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President Trump in Syria: Should I Stay or Should I Go?

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On April 7, 2018, the Asad regime used chlorine and perhaps sarin gas to kill dozens and injure hundreds in the rebel controlled Douma area of eastern Ghouta, a suburb of Damascus.¹ Seven days later, on April 14, France, the United Kingdom and the United States carried out a series of “precision strikes”² on three facilities used to manufacture and store the Asad regime’s chemical weapons.³ The strikes were intended “to deter the future use of chemical weapons by holding the Syrian regime responsible for its atrocities against humanity.”⁴ While defense officials emphasized that this attack was “qualitatively and quantitatively different” than the U.S. strike on the Shayrat airbase during April 2017, it appears that the latest strikes were carefully planned to avoid escalation with the Asad regime’s patrons, Russia and Iran.⁵ A Pentagon spokeswoman underscored this message, stating that “our mission in Syria remains the same. It is to defeat ISIS. It is not to be involved in the civil war.”⁶

¹ [“United States Assessment of the Assad Regime’s Chemical Weapons Use,”](#) Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, April 13, 2018; Stacy Meichtry and Nick Kostov, [“French Publish Report Asserting Assad Chemical Weapons Use in Attack,”](#) *The Wall Street Journal*, April 14, 2018.

² [“President Trump on Syria Strikes: Full Transcript and Video,”](#) *The New York Times*, April 13, 2018.

³ [“Briefing by Secretary Mattis on U.S. Strikes in Syria,”](#) U.S. Department of Defense, April 13, 2018.

⁴ Ambassador Nikki Haley, [“Remarks at an Emergency UN Security Council Meeting,”](#) United States Mission to the United Nations, April 14, 2018.

⁵ Julian Borger, Angelique Chrisafis, and Andrew Roth, [“Syria: US Concerned Military Strike Would Escalate Out of Control,”](#) *The Guardian*, April 12, 2018.

⁶ [“Department of Defense Press Briefing by Pentagon Chief Spokesperson Dana W. White and Lt. Gen Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr.,”](#) U.S. Department of Defense, April 14, 2018.

In Israel, many believe the civil war is already over and that Asad, Russia, Hizballah, and Iran have won.⁷ U.S. President Donald Trump's statements on March 29 and April 3 that he wants to "get out" of Syria and that it would be happening "real soon," has raised serious concerns in Israel. A call between Trump and Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu on April 4 "grew tense" over Trump's preference to pull all U.S. troops out of Syria within six months.⁸ Trump reiterated his position on April 13, emphasizing that "America does not seek an indefinite presence in Syria, under no circumstances," and that he looked forward to bringing U.S. troops home.⁹ In Israel the perception is that Trump is ignoring Iran's expansion across Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria, which is deemed the real long-term threat to stability in the region.¹⁰ Trump addressed this issue in his April 13 remarks, claiming "increased engagement" from "Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Egypt, and others, can ensure Iran does not profit from the eradication of ISIS."¹¹ Yet this comment raises important questions for Israel: What kind of increased engagement does the U.S. expect from these countries? Is Trump looking for political and military engagement, or is he simply bargaining for the \$4 billion he is reported to have asked of Saudi King Salman in December?¹² How does Israel fit in such a plan? Will the U.S. coordinate it? How will the U.S. bridge the huge divide between Qatar and the other Sunni states? Most importantly, how will this kind of engagement be any different than the competing Sunni efforts to oust Asad and counter Iran between 2012 and 2015, which ended in failure?¹³

The Saudis, Qataris, and Turks failed to create a unified and professional armed resistance to the Asad regime between 2011 and 2014. There were two primary reasons for this outcome: First, each of the three states acted independently and often at cross-purposes. Rather than coordinating their efforts, they each gambled that their respective Syrian clients would come out on top and subordinate the rest of the Syrian opposition. For example, in 2012, the Saudis and Qataris used competing middlemen in Istanbul to fund and supply the

⁷ Robin Wright, "[Israel Wages a Growing War in Syria](#)," *The New Yorker*, April 9, 2018.

