

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 Co-operation 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.

Mueller Examining Trump's Tweets in Wide-Ranging Obstruction Inquiry



WASHINGTON – For years, President Trump has used Twitter as his go-to public relations weapon, mounting a barrage of attacks on celebrities and then political rivals even after advisers warned he could be creating legal problems for himself.

Those concerns now turn out to be well founded. The special counsel, Robert S. Mueller III, is scrutinizing tweets and negative statements from the president about Attorney General Jeff Sessions and the former F.B.I. director James B. Comey, according to three people briefed on the matter.

Several of the remarks came as Mr. Trump was also privately pressuring the men – both key witnesses in the inquiry – about the investigation, and Mr. Mueller is examining whether the actions add up to attempts to obstruct the investigation by both intimidating witnesses and pressuring senior law enforcement officials to tamp down the inquiry.

Mr. Mueller wants to question the president about the tweets. His interest in them is the latest addition to a range of presidential actions he is investigating as a possible obstruction case: private interactions with Mr. Comey, Mr. Sessions and other senior administration officials about the Russia inquiry; misleading White House statements; public attacks; and possible pardon offers to potential witnesses.

None of what Mr. Mueller has homed in on constitutes obstruction, Mr. Trump's lawyers said. They argued that most of the presidential acts under scrutiny, including the firing of Mr. Comey, fall under Mr. Trump's authority as the head of the executive branch and insisted that he should not even have to answer Mr. Mueller's questions about obstruction.

But privately, some of the lawyers have expressed concern that Mr. Mueller will stitch together several episodes, encounters and pieces of evidence, like the tweets, to build a case that the president embarked on a broad effort to interfere with the investigation. Prosecutors who lack one slam-dunk piece of evidence in obstruction cases often search for a larger pattern of behavior, legal experts said.

The special counsel's investigators have told Mr. Trump's lawyers they are examining the tweets under a wide-ranging

obstruction-of-justice law beefed up after the Enron accounting scandal, according to the three people. The investigators did not explicitly say they were examining possible witness tampering, but the nature of the questions they want to ask the president, and the fact that they are scrutinizing his actions under a section of the United States Code titled "Tampering With a Witness, Victim, or an Informant," raised concerns for his lawyers about Mr. Trump's exposure in the investigation.

A spokesman for Mr. Mueller's office declined to comment.

Mr. Trump's lead lawyer in the case, Rudolph W. Giuliani, dismissed Mr. Mueller's interest in the tweets as part of a desperate quest to sink the president.

"If you're going to obstruct justice, you do it quietly and secretly, not in public," Mr. Giuliani said.

Mr. Giuliani was referring to more typical obstruction cases, where prosecutors focus on measures taken in private, like bribing witnesses, destroying evidence or lying under oath. While some of Mr. Trump's private acts are under scrutiny, like asking Mr. Comey for loyalty, his public conduct is as well. That sets this investigation apart, even from those of other presidents; Richard M. Nixon and Bill Clinton were accused of privately trying to influence witness testimony.

But as in those cases, federal investigators are seeking to determine whether Mr. Trump was trying to use his power to punish anyone who did not go along with his attempts to curtail the investigation.

If Mr. Mueller opts to tailor a narrative that the president tried to obstruct the Russia investigation, he would have to clear several hurdles to make a strong case. He would need credible witnesses (Mr. Comey and Mr. Sessions have been the target of concerted attacks by Mr. Trump and allies, undercutting their standing) and evidence that Mr. Trump had

criminal intent (the special counsel has told the president's lawyers he needs to question him to determine this).

"There's rarely evidence that someone sits down and says, 'I intend to commit a crime,' so any type of investigation hangs on using additional evidence to build a narrative arc that hangs together," said Samuel W. Buell, a professor of law at Duke University and former senior federal prosecutor. "That's why a prosecutor wants more pieces of evidence. You need to lock down the argument."

It is not clear what Mr. Mueller will do if he concludes he has enough evidence to prove that Mr. Trump committed a crime. He has told the president's lawyers that he will follow Nixon- and Clinton-era Justice Department memos that concluded that a sitting president cannot be indicted, Mr. Giuliani has said. If Mr. Mueller does not plan to make a case in court, a report of his findings could be sent to Congress, leaving it to lawmakers to decide whether to begin impeachment proceedings.

Investigators want to ask Mr. Trump about the tweets he wrote about Mr. Sessions and Mr. Comey and why he has continued to publicly criticize Mr. Comey and the former deputy F.B.I. director Andrew G. McCabe, another witness against the president. They also want to know about a January episode in the Oval Office in which Mr. Trump asked the White House counsel, Donald F. McGahn II, about reports that Mr. McGahn told investigators about the president's efforts to fire Mr. Mueller himself last year.

