

ALTERNATIVES TO U.S. HARD POWER: THE SAUDI RESPONSE TO U.S. TACTICS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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The conventional wisdom today is that Saudi Arabia will ultimately accept recent U.S. policy decisions that currently [it rejects](#)¹ because [it has no viable alternatives](#).² While it is true that there is no equivalent to U.S. power, there are certainly alternatives to it.

Historically, the Saudis have pursued regional security according to four broad principles: (1) preserving the internal security of the kingdom, (2) maintaining a regional balance of power, (3) preventing conflicts that may damage the kingdom, and (4) relying on the U.S. to be the dominant power in the region.³ The Obama administration's decision to reduce the role of U.S. military power in the region's active conflicts,⁴ means the Saudis are now searching for alternate sources of military power to achieve their regional security goals. Therefore, it is important to understand what the Saudis are doing and why they are doing it.

Prince Turki al-Faisal, the director general of the Saudi intelligence agency from 1977 to 2001, and a former ambassador to the U.K. and U.S., recently [explained](#) that "As 2014 begins, there is no more important question in world diplomacy than this: Has Iran changed?" He added, "Saudi Arabia has two large concerns about the Islamic Republic [of Iran]: its quest for nuclear weapons and its interference in its neighbors' affairs." In other words, the Saudis are concerned that Iran, through its involvement in Iraq and Syria, as well as its nuclear program, may be

¹ See also: Jay Solomon, "[Saudi Royal Blasts U.S.'s Middle East Policy](#)," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 15, 2013.

² F. Gregory Gause, "[Why the Iran Deal Scares Saudi Arabia](#)," *The New Yorker*, November 26, 2013; Zaki Shalom and Yoel Guzansky, "[U.S.- Saudi Relations: On the Verge of a Crisis?](#)" *INSS Insight* 504, January 1, 2014.

³ Efraim Halevy's review of *Saudi Arabia and the Conflict in Palestine* (2012, in Hebrew), by Michael Kahanov, *Bustan* 4:1 (2013), 92.

⁴ In contrast to the Saudi critique of the U.S. decisions to back away from employing force in the region, some observers see it in positive terms: David Ignatius, "[Obama's relentlessly pragmatic diplomacy](#)," *Washington Post*, December 12, 2013; and, Gideon Rachman, "[The year the US pivoted back to the Middle East](#)," *Financial Times*, December 23, 2013.

changing the regional balance of power. Moreover, from the Saudi perspective, this is happening with tacit U.S. approval. As Roula Khalaf points out, “Seen from Riyadh, the combination of US inaction on Syria, the interim nuclear deal in November with its arch-rival Iran and the shale gas revolution that is weaning America off Middle Eastern oil represents an unsettling shift in US commitment to the region.”⁵

Saudi Arabia is determined not to allow Iran to win Syria the way the Saudis believe the Iranians won post-2003 Iraq.⁶ Today the Iraqi state is disintegrating and Syria is riven by a civil war in which Lebanon has increasingly become the rear. More than one million Syrians have been pushed into Lebanon by the war.⁷ Sunni-Shi‘i sectarianism fuels the fighting between the militia proxies backed by Saudi Arabia and Iran, who have exploited the ideological divide to enhance security in what they view as a zero-sum geopolitical competition.

The Saudis fear being encircled by pro-Iranian forces. Iranian-backed Shi‘i militias have already [attacked](#) and [threatened](#) Saudi Arabia along Iraq’s border with Saudi Arabia. Only a thin strip of Jordanian desert separates the pro-Iranian government in Syria from a long, unsecured Saudi Arabian border. The Saudis’ oil infrastructure, located in its Eastern Province, and Bahrain along the Gulf coast are within short striking distance of Iranian [ballistic](#) missiles.

The Saudis also face internal pressure to take action to prevent the slaughter of Sunnis in Syria. The Saudi monarchy runs the risk of a public outcry and an attack on its legitimacy, if the king is viewed by leading Wahhabi religious figures in the kingdom as too passive in the face of the strong Iranian military support for Bashar al-Asad’s regime in Syria.⁸ Many Wahhabi religious leaders in Saudi Arabia view ‘Alawis and Shi‘is as unbelievers, and the death of tens of thousands of Syrian Sunnis at the hands of Asad and Iran is unacceptable to them. Therefore, in order to maintain regime stability at home, the Saudi royals believe they must do everything they can to stop the slaughter of Sunnis in Syria.

