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Qatar

What lies behind the blockade of Qatar?

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“How do you explain the rupture by Saudi Arabia and its allies, on June 5th, of their diplomatic relations with Qatar, accused of "supporting terrorism"? Is this the outcome of a crisis that has been maturing for a long time?”

Yvan Lemaître of *L'Anticapitaliste* spoke to Gilbert Achar to find out.

GA I interpret this as the coup de grace of what I have called the "relapse of the Arab uprising", which began in 2013. Since then, it has returned to a phase of counter-revolutionary ebb on a regional scale. This has taken the form of a marginalization of the progressives and of the domination of the political scene by the confrontation between the supporters of the former regimes and the Islamic fundamentalist alternative.

Both of these two counter-revolutionary poles, each of them opposed to the true aspirations of the "Arab Spring" of 2011, have supporters in the Gulf monarchies. The Saudi kingdom, faithful to its historical role as a reactionary bastion, defended the old regimes with two exceptions: Libya, where they remained neutral and did not participate in the NATO bombing, without however supporting Gaddafi, with whom they were frequently in conflict; and then Syria, because the Assad regime is closely allied to Iran. As for Qatar, which has sponsored the Muslim Brotherhood since the 1990s, the Arab uprising was a godsend, enabling its emir to assert his role in the eyes of Washington and play the card of getting the regional uprising under control by means of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The two options were therefore antithetical. We saw it from the very beginning, during the Tunisian uprising. Qatar, with its channel Al Jazeera, supported the uprising, especially the Ennahdha movement linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, while the Saudi kingdom offered asylum to the dictator. Today, the ongoing offensive aims to stop Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood, to put an end to the role of trouble-maker that Al Jazeera has played since its creation in 1996, insofar as it welcomes oppositionists from various countries, which is not to the taste of the Saudis. This is not to say that Qatar is "revolutionary", of course, but it is the option of accompanying the uprising to gain control over it by means of the Muslim Brotherhood which is under attack. The Saudi kingdom wants to give it the coup de grace to the advantage of the option of defending the old regime.

YL: What relationship is there with the recent visit to Riyadh of Donald Trump, who first attacked Qatar, before advocating the "unity" of the member countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)?

GA What really tipped the situation, in fact, is the change in Washington. The Obama administration appreciated the opportunity of playing both sides and benefiting from the option of the Muslim Brotherhood taking control. That is why there was a chill in relations between this administration and General Sissi in Egypt when he carried out his coup d'état in 2013. Trump, on the contrary, counts among his advisers Islamophobes who want today to classify the Muslim Brotherhood as "terrorist"; they thus find themselves on the same line as the United Arab Emirates, who are pushing in the same direction. The Saudis, under their new king, initially wanted to unite the Sunnis against Iran, and this included the Muslim Brotherhood. In Yemen, a broad front has been formed comprising the Saudis, the Qataris and the local Muslim Brotherhood, against the Houthis and the president who was deposed in 2011.

This was shattered by the change in Washington. Trump has no sympathy for democratic upsurges, as his predecessor might have had, however limited his sympathy may have been. He counts among his advisors hard-line Islamophobes, supporters of defining the Muslim Brotherhood as a "terrorist organization". They have worked with the Emirates, who have been fiercely hostile to the Muslim Brotherhood for years. With the blessing of Trump, this has led to the blockade of Qatar that we are witnessing.

YL: Is this about-turn of the Sunni oil monarchies - Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) - aimed at Iran, which itself has been the target of attacks claimed by the Islamic State ?

GA For the Saudis, the number one enemy is of course Iran. In the present conflict, Qatar has been accused of calling for dialogue with Iran. It would seem that there have been manipulations of "false news" to project this image of Qatar. Qatar is very much committed to supporting the Syrian opposition, and is therefore in direct opposition to Iran, and so far has been taking part in the war in Yemen. However, it has just been excluded from the coalition that is bombing Yemen. The question of Iran is not the real reason for what is happening to Qatar. What is at stake is Qatar's role in regional politics, especially its support for the Muslim Brotherhood in tandem with Erdogan's Turkey, not with Iran. In this, Qatar is the black sheep of the Gulf monarchies.

YL: While in Syria the battle of Rakka is taking place, in Iraq the battle of Mosul seems unending; what evolutions do we see in Daech and its branches, what are the relationships of forces?

GA It was clear from the beginning that the so-called Islamic State could not continue as a territorial entity. Daech's men seized the exceptional opportunity offered by a combination of factors to capture a vast territory, but it was unthinkable that they could control it over the long run. They took advantage of the moment when the United States had left Iraq and when the Sunni-Shiite religious tensions were at their height, as well as in Syria the Sunni-Alawi tensions.

Since then, the broad front of the opponents of Daech has been able to pull itself together and to take the offensive. Daech is in the final phase of its existence as a so-called state. What slows down their current rout is the struggle between different parties to decide who will take over the territories previously occupied by Daech. On the Syrian side there is a race between the Syrian regime supported by Iran and the Kurdish forces supported by the United States. Similarly, there is a conflict between the Kurdish forces in Iraq and the government forces closely linked to Iran. These conflicts within the conflict among those who are fighting Daech is delaying the whole process.

YL: What is the link between this growing destabilization of the region and the resurgence of attacks in Afghanistan, Iran and London?

GA Daech today is a beast at bay. When we see the most recent London bombing, a van and assailants armed with kitchen knives, this underlines the limits of their means. They can still use explosives, as in the Manchester bombing, but they mainly rely on rudimentary means, which can be terribly murderous but at the same time show the limits of what they can do. Unfortunately, they still find enough weak minds to embark in murderous follies by exploiting the resentment created by the experience of social marginality and racism in everyday life.

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