

Donald Trump hoping to call Gulf states to Washington summit



US hopes to defuse simmering dispute between Qatar and other key states in the region

Donald Trump's advisers are hoping to call the leaders of the Gulf states to a summit in Washington this Autumn, despite Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates' insistence that they will not drop their demand for Qatar to cease its disruption across the region.

Key figures in the alliance of four Gulf states boycotting Qatar are wary of the Trump summit agenda, but say privately they are willing in principle to attend.

Qatar has been pressing for months for a summit, believing there can be no progress in the Gulf dispute without the involvement of the US. It has lobbied the US to acknowledge that the year-long collapse in Gulf unity is damaging to US

interests. It also claims US reliance on a reckless Saudi foreign policy could lead to chaos in Iran and the energy markets, paralysis in Yemen and extended proxy conflicts in the Horn of Africa and Libya.

The US secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, has urged all sides to end the dispute.

Gulf leaders privately concede they have collectively become locked in a dispute that appears ugly, and sometimes petty-minded, and so damaging the image of all Arab states in the eyes of the west. Much of the propaganda, such as hiring protesters, is designed for domestic Arab media. But they insist the underlying issues at stake are too important to abandon, and that Qatar's independent-minded royal family is ultimately culpable by reneging on commitments made in 2014.

The four Gulf states – UAE, Saudi, Bahrain and Egypt – launched a blockade on Qatar in June last year, expecting the gas-rich kingdom to succumb to the economic squeeze within months. More than a year later, with millions spent by both sides on lobbyists, PR firms and contracts, the Gulf Cooperation Council is nearly defunct and a frustrated Saudi Arabia is reduced to discussing whether to dig a ditch across its border with Qatar, in effect turning the Qatar peninsula into an island.

The two demands on Qatar, according to the UAE foreign minister, Anwar Gargash, have now boiled down to a requirement that Qatar ends “its million pounds of interference in the internal affairs” of the boycotting states, and stop its “irresponsible financial support” for political Islam including the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas.

“The Brotherhood is an incubator – the gateway drug – to jihadism of all kinds,” Gargash said at a speech on Thursday to the British centre-right thinktank Policy Exchange.

Gargash said that if the dispute could not be resolved, the

aim should be that Qatar is “no longer seen as a crisis, but as the new state of affairs”. He argued that in the Middle East three forces were competing against each another – Iran, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the modernising Gulf States increasingly open to women’s equality, represented by the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

Qatar, far from siding with its natural allies in the Gulf, was backing extremism and Iran, he said. Gargash also claimed Qatar was funding the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen.

But Qatari officials this week, during Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad’s visit to London, presented their country as a reliable ally of the west and pointed to the reckless foreign policy judgments of the Saudis, in particular in Yemen’s civil war.

Qatar and the US “laid the foundation stone for expanding” the chief US airbase in the Middle East at al-Udeid, located 35km southwest of Doha, they said. The US has flown tens of thousands of missions against Islamic State from the base, which houses 10,000 US armed forces. This hardly suggests Qatar is hostile to the US, the officials said.

More concerning for the US is the possibility that if the Gulf dispute drags on, Iran and Qatar could find themselves pushed towards one another in a diplomatic embrace born of mutual isolation. That would be a high price for the US to pay for letting the dispute fester.

Qatar, unlike the other Gulf states, has sided with Europe, and not the US, in saying Iran has complied with the nuclear deal – the JCPOA – signed in 2015. It regards US policy as likely to lead to chaos, rather than regime change favourable to the west. It was noticeable this week that Qatar was willing to warn Britain that Iran could well block the Straits of Hormuz if the US pushed sanctions too fiercely.

In the battle for Washington’s ear, the Saudi-UAE support for Trump’s stance on Iran may yet prove decisive. But Gargash

admits he is worried by the divergence between Europe and the US on Iran. Privately, some Gulf leaders would like to see Trump temper his anti-Europe rhetoric on trade in the interests of bringing Europe on board for the US plan to isolate Iran.