Contrary to what some believe, the Saudis are not exclusively seeking [a military solution](#) to Syria. They want the slaughter and gassing of Sunni civilians to end and they insist that any solution [must include removing Asad from power](#).⁹ To these ends, they are pursuing a two-pronged strategy to ensure a satisfactory political deal to end the conflict.

First, many believe the Saudis had a hand in using their vast wealth as leverage to broker the November 22, 2013 unification between all non al-Qa‘ida Islamist militias in Syria. In essence, this means the Saudis are backing groups in Syria that are [fighting both Asad and al-Qa‘ida](#) at the same time.¹⁰ The Saudi-backed Islamic Front (*al Jabha al Islamiyya*) is a large, unified (in relative terms) fighting force (some estimates say more than 40,000).¹¹ [Recent gains](#) by these forces, particularly against the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), will give the Saudi-backed opposition more negotiating leverage at the Geneva II conference, if and when it takes place. Second, the Saudis removed Qatar and its Syrian Muslim Brotherhood clients, and reorganized the opposition leadership outside of Syria into a Saudi-backed [government-in-exile](#) led by Ahmed Ta‘meh al-Khadr.¹²

The Saudis are gambling that its clients in the Syrian opposition leadership in exile will assure the Saudis of strong

⁵ Roula Khalaf, “Middle East Terms of Engagement,” *Financial Times*, January 5, 2014.

⁶ For the Saudi view of how Iran won Iraq, see: Joseph Kostiner, “The GCC States and the Security Challenges of the Twenty-First Century,” *Mideast Security and Policy Studies*, No. 86, September 2010 (Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel), <http://besacenter.org/mideast-security-and-policy-studies/the-gcc-states-and-the-security-challenges-of-the-twenty-first-century-3-2/>.

⁷ International Crisis Group, “Too Close for Comfort: Syrians in Lebanon,” *Middle East Report No. 141*, May 2013, [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Lebanon/141-too-close-for-comfort-syrians-in-lebanon](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Lebanon/141-too-close-for-comfort-syrians-in-lebanon)

⁸ The Saudi Grand Mufti has [officially discouraged](#) Saudis from going to fight in Syria, however, many Saudi religious leaders have been instrumental in financially supporting jihadis in Syria. See: Elizabeth Dickinson, “[Playing With Fire](#),” Saban Center at Brookings Institution, Analysis Paper No. 16, December 2013.

⁹ See also: Dickinson, p. 15.

¹⁰ Hassan Hassan, “[Why Syria’s Islamic Front is bad news for radical groups](#),” *The National*, December 3, 2013.

¹¹ Charles Lister, “[The Next Phase of the Syrian Conflict](#),” *ForeignPolicy.com*, December 23, 2013.

¹² Samer Abboud, “Hard Road Ahead for the Syrian Exile Government,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, November 15, 2013.

post-Asad influence in Syria. Therefore, if the Saudis, working through the provisional government-in-exile, can negotiate Asad's exit and reasonable post-Asad terms at Geneva II, they would likely reduce their funding, support, and arms supplies to the Islamic Front on the ground. However, they are only likely to do so if they believe Iran will, as part of a negotiated agreement, reduce its support and funding to the the varied Shi'i militias from Iraq that are fighting in Syria and order Hizballah to withdraw its forces from its embattled neighbor. In this scenario, the fighting in Syria would eventually wind down because the belligerents would soon be starved of resources and support from regional patrons, and a negotiated solution would create a means to share power and reach political accommodations on essential interests.

The Saudis also believe the ongoing crisis in Syria may provide an opportunity to weaken Hizballah's grip on Lebanon. For example, [the Saudis recently offered \\$3 billion in military aid to the Lebanese army](#), which is nearly double the Lebanese military's annual budget and may be intended to prompt sitting President Michel Suleiman to abandon the March 8 coalition and weaken Hizballah's political influence.

