

## ***ATSE ISIAS'S SEVERING OF DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS WITH QATAR: NOT SURPRISING BUT A HARD PILL TO SWALLOW***

By: Abdu Habib

sabbahar@rocketmail.com

As June and July are notoriously known for radical events in history, June of the current year has witnessed a sudden declaration by three Gulf countries, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, supported by Egypt and blessed by their new sponsor (President Donald Trump), severing their diplomatic relations with their neighbour Qatar; the diplomatic rupture immediately turning into a full-fledged blockade imposed on Qatar, in a way similar to the one on Gaza Strip (by Israel and Egypt); something unprecedented in depth and breadth in inter-Arab relations.

Accompanying these fast developments is the overambitious campaign of the three Gulf countries and Egypt, using stick and carrot to bring other countries in the Middle East, and the Muslim majority countries in Africa and Asia, on board, to the effect that they too sever their diplomatic relations with Qatar. As the campaign of arm-twisting collected momentum, we witnessed a very aggressive attack and bullying on some of those countries that took a balanced and independent position of neutrality, dictated by "strategic choices".

Since these behaviours are alien to the history of the seasoned and highly sober Saudi diplomacy and the extraordinary weighing of things in their carefully thought of process of decision-making, we are tempted to see some examples to show how low things had gone:

- Imagine, the law jointly passed by the three Gulf countries and Egypt punishes a sympathizer with Qatar in any form (including tweeting, or even wearing a Barcelona T-shirt which carries the emblem and name of Qatar Airways) with 15-year imprisonment and a very heavy financial fine going up to millions, leaving the world in loss of words. ***Why do these governments fear a T-shirt***

***with the name of Qatar on it and a 140-character tweet that much?*** Fear from other views only come when governments do something illegal.

- Again, imagine Butcher Al CiCi boasting that Qatar will not find “Zabadi” (yogurt) for the “Suhur” (the last meal before a fasting day starts in Ramadan) because of the blockade.
- Another unfitting thing we had to hear was a Saudi journalist tastelessly mocking “Al Zabadi Al Othmani”, Ottoman or Turkish yogurt, will be rejected by the Qatari digestive system that is used only to the Saudi “Zabadi” (yogurt) of Al-Marae Company.
- Besides, according to the London-based Arabic newspaper, Al-Qudus Al-Arabi, Saudi channels, including Al-Arabia and Al-Arabia Hadeth, waged a campaign against Morocco, in which Al-Arabia Hadeth dedicated a special program that described the Western Sahara as “Occupied Territories” and the Polisario Front as the “Sahara Republic” (<http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=737452>).
- The same source indicated that a Morocco website (Tanja 24) accused Abu Dhabi Television of removing the Western Sahara from the map of the Kingdom of Morocco.

In short, what is going on (we hope the tension is on its way to a breakthrough) does not reflect a character of the Saudi Arabia and its leadership we know for decades, to the extent that many observers, who thought about any possible explanation, have started to suspect that the minds of the Saudi leadership have been negatively influenced by the silly Egyptian butcher, whose talks are always tasteless, childish, shallow and racist in nature, while his actions are based on naked jealousy, sheer hatred to people of different views and perspective, evil spirit of revenge, and the hidden fear created by the massacres he has committed on not less than ten thousand innocent Egyptians.

With the above background in mind, we need to see the question: ***What are our concerns as a part of the progressive forces of the world and as Eritrean nationalists regarding the circumstances explained above?***

Calling a spade a spade, our concerns are two-fold and could be summed up as follows:

- First, the gang up over Qatar by the Gulf conservative states is because it supports the Arab Spring which has been scaring these forces of reaction that have spent hundreds of billions to undo its achievements in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, Libya and Syria. Now they are after removing all its last legacies they knew have amounted to the unfolding of new consciousness of how to continue the Arab Spring, which has faced some setbacks, but is still breathing (political views and the determination to bring change could never be killed by power). To them, Qatar is the spearhead of the conspiracies they think have been hatched against them for the following reasons:
  - Qatar had founded Al-Jazeera, which they think is a source of threat against their medieval rules because it extraordinarily covers all injustices committed on the people of the region, advocates freedom of thought and expression, equality and good governance, in addition to exposing the robbery of the wealth of the Arab people by the ruling families, the corrupt circles in their orbit, and their Western guardians.
  - It is hosting some members of the Muslim Brotherhood who had fled massacres and persecution in Egypt after their democratically elected government had been ousted through a counter-revolutionary coup, supported and financed by these conservative Gulf countries. To Qatar, which has a more open leadership as compared to its conservative neighbours, the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt is one of the many legitimate political organizations that struggle for the establishment of a democratic system in Egypt, but for the Gulf conservative forces, they are terrorists, and that Qatar is funding and hosting them. We are aware that it is very common for governments across the Middle East, including Egypt, to routinely cite terrorism as justification to crack down on political opposition and human rights activists. At the same time, there are Syrian rebel factions

that Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries back, though they are not ideologically different from the groups Qatar is accused of hosting. ***Why these are considered political groups and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood terrorists?***