Mr. Trump has navigated the investigation with a mix of public and private cajoling of witnesses.

Around the time he said publicly last summer that he would have chosen another attorney general had he known Mr. Sessions was going to recuse himself from the Russia investigation, Mr. Trump tried behind closed doors to persuade Mr. Sessions to reverse that decision. The special counsel's investigators

have also learned that Mr. Trump wanted Mr. Sessions to resign at varying points in May and July 2017 so he could replace him with a loyalist to oversee the Russia investigation.

After Mr. Trump tried last July to get Mr. Sessions to resign, the president began a three-day public attack on a variety of fronts – tweets, a Rose Garden news conference and a Wall Street Journal interview – criticizing Mr. Sessions, raising the specter that he would fire him.

Similarly, Mr. Trump's relationship with Mr. Comey was strained from the start by the president's encroachment on the typically independent Justice Department. In late March of 2017, the president asked Mr. Comey to put out word that he was not under investigation. Mr. Comey demurred, and when the president called about two weeks later to ask again, Mr. Comey responded that he had passed along the proposal to the Justice Department, he later testified.

That request having gone nowhere, Mr. Trump issued an indirect threat the next day about Mr. Comey's job. "It's not too late" to ask him to step down as F.B.I. director, he said in an interview with Maria Bartiromo on Fox Business Network. The special counsel wants to ask the president what he meant by that remark.

A few weeks later, in early May, an aide to Mr. Sessions sought derogatory information about the F.B.I. director. Mr. Sessions, his aide told a Capitol Hill staff member, wanted one negative article a day in the news media about Mr. Comey, a person familiar with the meeting has said.

Four days later, Mr. Trump fired Mr. Comey, citing at first his management of the investigation of Hillary Clinton's use of a private email server to handle classified information.

By the fall, Mr. Comey had become a chief witness against the president in the special counsel investigation, and Mr. Trump's ire toward him was well established. His personal

attacks evolved into attacks on Mr. Comey's work, publicly calling on the Justice Department to examine his handling of the Clinton inquiry – and drawing the special counsel's interest.

Mr. Mueller's deputies told Mr. Trump's lawyers they also wanted to question the president about similar statements at the time by the White House press secretary, Sarah Huckabee Sanders.

"The Department of Justice has to look into any allegations of whether or not something is illegal or not," Ms. Sanders said at a press briefing last September. "That's not up to me to decide. What I've said and what I'm talking about are facts. James Comey – leaking of information, questionable statements under oath, politicizing an investigation – those are real reasons for why he was fired."

Mr. Trump's lawyers have pushed back against the special counsel about the tweets, saying the president is a politician under 24-hour attack and is within his rights to defend himself using social media or any other means.

The president continues to wield his Twitter account to pummel witnesses and the investigation itself, ignoring any legal concerns or accusations of witness intimidation. This week, he moved to strip the security clearances of six former senior national security officials, including Mr. Comey, Mr. McCabe and some of his most outspoken critics. And he tweeted false claims about the Russia investigation.

How a diplomatic crisis among Gulf nations led to a fake news campaign in the United States



By now, the story of how Russia used fake news to push its own agenda in the United States is well known.

But it's not just Kremlin-produced disinformation that Americans may have stumbled upon recently. Browsing Facebook and Twitter – and even just perusing the magazine rack at their local Walmart – they may have also been exposed to propaganda supporting the ambitious goals of two oil-rich Arab Gulf countries.

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have long spent huge

sums of money on Washington lobbyists and public relations firms to win favor with those in power in the United States and those who influence them. But when Saudi Arabia and the UAE launched a boycott and blockade of the tiny peninsula state of Qatar last year, organizations with ties to Riyadh and Abu Dhabi tried something new: They worked to sway American public opinion through online and social media campaigns, bringing a complicated, distant conflict among three Washington allies to US shores.

The Gulf crisis began in June 2017 when Saudi Arabia and the UAE led other Arab countries in cutting diplomatic relations with Qatar. They accused Qatar of supporting terrorism and destabilizing the region, a charge Doha rejects. After initiating an economic blockade, the boycotting countries issued a list of 13 demands for Qatar to meet, including aligning foreign policy with theirs, ending support for the Muslim Brotherhood, shuttering the satellite news channel Al Jazeera and cutting ties with Iran.

As they took steps against Doha, Saudi Arabia and the UAE also initiated propaganda efforts in the US aimed at weakening Washington's alliance with Qatar – which hosts the largest American military base in the Middle East – while also enhancing their own images.

Take, for example, The Qatar Insider.

The anti-Qatar website went live last year, advertising itself as “your comprehensive source for information on #QatarCrisis.” It pushed a steady stream of clickbait-style disinformation, often relying on catchy, misleading infographics to try to draw in an audience.