For example, an authoritative source on Saudi political rumors, who tweets under the pseudonym "mujtahidd," and who has been described as "[the Saudi Julian Assange](#)," recently posted a series of blog entries about a Saudi intelligence operation that secretly listened in on sensitive Hizballah communications during the last few months of 2013.¹³ The operation revealed that Hassan Nasrallah was frustrated with the way Maher al-Asad was using Hizballah forces in Syria because it repeatedly led to heavy losses for Hizballah.¹⁴ Mujtahidd claims that the Saudi intelligence operation discovered that Nasrallah asked Iran to intervene with Maher al-Asad, fearing that Hizballah's "enormous sacrifices" (*tadhayat ha'ila*) would lead to the disintegration of the party.¹⁵

Further, mujtahidd claims the Iraqi militias fighting with Iran's support in Syria have lodged similar complaints against Maher al-Asad.¹⁶ The Iranians have been reluctant to press Maher too hard on these issues because they believe Bashar al-Asad would not survive without Maher.¹⁷ The Iranians, according to mujtahidd's report, are concerned that the dynamic between Maher and Hizballah could lead to a dismantling of Hizballah and Iran's defeat in Syria.¹⁸ The Saudis appear to believe Hizballah's weakness may give them more leverage to break the political stalemate in Lebanon and secure a pro-Saudi government. A key component of the Saudis' \$3 billion military aid offer to the Lebanese army included revealing the identity of the prospective arms supplier: France.

After the U.S.-Russia deal on Syrian chemical weapons, it appears the Saudis turned to France to achieve some of their regional goals. During November and December 2013, there were several reports of joint [French-Saudi military exercises](#).¹⁹

Further, the French share the Saudi view that the U.S. negotiated interim deal on Iran's nuclear program is a bad one. While some believe French and Saudi interests on Iran and Syria converge, [others](#) see the French alignment with the Saudis as a cynical ploy to win commercial military contracts at the U.S.'s expense during a period of French economic weakness.²⁰ Be that as it may, from the Saudi point of view, the French are providing an alternative means to achieve Saudi regional goals.

Just as the Saudis have turned to the French as a tactical ally to achieve strategic interests in Lebanon and Syria, they appear to be backing a \$2-3 billion deal between Russia and Egypt to supply the 'Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi government with military aid. The Saudis view a strong military government in Egypt as a vast improvement over Muhammad Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood led government. The Saudis would also like to see a strong Egypt, friendly to Saudi Arabia, assume its natural position of leadership in the Arab world. If the U.S. is unwilling to back al-Sisi's military, then the Saudis appear willing to fill the void by funding alternative sources of the military equipment necessary for Egypt to maintain its hard power.

¹³ These micro-blog "tweets" were posted in Arabic on December 28, 2013.

¹⁴ @mujtahidd, Twitter Post, December 28, 2013,02:22 a.m., <https://twitter.com/mujtahidd/status/416876896299675648>

¹⁵ @mujtahidd, Twitter Post, December 28, 2013,02:28 a.m., <https://twitter.com/mujtahidd/status/416877094203715584>

¹⁶ @mujtahidd, Twitter Post, December 28, 2013,02:27 a.m., <https://twitter.com/mujtahidd/status/416878037058060288>

¹⁷ @mujtahidd, Twitter Post, December 28, 2013,02:27 a.m., <https://twitter.com/mujtahidd/status/416878108856156160>

¹⁸ @mujtahidd, Twitter Post, December 28, 2013,02:27 a.m., <https://twitter.com/mujtahidd/status/416877953318809600>

¹⁹ Ariel Ben Solomon, "Saudi and French forces carry out joint military drill," *Jerusalem Post*, November 14, 2013; Khamis al-Zahrani, "Saudi Arabia and France continue joint military exercises," *Al Arabiya News*, November 18, 2013.

²⁰ John Vinocur, "France, Iran and 'The Front of Mistrust'" *The Wall Street Journal*, January 6, 2014.

[Mustafa Alani](#) argued in [Anne Barnard's article in the *New York Times*](#) that the Saudi offer of billions to fund French military aid to Lebanon was a sign that the Saudis “are washing their hands of Obama.” This is undoubtedly an overstatement, but it may accurately reflect the Saudi frustration with recent U.S. behavior in the region.

Looking beyond the Fertile Crescent, and assuming the U.S. and Iran extend their “[detente](#)” beyond the initial six-month period outlined in November 2013, Saudi Arabia has at least three potential alternatives given the new U.S. regional posture, and it may choose to pursue all three options in parallel in order to address its short, medium, and long-term security.

First, in the short term, it may turn to enhanced security cooperation with China as an alternative or insurance policy for what it perceives as unreliable U.S. security commitments. Second, it may begin improving and developing the fighting capabilities of its own military forces. This might include importing a greater number of former Pakistani, Moroccan, and Jordanian military officers, as well as the possibility of offering citizenship to non-native Sunni Muslim mercenaries in exchange for military service. In combination with this step, Saudi Arabia appears to be showing interest in building its own military manufacturing and production industries. Improving its military fighting capabilities is likely a long-term process that will take decades to achieve meaningful results. And, third, Saudi Arabia is likely to coordinate with Pakistan, and perhaps China, to develop its own indigenous nuclear weapons capability, particularly if the current Western negotiations with Iran result in institutionalizing Iran’s nuclear breakout-capability.

