

Questions raised over paid protest timed for Qatari leader's No 10 visit



A casting agency advertised for paid extras to come and stand outside the gates of Downing Street when the emir of Qatar visits on Tuesday, amid accusations that the country's Gulf rivals are paying protesters to oppose the country's activities and create the impression of an upswell of British support against the country.

"This is NOT a film or TV production," said the advert from booking agency Extra People, offering £20 to respondents willing to take part. "The company are looking for a large group of people to fill space outside Downing Street during the visit of the president of Quatar [sic]. You will not have to do or say anything, they just want to fill space."

A Qatari diplomat pointed the finger at the country's regional rivals, who have placed it under an economic blockade since last year, creating a vicious and expensive media war often fought through lobbyists, online advertising and selective

leaks to journalists in the UK and US.

“The blockading countries have a long history of using paid protesters to try and discredit those who do not agree with their views,” said the Qatari diplomat. “Despite their latest attempts to spread lies about Qatar, the visit of HH the Emir has further strengthened the historic and strategic partnership between Qatar and the UK.”

The casting agency later retracted the advert and said that they did not want to be involved in providing extras for the event, which was arranged to coincide with the arrival of Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani to meet prime minister Theresa May.

“Upon receiving further information about the event, which regrettably was after our enquiry went out to our artistes, we began to understand what the hirer was asking of our artistes and the event involved,” said a spokesperson for the booking agency.

The agency declined to identify their client but said they backed out when they realised the event would involve the extras protesting outside the gates of Downing Street.

There have also been separate claims that attendees were paid to take part in an earlier anti-Qatar protest outside parliament on Monday afternoon. Protesters at the earlier event waved placards referring to allegations Qatar paid up to \$1bn to terrorist groups as a ransom for 28 members of a royal hunting party kidnapped in Iraq.

The advert raises questions over the growing influence of Gulf money in the UK, with the ongoing political struggle between Qatar and the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. It follows an agreement by the Independent to licence its brands to a publishing business with close links to the Saudi government to produce Middle Eastern versions of its publications.

A series of anti-Qatar adverts have appeared on billboards around London, while other adverts highlighted the country's treatment of migrant workers, its record on LGBT rights, and the continued existence of an absolute monarchy.

Many of the protests were also attended by British-based Qatari businessman Khalid Al-Hail. He has previously organised a "Qatari opposition" conference in London featuring paid speakers, such as the former cabinet minister Iain Duncan Smith and the BBC journalist John Simpson.

Al-Hail has also been linked to a high-profile big budget football conference opposing corruption in sport, which was attended by Tory MP Damian Collins and footballer Louis Saha, and focused on criticism of the decision to award Qatar the right to host the 2022 World Cup.

Qatar's successful bid to host tournament has been beset by widespread allegations of corruption and poor conditions for workers building the stadiums.

Qatari-funded news network al-Jazeera has previously claimed that extras were paid to protest against the Qatari government at events in Germany.