It wasn't an ordinary news outlet. The Saudi American Public Relation Affairs Committee (SAPRAC), a pro-Saudi lobby group not officially tied to the Saudi government, paid \$2.6 million last year to the now-defunct, Washington-based lobbying firm

the Podesta Group for public affairs services that included running the anti-Qatar website and its associated social media properties.

Among The Qatar Insider's claims were that Qatar had spent a whopping \$64.2 billion on supporting terrorism between 2010 and 2015 (citing the "US Treasury" as a source); that Qatar not only supports ISIS, but trained its fighters; that al-Qaeda's 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (who is imprisoned at Guantanamo Bay) is being "sheltered" by Qatar; that the Qatari state has openly threatened to carry out genocide on its people to quiet dissent; and that in preparing for the 2022 World Cup, Qatar has bankrolled Pyongyang's dictatorship and nuclear program by allowing North Korean workers to work on World Cup infrastructure projects.

TV ads aired in the US by the Podesta Group that advertised The Qatar Insider were identified to viewers as "distributed by SAPRAC" and "sponsored by the embassy of Bahrain," a close Saudi ally that was involved in funding SAPRAC. But The Qatar Insider's website made no mention of the Podesta Group, SAPRAC or the Saudi or Bahraini governments. It was laid out like a news site, with its "about us" section describing it as "the comprehensive source for information on the truth about Qatar's funding, activities and support for terrorist and extreme Islamist groups."

In its contract with the SAPRAC, the Podesta Group wrote that their online campaign would target "low-hanging fruit," which they described as users who were actively seeking information about Saudi Arabia and Qatar. The goal was to ensure "that they see the content we want them to see at the top of their search results."

Along with painting Qatar as a terror-friendly nation, The Qatar Insider encouraged the US to remove its Al Udeid Air Base, which is home to the forward headquarters of the US Central Command, from Qatar and lobbied against Qatar hosting

the 2022 World Cup.

SCL Social Limited, which is owned by the same parent company as Cambridge Analytica, took an approach similar to the Podesta Group when it was awarded a \$333,000 contract for social media outreach on behalf of the UAE's government.

Last September, the company spent more than \$60,000 on ads on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and other online platforms to promote the #BoycottQatar hashtag and link to a mix of articles critical of Qatar alongside disinformation.

Their ads were blunt and focused on Americans: "Trump: Qatar engaged in terrorism-related activity," read one.

Most of the posts on their Boycott Qatar Facebook and Twitter pages have disappeared, but documents supplied to the Department of Justice show that they frequently linked to The Qatar Insider while also pointing users to articles critical of Doha in more credible publications.

Efforts have not been limited to simple meme-formatted clickbait and ads on social media.

Last fall, a film billed as an "educational documentary" called "Qatar: A Dangerous Alliance" appeared online and was distributed to guests at an event hosted by the conservative Hudson Institute that featured Steve Bannon, a former senior adviser to President Donald Trump and the ex-chairman of Breitbart News.

The film had a clear anti-Qatar bent, but it was presented as an American production. But documents filed to the Department of Justice in recent months show that the film was made by two US companies paid by Lapis Middle East and North Africa, a Dubai-based communications firm that has worked for the UAE's government. One of those companies, Andreae & Associates, is headed by Charles Andreae, a former CEO of Bell Pottinger, which produced fake Iraqi insurgent videos as part of US

government propaganda push during his time with the company. Andreae & Associates was paid \$565,000 for their role in the anti-Qatar documentary. Videos uploaded to the film's YouTube channel has counted nearly one million views.

And when Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, visited the US in March, a magazine bearing his face and celebrating his reign appeared at 200,000 outlets across the country. The Saudi Embassy denied knowledge of the magazine, and the company that published it, National Enquirer publisher American Media Inc., denied receiving guidance from the Saudis.

Citing employees of American Media Inc, The New York Times later reported that the magazine was an attempt by the publisher's CEO to win business in Saudi Arabia. Still, there was evidencethat the Saudi Embassy and advisers to the Saudi royal family had received advanced copies of the publication, hinting that they were involved in its creation and fawning tone.

These attempts to woo the American public came even as the Saudis and Emiratis had access to the highest levels of power in the US – as well as the ability to influence Washington's Gulf policy.

Seeing Trump's hostility toward Iran mirroring their own, Saudi Arabia and the UAE were eager to strengthen their relationship with the former reality TV host when he took office, despite his harsh campaign-trail criticisms of Islam and Saudis (who, he once said, "want women as slaves and to kill gays"). In May, The New York Times reported that an emissary of Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed and the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed bin Zayed, held a meeting with Donald Trump Jr. ahead of the 2016 elections offering their support to Trump as well as social media help in winning the election.

