

Gulf confrontation worsens as deadline looms for Saudi ultimatum to Qatar

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The extraordinary ultimatum delivered last week to Qatar by Saudi Arabia and its allies—Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain—is due to expire next Monday with no sign of any resolution to the increasingly tense standoff.

The Saudi-led bloc imposed an economic, diplomatic and transport blockade on Qatar in early June, accusing it of supporting “terrorists” and criminals in the region. Its demands include shutting down the Al Jazeera news network and other Qatari-backed media, halting its support for the Muslim Brotherhood and other organisations, and handing over political opponents.

Qatari officials have flatly rejected the accusations and sharply criticised the hypocrisy of Saudi Arabia and its allies, which have backed right-wing Islamist groups in the Middle East and more widely. In an interview this week with Sky News, Qatar’s Finance Minister Ali Sharif al Emadi noted that “Osama bin Laden is not Qatari, he’s Saudi. People who hijacked the planes and bombed New York, 15 of them were not Qataris, they were Saudis and UAEs.”

Sheikh Saif bin Ahmed Al Thani, director of the Qatari government’s communications office, issued a statement last Friday saying the demands demonstrate “the illegal blockade” was not about terrorism but “limiting Qatar’s sovereignty, and outsourcing our foreign policy.” Saudi Arabia is demanding Qatar follow Riyadh’s foreign and military policy and pay reparations for the alleged damage caused by its policies.

Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir, who met with US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson on Tuesday, declared the demands were non-negotiable. “It’s up to the Qataris to amend their behaviour and once they do, things will be worked out but if they don’t they will remain isolated,” he tweeted.

This hardline stance was echoed by the UAE’s ambassador to Russia, Omar Ghobash, who indicated in an interview with the *Guardian* on Wednesday that the four-nation bloc was considering tougher penalties on Qatar, including secondary sanctions on countries that trade with Qatar.

“One possibility would be to impose conditions on our own trading partners and say you want to work with us then you have got to make a commercial choice,” Ghobash said. He also raised the possibility of expelling Qatar from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which he said was certainly under discussion.

Asked if the confrontation could lead to military conflict, Ghobash declared that the risk was “not from our side.” In reality, the aggressive Saudi-led blockade is an act of war in itself that has been followed by an ultimatum designed to be rejected. Bahrain accused Qatar of “military escalation” after Turkey last weekend airlifted armoured vehicles to Qatar and hinted it might send more troops. Turkey has rejected a demand to remove its troops.

The confrontation has led to an open rift in Washington as Tillerson seeks to end the brawling between US allies in the Gulf triggered by President Donald Trump’s encouragement of Saudi Arabia. After the demands of the Saudi-led bloc were made public, Tillerson declared last weekend they would be “very difficult for Qatar to meet” but suggested the list included “significant areas which provide a basis for ongoing dialogue leading to a resolution.”

Tillerson’s remarks put him at odds with Trump who supported the blockade, saying it was “hard but necessary.” Trump effectively gave the green light for Saudi Arabia’s aggressive actions against Qatar as part of the intensification of Riyadh’s confrontation with Iran throughout the Middle East.

Saudi Arabia and its allies are waging a brutal war in Yemen against Houthi rebels allegedly backed by Iran, and are supporting the US war in Syria aimed at ousting the Iranian- and Russian-backed government of President Bashar al-Assad.

Tillerson's bid to defuse the standoff in the Gulf is backed by the Pentagon and the State Department, which are deeply concerned at the implications for the huge US Al-Udeid air base in Qatar, home to 11,000 American troops and forward headquarters for the US Central Command.

While the Pentagon undoubtedly has plans for a confrontation with Iran, its present focus is on thwarting Iran in Syria as the "war on terror" against Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) more openly becomes a conflict to remove the Assad regime. US war planes bombing Syria fly out of its base in Qatar. The Pentagon registered its disapproval of the blockade by approving a \$12 billion sale of advanced weapons to Qatar this month.

In a letter to Tillerson, Republican Senator Bob Corker, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, publicly cut across Trump's backing of the Saudi-led blockade this week by declaring he would "withhold consent" from all US arms sales to Gulf countries until their dispute was resolved. He wrote that the conflict among the Gulf states "only serves to hurt efforts to fight ISIS and counter Iran."

The threat to halt arms sales would not apply to deals already approved but could affect the \$110 billion package of offensive weapons to Saudi Arabia that was agreed during Trump's trip to Riyadh last month. While the Trump administration could ignore the existing protocol of seeking Corker's approval, the senator's letter shows that significant sections of the US political establishment regard the conflict between American allies in the Gulf as a disaster.

A *New York Times* editorial threw its weight behind Corker's threat to arms sales as "a way to end the impasse and force some sort of resolution." It branded the "dangerous dispute" as a diversion from fighting ISIS and other serious challenges, and warned that "nothing good can come of this dispute if it is allowed to persist."

The public divisions in Washington over the US stance toward the Gulf dispute highlight the reckless, incoherent and crisis-ridden character of American

foreign policy in the Middle East and internationally. A quarter century of US-led wars in the region has left millions dead, destroyed entire societies and profoundly destabilised the nation-state system imposed by French and British imperialism after World War I.

The standoff between the Saudi-led bloc with Qatar adds another potentially explosive trigger to the existing powder kegs, particularly in Syria and Yemen, that could set off a region-wide and international conflict involving all the major powers.



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