

Arcanum in the news

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By Jared Malsin

SAUDI ARABIA, ALLIES MAINTAIN COLD SHOULDER FOR QATAR AHEAD OF GULF SUMMIT

Saudi Arabia and its allies are settling in for a new phase of a protracted standoff with rival Qatar, as officials from opposing Gulf Arab states gathered in Riyadh on Sunday for a meeting of the Gulf Cooperation Council.

Both sides have repeatedly defied U.S. attempts to find middle ground—and Sunday’s meeting made little progress narrowing differences. The deadlock shows how Saudi Arabia and its allies have refused to back away from a 2017 blockade of Qatar that has divided key American allies in the Middle East and further complicated the crises in Yemen, Libya, and other conflicts where Gulf states project power.

“We’ve been pressing. We’ve been trying to tell them that we’re here,” said Gen. Anthony Zinni, the retired former commander of U.S. forces in the Middle East who was tasked with mediating in the Qatar crisis.

Saudi Arabia along with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt imposed sanctions on Qatar last year, accusing the tiny state of supporting terrorist groups, a charge it has denied.

At the summit on Sunday, Gulf officials voiced a need for cooperation among Gulf states, appearing to resist the prospect of Qatar’s departure from the six-nation bloc. The breakup of the bloc has been feared since the beginning of the embargo placed on Qatar in June 2017, with renewed speculation since Qatar left the Saudi-dominated Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries last week.

Still there was no sign of any concrete steps toward a resolution of the Qatar crisis at the summit, where Saudi Arabia’s King Salman also made an appearance. In a diplomatic snub, Qatar was represented not by its emir, but by Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Sultan Al-Muraikhi.

“Qatar’s policies are supporting extremism and terrorism,” Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir said. “There is no compromise there,” he added.

Adding to regional tensions is the October murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi—by a team of Saudi operatives inside the kingdom’s consulate in Istanbul—which unleashed an angry outpouring directed at Saudi Arabia’s day-to-day ruler, Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and put pressure on the royal court to seek ways to repair its battered image abroad.

In wake of the killing, the crown prince praised Qatar's economy in a comment the Saudi government said was a gesture toward Gulf unity, raising speculation of a possible rapprochement among the rival states. But no reconciliation took place.

Qatari officials said they didn't receive a clear signal that Saudi Arabia was prepared to negotiate, while Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E. have reiterated their original demands of Qatar.

Saudi Arabia and its three allies have never dropped their insistence that Qatar acknowledge and address a list of 13 demands they raised at the outset of the blockade, precluding any chance of negotiations, said Gen. Zinni, the U.S. mediator.

"I have not seen any break in the entrenchment that the Quartet has had on this issue in terms of willingness to bring this to a mediation," he said, referring to the four countries imposing the embargo on Qatar.

The Saudi-led bloc's originally demanded that Qatar shut down its popular satellite news channel Al Jazeera, a request widely regarded as unrealistic. The four countries also insisted that Qatar cut alleged links to terrorist groups.

"The political crisis will end when Qatar stops funding extremism and interfering in regional stability," said Anwar Gargash, the U.A.E.'s minister of state for foreign affairs, on Dec. 6.

Qatar has denied the allegations that it supports terror groups. The U.S. State Department also has said it is satisfied with Qatari efforts to crack down on terror financing. Qatar also hosts the some 10,000 U.S. troops and is working to shore up its security ties with the U.S. including an expansion of the largest American military base in the region.

The blockade has paralyzed the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council, but the summit remains a rare point of contact between Qatar and its rivals, who have otherwise ceased diplomatic relations.

The killing of Mr. Khashoggi, who was a columnist for the Washington Post and a permanent U.S. resident, also has strained the usually close ties between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia.

In recent weeks, leading members of Congress have called for sanctions on Saudi Arabia and cited U.S. intelligence linking the killing to Prince Mohammed.

But President Trump and key members of his administration have refused to blame the crown prince for the assassination, signaling support for the 33-year-old royal who has pursued an aggressive foreign policy, including a war in Yemen in which more than 10,000 people have died, according to the United Nations.

"There was a short term opportunity to try to improve things, and it was missed, frankly by all parties including the United States," said Elizabeth Dickinson, a senior analyst for the Arabian Peninsula at International Crisis Group.