

KEEPING ON IN QATAR

Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Egypt, and other Muslim nations in June cut diplomatic ties and sea and land connections with Qatar, saying the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) country supports terrorism.

Saudi Arabia made the decision “as a result of grave violations being committed by the authorities in Doha over the past years,” according to a statement posted by the official Saudi news agency.

In the statement, Saudi Arabia accused Qatar of supporting the Muslim Brotherhood, ISIS, al Qaeda, Iran-backed “terrorist groups,” and other extremists.

Just hours after the announcement, commercial airlines in the region began suspending flights between Doha and cities in the four other countries. However, US military aircraft continued to conduct missions out of al Udeid Air Base, Qatar, said Lt. Col. Damien Pickart, spokesman for US Air Forces Central Command.

That included flights in support of Operation Inherent Resolve, Freedom’s Sentinel, and chartered flights that carry service members to and from the area, Pickart said.

“The United States and the coalition are grateful to the Qataris for their longstanding support of our presence and their enduring commitment to regional security,” Pickart said in an email to *Air Force Magazine*.

“We encourage all our partners in the region to work towards common solutions that enable regional security,” he continued.

Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson, speaking at a press conference in Australia, said he believes there is “a growing list of some irritants in the region that have been there for some time, and obviously they have now bubbled up to a level that countries decided they needed to take action in an effort to have those differences addressed.”

Tillerson said the US “certainly would encourage the parties to sit down together and address these differences,” adding that “it is important that the GCC remain unified.”

Still, he said he did not expect the move to have an impact on the “unified fight against terrorism in the region or globally.”

Qatar’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs said it was surprised at the decision by the countries to sever diplomatic relations and said the move was “unjustified and based on false claims and assumptions,” according to a translation by Al-Jazeera.

Qatar “has been subjected to a campaign of lies,” the statement continued, alleging that the move revealed “a hidden plan to undermine the State of Qatar.”

Al Udeid is the home of the 379th Air Expeditionary Wing, and more than 11,000 US and coalition troops are deployed to or assigned to the base. Nearly 1,000 of those troops work in the combined air and space operations center, and an aircraft takes off or lands there about every 10 minutes, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, Pickart said.

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

In May, 12 F-15C Eagles, two KC-135 Stratotankers, and about 230 England-based airmen deployed to bases in Finland and Sweden for exercise Arctic Challenge 2017.



Despite upheaval in Qatar, USAF continues operations, like this B-52’s arrival, at al Udeid Air Base.

The exercise included troops from Belgium, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, Norway, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the US. Arctic Challenge included live-flying training for offensive and defensive air combat.

The goal was to work with partner nations and increase interoperability, said Lt. Col. Jason Zumwalt, commander of the 493rd Fighter Squadron.

“These practice opportunities and experiences allow our pilots and maintainers to work together side-by-side with our partners and allies to plan, execute, and debrief some very complex missions. That allows us to see how we can better work together in the future,” he said.

Also in Europe, the Baltic Operations exercise—known as BALTOPS—in June marked the first time in two decades that a US E-3 Sentry AWACS aircraft participated in a NATO exercise, according to the Air Force.

Lt. Col. Jim Matthey, detachment commander for the 513th Air Control Group, said since the airmen are Reservists, most of their training is in the US, “so it is vital we seek opportunities to integrate and exercise various operation plans.”

The unit participated in three exercises in the Pacific region in the past two years and decided to work with US Air Forces in Europe this time “to learn and integrate with our European friends,” Matthey said.

BALTOPS gave the Reservists the opportunity to work with about 900 airmen from 13 NATO nations—“quite an endeavor, considering we all fly and fight with very different equipment,” Matthey said.

The annual exercise took place in the Baltic Sea during the first half of June and involved more than 50 aircraft, including three B-52H Stratofortresses from Barksdale AFB, La., as well as 50 ships and submarines, and was designed to strengthen response capabilities and demonstrate the ability of allied and partner nations to ensure stability in the Baltic Sea region—and defend it if necessary.

On June 6, the first day the bombers flew in support of BALTOPS, a Russian Su-27 intercepted a B-52 as it flew over international waters near Russia’s border. The Russian fighter took off from its Baltic fleet air defense unit based in Kaliningrad, located between Poland and Lithuania. Russian officials said the presence of the US nuclear-capable bombers so close to the Russian border “hardly helps de-escalate tensions in Europe,” according to the State-owned Sputnik news service.

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