⁸ "[US Officials: Trump-Netanyahu call grew tense over plans to leave Syria](#)," *Times of Israel*, April 5, 2018.

⁹ "[President Trump on Syria Strikes: Full Transcript and Video](#)," *The New York Times*, April 13, 2018.

¹⁰ "[Former Defense Minister: Iran is Most Prominent Threat to Global Stability](#)," JPost.com, January 30, 2018.

¹¹ "[President Trump on Syria Strikes: Full Transcript and Video](#)," *The New York Times*, April 13, 2018; See, also: Michael R. Gordon, "[U.S. Seeks Arab Force and Funding for Syria](#)," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 16, 2018.

¹² Karen DeYoung and Paul Sonne, "[Trump wants to get the U.S. out of Syria's war, so he asked the Saudi king for \\$4 billion](#)," *Washington Post*, March 16, 2018.

¹³ Emile Hokayem, "[Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War](#)," *Survival* 56:6 (2014), 59-86; Christopher Phillips, "[Eyes Bigger Than Stomachs: Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar in Syria](#)," *Middle East Policy* 24: 1 (Spring 2017), 36-47.

various armed groups during the early stages of the anti-Asad insurgency.¹⁴ The Saudis relied on a Lebanese Shi'i, Okab Sakr, who was close to the Hariri family.¹⁵ The Qataris worked through a Syrian regime defector, Major Abdulrahman Suwais and two others. The rivalry between Qatar and Saudi Arabia was transferred to the already fractious rebel arena that was divided by geographic, various religious and/or nationalist orientations, as well as by more parochial interests. The Qatari middlemen preferred to work through the pro-Syrian Muslim Brotherhood military councils, while the Saudis' man, Sakr, handpicked battalions that were not Brotherhood aligned.¹⁶ Instead of making their aid and support conditional on unification and consolidation, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey created competing patronage networks that divided the rebels and dissipated resources. While the Saudis had successfully used proxies to fight Nasserist revolutionaries in Yemen between 1962 and 1970 and the Soviet Union in Afghanistan from 1980 to 1988, the rivalry between the Saudis, Qataris, and Turks proved debilitating for the Syrian opposition in 2012-13.¹⁷

Second, the Gulf Arab States never fully committed to supporting the Syrian rebels, holding back in the belief that the U.S. would eventually intervene to oust the Asad regime. The Saudis, in particular, misjudged President Obama. They clung to the belief that they could induce or goad the Obama administration into toppling Asad.¹⁸ This perception peaked in September 2013, when Obama did not enforce his red line against Asad's use of chemical weapons. It was only in the first half of 2014, following Prince Bandar bin Sultan's dismissal as the Saudi intelligence chief, that the Saudis began to seriously coordinate their efforts in Syria with the United States, particularly the CIA. However, in the months before the Islamic State shattered the borders between Iraq and Syria in the summer of 2014, the rebel groups were both too diffuse and generating enough independent financial support from private donors, making them less interested in obtaining Saudi funding that came with additional strings attached. In the first half of 2015, following the establishment of the Islamic State's caliphate, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey began to more effectively consolidate their support

¹⁴ Rania Abouzeid, "[Syria's Secular and Islamist Rebels: Who are the Saudis and Qataris arming?](#)," *Time*, September 18, 2012.

¹⁵ Rania Abouzeid, *No Turning Back* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2018), pp. 107-108.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 148-150.

¹⁷ "[Anything but Politics: The State of Syria's Political Opposition](#)," Middle East Report No. 146, Crisis Group, October 17, 2013.

