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ASSESSMENT REPORT

# Tillerson Shuttles between Washington and the Gulf

Policy Analysis Unit | July 2017

The Disheveled Relationship White House and the Gulf States

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## Introduction

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson recently completed a round of shuttle diplomacy which took him to Ankara, Kuwait, Doha and Riyadh in an effort to resolve the crisis in intra-Gulf relations. A number of countries have imposed a blockade Qatar with the ostensible aim of helping to end alleged Qatari support for “terrorists” while many believe that the ulterior motives for the blockade are not so altruistic. Many of the demands made of Doha were tantamount to stripping Qatar of its sovereignty. Offering an implicit endorsement of the Qatari position, Tillerson stated while leaving Doha “I think Qatar has been quite clear in its demands, and I think those have been quite reasonable.”<sup>1</sup> In addition to the intransigence of the blockading countries, Tillerson had his work cut out for him by the erratic and contradictory stance of his own president. Tillerson’s efforts seemed to be in vain.

The US State Department has made no secret of its shock and disapproval of the maximalist demands of the anti-Qatar quartet, which includes Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates in addition to Egypt. State Department spokesperson Heather Nauert made it clear that the US was unimpressed by the lack of any detailed and verifiable allegations presented against Qatar. Nauert commented on the measures taken by the anti-Qatar bloc, saying “At this point, we are left with one simple question: Were the actions really about their concerns regarding Qatar’s alleged support for terrorism? Or were they about the long-simmering grievances between the GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] countries?”<sup>2</sup>

## Modest Expectations

From the outset, Tillerson and his aides sought to temper the expectations of those looking to American efforts to resolve the intra-Gulf crisis. Tillerson adviser R.C. Hammond insisted that the US Secretary of State was not going to the region as a “mediator”, acknowledging that that role went to Kuwait. Instead, said Hammond, the US’ job was to “make sure everybody continues talking to each other”<sup>3</sup>. Even a Memorandum of Understanding concluded by the US

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<sup>1</sup> Laura Smith-Spark, Nicole Gaouette and Zachary Cohen, “No breakthrough in Gulf crisis as Tillerson extends trip,” CNN, July 12, 2017, at: <http://www.cnn.com/2017/07/12/middleeast/tillerson-qatar-diplomatic-crisis/index.html>

<sup>2</sup> Department Press Briefing, U.S. Department of State, June 20, 2017, at: <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2017/06/272056.htm>

<sup>3</sup> “Tillerson Tries Shuttle Diplomacy in Qatar Dispute”, *New York Times*, July 11 2017, available online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/11/world/middleeast/tillerson-qatar-mideast.html>

and Qatar during Tillerson's visit to Doha, which covered steps against the financing of terrorism, failed to assuage the enthusiasm of the anti-Qatar quartet. Leaving the Saudi port city of Jeddah for Kuwait, deliberately chosen as both the first and final ports of call in the Gulf to avoid any suggestions of bias, Tillerson pointed out that no other Arab or Muslim nation—including members of the anti-Qatar quartet—had signed such a deal with the United States. This intensified speculation that the real motives for the blockade on Qatar had nothing to do with the stated aims of the campaign. Nonetheless, representatives of the four countries were not satisfied and insisted that the blockade on Qatar would remain in place until Doha complied with a June 23 ultimatum issued by the group<sup>4</sup>.

## Trump in the White House: a Disheveled US Position

Beginning at the outset of the blockade, on June 5, Rex Tillerson, together with his counterpart at the Pentagon James Mattis, encouraged all of the parties to the crisis to resolve their differences peacefully and offered their services to help achieve that aim. In contrast, President Trump launched into a Twitter tirade which seemed to position the presidency firmly in the Saudi camp. White House officials were forced to play down suggestions of a disagreement between the president and the State Department. The full extent of internal disarray within the Executive branch was illustrated in immense detail on June 9. On that day, Tillerson addressed a short press conference in which he urged all parties to find a negotiated solution to their differences<sup>5</sup>. A few short hours after the Secretary of State had finished his remarks, Trump, speaking alongside the Prime Minister of Romania, claimed that Qatar's regional isolation was some sort of victory for the American president's efforts to combat "extremists"<sup>6</sup>. In that same week, a weapons deal between Washington and Doha served to add further mystery to the American stance on the crisis.

