ultimatum, which would transform their country into a vassal state of Saudi Arabia. Turkey, which, along with Iran, has provided aid to Qatar since the imposition of the Saudi embargo, has also flatly dismissed the demands. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan denounced the call for the removal of Turkish troops as “disrespectful toward Turkey.”

While Saudi Arabia has not issued specific military threats, any retreat from its belligerent stand could trigger a political crisis in Riyadh. The Saudi monarchy has hypocritically denounced Qatar as a sponsor of terrorism in the Middle East, but its ultimatum to the Gulf state is bound up with a far broader strategy, aimed at crushing Iranian influence in the region.

The newly-installed Saudi heir, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, vowed last month to ensure that a war with Iran would be fought on Iranian, not Saudi, soil. The crown prince is publicly acknowledged

to be the architect of the brutal Saudi-led war against Houthi rebels in Yemen, which has killed some 12,000 people, left over 7 million on the brink of starvation and unleashed a cholera epidemic that threatens many more deaths.

The Saudi demands on Qatar are akin to the ultimatum delivered by the Austro-Hungarian Empire to Serbia in July 1914, following the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand. The Austrian demands, backed by a blank cheque for military action from Germany, were designed to be rejected in order to provide the *casus belli* for an invasion of Serbia. Amid the acute geo-political tensions throughout Europe, the Austrian attack on Serbia plunged Europe and the world into war within less than a fortnight.

While it is impossible to predict whether this or that flashpoint will provide the trigger for world war, the worsening global economic crisis is greatly exacerbating tensions between major and regional powers, as each seeks to offload the burden onto its rivals in a scramble for markets, cheap labour and geo-strategic advantage.

As Leon Trotsky warned in 1938, on the eve of World War II, in the founding document of the Fourth International: “Under the increasing tension of capitalist disintegration, imperialist antagonisms reach an impasse, at the height of which separate clashes and bloody local disturbances... must inevitably coalesce into a conflagration of world dimensions. The bourgeoisie, of course, is aware of the mortal danger to its domination represented by a new war. But that class is now immeasurably less capable of averting war than on the eve of 1914.”

Changing what needs to be changed, Trotsky’s warning applies to the current explosive situation, not just in the Middle East, but also in Eastern Europe and

North East Asia. The chief destabilising factor in world politics today is the role of US imperialism, which, in the Persian Gulf, is egging on Saudi Arabia in a manner analogous to Germany's support for Austria in July 1914.

While US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has urged talks and suggested that some of the Saudi demands might be “very difficult” for Qatar to meet, President Donald Trump has signalled his full support for Riyadh's aggressive action, declaring its blockade to be “hard but necessary.” Trump has boasted that his visit to Saudi Arabia last month, in which arms deals worth nearly half a trillion dollars were reached, was responsible for Riyadh's tough stance against “terrorism” and Qatar.

Tillerson's more equivocal remarks reflect concerns in Washington, particularly the Pentagon, about the impact of the standoff on the huge US military base in Qatar, home to 11,000 US troops, and the forward base for the US Central Command and US intelligence gathering in the region.

Trump, however, has made no secret of his determination to undermine Iran, in the first instance by ramping up the US-led conflict in Syria. Under the pretext of defeating the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which has its roots in Sunni extremists backed by Saudi Arabia and its allies, the US is now seeking to carve out no-go areas or “deconfliction zones” to use as bases for waging its war to oust Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, an ally of Iran and Russia.

The explosive situation in the Middle East is a product of, not just the recklessness of the Trump administration, but a quarter century of criminal wars of intervention by US imperialism, which have destroyed whole societies, killed millions of people, and turned many millions more into homeless refugees. In the process of seeking to secure its dominance over the strategic oil-rich region, the United States has effectively destroyed the state-system imposed by British and French imperialism in the aftermath of World War I, setting off a new great power struggle to redivide the Middle East, a key strategic crossroad between Europe, Asia and Africa.

US imperialism has aligned itself with the most reactionary regimes in the Middle East—the Egyptian military dictatorship as well as the autocratic monarchies of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. Israel

has signalled its support for the blockade of Qatar as well as the US war in Syria to oust Assad. Turkey and Iran are actively supporting Qatar, while in Syria, a clash between US and Russian forces threatens to bring the two nuclear-armed powers into direct conflict.

The European powers are by no means indifferent to the unfolding crisis, which threatens their economic and strategic interests in the Middle East, including their developing relations with Iran and Qatar. In a recent interview with the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel criticised the “dramatic” harshness of relations between Qatar and Saudi Arabia and its allies. He warned that “this dispute could lead to war.” For its part, France has recently been engaged in joint military exercises with Qatar in the Persian Gulf.

What has been revealed are the emerging fault lines of a war that can quickly drag in regional and major powers and plunge humanity into a catastrophe. Such a conflict is inevitable—whatever the particular trigger in Europe, Asia or the Middle East—unless the working class intervenes, on the basis of its own socialist and internationalist program, to put an end to the outmoded profit and nation-state systems, the root causes of war.



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