To cast further light into the issue, let us go to the basics and ask: ***Which country/countries is/are the roots of Islamic Fundamentalism, extremism, and fanaticism, entrenched in their school curriculum and daily life style? Where did the majority of the 911 culprits originate from? Whose money and human resources were responsible for the founding of Al-Qaeda?*** If we have to speak the truth, think beyond other considerations, the world community, including the American people, has scores to settle with those countries implicated in the answers to these questions, and the charges can never be dropped by pleasing Donald Trump, whom they had received in Riyadh in a welcome which was more than warm and gracious hospitality. He was welcomed in exactly the same way the people of Medina had received the followers of Prophet Mohammed in 622 A.D. The only difference was the version of the anthem:

طلع ال بدر علينا “Tala’ Al Baduru Alena” or “The moon has appeared on us.” sung, beating drums and dancing with Arab traditional swords. But to the dismay of these Gulf and Egyptian leaders, their God father, Donald Trump, who suffers from deep cognitive disorder and whose White House is in total disarray, is in a very bad shape: his approval rating has dived to 36%, lots of investigations are going on about him personally and about those in his orbit, and time is in favour of the American democracy to achieve its final victory over him and the right-wing extremists. If this is the situation of the US President: ***In what way could he be their saviour from some accountability for 911 when families of the victims are asking for justice and their request is still pending?***

- Qatar supports Hamas, which is a resistance movement against Israeli occupation. If Israel characterizes Hamas as a terrorist organization, it is

understandable because it is fighting against Israeli occupation. Here the mysterious questions are: ***Whose definition of the term “terrorism” are these Gulf countries adopting or taking as theirs? Whose war are they fighting?***

Further, as sources confirm, Qatar spent hundreds of millions in the construction of roads, housing, and a major hospital in Gaza, creating jobs in the devastated Gaza, which has been under the Israeli and Egyptian blockade. In this connection, Qatar argues that its work in Gaza is “purely humanitarian” and its engagement with the authority in Gaza (Hamas) could help peace talks that are internationally backed. ***Is there any of these works that is not a credit for Qatar? In what way could any of these works offend or harm these countries?*** If Israel stands against the role Qatar is playing in Gaza, we understand the reason. In any case, these questions might look too much to be raised here and we may be misunderstood as supporters of one side, but they are important for us as observers and academics.

- If having relations with Iran is a crime for a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council: ***Where is the national sovereignty of its members?*** If they think Iran is a threat: ***Is it through confrontation or engagement that Iran could be contained?*** If one of their members has good relations with Iran: ***Isn't that a positive link to be used to influence some positions of Iran and narrow the gap? Why do they think that either the Gulf countries or Iran has to die for the other to live?***

Reading the arguments above, some would ask: ***Why does all that matter to us as Eritreans?*** To begin with, the arguments above constitute our principled stand, as a part of the progressive forces or even residents of the world. Accordingly, it is very hard to ignore what is going on around us, especially when things reach new heights of absurdity, while being a part of this region or of the world. This is to say, we should not be humble or fold-handed observers, but we need to be active players in the region and the world to directly and indirectly protect our national interests. After all, we are living in a region where we see some dwarf states want to play a role bigger than their size, by putting their fingers and sometimes building military bases and putting boots here and there to control, to shape the direction of events in other countries or the region, and trying to deprive other

nations of their independence to decide the internal and external policies they want to pursue. Worrisome developments in our direct surrounding should worry us, and we should not keep quiet until our silence backfires on us. At least we have to speak out and educate our people on what is going on around them. This means that our people have to know the truth about the interference in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Yemen (to mention few) and what dangerous forms it is taking. Using these insights as our points of departure, we need to ask: ***What would happen tomorrow, if a serious civil disobedience erupts against Atse Isias? Is the alignment of forces unfolding in our region going to see an Eritrean movement as a friendly or a hostile one? Are they going to watch us with folded hands? Can we carry on a peaceful transition in the presence of such regional interferences as we see them in countries of Arab Spring?*** In principle, we have to go beyond a diplomatic language in our writings (of course we should not intimidate any and create enemies for our progressive movement), educate our people, and prepare them for what could happen tomorrow. Isias is very calculative in every move he is taking. He is putting mines here and there. We have to keep our eyes wide-open, but our behaviours should remain both seasoned and measured, without shying away from telling our people what we have to. We are with ourselves; not against anyone. ***What is the fear then from analyzing the situation surrounding us to inform our people? Are we going to refrain from doing what we have to, just to look good boys to others?***

By way of summarizing things, our firm stand here should be:

- Wrong-doers, whoever they are, should be punished, and those innocent should have their names cleared.
- No country, no matter how rich it is, has the right to dictate others what to do, what type of government to have, who to build relations with, who to host, what TV channels to open, who to grant citizenship, who to give aid to, who to release and who to put in jail...etc.

