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Saudi Strategy in Syria: Rewriting Mideast's Political Map?

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

Saudi Arabia has raised the ante in its battle with Iran by publicly committing to send ground troops to Syria. This latest move by the Saudis is aimed at drawing the US into a more direct involvement to confront Islamic State as well as the de facto alliance of Russia and Iran to keep Syrian President Bashar Al Assad in power.

Commentary

SAUDI ARABIA's recent announcement that it would send a ground force to confront the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) signals a ratcheting up of a high-risk strategy to get the United States to reengage in the Middle East and North Africa. Saudi Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman was unequivocal in a recent, wide-ranging interview about the goals of Saudi Arabia's more assertive, interventionist foreign and defence policy.

To achieve the kingdom's goal of rolling back the popular uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa and contain Iranian influence in the region, Saudi Arabia needs to leave the US no option but to re-engage rather than simply focus on the fight against jihadism. "The United States must realise that they are the number one in the world and they have to act like it," Prince Mohammed said, suggesting that the sooner the US re-engages the better. Reengagement means to the Saudi leader, aggressive US support for the kingdom's efforts to shape the Middle East and North Africa in its image.

Risking Direct Confrontation

What happens in Syria has a far more immediate regional fallout than events in

Yemen where the Saudi military is struggling to win an unwinnable war against Iran-backed Houthi rebels. Unlike the war in Yemen, with its indiscriminate bombing of civilian targets, Saudi ground forces in Syria could force the US to become more involved.

Saudi intervention in Syria would, in contrast to Yemen, which the kingdom sees as a proxy war, bring Saudi troops in closer proximity to Russian forces and Iran's Revolutionary Guard. Russian and Iranian attacks on Saudi-backed rebels would inevitably have to elicit a Saudi response.

It's a high-stakes gamble that would create the perfect powder keg, from which the US would be unable to stand aside. The US hopes that implementation of an agreement by the International Syria Support Group (ISSC) to arrange a ceasefire in Syria within a week will avert Saudi military intervention. The agreement, despite Saudi support for the ISSC decision, excludes not only Islamic State but also the Saudi-supported Al Nusra Front from the cessation of hostilities, which raises questions about what the kingdom's real intentions are.

Putting the US on the spot

In many ways, the Saudi offer, whether implemented or not, constitutes a master stroke. The Obama administration will find it difficult to reject the offer out of hand as it responds to repeated US admonitions that the Gulf states need to contribute more forcefully to the fight against Islamic State (IS), which is another name for ISIS, as well as the generally accepted notion that the group cannot be defeated by air power alone. US officials have repeatedly insisted that any ground force would have to be Arab-led.

To sidestep the Saudi challenge and prevent a dangerous escalation of the Syrian war, the Obama administration will have to come up with proposals that justify delaying Saudi intervention, but go beyond air strikes against IS and futile efforts to breathe new life into peace talks.

The Saudi gamble ironically fits neatly with the strategy of the Russian and Iranian-backed regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Neither Saudi Arabia nor Syria and its backers want real negotiations that could end Syria's five-year old, brutal civil war until the lay of the battlefield definitively enhances their respective negotiating position.

The Assad regime made this clear by recently launching a major offensive in Aleppo that significantly weakened a rebel stranglehold on the city and its environs and ensured that United Nations-sponsored peace efforts were rendered stillborn before they even effectively started. Saudi Arabia, backed by Turkey, contributed their bit by persuading rebel negotiators to leave Geneva in the wake of the Aleppo offensive.

The Saudi offer of ground troops exploits an increasingly untenable situation. The Aleppo offensive has sent tens of thousands fleeing to the Syrian-Turkish border. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu has warned that the latest fighting could force and additional one million Syrians to flee.

With 2.5 million Syrian refugees already in Turkey and European leaders urging Turkey to accommodate them rather than allow them to head to western Europe, Ankara is urging NATO to patrol the waters off its Mediterranean shore to prevent human traffickers from smuggling refugees to Greece. The Turkish demand for NATO assistance adds to the Saudi strategy of forcing the US to become more engaged.

The Ultimate Battleground

For both Saudi Arabia and Turkey, Syria constitutes the ultimate battleground for hegemony in the region. Russian military intervention and Iranian backing have turned around the once waning fortunes of the Assad regime. Rebel forces are on the defensive with Russia targeting Saudi-backed groups despite its insistence that it is focussed on destroying IS.

A Syria in which the regime and IS, rather than other rebel groups, are the only real domestic players turns Bashar al-Assad into a pivotal cog in the fight against jihadism. That is something Saudi Arabia cannot allow to happen. To turn the tide, it needs a United States that is engaged and willing to do its bit.

To force the US' hand, Saudi Arabia is threatening to plunge into the dark, risking a conflagration with Russia and Iran, as acknowledged by prominent Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. "Yes, it's a risk but it's more of a risk if the Iranians win in Syria and have hegemony over that Arab land," he said.

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