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THE SYRIAN CRISIS AND THE SAUDI-IRANIAN RIVALRY

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UNDERSTANDING SYRIAN-SAUDI RELATIONS

The ongoing internal conflict between the Assad-led government and the political and military opposition forces within Syria has increasingly become a regional conflict. This is the case not only because the violence within Syria has regional implications, but also because all the main regional powers have been directly involved in the conflict, mostly by supporting one of the warring sides. This is particularly true in the case of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which has been one of the stronger regional supporters of the anti-Assad opposition.

Historically, Saudi Arabia's relationship with Syria, while never particularly warm, had shied away from being directly confrontational. This changed only in 2005, following the assassination of the former Lebanese prime minister and Saudi protégé Rafic Hariri. The Saudis largely blamed Syria for the political assassination and thus reacted by taking an openly anti-Syrian stance, putting pressure on the Syrian president to withdraw from Lebanon while attempting to contain and even isolate him. This strategy was not successful and it lasted only until the May 2008 Hezbollah temporary takeover of West Beirut, which culminated in the Doha Agreement. Faced with the rise of Syria and its allies in Lebanese domestic politics, the Saudis shifted from a policy of containment to one of rapprochement. From mid-2008 until 2011, the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Syria improved, with the peak of this reconciliation process being the October 2009 visit of King Abdullah to Damascus. In reaching out to Syria, the Saudis were both recognizing the role Damascus played in the region (and in Lebanon specifically) as well attempting to weaken the ties between the Assad regime and Iran.¹ However, by the summer of 2011—with the escalation of the anti-Assad protests in Syria—the Saudis once again changed their tune and decided to bet against the Assad regime. Following failed attempts to promote a deal behind the scenes and to swiftly solve the Syrian crisis, Saudi King Abdullah openly took sides against Assad and his entourage.² Already in August 2011, the King stated that the violence in Syria was unacceptable to Saudi Arabia, demanding that Assad “stop the killing machine.”³

¹ Benedetta Berti, "The Ongoing Battle for Beirut: Old Dynamics and New Trends", INSS Memorandum No. 111, December 2011.

² Yoel Guzansky, "Saudi Activism in a Changing Middle East", Strategic Assessment Vol. 14, No. 3 (October 2011).

³ Adrian Bloomfield, "Syria unrest: Saudi Arabia calls on 'killing machine' to stop", The Telegraph, August 8, 2011.

SAUDI ARABIA'S ROLE IN THE SYRIAN CRISIS

The Saudi stance on Syria is motivated by a combination of personal, sectarian, and, above all, political factors. First, the Saudis were never head over heels about Assad and his Ba'athist secular ideology. Second, the continuous crackdown of the mostly Sunni political opposition by the Alawite-dominated regime made Riyadh very uncomfortable. Third, and most significant, Saudi Arabia perceived the decline of the Assad regime as a golden opportunity to weaken Iran, their bigger regional competitor. Moreover, supporting the opposition would also play well within Saudi Arabia while deflating some of the regional criticism regarding the KSA's policy with respect to the Arab Spring.⁴

In other words, one can see the Saudis' efforts to rally the international community and the region against Assad as part of a larger regional competition between the Gulf Countries and Iran. This is why in the case of Syria, the Saudis are openly backing a regime change—a position which directly contradicts the attitude they have adopted since the beginning of the Arab Spring. Riyadh has never been particularly fond of revolutions, fearing that regional instability would endanger their very own power and control of the Kingdom. This is certainly the rationale behind the Saudis' attempts to prevent the Arab Spring from spreading to regional allies like Bahrain, and to a lesser extent Jordan.

Because of this combination of personal, sectarian, and political rationales, Saudi Arabia has been one of the most vocal regional actors in expressing its opposition to Assad and his regime, as well as in advocating recognition, support and arming of the anti-Assad opposition forces.

Saudi Arabia's role has been particularly prominent as other regional powers—like Egypt—initially took a back seat in responding to the Syrian crisis. However, in the past few weeks, the new Egyptian President, Muhammed Morsi, has been trying to raise his country's profile on Syria, though his attempts to create a regional contact group to solve the conflict have thus far been unsuccessful.⁵

Similarly, the other Gulf States—albeit sharing Saudi Arabia's interests in seeing Assad go—do not have the same resources or power to match the Saudi involvement. Even so, their attitude has been supportive of the Syrian opposition, either by directly arming them, or simply by turning a blind eye towards the movement of weapons and militants from their countries into Syria. For example Qatar, initially took an openly anti-Assad stance, and by the spring of 2012 it went as far as announcing that it approved a fund of 100 million USD to acquire weapons for the Syrian opposition.⁶ However, lately, Qatar has decided to adopt a lower-profile. Interestingly, Gulf States seem to also be preparing for the “day after”—with Saudi Arabia ready to host senior defectors from the Assad regime, and even organizing a visit by the prominent defector General Manaf Tlas, in late July 2012.⁷

THE IRANIAN-SAUDI RIVALRY AND ITS IMPACT ON SYRIA

Even though the Saudis are certainly thinking about what could come after the demise of the Assad regime—the reality on the ground seems to indicate that the conflict between the Syrian government and the opposition is far from over. On the contrary, the bloody internal confrontation could be prolonged and, if unchecked, may lead to further regional instability— something the Saudis have been trying to contain since the beginning of the Arab Spring.