- Second, though what we have detailed above are our concerns as Eritreans too, the thing that worries us most, in the current regional developments, is Atse Isias's rupture of diplomatic relations with Qatar to please the Saudi, the Emirite and Bahraini regimes. No matter whether Atse Isias is an opportunist, a willing collaborator, or is slow to grasp the danger of his coalition with the Saudi-led regional forces, this should not come as a surprise to anyone. However, there is a high price for our country to pay when we sever relations to please others, and that is what concerns us most. This will be discussed in detail below.

From the details of our concerns, as a part of the progressive forces of the world and Eritrean nationalists, about what is going on in our surrounding, we move to the role of national interest in backing up a certain country or joining a coalition.

There is only one thing that matters most in the politics of international relations. That is the national interest, but only for those who put national interest above other considerations. For instance, during the Iraq-Iran war, Israel supplied Iran with weapons worth \$ 500 million from 1981 to 1983. Most of that was believed to have been paid by Iranian oil deliveries to Israel. In addition to that, Israel is reported to have supported the Iran war efforts by supplying instructors and non-armament assistance to Iran. One would ask here: ***Why did Israel back up Iran though it is known that Israeli leaders considered it their first enemy since 1948?***

Iraq was becoming a regional power that wanted to control the whole region. By helping Iran, Israel prevented Iraq from winning the war (though it could check its expansion to the Gulf), later, through a series of events, Israel saw to it that Iraq, its big enemy at that particular time, was totally destroyed (remember the role of the Gulf countries later in the destruction of Saddam Husain). I do not think Iran thanked Israel because Iran knew Israel did that for the sake of its own national interest. Maybe a more surprising example is that Russia which had backed up Iraq during the 1981-1983 Iran-Iraq War is now Iran's biggest ally. In short, these examples show that countries decide to help another country not because of the

feeling of guilt or petty. They do so to make themselves more powerful and stronger. Simply put, backing up a country or joining a coalition at the time of a crisis, no matter with whom, should only be to protect the national interest.

After calling the above historical episodes to memory, we finally come to the key question: ***Could Atse Isias tell the Eritrean people what national interest he has in mind when he severed diplomatic relations with Qatar, siding with the Saudi-led anti-Qatar coalition?*** Nobody would expect him to do that because he does not have the Eritrean national interest in mind, and every move he takes by way of relations with others is just to strengthen his grip on the people, through the finding of new finances, shipments of weapons and non-armament help or diplomatic support against the UN sanctions imposed on the regime for terrorism, destabilization of the neighbours, and the gross violations of human rights. As he noticed that Qatar has started to distance itself from him because the Qataris did not want to associate themselves any more with one hated by his people and known for criminal records in the region, he has to side with fresh friends who can pay more and strengthen his grip on his people. The war in Yemen was a jack-pot for him and the current conflict of the three Gulf states with Qatar would put him in a better position financially, at least, until he gets a better partner (if he survives the fire storm). But the question is: ***Does Eritrea afford to side with one of its neighbours against another at this particular time?*** To answer this, I will recycle the same paragraph I had written in my May 19, 2017 post entitled: ***ALLOWING A FOREIGN MILITARY BASE IN ASSAB: YIELDING THE HARD-EARNED NATIONAL SOVEREIGNTY TO A FOREIGN POWER*** ([www.togoruba.org](http://www.togoruba.org)) . In an attempt to answer the question: ***To what extent was Eritrea's participation in the Yemeni civil war justifiable from the perspective of the Eritrean national interest?*** I wrote:

“It is difficult to see any genuine justification for Eritrea’s participation (both in the fighting and by way of allowing a military base on our soil) in the civil war between brothers in Yemen, with all its complications related to the political views (especially the positions on Yemeni Muslim Brothers and the controversial issue of independent South Yemen) that are working

underneath, dividing the different forces making up the Arab coalition, and coming to the surface every now and then (though artificially suppressed). What we Eritreans need to follow regarding regional conflicts is “settle it among yourselves” policy. We cannot afford to side with this against that, though we may have some principled stands on the causes of the conflict and the way it is handled. As the Arabs say, “Ale Fena Yekfena” (We have enough problems of our own to worry about).”

