



NATO paratroopers drop out of a US Air Force Hercules during the 'Swift Response 17' joint airborne military exercise at Bezmer airfield near the village of Bezmer on Tuesday. The US led exercise, part of the multinational 'Saber Guardian 2017' exercise, involves up to 1,600 soldiers from the United States, Canada, Italy, Portugal and Greece. — AFP

CAN TRUMP SAVE HIS PRESIDENCY?

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Republican defections, all of this is not what you expect," said Julian Zelizer, a professor of history at Princeton University.

Trump swaggered into office on Jan 20 declaring Washington was broke and only a killer businessman such as himself could fix it. That promise looks increasingly threadbare. The White House remains understaffed, under-skilled and struggling to attract new talent. Existing staff there admit to being exhausted and demoralized. Trump's political agenda has been blown to smithereens: The border "wall" has not been built, NAFTA has not been torn up, the Iran deal is still in place and Obamacare remains the law of the land.

Even with Republicans in control of both houses of Congress, the influential and nominally supportive Drudge Report declared this the "MOST UNPRODUCTIVE CONGRESS IN 164 YEARS." Oratorically, Trump has continued where his campaign left off, picking fights with the press, judges, his own party, Democrats and FBI director James Comey, whom he fired. All the while, a drip, drip of evidence has amplified allegations that his family and aides sought help from Russia to tip the election against Hillary Clinton.

There have been bright spots. The Islamic State group has been virtually defeated in Mosul and in Raqqa, the capital of the so-called caliphate, is besieged. Trump has fulfilled his promise to scrap a trans-pacific trade deal, and successfully appointed conservative judge Neil Gorsuch to the Supreme Court. But Trump wins have been few and far between. "I don't see these six months as a success and it's hard for me to see the argument that it was," said Zelizer.

But presidents can and do right the course. Bill Clinton's first term was notoriously difficult and like Trump he suffered an early and embarrassing legislative defeat on healthcare. "History is full of examples of presidents who learn from their mistakes and go on to have major legislative successes," said Alex Conant, a Republican strategist at Firehouse Strategies who served in George W. Bush's administration. "Presidents are ultimately judged

on what they get done and he's only six months in. There is still plenty of time for them to do a lot. He could still end up being a highly successful president."

But changes would be needed, Conant admits. Even Republicans have criticized Trump's recent failed efforts to push his own healthcare reforms over the line. With little policy background, Trump has seemed more at home with the theater of the presidency: Preferring military parades in Paris to making policy speeches and wrangling votes. "A couple of meetings with senators and a handful of tweets is not going to cut it on something as controversial as healthcare reform," said Conant.

But, he argues, Trump still has the time and some of the skills needed to secure victories, as long as he is willing to make the pitch. "His entire life he's been a very good marketer and during the campaign he did an amazing job energizing the conservative base," Conant said. "Those are the skills he needs to now apply to governing." "In his previous life he was marketing everything from steaks to bottled water to condos with his name on it. Now tax reform is going to have his name on it."

But Trump's character could equally prove his administration's worst enemy. "A lot of the problems he faces are him, and he's not going to change his personality," said Zelizer. Michael Signer, the Democratic Mayor of Charlottesville and a lecturer at the University of Virginia said "the path to legitimacy" for Trump "would be to signal his embrace of our traditional norms and our checks and balances." "The more he refuses to do that, the lower his numbers will go, the more illegitimate his presidency will get and the more desperate he will get."

If nothing changes, Trump's approval ratings - already historically low at 40 percent - could portend a shellacking in the 2018 midterm elections. "If Democrats strengthen their size or gain power in one or both chambers then the president is in for a ride," said Zelizer, predicting impeachment hearings and wholesale pushback. "The more cornered he feels, he's not going to have some diplomatic response. He'll get angry, he'll attack his attackers. I don't think it gets calmer or pretty in the Oval Office, I think as things get intense it's going to get much uglier." — AFP

FRENCH MILITARY CHIEF RESIGNS

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had lost "a man of huge value" and claimed de Villiers' resignation showed "the very serious abuses and worrying limits" of Macron's leadership.

De Villiers had repeatedly complained that the military was overstretched and said he saw it as his duty to inform politicians. In a Facebook "letter to a young recruit" last week, he wrote: "As everyone has their shortcomings, no-one should be blindly followed."

The opposition accused Macron of humiliating his military chief but Prime Minister Edouard Philippe told parliament yesterday de Villiers could not, as a soldier, "honorably contest his boss's choices". Retired General Dominique Trinquant, who advised Macron during his campaign, said the row had cast a pall over his otherwise "remarkable" start in office. "This is a hitch that will probably be a bit difficult to get past," he said in an interview with AFP.

Macron's defense cuts - part of a 4.5-billion-euro reduction in spending aimed at reducing France's budget deficit - have been viewed by the military as a betrayal after his strong show of support for the armed forces. On his first day as president, he visited soldiers injured in overseas operations and his maiden foreign trip as leader

took him to Mali to meet French troops engaged in counter-terrorism operations.