The early outreach attempts seemed to work: Trump's first international trip as president, in May 2017, was to Saudi Arabia, where he signed a \$110 billion arms deal. And when the Qatar crisis broke out the next month, Trump quickly expressed support for Riyadh and Abu Dhabi and accused Qatar of supporting terror.

"I think the Saudis and Emiratis very quickly grasped that they had pretty much a clean slate to try to paint – and I think that's exactly what they tried to do," said Kristian Ulrichsen, a Gulf expert at the Baker Institute for Public Policy at Rice University.

But Ulrichsen questions how effective the broader propaganda efforts have been.

"Very few of these moves – to target Facebook, Twitter, to make videos that very few people watch – would have any impact on shaping public opinion," he said. "In terms of the Gulf crisis ... very few people [in the US] actually think about it at all."

Sigurd Neubauer, a Washington-based Middle East analyst, agreed.

"If you asked the average American about the Gulf and they see these commercials, they will not be able to tell the difference," he said. "And for those who do know the difference, they will remember that Saudi Arabia, not Qatar, had its citizens participating in the 9/11 attacks."

While Qatar has not apparently engaged in the kind of propaganda war that groups linked to Saudi Arabia and the UAE have in the US, it has not sat idle. Qatar – or, at best, its friends – has been involved in the hacking and leaking of emails designed to embarrass the UAE and reveal its role in trying to influence the Trump campaign. Qatar has increased its spending on lobbyists while also trying to soften its image by wooing American Jewish groups, including the Zionist

Organization of America, which previously called for Qatar to be listed as a state sponsor of terrorism. And in May, Qatar flexed its soft power muscles when it offered to pay to keep the Washington, DC, metro open after a Capitals playoff game.

Over time, Trump softened his tone on Qatar, and now again hails them as an ally against terrorism. The situation remains delicate, but the US is once again on a friendly footing with all three allies, even as their own feud continues and Saudi Arabia threatens to turn Qatar into an island.

But to Neubauer, the Gulf crisis has left all parties involved looking bad.

“Instead of saying one country is better than the other, everyone looks really, really horrible,” he said. “It really raises questions about what kind of partners these countries are for the United States.”

UAE denies report of Houthi drone attack on Abu Dhabi airport

(Reuters) – The United Arab Emirates (UAE) denied reports on Thursday that Yemen’s Iranian-aligned Houthi movement had attacked Abu Dhabi airport with a drone, and said operations were unaffected.

Houthi-run media said earlier that a Sammad-3 drone had launched three strikes on the facility, disrupting air traffic, but did not provide any evidence and there were no reports of damage or casualties.

“Operations at the airport are business as usual,” a UAE official told Reuters.

The Houthis attacked two tankers in the Bab al-Mandeb strait a day earlier, prompting Saudi Arabia to suspend oil shipments through the strategic Red Sea lane.

The Houthis control much of northern Yemen and have said Abu Dhabi, a member of the Western-backed coalition fighting against them since 2015, was a target for their missiles.

The UAE has an advanced anti-missile interception system – the Theater High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) which is designed to destroy short- and intermediate-range missiles both inside and outside the Earth’s atmosphere.

Abu Dhabi airport tweeted earlier in the day that there had been an incident involving a supply vehicle which had not affected operations, but it was unclear if it was referring to the same incident.

In December last year, the Houthis said they fired a cruise missile toward a nuclear power plant in Abu Dhabi.

KSA suspends oil shipments through Bab Al Mandab after Houthi terror attack



- Houthi terrorists earlier attacked two Saudi giant oil tankers, causing “slight damage” to one of the vessels
- The Arab Coalition helping Yemen’s legitimate government said the Houthis almost caused an environmental disaster.

JEDDAH: Saudi Arabia has suspended oil shipments through Bab Al-Mandab Strait after Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen attacked two oil tankers, Energy Minister Khalid Al-Falih said on Wednesday.

“All oil shipments passing through Bab Al-Mandab Strait have been suspended temporarily until navigation through the area is secure,” Al-Falih said in a statement released through the Saudi Press Agency (SPA) and state TV Al-Ekhbariyah.

Al-Falih and Saudi Aramco confirmed in statements that two giant oil tankers belonging to the Saudi National Shipping Company, each carrying 2 million barrels of crude oil, were attacked by Houthi terrorists in the Red Sea Wednesday morning after crossing Bab al-Mandab.

“One of the ships sustained minimal damage. No injuries nor oil spill have been reported,” Aramco said.

The oil giant said the decision to suspend shipments was “in

the interest of the safety of ships and their crews and to avoid the risk of oil spill.”

Earlier, the pro-Houthi Al-Masirah television said that the rebels had targeted a Saudi warship named Al-Dammam, without providing further details.

