Analyses OSW

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 21.06.2017 www.osw.waw.pl

Turkey on the Qatar crisis

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The crisis in Qatar which began on 5 June, involving Saudi Arabia and its allies blocking the country, has provoked a significant and unprecedented activation of Turkey in the Middle East. The government in Ankara has condemned the blockade of Qatar as groundless and offensive to Muslim values, and has made a series of efforts to mediate, including talks on various levels with Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Western countries. Additionally, Ankara has also taken more active measures. These include initiating a humanitarian air bridge to Qatar and military support – the deployment of hundreds of soldiers, officially with the intention to hold joint exercises and organise a training mission for Qatar's military police.

Commentary

- The Qatar crisis was sparked by Saudi accusations that Emir Tamim bin Hamad al Thani supports Islamic terrorism in the Middle East and that Qatar co-operates with Iran and Israel. What ignited the situation were statements from the emir of Qatar which, in Doha's opinion, were an effect of a Russian hacker attack on the Qatari news agency. Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and other countries launched an economic and political blockade of Qatar, hoping that they could de facto control the country's policy (in a similar situation in 2013 they forced the then emir to resign). Qatar adopted a tough stance, gaining support from Turkey and Iran (among other countries) and friendly neutrality from the USA, despite initial pro-Saudi statements from President Donald Trump. The Qatar crisis is above all an attempt to build and strengthen the Saudi hegemony over the Arab countries in the Middle East as part of the strategic confrontation with Iran. Qatar, with its independent, active and multi-vectoral policy (for example, it is home to the largest US military base in the region, it co-operates with Iran, it is the second largest gas exporter and a global potentate on the LNG market) has so far been able to successfully curb Saudi Arabia's ambitions.

- Turkey, which has been engaged in a very active policy in the Middle East since the Arab Spring, views Qatar as its main political partner in the region. At the time of the Arab Spring, these two countries (opposing, amongst others, Saudi Arabia) actively backed the protest movements, political parties and military groupings, including in particular the circles linked to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Syria. Qatar offered important support to Turkey during the failed coup in 2016 (for example, special forces from Qatar reportedly acted as President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's bodyguards in the immediate aftermath), while Ankara has politically accused the UAE of having participated in the

coup. One manifestation of this co-operation has been Turkey's limited military presence in Qatar initiated at the beginning of this year (a training contingent of a few dozen of soldiers) currently reinforced in connection with the crisis (up to several hundred of soldiers). Qatar is also an important economic partner for Turkey, especially as regards investments in the Turkish financial sector.

- The issue of the Turkish policy towards Qatar lays bare the limitations of narrowing down regional tension to the religious-political conflict between Shia and Sunni Muslims. Although Sunni Turkey and Qatar negatively evaluate the regional policy of Shia Iran (in the case of Turkey this has the character of strategic rivalry), they have avoided escalating tension with Teheran and are able to become engaged in limited co-operation with Iran on specific issues. At the same time, despite a number of common interests with Saudi Arabia, distrust and sometimes even hostility is present in the two countries' relations with Riyadh, Ankara's strongest rival in its efforts to extend patronage over the Sunni forces in the region. Tension in Saudi Arabia's contacts with Turkey and Qatar was especially visible in Egypt, where Riyadh backs the military regime of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who in 2013 ousted President Mohamed Morsi, who originated from the Muslim Brotherhood and was backed by Turkey and Qatar.