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Saudi Arabia issues provocative ultimatum to Qatar

By Peter Symonds

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Saudi Arabia and its allies have issued an extraordinary ultimatum to Qatar that sets the stage for a dramatic escalation of the confrontation that began with the imposition of a diplomatic and economic blockade in early June. Qatar has been given 10 days to agree to a sweeping list of 13 demands or face unspecified consequences. Acquiescence would transform the tiny, energy-rich Gulf state into a political vassal of Riyadh.

The demands, which were published yesterday, are a calculated provocation, which, as Saudi Arabia and its allies understand only too well, will almost certainly be rejected. According to the Associated Press (AP), Qatar's neighbours are insisting that their demands are a bottom line—that is, non-negotiable—and are warning of further penalties beyond the existing restrictions on air, sea and land routes.

Yousef al-Otaiba, United Arab Emirates (UAE) ambassador to the US, told AP that there would be “no military element” to the sanctions on Qatar, but no credence can be placed in this assurance. The imposition of a blockade by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE and Bahrain is tantamount to an act of war and provides ample opportunity for a provocation that could precipitate military conflict.

In a display of staggering hypocrisy, Saudi Arabia, which is notorious for its funding of Islamist militias, is exploiting the “war on terror” as the pretext for its ultimatum. The demands include Qatar’s severing ties to a list of "terrorist, sectarian and ideological organizations” and handing over "terrorist figures," fugitives and wanted individuals from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain.

Qatar has vigorously denied the allegations and declared that it will not negotiate until the blockade has been lifted. Responding to a “terrorist” list of 59 individuals and groups released by Saudi Arabia and its allies, Qatar’s foreign minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Thani said it included legitimate charities, groups Qatar had already sanctioned, and extremists who had died or were no longer living in the country.

The highly political character of the Saudi demands is underscored by Riyadh’s insistence that Qatar’s satellite TV channel and news network, Al Jazeera, be shut down, along with other Qatari-sponsored media. The Saudi monarchy and its despotic allies are determined to silence any criticism of their policies and to force Qatar to hand over critics and opponents for punishment. Qatar is to provide details of all of its contacts with the political opposition in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE and Bahrain.

At the top of the list of demands is for Qatar to end relations with Iran, which Saudi Arabia regards as its chief rival for regional dominance. The ultimatum calls for Qatar to scale back diplomatic ties with Iran, close Iranian diplomatic missions in Qatar, expel members of Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps, cut military and intelligence cooperation with Iran and wind back trade and commerce with Iran.

Saudi Arabia is also demanding that Qatar immediately shut down the Turkish military base being built in the country and halt military cooperation with Turkey. Turkey, which has stepped up its support for Qatar following imposition of the Saudi-led blockade, announced yesterday that it has no intention of agreeing to the demand.

In a move that twists the knife in the wound, Saudi Arabia is demanding that Qatar pay unspecified reparations and compensation for loss of life and other financial losses allegedly caused by its recent policies.

At the same time, Qatar must “align” itself “militarily, politically, socially and economically” with the other Gulf and Arab countries—effectively turning it into a colony of Saudi Arabia, which will determine its external and internal policies. To ensure Qatar’s compliance, a system of intrusive audits will be set in place for the next decade.

US President Trump has cheered on the Saudi-led blockade of Qatar and claimed it as a success for his trip to the Middle East last month. “We cannot let these incredibly rich nations fund radical Islamic terror or terrorism of any kind,” he told a rally in Iowa last week. Referring to his meeting with Saudi King Salman, Trump bragged that “we had a huge impact” in cracking down on terror funding.

While Trump lined up enthusiastically with Saudi Arabia against Qatar, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson was more cautious in his approach, warning on Thursday that any list of demands against Qatar had to be “reasonable and actionable.” Washington has longstanding ties with Qatar, including a strategically important US air base that houses 10,000 American troops. Qatar is the forward base for the US Central Command and is at the centre of its intelligence operations in the region.

The Trump administration’s support for Saudi Arabia is part of a far broader regional offensive directed in the first instance against Iran, but also Russia. The Saudi military backed by Washington is already engaged in a long-running and bloody war in Yemen against Shiite Houthi rebels that Riyadh claims are backed by Tehran.

Saudi Arabia is also part of the US-led war in Syria to oust the Russian- and Iranian-backed government of President Bashar al-Assad. While nominally directed against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), a reactionary Islamist group that had its roots in outfits armed and financed by the CIA, Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies, the conflict is increasingly and openly aimed against the Assad regime.

The US Air Force this week for the first time shot down a Syrian government fighter bomber in what is becoming a scramble to carve out territory in preparation for a showdown with Assad and his backers after ISIS is neutralized. The US has claimed a no-go area at a strategic border crossing from Iraq into Syria where it is training anti-Assad fighters, and has shot down two Iranian drones in recent weeks.

The US intensification of the war in Syria follows major blows to Washington’s proxy forces, which were driven from the city of Aleppo late last year. Washington’s reckless actions are heightening the danger of a far broader conflict with Iran and Russia. Following the shoot-down of the Syrian aircraft, the Russian military declared that it would no longer observe “deconfliction” protocols and would target threatening US and allied warplanes.

The ultimatum issued by Saudi Arabia and its allies against Qatar has added another explosive flashpoint to the tinderbox in the Middle East that could trigger a catastrophic regional and world conflict involving nuclear-armed powers.