But the Arab Coalition supporting the legitimate government of Yemen President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi said crude oil tankers were attacked.

Col. Turki Al-Maliki, spokesman of the coalition, said the Houthis “had almost caused an environmental disaster.”

The coalition has repeatedly raised alarm that Houthi rebels threaten vessels in the Red Sea – a key shipping route for world trade – through their control of the strategic Hodeida port.

The Bab Al-Mandab Strait, one of the world’s busiest shipping routes, links the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, and the Indian Ocean.

“This terrorist attack is a dangerous threat to the freedom of navigation and international trade in the Red Sea,” said Colonel Al-Malik.

“Port of Hodeida is still the starting point of terrorist attacks,” he said.

Pro-government forces backed up by a coalition led by Saudi Arabia have paused their offensive on Hodeida port in a bid they say to give UN-led peace efforts a chance.

The United Arab Emirates, whose forces in the coalition have been spearheading the Hodeida assault, has warned that troops could “liberate” the port city if those efforts fail.

Saudi Arabia intervened in Yemen in 2015 at the head of a military coalition backing the country’s government after Houthi rebels ousted it from the capital Sanaa the previous year.

Meanwhile, the UN special envoy for Yemen Martin Griffiths arrived Wednesday in the capital, Sanaa to meet with rebel leaders amid efforts to restart peace talks after a two-year hiatus.

Yemeni Prime Minister Ahmed Obaid bin Daghr said Sunday the rebels should release all detainees and captives held in their prisons ahead of peace talks. He said the Houthis should also hand over their arms and withdraw from all rebel-held areas including Sanaa, which they seized in September 2014.

Last month, Griffiths announced plans to bring Yemen's warring parties to the negotiating table. He held several meetings with both sides since.

Yemen's three-year stalemated war has damaged Yemen's infrastructure, crippled the health system and pushed it to the brink of famine.

The impoverished country is also now in the world's worst humanitarian crisis, with more than 22.2 million people in need of assistance. Malnutrition, cholera and other diseases have killed or sickened thousands of civilians over the years.

Qatar to maintain its position as world's largest LNG producer: NBK



With non-oil growth expected to taper as the government's investment programme reaches an advanced phase, Qatar has turned back to gas/liquefied natural gas (LNG) production as it intends to maintain its position as the world's largest LNG producer, according to NBK.

Non-oil growth is expected to taper with the government's investment programme reaching an advanced phase; only four years remain for many of the high-profile infrastructure projects, such as the metro, light rail system and stadia, to be completed in time for the 2022 FIFA World Cup, it said in a report.

The \$7.4bn Hamad Port, which Qatar plans to develop into a regional transport hub and with which Doha hopes to bypass trade sanctions, was officially inaugurated at the end of 2017, leaving only a handful of projects left for the authorities to eke out future output gains, it said.

"Attention, therefore, has turned back to gas/LNG production," NBK said, adding in the short term, the delayed 1.4bn cubic feet per day Barzan gas facility should finally come on line in the fourth quarter of 2018, supplying additional volumes of gas and condensates; while in the medium term, Qatar's intention to expand liquefaction capacity by 30% to 100mn

tonnes per annum will significantly boost growth in the hydrocarbon sector.

Qatar's economic growth is expected to edge up slightly in 2018 to 1.7%, following last year's growth of 1.5%, before accelerating to 2.2% in 2019.

The economic activity will benefit from output gains in both the hydrocarbon (+0.3%) and non-hydrocarbon sectors (+3.3%), with the former witnessing an expansion in crude and LNG production and the latter benefitting from the government's \$200bn infrastructure spending programme.

Qatar's public finances appear to be on a sound footing following the government's fiscal consolidation efforts (cuts to subsidies, merging of ministries etc.), which brought public expenditures down by 12% in 2017, and the rise in oil and gas prices, it said.

"The fiscal deficit should continue to narrow to 1.2% of GDP (gross domestic product) by 2019, helped by firmer energy prices and additional non-hydrocarbon revenue streams, such as value added tax," it said.

The deficit has been financed primarily by domestic debt, although Qatar returned to the international bond markets in April with a successful \$12bn bond sale.