As time goes by, Saudi Arabia does indeed face a dilemma: either to continue to pursue regime change, risking igniting further regional instability and fueling a bloody and prolonged civil war, or to bet on a negotiated transition and thus bargain with Iran.

Recently King Abdullah and Iranian President Ahmadinejad met in Mecca in mid-August in the context of the

⁴ Benedetta Berti & Yoel Guzansky, "Saudi Arabia and Qatar's Role in the Regional Efforts to Oust Assad", *Atlantic Council New Atlanticist Blog*, April 6, 2012.

⁵ Zack Gold, "Morsi's Doomed Syria Plan," *The National Interest*, September 4, 2012.

⁶ Benedetta Berti & Yoel Guzansky, "Saudi Arabia and Qatar's Role in the Regional Efforts to Oust Assad ", *Atlantic Council New Atlanticist Blog*, April 6, 2012

⁷ "Defected Syrian general Manaf Tlas says seeks to unite opposition", *Haaretz*, July 26, 2012.

meeting Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).⁸ Ahmadinejad, had visited Saudi Arabia previously in December 2005 and in March 2007, but given the ongoing rift over the conflict in Syria and the increased tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, his visit was particularly important. It appeared that the two main regional competitors were indeed attempting to maintain open channels of communication and to mend their differences.

Both parties understand that they may need each other in the context of Syria. On the one hand, Iranian attempts to influence a post-Assad Syria would require Saudi cooperation, especially given the complex and mostly adversarial relationship between Tehran and the Syrian opposition. For its part, Saudi Arabia, if it seeks to establish a friendly regime in Syria, also needs Iran. This is the case as Iran does hold considerable influence on Assad and his political and military entourage. If left out of the post-conflict transition, it could work very hard to wreak havoc and undermine any post-Assad government. All of these options would delay the stabilization of Syria and continue to breed regional instability.

Regional stability is a real concern for the Saudis, especially when they look at the growing impact of the Syrian crisis on their regional ally, Jordan. The Jordanians, already struggling with a serious economic crisis, have without a doubt been destabilized by the Syrian conflict—with the country now hosting approximately 85,000 refugees, according to UNHCR data.⁹ Even so, achieving a political resolution of the conflict becomes more difficult every day. With the war getting bloodier, the stakes for both parties are even higher, as the warring parties increasingly perceive their struggle in zero-sum terms. Similarly, both Tehran and Riyadh have been seeing Syria through a zero-sum prism by standing squarely behind, respectively, the regime and the opposition forces. As such, a bargain between the Saudis and the Iranians on Syria appears unlikely at the moment.

In behaving this way, both states are adding fuel to the sectarian fire and leading to the further regionalization of the conflict. The example of the Lebanese civil war powerfully illustrates the problem of foreign powers using a domestic conflict as a proxy battlefield for a larger geo-political battle: it makes the conflict last longer, causes more damage, and becomes more intractable. Still, the Saudis seem more preoccupied with delivering a blow against Iran than with engineering a political transition in Syria. This is also the case as Iran is now perceived as weak, with its main regional ally on the verge of collapsing, and with the regime struggling to cope with sanctions and growing isolation. Therefore, despite calls for external intervention and reported covert military assistance for the opposition forces, there seems to be relatively little focus on pushing the opposition to get its act together politically and to plan for the “day after.”

To be sure, even though right now the relationship between the Syrian opposition and Saudi Arabia is a positive one, frictions may arise in the future following the collapse of the Assad regime. Firstly, arming the opposition could in the future create problems for the Saudis, while potentially posing a proliferation and stability threat on the regional level. Secondly, the Saudis may be partly worried about the potential rise of groups like the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in a ‘post-Assad’ Syria. This is the case despite the ideological proximity between the Islamist movement and the Wahhabi school of Islam endorsed by the Saudis.

For the time being however, long-term considerations over how to best ensure a successful political transition in Syria and on how to deflate internal violence, are being trumped by the immediate desire to see Iranian influence in the region curbed. As long as this is the case, and both Saudi Arabia and Iran perceive the Syrian conflict as an opportunity to get even with each other, one can expect these countries to continue fueling the fire rather than working towards its extinction.

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⁸ Angus McDowall, “Saudi king sits next to Iran's Ahmadinejad in goodwill gesture,” *Reuters*, August 14, 2012, http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/48667641/ns/world_news-mideast_n_africa/t/saudi-king-sits-next-irans-ahmadinejad-goodwill-gesture/

⁹ <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>