

Going for Regime-Change in Doha

Trump talks tough and calls in the generals after Qatari emir, fearing a trap, snubs his mediation offer

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The strongly-worded warning issued to Qatar on Friday by US President Donald Trump – accusing it of being a “funder of terrorism... at a very high level” and demanding that it “stop immediately supporting terrorism” — suggests that the US has not only signed up fully to the Saudi-UAE-Egyptian-Bahraini alliance against Qatar, but assumed its leadership. It also confirms that the steps taken by the four countries to blockade Qatar and suffocate it economically had prior American approval.

This amounts to a conditional American declaration of war. When Trump announces at a White House press conference,

‘I’ve decided, along with Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, our great generals, and military people, the time has come to call on Qatar to end its funding,’ the meaning cannot be clearer in this regard.

Trump struck this hard-line stance just hours after Tillerson made statements about the crisis in the Gulf that were conciliatory and calming in tone. He urged Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain to ease their blockade of Qatar, arguing that it was damaging to US military operations against the Islamic State (IS) group in addition to causing humanitarian harm.

In our view, this sudden toughening of the American position was a response to the way the emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin-Hamad Al Khalifa, turned down Trump’s invitation to him and the other principals in the crisis to travel to Washington to explore for solutions. He justified his refusal to attend on the grounds that he could not leave his country while it remained under blockade. This angered the US president, who has been behaving like an emperor and thinks his orders cannot be disobeyed.

Emir Tamim does not trust the US administration, and fears the invitation could merely have been a trap to keep him in the US and prevent him from returning home, while Saudi and UAE forces invade in support of an internal coup that deposes him as ruler and installs a new emir from the other wing of the ruling Al Thani. The 10,000 US troops based at al-Udaid in Qatar also could conceivably play a supporting role in such a scheme.

It was striking that during the three summits that were convened for him in Riyadh earlier this month (with Saudi, Gulf and Arab/Islamic leaders respectively), Trump adopted

wholesale the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia and the UAE which deems Iran to be the spearhead of terrorism in the region. He supported their severing of ties with and closure of their borders and airspace to Qatar on the grounds that is an ally of Iran and supporter of terrorism, in the view of this new alliance.

When Trump instructs his generals, as he did at the White House press conference, to take practical measures to oblige Qatar to stop funding terrorism, that leaves Doha with very few options. It can either accept the ten conditions to which Saudi Arabia and its allies demanded its immediate compliance, or it must face up to the consequences of refusing to do so.

The summary expulsion, in a harsh manner, of Qatari citizens from Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain and the three Gulf countries' closure of their borders and severing of relations is a declaration of war that spells of the end of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as we have known it. Trump's adoption of these steps, meanwhile, aborts the so-called 'Arab/Islamic NATO' as it was proposed at the Riyadh summits. Instead, this alliance will be reduced to one based solely on the members of the Gulf/Arab anti-Qatar coalition. When Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain enact laws that punish expressions of support for Qatar on social media with 15 years imprisonment or fines of up to one million dollars, this means that all the talk of brotherhood and common bonds between the Gulf states has evaporated forever – along with any remaining lip-service to respecting human rights.

Qatar has announced that it will not submit to tutelage or surrender in the face of attempts to suffocate and blockade it, and will therefore not change its foreign policy. It has begun to seek support and protection from its friends in Ankara and Tehran. This could prompt its adversaries to take even harsher and more aggressive measures against it, such as Egypt preventing Qatari gas exports from transiting the Suez Canal.

Qatar has cards of its own to play, such as shutting down the pipeline that supplies Qatari gas to the UAE, or expelling 200,000 resident Egyptian migrant workers. But it has insisted that it will not resort to such measures, and that Egyptian workers will not be harmed and Qatari gas will continue being pumped.



Emir of Kuwait Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah (Source: da.gov.kw)

It was evident from the outset of this crisis that it would becoming increasingly serious, and now it can be expected to escalate further – especially after the Emir of Kuwait Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad fell into a state of depression due to the failure of his mediation effort, to which not all sides were responsive.

When Trump brings his generals – some of them based at al-Aideed — into the crisis and orders them to act to stop Qatar from supporting terrorism, we should expect the worst. The 'worst' in this case could mean a military solution and enforced regime-change. And that would mean setting the region, in part or in whole, ablaze.

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