

Events Transform Qatar Airways CEO, Not Always Popular, Into A Blockade Runner And Resistance Leader



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Qatar Airways CEO Akbar al-Baker speaks at a press conference in Dubai in April 2017. (AP Photo/Kamran Jebreili) [+]

It is safe to say that the world is not overly fond of Qatar Airways CEO Akbar al-Baker. He is not pleasant; he seems to say whatever is in his interest to say and he gives the impression that he figures every angle to his own benefit.

Yet recent events have conspired to made al-Baker admirable -- a resolute man fighting bigger powers aligned in a blatantly unfair alliance to blockade a country that is not at war with anyone.

Al-Baker today is a blockade runner. He is Rhett Butler in *Gone with The Wind*.

Love him? Hate him? What difference does it make? He embodies a righteous cause. Or several causes: Honor. Country. Self-Interest.

Who could possibly not support Qatar Airways as it busts through the Doha Blockade, flying in needed supplies after four neighboring countries -- Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain -- severed relations with Qatar.

The quartet closed their airports to Qatar Airways' flights and also shut off their airspace -- a big because the four countries largely surround Qatar. Its airline must now fly over Iran, adding extra miles to many routes.

"Mr. al-Baker is being tested like never before," said aerospace consultant Addison Schonland. "One has to be sympathetic to the position he finds himself in.

"Politics has interfered in a most unpleasant way," Schonland tweeted on Monday. "As {al - Baker} points out, Qatar had no warning. But the airline has adjusted remarkably. They still fly, and plan to keep growing. This is truly a brave face."

Next week's Paris Air Show will put Qatar Airways and al-Baker squarely on the world stage.

Last week, Boeing announced highlights of its Paris Air Show presence. The announcement named just two airlines: Malaysian carrier Malindo Air, launch customer for the 737 MAX 8, and Qatar Airways.

"Qatar Airways plans to present a 777-300ER, showcasing its newly designed business class interior," Boeing said, in a prepared statement.

Schonland said it is noteworthy that Boeing has announced that Qatar Airways will display only one aircraft. For the past several years, he said, Qatar has shown five. "Given the {blockade}, the airline is now a critical part of the small nation's pipeline for supplies," he said. "Every aircraft is needed.

"Bringing no aircraft to the show would send a signal of weakness," he said. "Having at least one on the site shows perseverance.

Boeing has not spoken publicly on the blockade. "There's no win for Boeing either way," Schonland said.

In an interview with Aljazeera on Tuesday, al-Baker was defiant.

Asked about being called away from the Cancun Mexico meeting of the International Air Transport Association on June 5, al-Baker said, "This is the last thing any CEO of an airline would want to hear, that the airspace in which it operates, international airspace, in which it operates has illegally been blocked.

"It was very difficult for me to find a way to come here quickly, but I did," he said. "This is a call of duty for me to be in my country at such a time."