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SITUATION ASSESSEMENT

President Trump's Evolving Approach to the US Position on the Gulf Crisis

Policy Analysis Unit | September 2017

New Developments in the US Position on the Gulf Crisis

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Introduction

US diplomatic efforts to find a solution to the recent Gulf crisis have gained momentum over the past two weeks, with US President Donald Trump meeting with the Emir of Kuwait, Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, in Washington, DC on September 7. On September 19, he also met with the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani, who was in New York to attend the most recent opening of the United Nations General Assembly. Trump's direct involvement in the Gulf crisis is a significant development. It marks a break with the White House's previous stance, in which the Trump Administration had previously stood idly by after Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt severed relations with Doha on 5 June before imposing a blockade on the country. Trump's earlier approach was also markedly different from the stance taken both by the Pentagon and the State Department.

A Shift in the US Position?

In his remarks in the run-up to the meeting with Sheikh Tamim, the US president displayed a clear change of tone. He began by praising the Emir, emphasizing the "strong" and "historic" relationship between their two countries. Trump delved into the Gulf crisis directly, stating, "we're trying to solve a problem in the Middle East, and I think we'll get it solved. I have a very strong feeling that it will be solved pretty quickly." Trump went even further by stressing that US-Qatari relations were not confined to the Gulf crisis, but included "trade and many other things". He also stated that, "we've had a tremendous relationship for the last short period of time, especially since our meeting in Saudi Arabia, which I think was an epic and very important -- really a very historic meeting. And now we want to make the most of it by getting things settled.¹"

This enthusiasm was shared by Sheikh Tamim, whose remarks also expressed admiration for the strength of the multifaceted relationship between the US and Qatar. Similarly pointing out the importance of the Riyadh Summit, Sheikh Tamim also pointed out that in July, Qatar

¹ "Remarks by President Trump and Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani Before Bilateral Meeting," The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, September 19, 2017, at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/09/19/remarks-president-trump-and-emir-tamim-bin-hamad-al-thani-bilateral>

became the first ever country to sign an MOU on counterterrorism with the US. The MOU in question was signed by US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and his Qatari counterpart. Turning to the Gulf crisis, the Emir told Trump: "As you said, Mr. President, we have a problem with our neighbors, and your [involvement would be of great use]. And I'm sure that, with your intervention, hopefully we can find a solution to this problem. We've always said that we're very open to dialogue, and we always will be open to dialogue."² Trump stressed that he would personally make an effort to bring the parties to the negotiating table.

The first hints of a shift in the White House position came on the eve of a meeting between the President and the Emir of Kuwait earlier this month. In previously prepared remarks, Trump called on the Gulf Cooperation Council countries and Egypt to focus on the commitments of the Riyadh Arab Islamic-American summit, "to continue our joint efforts to drive out and defeat terrorists." He emphasized, "Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt are all essential U.S. partners in this effort," adding that "We will be most successful with a united GCC."³

Trump went as far as to announce his preparedness to become directly involved in the crisis which pitted four Arab states against Qatar, expressing his confidence that a solution could be found quickly. He said "If I can help mediate between Qatar and, in particular, the UAE and Saudi Arabia, I would be willing to do so. And I think you'd have a deal worked out very quickly." Trump went on to say, during the press conference, "This all began because of the fact that there has been massive funding of terrorism by certain countries. And what I want is I want to stop the funding of terrorism, and we're going to stop the funding of terrorism. And if they don't stop the funding of terrorism, I don't want them to come together. But I think they will."⁴

Absence of a Clear US Foreign Policy Doctrine

Observers of the Trump White House are generally in agreement that this administration has not yet developed a clear foreign policy doctrine. This is not only evident from the reaction to

² Ibid

³ "Remarks by President Trump and Emir Sabah al-Ahmed al-Jaber al-Sabah of Kuwait in Joint Press Conference," The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, September 07, 2017, at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/09/07/remarks-president-trump-and-emir-sabah-al-ahmed-al-jaber-al-sabah-kuwait>

⁴ Ibid

the Gulf crisis, but also from the White House reaction to the North Korea crisis, the Iranian nuclear issue and the Syrian conflict. This incoherency can be attributed directly to Trump. A *Washington Post* report, published the day after the president's meeting with Sheikh Tamim indicated an escalation in hostilities between the White house and the Department of State, regarding the handling of the Gulf Crisis. According to the report, the White House, and Trump personally, were irritated by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's stalling of large arms-sales packages to the Gulf that the President had agreed to in May, including more than US\$ 110 billion worth of arms promised to Saudi Arabia. According to US officials who spoke to the newspaper, the Secretary of State "has also been slow-walking the deals as part of Tillerson's quest for leverage as he tries to mediate the Arab family feud", while the White House argues that this strategy is ineffective⁵.