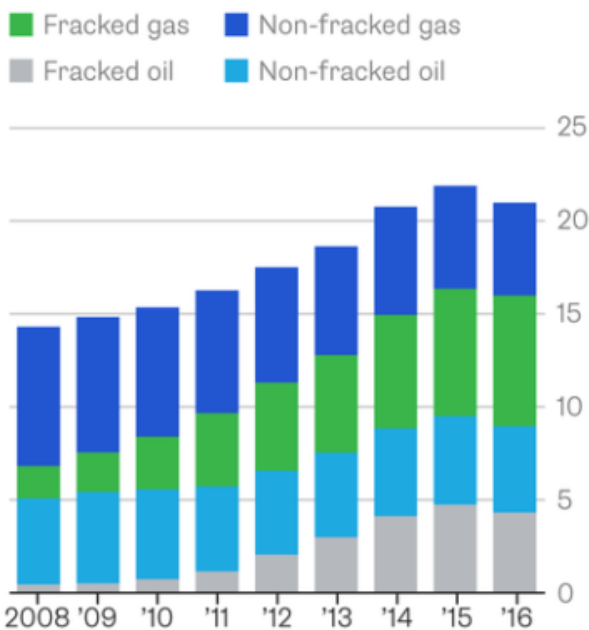
Meanwhile, Qatar Central Bank's international reserves appear to have recovered to \$24.7bn in May; around \$20bn was tapped in 2017 to stem the capital outflows.

NBK said public debt is expected to peak at 57.8% of GDP this year, before falling to 54.3% of GDP in 2019.

Fracking

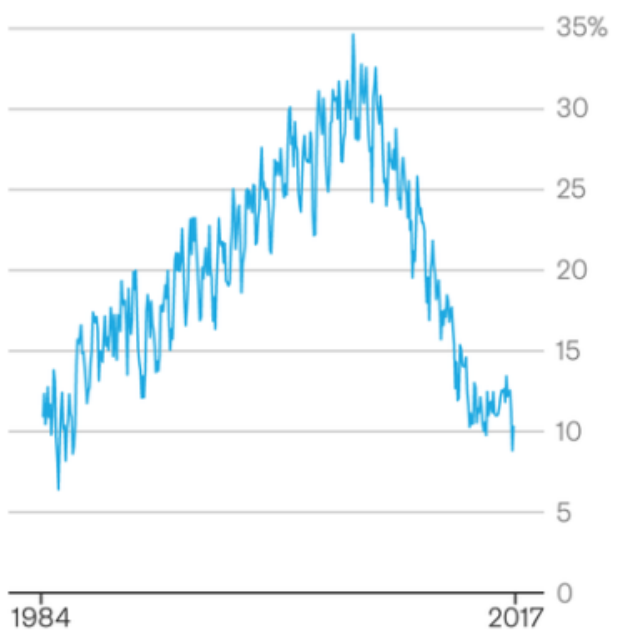
Fracking Drives U.S. Energy Boom...

Estimates, in millions of barrels of oil or the equivalent per day



... and Energy Independence

U.S. net energy imports as a share of energy consumption



Sources: William Foiles, Bloomberg Intelligence; U.S. Energy Information Administration

BloombergQuickTake

Fracking to extract oil and natural gas from shale rock has produced a flood of energy in the U.S. and Canada, lowered fuel prices and created tens of thousands of jobs. It's helped the two countries lessen their dependence on foreign energy and cut their use of coal, the dirtiest fossil fuel, by almost a third since 2008. At the same time, fracking is associated with earthquakes, greenhouse-gas emissions and water and air pollution. Fracking raises questions about whether the benefits justify the costs, whether the minuses can be diminished through technology and regulation, or whether fracking presents a threat so grave it must be banned, an action many communities have taken.

The Situation

Hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, was largely responsible for a 52 percent increase in U.S. oil and gas output from 2008 to 2015 and has made the country one of the world's biggest producers of the two fuels. Fracking generates a little more than half the oil and gas the U.S. produces today. The practice has yet to take off outside North America.

Environmental concerns have provoked a backlash, with bans or limits imposed by several European countries, Canada's Quebec province and, in the U.S., the states of New York, Vermont and Maryland and hundreds of counties and municipalities. Saudi Arabia and other members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries tried to drive North American frackers out of business starting in 2014 by flooding the market to push down oil prices. The biggest crash in the price of crude in a generation put some frackers out of business and prompted others to scale back. In 2016, U.S. crude production declined 5.7 percent and gas output fell 1.7 percent. After slashing costs by more than a quarter by adopting more efficient drilling techniques, the fracking industry began to rejuvenate in 2017. At the same time, U.S. President Donald Trump began to reduce energy regulations.