While Obama adviser [Bruce Riedel](#) argues that the Saudis have “consistently cited” the objective of a WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East, he ignores the true thrust of Turki al-Faisal’s remarks on three separate occasions in 2011, when Turki strongly suggested that there should be an Arab nuclear weapon if Iran obtains such a capability.²¹ More recently and explicitly, Prince Turki [wrote](#) that “Faced with a nuclear-armed Iran, the Gulf Cooperation Council members, for example, will be forced to weigh their options carefully – and possibly to acquire a nuclear deterrent of their own.”

If the Saudis indeed have nuclear ambitions, they will need considerable time to develop the infrastructure, personnel, and institutional knowledge necessary to make rapid progress toward a nuclear capability. And Saudi Arabia is not likely to place all of its eggs [in the Pakistan basket](#) when it comes to developing its nuclear program. Turki al-Faisal has claimed Saudi Arabia will invest \$100 billion to build 16 nuclear reactors by 2030. On January 16, 2012, Saudi Arabia signed a nuclear cooperation agreement with China. A joint statement outlined a legal framework to build scientific, technological, and economic cooperation between Riyadh and Beijing. On a practical level, a nuclear cooperation agreement with China would provide Saudi Arabia with the means, experience, and expertise to develop and supply nuclear-power plants and research reactors, and manufacture nuclear-fuel elements. China has adopted advanced technology from Westinghouse Electric Co. to develop a domestic version of the company’s AP1000 nuclear reactor.²² Saudi Arabia may be looking to China to provide it with a stable nuclear supply chain as well as training facilities for a new generation of Saudi nuclear technicians and scientists. Saudi Arabia also has nuclear cooperation agreements with France, Argentina, and South Korea, but the agreement with China may be the most significant and symbiotic, in terms of the strategic goals of both states.

Unlike the U.S., China is not likely to achieve energy independence in the near term. Saudi Arabia and China have similar authoritarian postures toward domestic dissent, and they both resist outside pressure to accelerate domestic political reform. China is also looking to expand the reach of its sea power by creating port facilities from Asia to Africa in the Bay of Bengal, Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea in what some have characterized as a thinly disguised “string-of-pearls” strategy of naval military expansion. The western coast of Saudi Arabia, along the Red Sea leading to the Suez Canal, might be an attractive location to the Chinese navy given China’s energy interests in Sudan, South Sudan, and elsewhere in Africa. Finally, Saudi Arabia and China have a historical track record of discreet security cooperation. In the mid-1980s, Saudi Arabia secretly acquired Chinese DF-3A intermediate range ballistic missiles.

²¹ In March, June, and December 2011. For more detail, see: Brandon Friedman, “The Concept of Deterrence in Arab and Muslim Thought: The Arab Gulf States,” Project Supervisor Shmuel Bar, Herzliya Conference Working Paper, June 2012, <http://www.herzliyaconference.org/eng/Uploads/dbsAttachedFiles/BrandonFriedman.pdf>.

²² *The Wall Street Journal*, 17 January 2012.

Steven A. Cook, the Hasib J. Sabbagh Senior Fellow for Middle Eastern Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York, has argued that there is no reason to fear that the Saudis will obtain a nuclear weapon. He wrote that “given the fact that the Saudis have very little nuclear infrastructure to speak of, this kind of statement is little more than posturing designed to force the U.S. hand on Iran.” He added that “Riyadh's rhetoric about acquiring nuclear weapons is empty. What is amazing is how many people take the Saudis seriously.”²³ Cook is right to be skeptical, Saudi Arabia is often noted for being risk averse and cautious, yet it engaged in high risk behavior by going behind the backs of its major security ally, the United States, in order to acquire the Chinese made DF-3A ballistic missiles in the 1980s. What triggered the Saudi deviation from its traditional behavior?