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Bob Corker (a Republican from Tennessee) supports Tillerson's position. In late June, he blocked sending more arms shipments to US allies in the Gulf until they found a diplomatic resolution their differences.⁶ The *Washington Post* reveals the extent of inconsistency in the Trump administration's position regarding the Gulf crisis by reporting that after his son in law Jared Kushner traveled to several Gulf countries last month, Tillerson called each of those countries' foreign ministers to ensure that "Kushner had not sent conflicting messages about U.S. policy"⁷.

Trump has a Change of Heart?

According to a number of media sources, Trump's formerly anti-Qatar slant in the Gulf crisis began to evolve after warnings from Tillerson, Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, and National Security Advisor H.M. McMaster. They warned that a prolonged conflict would benefit Iran, and

⁵ Josh Rogin, "White House angry with Tillerson over Gulf arms-sales delays," *Washington Post*, September 20, 2017, at:

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/josh-rogin/wp/2017/09/20/white-house-angry-with-tillerson-over-gulf-arms-sales-delays/?utm_term=.6a5ab9438ae3

⁶ Joe Gould, "Corker chides Saudi Arabia, UAE over terror ties amid Qatar row," *Defense News*, June 30, 2017, at: <http://www.defensenews.com/articles/corker-chides-saudi-arabia-uae-over-terror-ties-amid-qatar-row>

⁷ Josh Rogin, "White House angry with Tillerson over Gulf arms-sales delays," *Washington Post*, September 20, 2017, at:

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/josh-rogin/wp/2017/09/20/white-house-angry-with-tillerson-over-gulf-arms-sales-delays/?utm_term=.6a5ab9438ae3

compromise efforts to exert pressure on the country. The escalated hostilities with North Korea increased pressure on the US president who could have done without a new crisis emerging in the Gulf. In fact, the State and Defense Departments have made great efforts to provide Trump with a more comprehensive picture of the situation in the Gulf, counteracting the information provided by the Saudi and Emirati leaders.

Tensions on the Korean Peninsula and the likely outbreak of a crisis with Iran over the nuclear deal all contributed to the evolution of Trump's current position. The president now appears more inclined towards exerting pressure on the countries imposing the blockade to come to a negotiated settlement⁸. To this end, Trump attempted to organize a telephone call on Friday September 8, between the Emir of Qatar and the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammad Bin Salman, who is pivotal in efforts to isolate Doha. During the conversation, the two leaders agreed to find a solution to the crisis at the negotiating table. Yet Saudi Arabia hesitated and suspended talks that same day, seemingly blaming Qatar out of frustration and a desire not to appear to have buckled.⁹

Further to this, reports in Western media cite US officials connected to Trump who suggest that he personally intervened to curb a Saudi-Emirati plan to launch military action against Qatar,. According to these reports, Trump stressed that any military action would strengthen Iran's position in the Middle East. While Trump downplayed the severity of these reports during his meeting with Sheikh Tamim, statements by the Emir of Kuwait, which take credit for the avoidance of military action, suggest that plans for military involvement were well underway. In the end, the group of countries leading the blockade was frustrated not only by the US position, but also by the approach of Turkey and Iran. Ultimately, the failure of their efforts is due primarily to the success which Qatar itself had in breaking the strangle hold of the siege.

Conclusion

The US president's position towards the Gulf Crisis continues to fluctuate. Yet, it is possible to assume that the official consensus within the US administration is that the crisis must be solved and the blockade lifted as soon as possible. The continuation of the Gulf crisis threatens to

⁸ Jennifer Jacobs. Ibid.

⁹ Zaid Sabah and Zainab Fattah, "Phone Call to Ease Saudi-Qatar Spat Causes New Problem," Bloomberg, September 9, 2017, at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-09-09/qatar-crisis-breakthrough-undermined-by-new-spat-with-saudis>

dismantle the most important US allied bloc in the region, the Gulf Cooperation Council. Its persistence serves Iranian interests and undermines efforts to isolate Iran within the rest of the Middle East. At present, and as made clear by Trump's recent address at the UN General Assembly, Washington is in fact escalating its rhetoric with Iran. In addition, this crisis threatens the US-led War on Terror, a cornerstone of Washington's foreign policy. The Pentagon is concerned that its military operations in the Middle East may be affected by the Gulf crisis, especially since Qatar hosts the largest US military base in the Middle East. The base hosts many of the approximately 11,000 US troops, as well as the Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC), which provides command and control of air power throughout Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and 18 other nations¹⁰. US officials, especially those in the Defense Department, fear that the US privileges in Qatar could be threatened if diplomatic hostilities, and Trump's unrestrained comments, go unchecked.

For the above reasons, Government institutions seem unwilling to remain hostage to the current US president's approach to foreign policy. At every crisis, they are clearly visible intervening to pick up the pieces. The importance of such efforts notwithstanding, they often take place after much damage has been done. Before any substantive solution can be realized, Trump's political and diplomatic behavior will have to change.

¹⁰ Brad Lendon, "Qatar hosts largest US military base in Mideast," CNN, June 5, 2017, at: <http://www.cnn.com/2017/06/05/middleeast/qatar-us-largest-base-in-mideast/index.html>