The Background

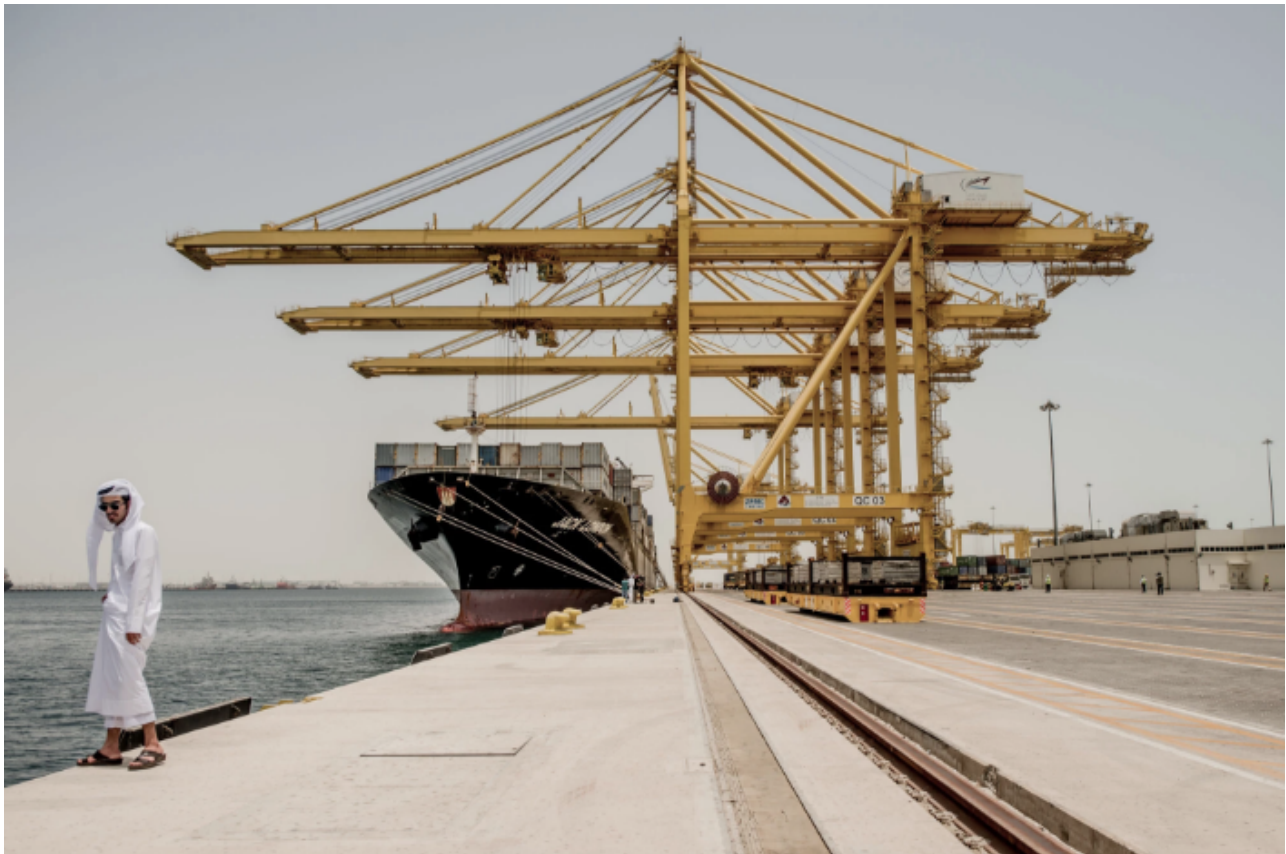
The first commercial use of fracking was in 1949 in Oklahoma. The technique involves forcing water mixed with sand and chemicals into a well to create fissures in shale rock so the oil or gas trapped inside escapes. Advances in another innovation, horizontal drilling, came in the early 1980s and provided access to shallow layers of shale deep underground. The subsequent exploitation of the Barnett Shale formation in Texas proved large-scale fracking was economically viable, not least because of high oil and gas prices.

The Argument

Advocates of fracking point out that abundant gas has let many U.S. power plants abandon coal, helping drive down energy-related carbon emissions 12 percent from 2005 to 2015. It's also decreased U.S. dependence on Persian Gulf oil, with U.S. net energy imports as a share of consumption in recent years hovering around 10 percent – levels last seen in the 1980s. The environmental risks of fracking, proponents argue, can be mitigated. For instance, operators can reduce leaks of

methane, a potent greenhouse gas, by testing and repairing pressure safety valves. Pollution of nearby water sources can be minimized by ensuring that oil and gas wells are properly sealed with cement. Fracking's champions say the risks of small earthquakes – linked mainly to the injection of wastewater into underground wells – can be lessened by mapping deep-rock formations and avoiding areas where tremors might result. They say frackers can trim their tremendous consumption of fresh water by recycling wastewater or using foam or gel as alternatives. Opponents say fracking is inherently too hazardous to tolerate. They say that methane leaks not only offset the greenhouse-gas savings from fracking but could outweigh them. Critics say strictly enforced nationwide regulations are required before operators would make investments that might curb environmental risks. They argue that the oil and gas industry has the power to block comprehensive regulation, and that the Trump administration has no interest in such oversight in any case. That leaves in place an existing patchwork of gap-filled laws. Opponents argue that the abundance of fossil fuels fracking produces will prove a curse because it will delay the development of renewable alternatives and thus impede the effort to slow global warming.

