

The Saudi-Qatar Spat - An Offer to be Refused

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Today the Saudi ruler issued an ultimatum to Qatar that was written to be rejected. Such has happened before and one should not forget the lessons to be learned from it.

After the crown prince of the Austria-Hungary monarchy, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, was shot and killed in Sarajevo, the government of Austria waited three weeks to issue a [10 point ultimatum](#) to Serbia which it held responsible for the incident. At least three of those points concerned the suppression of “propaganda against Austria-Hungary” and the Austrian Monarchy by Serbian private and state entities. It demanded a response within two days:

Sir Edward Grey, the British Foreign Secretary, commented that he had “never before seen one State address to another independent State a document of so formidable a character.”

The Austrian ultimatum was an offer to be refused. But Serbia did not fall into that trap. It conceded everything but two minor points. This was to no avail. The issues and plans Austria had were not about the assassination of [the disliked] Franz Ferdinand or the demands issued in the ultimatum. Two days later Austria-Hungary declared war against Serbia. Allies jumped to either side. World War I had started.



[See bigger picture here](#)

The now [official demands](#) by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and some minor Gulf

sheikdoms against Qatar have a similar smell to them. They are also “an offer to be refused.”

The demands come late, three weeks after Saudi Arabia [first accused](#) Qatar of “supporting terrorism”, three weeks after it closed the border and laid siege on the country.

(Qatar is surely “supporting terrorism”. So is the U.S. – the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service just rejected an asylum request because the person in question has relations with the Free Syrian Army which the C&I-Service [considers to be an “undesigned terrorist organization”](#). The CIA built and supports the FSA. According to the U.S. government the U.S. government is a state sponsor of terrorism. But the [biggest terrorist sponsor](#) of all are and have been the Saudis.)

Spats between member of the Gulf Cooperation Council are usually mediated by the U.S. government. But without any official demands issued against Qatar there was nothing to mediate about. Three day ago U.S. Department of State finally issued a [rather angry statement](#) towards Saudi Arabia:

“We are mystified that the Gulf states have not released to the public, nor to the Qataris, the details about the claims that they are making toward Qatar,” explained State Department spokesperson Heather Nauert on Tuesday.

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“At this point, we are left with one simple question: Were the actions really about their concerns about Qatar’s alleged support for terrorism, or were they about the long-simmering grievances between and among the GCC countries?” Nauert asked.

The real issue for Saudi Arabia is the support for the Muslim Brotherhood by Qatar. The MB provides an alternative model of Islamic government to the hereditary kingdoms of the Gulf sheiks. They are a danger to the Saudi ruling family. A second point are Qatar’s relative good relations with Iran, the external enemy the Saudis (and Israeli) rulers need to keep their people in line.

The “terrorism” accusation was never the real issue. What the Saudis demand is subjugation. A [summary](#) of the thirteen point ultimatum:

In effect, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain are asking Qatar to hand over control of its foreign policy to them. It will not be allowed to have diplomatic relations with Iran and its contact with Iran will be limited to trade and commerce that “complies with US and international sanctions”. Qatar will not be allowed contact with political opposition figures in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain—even though other countries (including western countries) do so routinely. In addition, Qatar is being asked to hand over all its files on those opposition groups.

...

Qatar is also being asked to “end interference in sovereign countries’ internal affairs” while allowing Saudi Arabia, the UAE, etc, apparently unlimited interference in Qatar’s own affairs. Qatar, according to the list of demands, must “align itself with the other Gulf and Arab countries militarily, politically, socially and economically”. Then there’s the closure of Qatar’s TV station, al-Jazeera. Obviously, the Saudis, Emiratis, etc, don’t like it. ... Qatar is also told to stop funding several other news organisations, including Middle East Eye and al-Arabi al-Jadeed (also available in English as The New Arab).

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Finally, Qatar is being asked to sign blank cheque covering “reparations and compensation for loss of life and other, financial losses caused by Qatar’s policies in recent years”.

The Saudi ultimatum ends on July 3, the anniversary of the Saudi sponsored military coup against the Qatari backed Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt. One demand in the ultimatum is for Qatar to end all support for the Brotherhood.

The ultimatum will likely be rejected. Qatar will simply not respond until the Saudis and others lift their blockade of the country. If the Saudis want war they should launch it right away, the Qatari ruler thinks. Doha is sure that the U.S. will not allow that. Ten-thousand U.S. troops are stationed in Qatar. It hosts a major U.S. air base and the important Central Command, which leads the war against ISIS and Syria. Qatar just bought U.S. fighter jets for \$12 billion and is offering to take a 10% share of American Airlines.

Turkish troops have arrived to protect the sheikdom. One unexpected Saudi demand is that all Turkish troops leave Qatar. The Erdogan government, a Muslim Brotherhood branch, [responded](#) with a snippy “Make me do so”:

Turkey’s Defense Minister Fikri Işık rejected the demand, saying any call for the base to be shut would represent interference in Ankara’s relations with Doha. He suggested instead that Turkey might bolster its presence.

There is no “or else” in the Saudi ultimatum. The Saudi ruler, the clown prince Mohammad bin Salman, is not a strategist. He likely has not thought through what he could do would if Qatar says “no” to him.

The Trump administration is [considering](#) a Camp David-style summit to solve the conflict:

“The president now wants to bring all the key players to Washington,” he said. “They need to disavow groups like the [Muslim] Brotherhood for the stability of the Middle East at large. It’s not just about Qatari elements funding the Brotherhood but disavowing support for extremism in general,” [a senior White House official] said.

The real issue for the Trump administration is to unite the GCC behind its plans against Iran. There is only a small chance that such can be achieved. Iran is an important commercial partner for Kuwait, Qatar, the UAE and Oman. Those countries have nothing to win from any war with it.

So far Iran is the sole winner of the GCC spat. Should the Saudi blockade of Qatar continue Iran’s farmers will sell over 400,000 tons of food per year to Qatar. Steel and concrete are other potential exports products for Iran. Lucrative air traffic in Iranian air space has increased by 17% since the Saudis blocked Qatar Airlines flights through their airspace. Iran will sell more natural gas should Qatar’s gas exports be damaged.

Saudi Arabia as well as Qatar are Wahhabi extremist states. They both spend their huge resources to spread their deadly sectarian and racist beliefs. Qatar’s ideological export is handled by Al-Jazeera Arabic known for vile [sectarianism and support](#) of ISIS and al-Qaeda. The Saudis finance extremist mosques and madrassas all over the world. Let them fight

each other and spend their resources against each other. The world can only win from that.

But there is also danger in such a fight. As the historic example of Serbia demonstrates, allies jumping in on either side, each with their own agenda, may spread the fire way beyond the local conflict. What if Pakistan takes the Saudi sides and India, which receives some 90% of its gas imports from Qatar, joins the Qatari one?

The Saudis and Emiratis surely did not think of this when they launched their belligerent plans. They had hoped that Qatar would fold within a day or two. They never thought about real fighting or of a possible escalation beyond the local conflict. As both sides have now taken hardened positions it will be difficult for each to climb down. It will now take a year or two, if not longer, for this conflict to end.

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