As the three Gulf countries have always been accusing Qatar of having relations with Iran, and Qatar has the Iranian support in this current crisis: ***Couldn't this brew a war between the Saudi-led coalition and Iran?*** Such a war is possible if things are not contained. But if it occurs (God forbid), it could divide the entire Muslim world from Albania and Bosnia in Europe, to Arabs and Muslims in Asia and Africa, including those at present have taken the position of neutrality. But the questions that impose themselves are: ***Is Atse Isias's Eritrea going to fight the Saudi war in which our people have no interest? Is the Atse ready for the bumpy road and able to fasten his belt? Or is he going to change gears and betray his present partners when he finds himself hit by a huge dose of reality?*** Again, time will tell.

Had Atse Isias severed relations with Qatar for reasons related to Eritrean national interest, all of us would have stood with him, but severing relations with Qatar, which has some, though limited, positive contributions for our people, just to please Saudi Arabia and the UAE, neither of them has Eritrean interest in mind, unduly compromises national interest, in addition to the risks resulting from siding with one country against another in the current regional politics. We Eritreans do not have a dog in the fight going on among the Gulf countries. This is a Gulf circus we have to distance ourselves from. In other words, it does not concern us, or we do not have a personal stake in the issue.

It should be made abundantly clear here that Atse Isias should have historical knowledge by reading about similar historical crises. That is the only way that prepares one to manage future crises. To replay history, we ask: ***What did the Palestinians and the Yemenis gain from siding with Saddam Hussain during the invasion of Kuwait?*** A very big number of Yemenis left Saudi Arabia when their free residence permits were revoked. That constituted a great disaster for Yemeni

families, whose bread earners worked in the Kingdom with free residence and work permits; just like the Saudi nationals. Those who decided to remain in the Kingdom after the war, had to look for sponsors; a status that equated them to other foreign workers. That “expulsion” was not less disastrous for the Yemeni Government that depended on foreign remittance from Saudi Arabia. Additional thousands of unemployed Yemenis were also an added burden to the society and a security concern for the government too. By the same token, Palestinians who had been treated like the Kuwaiti nationals had to leave the country, including those born and brought up in Kuwait. This will lead us to the question: ***What would happen if Atse Isias’s Eritrea remained neutral in this Gulf crisis?*** We cannot guess any because we have not seen anything happening to the governments of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Pakistan, Somalia, Ethiopia, Azerbaijan and others who remained neutral, except some of them becoming the target of intimidation, bullying and smear campaign. On the contrary, because they refused to succumb to pressure and arm-twisting, they earned the respect of their people and the world community. To localize the issue we ask: ***Did Eritreans living in Saudi Arabia gain anything from the stand of their government?*** In Saudi Arabia, at present, thousands of Eritreans are getting ready to leave the country (a big number of families to the Sudan) after Eid holiday because of the new law concerning illegal staying or illegal status. The central question hanging over Atse Isias’s partnership with the Saudis is: ***Could Atse Isias interfere on behalf of Eritrean citizens and convince the Saudi government to correct their legal status for them or alleviate their hardships?*** This is impossible to expect from Atse Isias, whose heart and mind have no place for Eritrean citizens. At the same time, for the Gulf leaders, he is nothing but an employee, who takes his check at the end of the day and has no right to ask any question or open his mouth. Nothing more and nothing less. To put it candidly, he is not a heavyweight partner to be reckoned with. Moreover, there is a basic reality we should not miss. Whether the Kingdom or the UAE cannot do for Eritreans what they did not do for Syrians, who are getting drowned in the Mediterranean Sea to go to Europe in search of a refuge in the Christendom because no Arab/Muslim country (except Turkey and Lebanon to a lesser extent) has accepted a single Syrian refugee but the empty noise about them is too deafening and the crocodile’s tears are too obviously insincere.

Above all, we want to be good neighbours with all and cooperate for the common good on all fields. We consider this essential and exceptionally imperative. Nonetheless, we do not allow any to push us around to do what they want us to do.

As a matter of fact, our good wishes and respect are for all Gulf countries and others, but we do not shy away from saying that we recognize some effective tools that make Qatar appear stronger and at the same time make her grow in the eyes of others. These are: their political will, Aljazeera, active diplomacy, steadfastness to protect its independent decisions (a principle we highly value and cherish), and the wisdom of restraint from retaliation on the peoples of these opponent countries. For instance, Egyptian foreign workers in Qatar are estimated to be around 300,000 but Qatar did not punish them for the hostile position of their government. Unlike its opponents, Atse Isias's current partners, Qatar did not take measures that split families partially Qatari and partially Saudi, Emerati or Bahrani (a reality of the the interwoven social fabric of the Gulf population).

To get something off my chest, I ask the question: *What is the one thing I have to whisper to Atse Isias?* My answer is in Tigre, and it is a very widely used advice, in our social language, by any mother to her son when she sees him wasting away by interfering in the internal contradictions of his friends, who are either closer to each other than him or are cousins, but he is not related by blood to them. It is "*BATAKA YETEBDENI*".

=====

# EID MUBARAK