In Prince Khalid bin Sultan's book, *Desert Warrior*, published after the 1990/1 Gulf War, he states: “In brief, our aim was to give us the capability to counterattack in the event of an attack on us by either Israel or Iran, both in their different ways hostile at that time.”²⁴ Yet Prince Khalid devotes only a brief paragraph to explaining the Israeli threat, while devoting two full pages to explaining the Iranian threat to Saudi Arabia. He finishes the explanation with perhaps even a sharper statement on the Saudi decision to acquire the Chinese ballistic missiles: “It was against this background of Iranian violence and belligerence that, I assume, King Fahd decided we needed a weapon to improve the morale of our armed services and our people; a deterrent weapon not intended to be used, except as a last resort when it should be able to demoralize the enemy by delivering a painful and decisive blow; a weapon which, once launched, could not be jammed or intercepted; a weapon which would make the enemy think twice before attacking us.”²⁵ In short, Prince Khalid, the former deputy defense minister of Saudi Arabia, framed the Saudi acquisition of the Chinese missiles as a deterrent in response to Iranian belligerence in the 1980s.

Today, it is likely that outside of the Fertile Crescent Saudi behavior will appear to remain much the same. The Saudis are slow to change and despite the very real Saudi discontent with current American leadership, it is unlikely that the Saudis will take any radical public action that signals an abrupt shift in its security policies. It is more likely that they will move incrementally on a number of fronts, hedging their bets depending on the regional and international security context. It is not just the Iranian nuclear program that concerns the Saudis. They also sense that the shifting fortunes of supply and demand in world energy markets may be moving against them in the medium to long-term, and vast cash reserves they have generated during the past decade may not be a permanent feature of the budget in the long-term. In line with the possibility of diminishing energy resources due to rapidly increasing domestic consumption,²⁶ a fast growing and youthful population will tax the regime's resources and force it to move a bit more aggressively than usual to create suitable employment opportunities for its youth. In other words, the Saudis are going to assess the future impact of major shifts in international energy markets, domestic demographic changes, regional security threats, domestic dissent and regime cohesion, and the nature of the current leadership of the international system. Ultimately, Saudi Arabia's decision to pursue nuclear weaponization will depend on a multi-dimensional calculation of how best to protect Al Saud rather than a narrow response to one specific external regional security threat.

At the end of 2011, following the tumultuous changes in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, the *Washington Post's* foreign affairs columnist [David Ignatius noted](#), perhaps somewhat prematurely, “that Saudi Arabia has increasingly replaced the United States as the key status-quo power in the Middle East - a role that seems likely to expand even more in coming years as the Saudis boost their military and economic spending.” Ignatius noted that Saudis described the kingdom's expanding security role as “a reaction, in part, to the diminished clout of the United States. They still regard the U.S.-Saudi relationship as valuable, but it's no longer seen as a guarantor of their security. For that, the Saudis have decided they must rely more on themselves - and, down the road, on a wider set of friends that includes their military partner, Pakistan, and their largest oil customer, China.”

The Saudis were clearly using Ignatius to deliver a message that if the U.S. is not a reliable security partner, then the Saudis have other options -- namely, Pakistan and China, and, perhaps in the medium and long-term, themselves. Whether or not this was a Saudi bluff, intended to refocus the U.S.'s attention on the Middle East during a period

²³ Steven A. Cook, “Don't Fear a Nuclear Arms Race in the Middle East,” *Foreign Policy*, 2 April 2012, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/04/02/don_t_fear_a_nuclear_arms_race.

²⁴ Khalid bin Sultan (with Patrick Seale), *Desert Warrior: A Personal View of the Gulf War by the Joint Forces Commander* (Harper Collins, 1995), p. 142.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 145.

²⁶ Yitzhak Gal, “[Arab Use of Energy: Oil Out, Renewable Energy In.](#)” *Iqtisadi* 3:7: September 15, 2013.

when it seemed as if Washington was focused on its security “pivot” to East Asia, simply discussing a turn toward Pakistan or China as a regional security partner represents a sea-change in terms of Saudi perceptions.

Today, the Saudis are worried, not confident (if indeed they were in fact confident in 2011). They fear the U.S. will make a deal with Iran that will leave Iran’s nuclear program intact. The Saudis believe that a deal that legitimizes Iran as the threshold nuclear weapons state is a deal that comes at the expense of their security. It would be a mistake for Obama officials to accept today’s conventional wisdom, which holds that the Saudis will simply accept that they have no alternatives, for the Saudis are trying to cobble together a patchwork of tactics to achieve their regional goals. Yet it remains to be seen whether these moves will bring the Saudi monarchy more security or in fact lead the kingdom and the region into a period of even greater security competition and instability.

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