On June 15, Pentagon chief Mattis and his Qatari counterpart signed a US\$ 12 billion contract to sell 36 F-15 jets. These jets were originally part of a larger \$21 billion plan to sell 72 planes of the same type and originally agreed with the former Obama Administration. That the Trump White House allowed the deal to go through however is an indication of a deep seated

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<sup>4</sup> "Top U.S. diplomat ends talks in Gulf; no sign Qatar crisis resolved", *Reuters*, July 12, 2017, available online:

<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-gulf-qatar-idUSKBN19X0WM>

<sup>5</sup> "Remarks on the Middle East," U.S Department of State, June 9, 2017, at:

<https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/06/271672.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Mallory Shelbourne, "US Ambassador to Qatar's assignment ends this month", *The Hill*, June 13, 2017, available online:

<http://thehill.com/homenews/administration/337556-us-ambassador-to-qatar-resigns-report>

confusion within the US government<sup>7</sup>. Speaking in front of the House of Representatives' Foreign Relations Committee, Tillerson was forced to downplay rumors of a rift between the State Department and the White House. While insisting that there was harmony between himself and President Trump, Tillerson did acknowledge that there were "differences" in how the president "chooses to articulate elements" of their supposedly unified policy<sup>8</sup>.

By the time he was heading back from the Gulf, however, Tillerson made comments to American journalists in which he appeared to be speaking more frankly about his disagreements with the White House. Tillerson contrasted his experience as CEO of what he described to be a "highly structured" organization such as Exxon-Mobil, with working within the US Administration. The latter, said Tillerson, was "not a highly disciplined organization," but rather, "decision making is fragmented, and sometimes people don't want to take decisions, coordination is difficult through the interagency [system]"<sup>9</sup>.

Even President Trump conceded that while "Rex is doing a terrific job" that there was a "little bit of a difference, only in terms of tone"<sup>10</sup>. What Trump failed to see is that his minor differences of "tone" with his chief diplomat meant that the rest of the world, and particularly the Gulf, were being plunged into crisis. It also appeared to signal a unique and novel, as well as chaotic, style of conducting US foreign policy. It was in this vein that the German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel accused the governments leading the blockade on Qatar of "Trumpization" of their foreign policy, in reference to the brash grandstanding that deepened the crisis<sup>11</sup>.

While there has been a latter-day shift in the White House approach, even the most recent statements remain subject to Trump's temperamental and irrational changes of direction. One particular case highlights how much more significant the differences between the president and other members of the Executive branch are than Tillerson cared to admit to the House Foreign Relations Committee. In a written answer formulated by the National Security Council, a body

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<sup>7</sup> Anthony Capaccio and Nick Wadhams, "Qatar Signs \$12 Billion Deal for U.S. F-15 Jets Amid Gulf Crisis", *Bloomberg*, June 14, 2017, available online: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-06-14/qatar-said-to-sign-deal-for-u-s-f-15s-as-gulf-crisis-continues>

<sup>8</sup> Laura Koran, "Tillerson: No daylight between the President and me," CNN, June 14, 2017, available online: <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/06/14/politics/tillerson-trump-no-daylight/index.html>

<sup>9</sup> See Gardiner Harris, "Tillerson Comes Up Short in Effort to Resolve Qatar Dispute", *The New York Times*, July 13, 2017, available online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/13/world/middleeast/qatar-saudi-arabia-rex-tillerson.html>

<sup>10</sup> Conor Finnegan and Elizabeth McLaughlin, "Trump team sending mixed messages on Qatar and Gulf crisis", *ABC News*, July 15, 2017, available online: <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trump-team-sending-mixed-messages-qatar-gulf-crisis/story?id=48657883>

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Sigmund, Mathias Brueggmann and Dieter Fockenbrock, "Foreign Minister Supports Qatar, Bashes Trump", *Handelsblatt Global*, June 6, 2017, available online: <https://global.handelsblatt.com/politics/german-foreign-minister-voices-support-for-qatar-bashes-trump-777208>

answerable directly to Trump, together with the State Department, both bodies said “We encourage countries to minimize rhetoric and exercise restraint to allow for productive, diplomatic discussions”, an apparent hint that the Saudi-led quartet should back down from its demands issued to Qatar in late June<sup>12</sup>.

