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Middle East

Crisis between the reactionary monarchies of the Gulf

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On June 4, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt (followed a few hours later by Bahrain, Yemen, the Maldives, Mauritania and the Libyan dissident government) broke off relations with the Emirate of Qatar for its links with "terrorist organizations and denominational groups seeking to destabilize the region, including the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamic State, and al-Qaeda", not to mention the maintenance of relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran, despite differences. The crisis came a week after intense controversy over remarks attributed to the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, where he criticized Riyadh's determination to isolate Iran diplomatically while taking up the defence of Hezbollah and the Muslim Brotherhood, both viewed as terrorist groups by Riyadh. Doha was moreover excluded from the Arab military coalition led by Riyadh against the alliance of the Houthis, backed by Iran and the former dictator Ali Abdallah Saleh, while the Qatari media, such as al-Jazeera, have been banned in the majority of countries that have broken off relations with Qatar.

A few days later, Saudi Arabia and its allies published a list of "terrorists" supported, according to them, by Doha. The list contained the names of 59 people and 12 entities "linked to Qatar and in the service of a suspicious political programme of Qatar". Among them were officials or organizations from Egypt, Bahrain and Libya, such as the spiritual leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood and of a Sunni religious association, Youssef al-Qaradawi. The Gulf Arab states have not made any public demands concerning Qatar, but a list that has circulated includes breaking diplomatic ties with Iran, expelling all members of the Palestinian Hamas movement and the Muslim Brotherhood, freezing all the bank accounts of Hamas members, ending support for "terrorist organizations" and ending interference in Egyptian affairs.

The Emir of Qatar, Al-Thani, assured the world that his country could hold out "eternally" despite the severe air and maritime restrictions imposed by its neighbours and the closure by Saudi Arabia of its only land border, through which transits 40 per cent of its food supply. The rich emirate also said it was in a position to guarantee its delivery agreements for liquefied natural gas (LNG) and oil, which provide more than 90 per cent of its revenues. A week after the outbreak of the crisis, Qatar once again rejected all the accusations and declared its determination not to give way under pressure. Qatari Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammad bin Abdel Rahman Al Thani, on a European tour to "inform" the "allied and friendly" countries of the crisis, denounced the "unfair" and "illegal" measures imposed on his country by Gulf countries and Egypt. The minister also denied the allegations of support for the Muslim Brotherhood movement and did not understand why it was necessary to break off political relations with Hamas, since it was a resistance movement and not a terrorist group as the Saudi Foreign Minister said. Qatar is nevertheless seeking international support to break its isolation and has called for an "open and honest dialogue" with Saudi Arabia to in order to emerge from this crisis.

Since the campaign to isolate Qatar, Iran has been sending tons of food products over the last week to the Emirate of Qatar. Tehran sent five planes loaded with 90 tons of fruit and vegetables, and 350 tons of fruit and vegetables were also loaded onto three small boats. Turkey, for its part, has accelerated the dispatch of troops, increasing the number of its soldiers in the emirate from 100 to 3000, something planned for a long time. Turkish President Erdogan also said on June 13th that the measures of isolation against Qatar are in violation of Islamic values.

This crisis is causing embarrassment to many foreign countries, including the United States, despite statements by US President Trump at the outset of the crisis supporting the Saudi position against Qatar, which is home to the largest US air base in the region, with 10,000 troops and the US military command headquarters in the Middle East. This base is crucial for the struggle of the international coalition led by the United States against the Islamic State in

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Syria and Iraq. Diplomatic efforts involving Washington, Paris and Kuwait have been intensified in order to contain the crisis in the Gulf.

Puffed up by Donald Trump's recent visit to Riyadh, where the US president fully aligned himself with the Saudi doctrine seeking to stem Iran in the region, the Saudis are taking advantage of this to deal with any state in their own camp that does not completely follow their political line. Qatar has been pursuing its own regional policy for a long time, reinforced by a coup in 1995 by Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, which annoyed his Saudi neighbour. But it was the different political strategies in the context of the revolutionary processes in the region that began at the end of 2010 and the beginning of 2011 that was most important. These differences, between Saudi Arabia and its ally, the United Arab Emirates, on the one hand and Qatar on the other, created more and more tension and finally led to an unprecedented crisis. Saudi Arabia and its allies have generally supported the former regimes against any form of protest, with the exception of Libya and Syria (because of its alliance with Iran, where they supported the most reactionary forms of opposition to the regime), while Qatar supported the movement of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamic fundamentalist movements against the former regimes, with the exception of Bahrain, where Qatar and the rest of the Gulf monarchies opposed the popular revolt.

A first crisis had already broken out in 2014, with the recall of the ambassadors of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain from Qatar in March of that year on the pretext that Doha was threatening regional security. The crisis was resolved by an agreement between these states, but Qatar did not respect its promises, such as the cessation of support for the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamic fundamentalist movements in the region, as in Syria and Libya. That is why Saudi Arabia and its allies today demand a "political commitment" from Qatar, including respect for promises made during the initial crisis in 2014, as well as a "road map" with "clear mechanisms" for its implementation. There was, however, a form of appeasement between Qatar and Saudi Arabia after Saudi Arabia's King Salman, who was less hostile than his brother Abdallah to the Muslim Brotherhood, came to power in January 2015. In the name of the unity of a "Sunni camp", as opposed to a "Shiite camp" led by Iran, Riyadh arbitrated the conflicts between Doha, Abu Dhabi and Cairo, while Qatar participated in the coalition led by Saudi Arabia in Yemen. The continuation of the independent policy of Qatar finally exhausted the patience of the Saudi kingdom.

In this political crisis between reactionary states, we must of course denounce the political opportunism and the lies of Saudi Arabia and its allies in their campaigns of isolation and pressure against Qatar. These states are dictatorships which repress any form of opposition. The reactionary Wahabi ideology is promoted by the Saudi kingdom throughout the world, inspiring jihadist, Salafist and Islamic fundamentalist groups. However, this reality must not lead us to a form of idealization or a rose-tinted view of the Emirate of Qatar, which is also a dictatorship promoting the same reactionary Wahabi ideology.

Despite these political differences, all these dictatorships have a counter-revolutionary agenda by their support for former regimes and fundamentalist Islamic forces. All these monarchies are in total opposition to the objectives of the popular uprisings for democracy, social justice and equality and seek only to strengthen their political interests through support to different actors. Riyadh and Doha both support imperialist, neo-liberal and authoritarian policies, treating the great majority of their workers as modern slaves, particularly the foreign workers. Not to mention a dissemination of a religion-based discourse filled with hatred, while promoting a retrograde view of society and of women's rights.

Faced with this crisis between reactionary states, we seek the fall of their elites and the liberation of the peoples of the region.

June 13th, 2017

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