¹⁸ Emile Hokayem, "[Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War](#)," *Survival* 56:6 (2014), 59-86; Christopher Phillips, "[Eyes Bigger Than Stomachs: Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar in Syria](#)," *Middle East Policy* 24: 1 (Spring 2017), 36-47; Brandon Friedman, "[Saudi Brinkmanship in the Syrian War](#)," *Tel Aviv Notes* 10:4, February 28, 2016.

behind *Jaysh al-Fatah* (Army of Conquest) in Syria.¹⁹ The Syrian rebels made increasing gains during the summer of 2015, and the Asad regime was in real danger of collapse until the Russian and Iranian military intervention in September 2015 turned the tide of the war in favor of the regime.²⁰

Given this recent history, is there any reason to expect anything different from Sunni engagement in 2018? Saudi Arabia has consistently called for Bashar al-Asad's ouster since 2011. Therefore, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's surprising statement to *Time* magazine that "Bashar is staying," has signaled a different approach from the Saudis, something other than another war by proxy. Bin Salman suggested that he may be trying to drive a wedge between Iran and the Asad regime: "But I believe that Bashar's interest is not to let the Iranians do whatever they want they want to do."²¹ Saudi Arabia may be trying to find a way to provide incentives to the Asad regime in order to limit Iran's political influence in Syria.²² Similarly in Iraq, the Saudis have been courting Iraq's Shi'i religious elite in Najaf, who may feel that Iran's position in Iraq is growing too strong.²³ Both Syria and Iraq appear eager to begin reconstruction, and both countries badly need economic assistance to stabilize and pay for the massive amount of rebuilding ahead. Iraq is seeking \$100 billion for reconstruction, while Syria needs between \$100 and \$350 billion, with some estimates placing the cost at \$1 trillion.²⁴ Increased political engagement in Syria and Iraq may allow the Saudis to link financial support for reconstruction with reducing Iran's influence and presence in the historically Sunni populated areas of Syria and Iraq.

However, prospective Saudi political and economic influence in Iraq and Syria does not solve the problem of replacing U.S. military power in eastern Syria. During Donald Trump's May 2017 visit to Saudi Arabia for the Riyadh Summit of Muslim States, there was some suggestion that the U.S. and a Saudi-led Islamic Military Alliance (established in 2015) would jointly create a "regional defense architecture." The idea seemed to be to create an "Arab NATO," which would be

¹⁹ David Ignatius, "[A new cooperation on Syria](#)," *Washington Post*, May 12, 2015; Ben Hubbard, "[A Look At the Army of Conquest. A Prominent Rebel Alliance in Syria](#)," *The New York Times*, October 2, 2015.

²⁰ Eyal Zisser, "[The Russian and Iranian Military Intervention in Syria](#)," *Tel Aviv Notes* 9:16, September 25, 2015.

²¹ W.J. Hennigan, "[Saudi Crown Prince Says US Troops Should Stay in Syria](#)," *Time*, March 30, 2018.

²² Y. Yehoshua, "[Sharp Shifts on Saudi Policy on the Syria Crisis](#)," Inquiry and Analysis Series No. 1391, MEMRI, April 13, 2018.

²³ Erika Solomon, "[Sunni Saudi Arabia courts an ally in Iraq's Shia](#)," *Financial Times*, April 1, 2018.

²⁴ Paul Rivlin, "[Syria: towards reconstruction or deconstruction?](#)," *Iqtisadi* 8:3, March 23, 2018; "[Syria's post-war recovery may cost up to \\$1 trillion](#)," *TRT World*, January 12, 2018; Ahmed Aboulenein, "[Iraq seeks \\$100 billion to reconstruct transport, agriculture and oil sectors](#)," *Reuters*, February 9, 2018.

used to stabilize the areas of Iraq and Syria that were then held by the Islamic State.²⁵ There has been little visible progress on the construction of an Arab NATO alliance since the Riyadh Summit, and the Islamic Military Alliance's Pakistani commander Raheel Sharif, made no mention of preparing a force for Iraq or Syria in his first public address in Manama, Bahrain during October 2017.²⁶ Practically speaking, it may not be realistic to expect the Arab countries that Trump named in his April 13 remarks to increase their military engagement in Syria. Saudi and Emirati forces are still actively fighting in Yemen. Egypt is also consumed with armed conflict, as it struggles to cope with the Islamic State's urgency in Sinai. Qatar's military has limited experience, and its unprecedented political rift with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt would appear to preclude active military cooperation between their forces. Even if the Sunni states could create an Arab NATO force to occupy post-Islamic State eastern Syria, it is not clear that such a force would have the military capabilities or experience to deter or contain Iran's battle-hardened militia forces in Syria and Iraq.²⁷ Finally, the notion of an Arab NATO does not clearly address the fate of the Syrian Kurds. How will increased Arab engagement in Syria affect Kobanî and Jazira, the autonomous areas of northeast Syria held by the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)?