Court Orders U.A.E. to Let Expelled Qataris Back In



CAIRO – The top United Nations court intervened Monday in the bitter political feud dividing the Persian Gulf, ordering the United Arab Emirates to allow the return of Qatari citizens expelled from the country last year.

The provisional order by the International Court of Justice, which is based in The Hague, is expected to have limited concrete effect. The court has no powers of enforcement and the United Arab Emirates, in response to the verdict, insisted it was already in compliance with it.

But the decision, by the most prominent international body to rule on the dispute, struck a symbolic blow to the punishing trade and diplomatic embargo that the United Arab Emirates and its allies – Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Bahrain – have been pressing against Qatar for the past year in an effort to isolate the tiny and fabulously wealthy nation.

“This sends an early, strong signal that there will be no tolerance shown to countries that take arbitrary measures against Qataris,” Lulwa al-Khater, a spokeswoman for Qatar’s

foreign ministry, said in comments published by Qatar's state media.

The ruling may have its biggest impact in the battle for influence in Western capitals and international bodies, where Qatar and its foes have spent tens of millions of dollars in the past year on conferences, lawyers, news media advertisements and Washington lobbyists.

The court order "marks another blow to the blockade, which has failed from the beginning to gain support from the international community," said Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, a fellow for the Middle East at Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy.

Qatar's foes initially enjoyed loud support from President Trump, who appeared to side with their accusations that Qatar was financing Islamist terrorist groups and was secretly in league with Iran. Qatar denied the charges, saying it was being targeted for its outspoken TV network, Al Jazeera.

American officials pointed out that Qatar was home to a major American military air base, and Mr. Trump later backed off. In April he welcomed Qatar's emir, Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, to the White House, where Mr. Trump hailed him as a "great friend."

In the complaint filed to the International Court of Justice last month, Qatar argued that the United Arab Emirates breached an international convention on racism when it expelled thousands of Qatari citizens in the opening weeks of the embargo in June 2017.

Under the ruling issued Monday, the United Arab Emirates must allow families with a Qatari member that were separated to be reunited, and Qatari students who were expelled must be allowed to resume classes or obtain records to continue elsewhere. A third order stipulated that Qataris should be allowed to seek legal redress in the United Arab Emirates.

The orders do not constitute a final ruling, and it could be years before the full case is heard and decided.

The United Arab Emirates minister of state for foreign affairs, Anwar Gargash, attempted to put a positive spin on the decision, saying in a Twitter post that the judges had refused six other Qatari demands.

Mr. Gargash said his government had already met the “conditions required” by the court ruling.

Actors offered money by UK casting agency to take part in ‘anti-Qatar event’ outside Downing Street



A UK casting agency has been offering actors money to take part in an “anti-Qatar event” outside Downing Street during a meeting between Theresa May and the ruler of the Arab country.

The Independent has seen an email sent to extras offering £20 per person to take part in the supposed protest from 11am until 12.30pm on Tuesday, just before Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani is due to arrive at No 10.

“This is NOT a film or TV production,” casting agency Extra People said in the email to their actors. “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). This is an ANTI-Qatar event – You will not have to do or say anything, they just want to fill space. You will be finished at 12:30.”

Extra People told *The Independent* it was “contacted by an individual” to “source people” for the event, but refused to

reveal the identity of the client.

At 8.15pm, shortly after media reports first began to circulate about the job offer, the agency sent another mass email to its extras saying “on reflection” it would not be involved “in such a project”.

A spokesperson said the agency decided to cancel the project having begun “to understand what the hirer was asking of our artistes and the event involved” after “receiving further information”.

“We quickly made the decision to withdraw our involvement and wish to have no association with the event,” he added.

The planned event comes amid a visit to Britain by Mr al-Thani aimed at promoting Qatar in the face of a year-long blockade by four neighbouring states – Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain.

They accuse Qatar of funding Islamist terrorism, supporting extremists and fostering ties with Saudi’s arch-rival Iran.

Qatar in turn has accused Saudi Arabia, its biggest neighbour, of “bullying” and risking a new conflict amid the ongoing diplomatic crisis.

On Tuesday, the UAE was ordered by the United Nations’ highest court to immediately allow Qatari families affected by the dispute between the countries to reunite.

The International Court of Justice in The Hague imposed the measure before it hears the full case filed by Qatar at a later date.

According to Qatar, which filed the suit in June, the UAE has as part of the boycott expelled thousands of Qataris, blocked transport and closed down the offices of the Doha-based Al-Jazeera news channel.

The UAE had argued the case was without merit and should be dismissed.

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 Qatar [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.