

Gulf crisis poised to escalate as Saudi-led Qatar ultimatum expires

By Roger Shilton and Keith Jones
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The ultimatum Saudi Arabia, Egypt and other Gulf states issued to Qatar twelve days ago expired midnight Tuesday with no indication that Doha is prepared to accept its provocative terms.

The Saudi-led bloc has confirmed it has received a formal Qatari response to their 13 demands, via Kuwait, which has been acting as a mediator. But this response is almost certain to be rejected by the Saudi regime and its allies. Just minutes before the deadline expired, Qatari Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani described the demands of the Saudis, Egypt, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates as “unrealistic” and “not actionable.”

On Sunday, Kuwait secured a 48-hour extension of the ultimatum’s deadline to allow further negotiations. The US and various other western powers have been trying to defuse the crisis, which pits monarchical and authoritarian regimes they have long back-stopped against each other.

Yesterday British Prime Minister Theresa May called the newly installed Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammad bin Salman, to press for “de-escalation.”

German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel travelled to Doha Tuesday evening from the UAE capital, Abu Dhabi. He had spent much of Monday meeting with Saudi officials in Riyadh.

Although the Saudis and their allies have claimed that military action against Qatar is not imminent, Gabriel, after meeting with the Qatari Foreign Minister, made a point of saying the “sovereignty” of a country is among the “boundaries that you should not cross.” Gabriel praised Qatar for the “restraint” it has shown in the face of a month-long Saudi economic blockade and urged further dialogue.

On June 5, Saudi Arabia and its allies imposed a diplomatic and economic blockade on Qatar that stopped just short of war with the aim of forcing Doha to adhere to their belligerent anti-Iran policy and otherwise recast

its foreign policy in accordance with Riyadh’s wishes.

Although the Saudi regime, often working in concert with Washington, has funded Islamist terrorist groups for decades, it has railed against Doha for supporting terrorism.

In addition to demanding Doha downgrade its relations with Iran, including ceasing all military and intelligence cooperation, the Saudi-led coalition’s ultimatum insisted Qatar must break all ties with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Lebanon’s Hezbollah, and the successor to the al Qaida-affiliated al Nusra Front in Syria. The ultimatum also called on Qatar to pay reparations for the consequences of its policies, shutdown the broadcaster Al Jazeera, and close a recently opened Turkish military base in Doha.

These demands, as Qatari officials have pointed out, would turn the energy-rich peninsular sheikdom into a vassal state and, having clearly been formulated with the expectation that they would be rejected, raise the danger the standoff could quickly escalate into a military clash. Speaking Sunday to Britain’s Sky News, Qatari Defence Minister Khalid al Attiyah declared, “I hope we don’t come to a stage where a military intervention is made but we always stand ready.” He continued, “We are here to defend our country,” then accused Qatar’s neighbours of plotting regime change in Doha.

In a move that will no doubt further raise the ire of Riyadh and its allies, Qatar announced Tuesday that it will dramatically increase its natural gas production over the next five years, a step that will require it to intensify cooperation with Iran. Doha and Qatar share ownership and jointly manage a Persian Gulf gas field, South Pars, that is the world’s largest.

The Saudi-led blockade has backfired. Rather than causing it to capitulate, it has driven Doha into a closer alliance with Iran and Turkey, states Riyadh views as rivals for regional dominance.

But the Saudi absolutist regime is heavily invested in bringing Qatar to heel. Installed in the midst of the crisis, the new Crown Prince, who has served as Saudi Defence Minister since 2015, is said to have both orchestrated the blockade of Qatar and the Saudi war in Yemen.

Two days after the start of the Qatar crisis, Turkey announced that it was sending 5,000 troops to Doha and it has joined Iran in shipping food supplies to help break the blockade.

In comments Monday, Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Numan Kurtulmus warned against connecting Turkey's military presence in Qatar to the Gulf crisis, declaring, "Turkey has a base there as part of the area's safety. The presence of Turkish soldiers will remain."

Neither Saudi Arabia nor its allies have stated publicly what their next steps will be, but they are meeting in Cairo today to plot strategy. Further economic reprisals, including a strengthening of the economic and air blockade, disinvestment from Qatar, and a run on Qatar's banks are rumoured. So too is Qatar's expulsion from the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC).

The Gulf crisis has not only inflamed relations between GCC members. It has increasingly exposed the competing agendas and interests of the regional and major imperialist powers and deepened differences in Washington over US strategy in the region and how it relates to the drive to maintain American imperialism's world dominance.

Riyadh's aggression against Qatar was enthusiastically endorsed by US President Donald Trump. Indeed he immediately claimed credit for it, saying that when he had travelled to Saudi Arabia in May he had called for a tougher stand against "terrorism." Trump has repeatedly made bellicose threats against Iran and warned that he could repudiate the nuclear deal that the Obama administration negotiated with Tehran.

Washington's determination to isolate, bully and threaten Iran is increasingly opposed by the European imperialist powers, led by Germany and France. Berlin has struck a noticeably different tone in its intervention into the Qatar crisis. In an interview just days after the Saudi-led blockade was imposed, German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel warned against a "Trumpification" of relations between the Gulf states.

Reflecting the growing divergence between European and US policy in the region, French energy giant Total concluded a \$1 billion agreement with Iran Monday in what is the first major energy deal between a Western company and Teheran since sanctions were lifted in

January 2016.

The US military-intelligence apparatus and political establishment, Democrat and Republican alike, view Iran as an unacceptable impediment to unbridled US domination of the world's most important oil-exporting region.

However, Trump's very public support for the Saudi campaign to strong-arm Qatar—a stance that apparently has been encouraged by his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, and chief strategist, the alt-right patron Stephen Bannon—has caused major rifts within his administration and is widely viewed in Washington as a blunder.

Defence Secretary General James Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson have repeatedly distanced themselves from Trump's position. Mattis has lauded Qatar for hosting two major US airbases, more than ten thousand US troops, and the "forward" headquarters of the US Central Command. Tillerson, for his part, has been urging America's Saudi allies not to imperil the "unity" of the US aligned GCC and to scale back, if not shelve, most of its demands.

For these strategists of US imperialism, the Saudi-led campaign against Qatar is an unwanted diversion from, and potential disruption of, their plans to confront Iran and Russia in Syria.

With the fall of ISIS-controlled Mosul, in Iraq and the impending fall of Raqqa the US is rushing to gain control, directly in southeastern Syria, and through proxy forces elsewhere of eastern Syria. Its first aim is to prevent Tehran from establishing a "land bridge" from Iran through Iraq and Syria and extending into south Lebanon. Its longer term objective is to position itself to be able to mount a direct military assault on the Russian- and Iranian-backed regime in Damascus.

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