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Trump's Embrace of the Saudi Crown Prince, and a Qatar Nightmare Scenario

By Gary Leupp
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The failure of Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, in four-day talks with the Qatari emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani and a Kuwaiti official, to mediate an end to the inter-Arab dispute over Qatar, suggests that U.S. influence in the Middle East is waning. Even in the wake of the most recent massive Saudi arms deal announced during Trump's visit to Riyadh on June 5, and the president's receipt of the King Abdulaziz al Saud Collar, Washington is unable to dissuade its "enduring partner" from its highly rash course of action.

The New York Times reports that Tillerson flew out from Jiddah Wednesday night "without even attempting the usual tight-smiled announcements of incremental progress." Maybe because there was none.

The Saudis, along with their Egyptian, UAE, and Bahraini allies, are determined to ostracize and isolate Qatar. Not for the stated reason—repeated by a clueless Donald Trump on June 9—that Qatar supports terrorism.

Trump, claiming credit for leading the effort, declared, "The nation of Qatar, unfortunately, has historically been a funder of terrorism at a very high level." He claimed (alluding to his Saudi visit) that "nations came together and spoke to me about confronting Qatar over its behavior... I decided, along with Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, our great generals and military people, the time had come to call on Qatar to end its funding—they have to end that funding, and its

extremist ideology in terms of funding. Do we take the easy road or do we finally take a hard but necessary action? We have to stop the funding of terrorism.” This is bullshit. It rests upon the Saudi and Egyptian assumption that tolerating the Muslim Brotherhood, allowing media criticisms of Gulf Cooperation Council regimes, and refusal to condemn Hizbollah all constitute support for terrorism.

The real reason for the pressure on Qatar is Iran, and the Saudis’ long term campaign to undermine the Islamic Republic and its Shiite allies and “proxies” (real or imagined) in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and elsewhere in the region. Riyadh is concerned about the prospects of Shiite rebellion within the Saudi Arabia itself, where over 10% of the population are Shiites oppressed by Wahhabi rule; and in Bahrain, where 70% are Shiites, ruled by an absolute monarch who shares the Saudis’ Wahhabi Islam.

Young Crown Prince Salman clearly feels he has received the green light from Trump to lead, in tandem with Egypt, an anti-Iranian coalition. (The NYT states: “Part of the reason a deal could not be reached...is that the president’s embrace for King Salman...is thought to have given the kingdom the confidence to start and then stick by the embargo regardless of Tillerson’s increasing urgent and frustrated feelings.”) This anti-Iran effort requires the ostracizing of Doha, and its expulsion from the Gulf Cooperation Council, unless it accepts a list of non-negotiable demands (including the closure or complete reorganization of the Qatar-based al-Jazeera news network which sometimes reports critically on the countries now targeting Qatar).

This rupture among some of its closest Mideast partners is most certainly not in Washington’s interests. Qatar hosts 11,000 U.S. troops at Al Udeid Air Base. This is the largest concentration of U.S. forces in the region. Bahrain meanwhile hosts the Fifth Fleet, with 5,000 U.S. sailors and Marines in port at any time. It’s awkward for the two countries to be at odds with one another. And it’s embarrassing for the U.S. to be so conspicuously unable to reconcile its allies. What if the crazed and vicious Saudi prince, who has unleashed pure hell on neighboring Yemen with unqualified U.S. support, were to call Trump at 4 A.M. sometime soon, and ask what he thought about a Saudi annexation of Qatar, in order to fight terrorism?

He might remind Trump, or inform him for the first time, that Saudi Arabia intervened in Bahrain in March 2011 to aid the Sunni king in suppressing Shiite protests. So there is successful precedent.

Trump—fondly remembering that sword dance with the king—just might say, sounds good to me, I just need to check with my generals since we have troops there as I recall. The prince would say, “The troops can stay of course. And we will pay all their expenses from this point. We will hurt Iran and its terrorist allies in the region.”

Later that morning Tillerson and Secretary of “Defense” James Mattis will perhaps say: “No, Mr. President, this is not a good idea. Congress will surely react with horror, and attempt to sanction Saudi Arabia. You’re already in deep political danger. Siding with the one country in the world that doesn’t allow women to drive against a neighbor that has a far more liberal culture and civil society does not look good politically, even if the latter does have a cordial relationship with Tehran. It would be a hard sell, and very much complicate the already difficult relationship with

Turkey, a NATO member and also a Doha ally. The Europeans would be very upset.” Donald will listen, frown, and maybe nod his head in apparent understanding.

But let’s say the prince calls back mid-afternoon and Trump, preoccupied with Junior’s situation—and disregarding advice as he often does, and being impulsive as he often is—says: “Well, you gotta do what you gotta do, I guess. Just don’t attack our base. Say hello to your dad, he’s doing a terrific job.”

Then the chaos unleashed by George W. Bush in 2003 will enter a new stage. Turkey, which has troops stationed in Qatar and has offered assistance to Doha to cope with its current difficulties, will perhaps break ties with Riyadh and draw closer to Iran. Iran may move to seize control of the Persian Gulf oil field jointly owned by Qatar and Iran. Trump will declare the Saudi-Egyptian led war on Iran a war against terrorism and the Iranian nuclear threat. Pandora’s box has been open for many years now, and the hope that remained in the box may have escaped by now too.