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From Baghdad to Riyadh: A New Regional Security Pact?*

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President Trump's trip to Saudi Arabia did not, as some expected, result in an announcement of an "Arab NATO."¹ Nevertheless, the May 20-21 Riyadh Summit, which brought more than 50 Arab and Muslim leaders to Saudi Arabia, was intended to show American support for the Saudi regional security agenda that is focused on confronting Iran and the Islamic State. Observers were quick to draw comparisons between a "Riyadh Pact" and the 1955 Baghdad Pact, which facilitated regional security cooperation between the U.S. and U.K. and their pro-Western regional allies — Turkey, Iraq, Pakistan, and Iran — in an effort to contain communism and Arab nationalism. While the commentator Faisal Al Yafai favorably characterized the gathering as a first step "toward a more formidable defense posture that will allow cooler heads to prevail," the historian Rashid Khalidi argued that "Trump's Arab Nato would be a terrible mistake."² Saudi officials, for their part, viewed Trump's visit as a vital "reset" of U.S.- Saudi bilateral relations and "a symbol that Washington aimed to be once again a bedrock for the kingdom and its allies."³ However, the hint of something more ambitious was suggested by Saudi foreign minister Adel al-Jubeir's reference to "increasing defense capabilities" and "working on a defense architecture for the

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¹ Josh Rogin, "Trump to unveil plans for an 'Arab NATO' in Saudi Arabia," *Washington Post*, May 17, 2017.

² Faisal Al Yafai, "[The real test for an Arab Nato will come the day after Raqqa falls](#)," *The National*, May 22, 2017; Rashid Khalidi, "[Why Trump's 'Arab Nato' would be a terrible mistake](#)," *The Guardian*, May 22, 2017.

³ Martin Chulov, "[Saudi leaders hail Trump visit as 'a reset of the regional order'](#)," *The Guardian*, May 20, 2017; Fuad Matar, "[Riyadh...an incubator for compatible nations](#)," [in Arabic], *as-Sharq al-Awsat*, May 24, 2017.

region – initially between our two countries and then looking at how other countries can join.”⁴

The U.S.- Saudi reset reflected a mutual desire to undo the the Obama Administration’s efforts⁵ to promote “geopolitical equilibrium” between Iran and the Sunni Arab States in the region.⁶ From the Saudi perspective, “Iran took the United States hostage” during Obama’s drive for a nuclear agreement in his second term, which allowed Iran a free hand to sow chaos in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen and created the worst tragedy “in the region’s history.”⁷ At the Riyadh Summit, King Salman referred to Iran as the spearhead of global terrorism and enumerated its “expansionist ambitions, criminal practices, interferences in the internal affairs of other countries, flagrant violations of the international law, and violations of the principles of good-neighborliness, coexistence and mutual respect.”⁸ Trump was warmly received in Riyadh, because, in contrast to Obama’s conciliatory approach toward Iran, he was openly confrontational in his speech at the summit. Echoing Saudi statements, Trump declared:

From Lebanon to Iraq to Yemen, Iran funds, arms, and trains terrorists, militias, and other extremist groups that spread destruction and chaos across the region. For decades, Iran has fueled the fires of sectarian conflict and terror.⁹

Trump also explicitly called on the international community to isolate Iran and deny it funding for terrorism.¹⁰ While Trump’s new approach to Iran may not be particularly surprising, what makes the Riyadh Summit much more than a “reset” or simply a return to the “status quo” in the U.S.- Saudi relationship is the Saudi aspiration to play a more assertive and forceful leadership role in the region.

Saudi intellectual Khalid al-Dakhil, who is known for his independent views, praised King Salman for tackling Iranian behavior head-on with clear and

⁴ Rex W. Tillerson, [“Remarks with Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir at a Press Availability,”](#) U.S. Department of State, May 20, 2017.