In November 2015, John Bolton, Donald Trump's recently appointed national security adviser, wrote an op-ed in the *New York Times*,²⁸ arguing that the "best alternative to the Islamic State in northeastern Syria and western Iraq is a new, independent Sunni state." Bolton believed this "Sunni-stan" could serve as a "bulwark" against both Asad and Iran. He further argued that "an independent Kurdistan that has international recognition could work in America's favor." However, Bolton also argued that "American ground combat forces will have to be deployed to provide cohesion and leadership," something his new boss appears dead set against.

Where does this leave Israel? Many believe the pattern of escalation that was set in motion when Iran sent a drone into Israeli airspace on February 10, suggests that Israel is on a collision course with Iran.²⁹ The conventional wisdom is that Iran is moving quickly to consolidate its position in Syria in the aftermath of the

²⁵ Margherita Stancati and Maria Abi Habib, "[U.S. Allies to Form 'Arab NATO'](#)," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 21, 2018.

²⁶ Joanne Stocker, "[Commander of 'Muslim NATO' gives first public address in Manama, Bahrain](#)," *Defense Post*, October 16, 2017.

²⁷ Iranian backed Shi'i militias have recently crossed into Syria from Iraq, heading to Deir ez-Zour: "[Popular Mobilization Forces move their positions from Iraq into Syria](#) [in Arabic]," *al-Journal*, April 14, 2018.

²⁸ John Bolton, "[To Defeat ISIS, Create a Sunni State](#)," *The New York Times*, November 24, 2015.

²⁹ Eyal Zisser, "[Don't Surrender to Iran and Don't be Frightened by its Threats](#), [Hebrew]" *Israel Hayom*, April 15, 2018; Charles Freilich, "[Why Israel Needs to Escalate Its Threats Against Iran – Right Now](#)," *Haaretz.com*, April 15, 2018; Avi Issacharoff, "[Israel and Iran are Headed for a Collision Course in Syria](#)," *The Atlantic*, April 12, 2018.

destruction of the Islamic State's caliphate, while testing Israel's red lines in the process. Those red lines include transferring advanced weaponry to Syria or Lebanon; breaching Israeli sovereignty; the establishment of permanent Iranian military bases in Syria; and, the building of facilities to manufacture advanced missiles in Lebanon.³⁰ In the aftermath of Asad's chemical attack in Douma on April 7, Israel was reported to have conducted air strikes on the Tiyas ("T-4") airbase near Homs, which killed several members of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps. One of those reported dead was said to be the officer responsible for Iran's drone aircraft development in Syria.³¹ Less than 24 hours after the joint U.S., U.K., and French strikes on Asad's chemical weapons facilities, there were reports of Israel carrying out strikes on an Iranian militia base and arms depot south of Aleppo, on Mount Azan.³² If Israel hopes to curtail a sustained cycle of escalation with Iran in Syria, there may be nothing more important than convincing Trump to maintain a strong American military presence in eastern Syria. In other words, Bolton will need to succeed where his predecessors have failed.

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³⁰ Raphael Ahren, "[Israeli Official: Iran's aggression from Syria escalated faster than expected](#)," *Times of Israel*, February 18, 2018.

³¹ Raz Zimmt, "[Eye on Iran: March 29-April 15](#)," [in Hebrew]" Meir Amit Center for Intelligence and Terrorism; Farzin Nadimi, "[Israel Once Again Strikes Iran's UAV Base in Syria](#)," Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), April 10, 2018.

³² *Radio Sawt Beirut International* [Arabic], April 15, 2018.