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## Gulf crisis could lead to war, says German foreign minister

By Jordan Shilton

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German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel warned over the weekend that the Gulf crisis, triggered by the decision by a Saudi-led coalition of Persian Gulf sheikhdoms and Egypt to break off diplomatic ties with Qatar over accusations of funding terrorist organizations, could lead to war.

Referring to the “dramatic harshness” in relations between the Gulf States, Gabriel told the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, “There is a danger that this dispute could lead to war.” Noting his involvement in talks over the past week to resolve the situation, including face-to-face meetings with his Saudi and Qatari counterparts and phone calls with the foreign ministers of Iran and Kuwait, Gabriel added that he saw “good chances” for reaching a solution.

Gabriel’s remarks underscore the explosive geopolitical conflicts rapidly emerging over the Gulf crisis. His warning about the threat of war has nothing to do with a German commitment to pacifism, but is in fact part of Berlin’s strategy to extend its imperialist interests in the region at the expense of the United States.

Gabriel spoke less than two days after US President Donald Trump indicated his full backing for Riyadh’s measures, which have included the breaking of all diplomatic ties, the expulsion of all

Qatari citizens from the territories of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain within 14 days, the closing of these countries' airspaces to Qatari aircraft, and the placing of 59 individuals and 12 charities with links to Qatar on a "terror watchlist."

Trump declared Friday that the moves were "harsh but necessary" and according to a White House official added that Qatar "deserves it." His comments exposed sharp divisions within the US state over its policy in the Gulf, with Secretary of State Rex Tillerson urging a de-escalation of the crisis only an hour prior to Trump's comments. Tillerson speaks on behalf of sections of the military, which is concerned that the largest US base in the region, from which the wars in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan are directed, could be under threat due to the isolation of Qatar.

Saudi Arabia felt emboldened to act against Qatar following Trump's visit to Riyadh three weeks ago, during which he demonized Iran as the main source of terrorism in the region and urged Sunni states to form an alliance to push back Teheran's influence. The Saudi move also seeks to consolidate Riyadh's dominance in the Gulf, with its government demanding that Qatar abandon any semblance of an independent foreign policy by dropping its economic and diplomatic engagement with Iran and support for political groups in the region like Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood.

Gabriel and the German ruling class are increasingly hostile to this agenda. Earlier last week, the SPD Foreign Minister took a direct shot at Washington, criticizing the "trumpification" of relations between the Gulf States in an interview with *Handelsblatt*. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who clashed with Trump at last month's NATO and G7 summits over trade and defense spending in an expression of the deepening rift between the US and European imperialist powers, attacked Washington's policy in the Gulf by calling Friday for all nations, including Iran and Turkey, to work to resolve the dispute. In a visit to Mexico City, she stated, "We have to see that the political solution of conflicts...such as the situation in Syria, such as the situation in Libya or the situation in Iraq, won't happen if certain players are no longer even included in the conversation, and that includes Qatar, it includes Turkey, it includes Iran."

Gabriel and Merkel are determined to defend and expand German access to the Middle East and the broader region, which offer important markets for exports. In 2016, German companies sold goods worth \$47 billion to countries in North Africa and the Near and Middle East. Berlin is firmly opposed to the ratcheting up of tensions by the Trump administration with Iran, including threats to abandon the 2015 nuclear deal with Teheran, which the German ruling elite views as a potential area of expansion for its corporations. Given such substantial economic interests and in light of Germany's drive over recent years to remilitarize and adopt a more aggressive foreign policy, Gabriel's raising of the prospect of war in the region should not be taken as an idle threat or an exaggeration.

The conflicts between the major imperialist states are exacerbating the tensions between the regional powers involved. Evidently egged on by Trump's support, the Saudi-led coalition is reportedly drawing up a list of demands Doha must follow if relations are to be reestablished.

These include a scaling back of the country's Al Jazeera media network, which Riyadh and its allies accuse of promoting political opponents like the Muslim Brotherhood, and a commitment from Doha not to finance political organizations deemed to be extremist by Saudi Arabia.

Turkey and Iran are backing Qatar in the dispute. On Sunday, Teheran announced that its 47th naval flotilla, consisting of a destroyer and logistics warship, would make a stop in Oman on its way to patrol the sea route between the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. Oman, another member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), has like Kuwait not joined the Saudi-led blockade of Qatar and is seeking to mediate the dispute.

Turkey is to send an increased number of military personnel to Qatar and began supplying supermarkets in the country with groceries after panic buying and trade restrictions led to shortages.

The dispute is already having devastating consequences for the region's population, which is closely connected by family and other ties. Thousands of mixed families living in all of the states involved have been torn apart by the travel bans, with some instances of parents being separated from their children. Amnesty International issued a report criticizing the violation of human rights for thousands of Gulf States residents, including large populations of guest workers from countries like Nepal, India and Pakistan who could end up losing their right to remain in the region.

The authoritarian regimes in the UAE and Bahrain have adopted laws stipulating that anyone who shows "sympathy" for Qatar will face a lengthy prison sentence of up to 15 years.

Chief responsibility for the Gulf crisis lies in Washington. US imperialism's reckless drive to assert its control over the energy-rich Middle East and sideline all potential rivals has not only escalated tensions with its imperialist competitors, but inflamed regional divisions. Its attempt to mobilize a Sunni axis to marginalize Iran and its regional allies not only threatens to trigger a regional bloodbath and deepen already widespread sectarian violence that has claimed millions of lives, but also to draw in the major powers on opposing sides in a desperate struggle for economic and geostrategic dominance that poses the direct danger of a global conflagration.

Across the Middle East, there are a growing number of flashpoints that could provoke such a clash. In Syria, where around half a million people have been killed as a result of the US-instigated war for regime change in Damascus, the major powers and their proxies are moving to carve up the country. The US has conducted three attacks in as many weeks on pro-government forces in the south of the country under the pretext of enforcing a "deconfliction zone," which Russia has refused to recognize.

Washington's goal is to block the establishment by the Assad regime of a land bridge using territory recaptured from ISIS that would stretch from Teheran through Iraq to Syria and Lebanon. To this end, it is arming and training proxy Islamist forces at the al-Tanf base near the Iraqi and Jordanian borders with the aim of establishing control over territory in eastern Syria.

The *New York Times* reported Saturday that the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) currently engaged in retaking Raqqa are tacitly allowing ISIS fighters to escape to the south, shifting the battle with the *jihadis* to areas where pro-Assad forces are currently advancing. A consequence of this could be the inflaming of tensions between Kurdish and Arab populations, since the Kurdish militias will be occupying Arab-controlled areas during their pursuit of ISIS further south.

Pro-government troops, backed by Russian air power, struck a blow at Washington's plan of pushing north to retake ISIS territory from al-Tanf by reaching the Iraqi border Friday in battles with ISIS.

Regional and global powers stand behind all of these forces. Iranian fighters and Russian air power are backing the Syrian government, including by carrying out air strikes close to the US's unilaterally declared "deconfliction zone." US Special Forces are being assisted at al-Tanf by British and Norwegian military personnel and will be relying on the so-called international anti-ISIS coalition, which includes all of NATO's members. The *Times* described the emerging battle as "even more decisive" with "far more geopolitical import and risk" than that going on in Raqqa.