

US military halts exercises with Gulf allies over Qatar crisis

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Dubai: The US military has halted some exercises with its Gulf Arab allies over the ongoing diplomatic crisis targeting Qatar, trying to use its influence to end the monthslong dispute, authorities told The Associated Press on Friday.

File - Gulf Arab soldiers take part in the Eagle Resolve exercise in Kuwait City

While offering few details, the acknowledgement by the U.S. military's Central Command shows the concern it has over the conflict gripping the Gulf, home to the U.S. Navy's 5th Fleet and crucial bases for its campaign against the Islamic State group in Iraq and Syria, as well as the war in Afghanistan.

The Qatar crisis began June 5, when Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates launched an economic boycott while closing off the energy-rich nation's land border and its air and sea routes. The quartet of Arab nations pointed to Qatar's alleged support of extremists and overly warm ties to Iran. Qatar long has denied supporting extremists and shares a massive offshore natural gas field with Tehran that makes its citizens have the highest per-capita income in the world.

Initially, U.S. military officials said the boycott and dispute had no impact on their operations. Qatar is home to the massive al-Udeid Air Base, the forward headquarters of Central Command which oversees the U.S.-led coalition's bombing campaign of the Islamic State group and manages a direct line to Russia to manage Syria's crowded skies.

But as the dispute went on, Defense Secretary Jim Mattis traveled to Doha to offer his support. The Trump administration also agreed to an in-the-works sale of F-15 fighter jets to Qatar for \$12 billion.

Responding to queries from the AP, Air Force Col. John Thomas, a Central Command spokesman, acknowledged it would be cutting back on the exercises.

"We are opting out of some military exercises out of respect for the concept of inclusiveness and shared regional interests," Thomas said in a statement. "We will continue to encourage all partners to work together toward the sort of common solutions that enable security and stability in the region."

Officials in Qatar did not immediately respond to a request for comment, while the boycotting nations have not acknowledged the disruption in military exercises with the U.S.

The Qatar diplomatic crisis has torn apart the typically clubby Gulf Cooperation Council, a regional Arab bloc created in part as a counterbalance to Iran. The U.S. military holds exercises in part to build the confidence of local forces, many of which use American-made equipment.

Among the exercises likely to be affected is Eagle Resolve, an annual exercise held since 1999 that has GCC countries send forces alongside Americans to simulate working as a multinational force in battle. This year's Eagle Resolve exercise, held in Kuwait in March, involved 1,000 U.S. troops.

U.S. and Gulf allies also have regularly held joint, smaller-scale exercises in the region.

The American military's decision comes after an influential Republican senator said in June he'd withhold

approval of U.S. weapons sales to several Middle Eastern allies. Those moves together signal to Gulf countries that American officials want the crisis resolved sooner than later, said Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, a research fellow at the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy at Rice University.

“U.S. officials could be using a pressure point to express their frustration that what they see as a needless crisis and a distraction from far more urgent regional issues is going on so long,” Ulrichsen told the AP. “It is likely an indication to longstanding security and defense partners that U.S. patience on this spat is not open-ended and is rapidly drawing to a close.”

- AP