⁵ Michael D. Shear and Peter Baker, [“Saudis Welcome Trump’s Rebuff of Obama’s Mideast Views,”](#) *The New York Times*, May 20, 2017; Julie Pace and Jonathan Lemire, [“Saudis Welcome Trump With Gold Medal, Receive Arms Package,”](#) *Associated Press*, May 20, 2017.

⁶ David Remnick, [“Going the Distance: On and Off the road with President Obama,”](#) *New Yorker*, January 27, 2014.

⁷ Abdulrahmen al-Rashed, [“Trump in Riyadh: Obama’s Advice,”](#) *as-Sharq al-Awsat*, May 20, 2017.

⁸ [“Full Text of the Speech of King Salman at the End of President’s Trump’s Visit,”](#) *Arab News*, May 22, 2017.

⁹ [“President Trump’s Speech to Arab Islamic American Summit,”](#) Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, May 21, 2017.

¹⁰ [“President Trump’s Speech to Arab Islamic American Summit,”](#) Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, May 21, 2017; Marc Champion, [“Trump’s Call to Isolate Iran Sets Up a Challenge for Rouhani,”](#) *Bloomberg.com*, May 21, 2017.

unambiguous language. He argued that in the past Arab states have tried to conciliate Iran and avoid confronting it with the reality of its dangerous sectarian policies, fearing that they too would be painted with the sectarian brush. However, Dakhil claimed hardliners in Iran capitalized on Arab quiescence and implemented their sectarian policies, knowing that Arab states would be hesitant to confront them on it. Here Dakhil is alluding to King Salman's statement that "The Iranian regime erroneously thought that our silence a sign of weakness and our wisdom a retreat."¹¹ Dakhil argued that the time has come to distinguish between the Iranian state's *active* exploitation of sectarian differences in the region and the Arab fear of facing-up to the weight of its centuries-old sectarian culture.¹²

To many, Dakhil's distinction may sound like a specious argument, particularly coming from a Saudi subject. After all, Saudi legitimacy rests, in part, on its historical and ongoing ties to the Al Shaykh family and Wahhabi Islam, which has a history of sectarian enmity toward Shi'is and Muslims who do not share the Wahhabi creed. Some may find it ironic that Dakhil is arguing that it is Iran rather than the Saudi government that is using sectarianism and Islam as a tool for political aggrandizement. Nevertheless, the distinction Dakhil is drawing, while debatable, is important. He is saying that while Islam is a source of legitimacy and authority for the Saudi royal family, the Saudi state does not use sectarianism as an instrument of power projection or subversion. He further claims that confronting Sunni terror and extremism without confronting Shi'i terror is also a form of sectarianism.

To be sure, Saudi declarations about confronting extremism should be treated with a heavy dose of circumspection.¹³ The Saudis have been making strides in this area for some time now, but the process is too slow to be felt, according to the analyst Hassan Hassan. He argues that the Kingdom should systematically "pushback against clerics who spew sectarian hatred at home"¹⁴ and embrace the "holistic" approach to combating extremism proposed by Jordan's King Abdullah in 2006 and reaffirmed in his speech at the Riyadh Summit.¹⁵

¹¹ ["Full Text of the Speech of King Salman at the End of President's Trump's Visit," Arab News](#), May 22, 2017.

¹² Khalid al-Dakhil, ["Riyadh Summit: The Correction," al-Hayat](#) [in Arabic], May 23, 2017.

¹³ For representative Saudi perspectives, see: Abu Lujayn Ibrahim al-Dahman, ["Islamization of extremism and the desired strategy of 'moderation' \[in Arabic\]," Sabq](#), May 22, 2017; and, Aql al-Aql, ["The capital of moderation and the fight against terrorism \[in Arabic\]," al-Hayat](#), May 20, 2017.

¹⁴ Hassan Hassan, ["Riyadh's fight against extremism must expand," The National](#), May 22, 2017.

¹⁵ ["Full Speech of Jordan's King Abdullah II Speech at Arab Islamic-American Summit," Arab News](#), May 22, 2017.