For a while, Trump appeared to be falling into line behind this attempt to bring a sense of discipline and uniformity to the US Executive stance towards the Gulf crisis. On July 5, the eve of the G20 Summit in Hamburg, Trump made a phone call to Egyptian leader Abdelfattah El-Sisi who was himself due to host a meeting of the foreign ministers of the countries leading the blockade on Qatar. Trump enjoined the parties gathered in Cairo to “engage constructively” and end the crisis without further escalation<sup>13</sup>. For a while, it seemed that all branches in the United States Executive were in unison regarding this pressing and unprecedented crisis in international affairs and in particular that Washington was not supportive of the ultimatum handed down to Qatar.

Within a week, however, statements by the US president served to confuse the situation further. While Trump downplayed the possibility of moving the US command base located in Qatar’s Khor Al-Udeid, he also added “If we ever had to leave, we would have 10 countries willing to build us another one, believe me, and they will pay for it”. This was in sharp contrast to statements by Defense Secretary Mattis who had earlier categorically rejected the prospect of moving the base from Qatari territory<sup>14</sup>.

One explanation for this seeming misalignment within the US Executive branch is the purported existence of a “parallel foreign policy” which some have suggested was formulated in the “family quarters” of the White House. Specifically, suspicion surrounds the role of Donald Trump’s son-in-law Jared Kushner and his outsized role in contributing to policy. Kushner is reported to hold a particular gripe against Qatar following Qatari investors’ unwillingness to help support a real estate deal his family was attempting. Aides close to Tillerson have speculated that Kushner was the channel through which paragraphs drafted by the United Arab

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<sup>12</sup> Jenna Liffhits, “White House, State Department Indicate They’re on Same Page about Qatar Dispute”, *The Weekly Standard*, July 6, 2017, available online: <http://www.weeklystandard.com/white-house-state-department-indicate-theyre-on-same-page-about-qatar-dispute/article/2008716>

<sup>13</sup> Readout of President Donald J. Trump’s Call with President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi of Egypt, July 5, 2017, available online: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/07/05/readout-president-donald-j-trumps-call-president-abdel-fattah-al-sisi>

<sup>14</sup> Connor Finnegan and Elizabeth McLaughlin; “Trump team sending mixed messages on Qatar and Gulf crisis”, July 15 2017, available online: <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trump-team-sending-mixed-messages-qatar-gulf-crisis/story?id=48657883>

Emirates' Ambassador to Washington, Yousef Al-Otaiba, found their way to Trump's July 9 address in which he was seen to be at odds with his Secretary of State<sup>15</sup>.

## Conclusion

The inconsistencies that exist within the Trump administration surrounding the crisis in intra-Gulf relations are simply one further example of the un-harmonized foreign policy under the current president. They illustrate the unpreparedness of a man who has yet to understand that he is in fact the president of the United States, and not merely a quarrelsome commentator on world affairs. This has clearly irked many in the US establishment, with former CIA Director David Petraeus taking the unusual step of reminding Trump that it was a request from the United States which drove Qatar to host both Hamas and representatives of the Taliban<sup>16</sup>.

This reminder drove Bob Corker, the Chairman of the US' Senate's Foreign Relations Committee, to suggest that Saudi Arabia and the UAE were being disingenuous in their allegations of Qatar financing terrorism, and instead demanded that all of the Gulf states do more to curb the financing of extremists. One tangible result of Corker's exasperation has been the promise by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to block any future arms sales to all of the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, including the three who are blockading Qatar<sup>17</sup>. Added to the most recent revelations published in the Washington Post regarding the possible confirmation of UAE involvement in hacking the Qatar News Agency website--the opening shot in this crisis-- all of these factors have served to put Trump's foreign policy on the backfoot.

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<sup>15</sup> Mark Perry, "Tillerson and Mattis Cleaning Up Kushner's Middle East Mess", *The American Conservative*, June 27, 2017, available online: <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/tillerson-and-mattis-cleaning-up-kushners-middle-east-mess/>

<sup>16</sup> "Qatar hosted Hamas, Taliban delegations at the request of US", *Qatar Tribune*, July 4, 2017, available online: <http://www.qatar-tribune.com/news-details/id/73511>

<sup>17</sup> Elana Schor, "Corker to block future arms sales to Gulf nations", *Politico*, June 26, 2017, available online: <http://www.politico.com/story/2017/06/26/gulf-nation-arms-sales-bob-corker-239959>