A former head of the French air force, General Vincent Lanata, told L'Express news weekly on Tuesday he was "very shocked" by Macron's "rant" at de Villiers. The crisis was exacerbated by its timing, coming in the week of the July 14 Bastille Day military parade, where US President Donald Trump was the guest of honor. During the parade, Macron rode down the Champs-Elysees avenue in an open-topped military vehicle with a grim-faced de Villiers as Trump looked on.

Macron says the belt-tightening is temporary and that he remains committed to boosting defence spending to 2.0 percent of gross domestic product by 2025 (around 50 billion euros), in line with NATO targets. Nuclear-armed France and Britain are the biggest military powers in the European Union. French forces are currently engaged on three fronts. French jets are taking part in strikes against Islamic State jihadists in Syria and Iraq. Some 4,000 French soldiers are involved in efforts to stop the spread of extremism in West Africa. And at home, 7,000 soldiers are deployed to patrol the streets after a series of terror attacks that have killed more than 230 people since 2015. — AFP

QUARTET SWAPS 13 QATAR DEMANDS...

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Mouallimi said the four-nation quartet thinks it "should be easy for the Qataris to accept" the six principles. He stressed that implementation and monitoring must be "essential components", and "there will be no compromise when it comes to principles". But he said both sides can talk about details of "the tactics" and "the tools" to implement them - "and that's where we can have discussion and compromise."

The Saudi ambassador explained that the initial 13 points included some principles and some tools to achieve compliance. Mixed in the 13 points were what Western nations might see as fair demands, such as cracking down on support for extremists and curbing ties with Iran, and tougher-to-swallow calls to shut down the Al-Jazeera television network - one of Qatar's best-known brands - and kick out troops from NATO member Turkey, which has a base in Qatar.

Mouallimi stressed that stopping incitement to violence is essential, but he said closing Al-Jazeera might not be necessary. "If the only way to achieve that is by closing down Al-Jazeera, fine," he said. "If we can achieve that without closing down Al-Jazeera, that's also fine. The important thing is the objective and the principle involved."

UAE Minister of State for International Cooperation Reem Al-Hashimi said all the countries involved have strong relations with the United States "and we believe that the Americans have a very constructive and a very important role to play in hopefully creating a peaceful resolution to this current crisis". US President Donald Trump has sided strongly with Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the dispute, publicly backing their contention that Qatar is a supporter of Islamic militant groups and a destabilizing force in the Middle East.

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson recently concluded several days of shuttle diplomacy and sealed a deal to intensify Qatar's counterterrorism efforts. The memorandum of understanding signed by the US and Qatar

lays out steps Qatar can take to bolster its fight against terrorism and address shortfalls in policing terrorism funding. Hashimi called the MOU "an excellent step". "We'd like to see more of that," she said. "We'd like to see stronger measures taken and stronger commitment made to address that." Hashimi said "at this stage the ball is in Qatar's court". "We're looking for a serious change in behavior, serious measures," she said. "No more talk."

Qatar has further escalated the situation by encouraging Turkey's military presence, Hashimi said. "We do not want to see a military escalation of any kind," she said. "We hope to be able to resolve this internally and among ourselves with the assistance of strong mediation, whether it's from the US or the Kuwaitis."

Mouallimi stressed that Qatar's future lies with its neighbors not with "faraway places", a clear reference to Turkey and Iran which are supporting Doha. "Our Turkish brothers need to recognize that the era of covert and to some extent unwanted intervention in the Arab world has long gone," he said. "If Turkey wants to play a constructive role they are welcome to do so, but trying to find the role through military bases or military intervention would not be productive, and would not fare well for Turkey's reputation in the Arab world."

Diplomats from the four countries who attended the briefing said there have been discussions about possible next steps. UAE Ambassador Lana Nusseibeh said that "if Qatar is unwilling to accept core principles around what defines terrorism or extremism in our region, it will be very difficult" for it to remain in the Gulf Cooperation Council with Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain. "So it may be a parting of ways for a little while in order to work things out," she said. Mouallimi said the quartet briefed the 10 elected Security Council members Tuesday and hopes to meet the permanent members as well. There are no plans to take the dispute to the UN's most powerful body, he said, but "if we develop the conviction that that is a necessary move forward, then we will do so." — Agencies

AUTHORITIES CALL FOR INFO ON ABSCONDING...

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Meanwhile, Islamist opposition MP Waleed Al-Tabtabaei said yesterday he plans to call for an emergency National Assembly session to discuss the pro-Iran cell. Tabtabaei said on his Twitter account that he is coordinating with opposition MPs Mohammad Hayef and Mohammad Al-Mutair to request the emergency session for the Assembly, which is currently on summer

recess. Tabtabaei and his colleagues must secure the signature of 33 MPs in order to submit a request calling for the emergency session, according to Assembly laws.

Tabtabaei and Hayef have sent several questions to the interior minister about the 14 men and demanded that the ministry issue a statement clarifying the reported escape. The 14 men were set free after the appeals court acquitted them last year. But the court of cassation overturned the ruling and sentenced them to various jail terms.



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