In order to play a more forceful leadership role, the Saudis are also keen to continue augmenting their military capabilities. The unprecedented size of the U.S.- Saudi economic deals that were announced during Trump's visit is another indication that the Riyadh Summit is more than simply a post-Obama reset of bilateral ties. Their value is expected to be more than \$300 billion, and the arms package alone is estimated to exceed more than \$100 billion, which is approximately 15 percent of total Saudi Gross Domestic Product (GDP).¹⁶

Since the 1970s, the Saudis have used massive arms deals as a means to recycle their petrodollars and cement their security alliances with Western military powers.¹⁷ Some would argue that the Saudis were outsourcing their national security, but in reality the Saudis were forced to seek new modes of security in the period that followed the British military withdrawal from the region in 1971. In line with this logic, these enormous arms deals were viewed in Saudi Arabia as a symbol of the U.S.'s commitment to Saudi security. There was a perception that the Saudis purchased the West's most advanced military technology without clear operational objectives and often struggled to integrate all of its advanced hardware into its military operations.¹⁸

However, what makes the arms package different this time around, beyond its unprecedented size and scope, is that the Saudi military is actively engaged in ongoing military operations in Yemen. Since March 2015, and for the first time in the kingdom's history,¹⁹ Saudi Arabia is independently projecting force beyond its borders in an attempt to roll-back the Iranian-backed Houthi insurgency in Yemen. While the Saudi military has had mixed success in Yemen,²⁰ it is the effort to independently use its military to achieve its security objectives that is new and significant, indicating an important shift to a more self-reliant Saudi strategic culture.²¹

¹⁶ Dave Majumdar, "[How the United States Is Turning Saudi Arabia Into a Military Juggernaut](#)," *The National Interest*, May 19, 2017.

¹⁷ Matteo Legrenzi, *The GCC and the International Relations of the Gulf* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011).

¹⁸ Anthony Cordesman and Nawaf Obaid, *National Security in Saudi Arabia* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005).

¹⁹ Saudi Arabia's role in jointly commanding U.N. coalition forces in 1990/1991 Operation Desert Storm was an important development; see: Khalid Bin Sultan (with Patrick Seale), *Desert Warrior* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995). The Saudi involvement in the war in Yemen between 1962-1970 was primarily through proxies or mercenaries. The Saudi military directly engaged the Soviet-backed South Yemeni forces at the battle at Wadi'a in November 1969, but also received substantial foreign support in both deploying its air power and securing its air defense.

²⁰ Ralph Shield, "[The Saudi air war in Yemen: A case for coercive success through battlefield denial](#)," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, April 7, 2017; Emile Hokayem and David B. Roberts, "[The War in Yemen](#)," *Survival* 58: 6 (2016), 157-186.

²¹ Barjas Humud al-Barjas, "[The Riyadh Summit and the U.S. President's Visit](#) [in Arabic]," *Sabq*, May 23, 2017.

The discussion of an “Arab NATO,” while perhaps premature, and Adel al-Jubeir’s references to a new regional “defense architecture” are a clear indication of Saudi ambitions. To that end, the U.S.- Saudi arms package will contribute to developing an indigenous Saudi military-industrial complex. Saudi Arabia’s “Vision 2030” plan for economic development calls for manufacturing half of Saudi armaments domestically.²² The establishment of the Saudi Arabian Military Industries (SAMI), which will be modeled on the multi-billion dollar Saudi petrochemical giant SABIC, will provide the kingdom with a private sector vehicle for U.S. technology transfer and joint ventures.²³ Further, Lockheed Martin and Raytheon, two of the American companies profiting from the new arms deals, will be creating a large numbers of jobs in Saudi Arabia to assemble, modernize, and maintain much of the advanced military hardware and weapons systems the Saudis are purchasing.²⁴

Perhaps the most intriguing immediate development to come out of the Riyadh Summit was the declared intent to bolster the U.S.-led coalition against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria with a 34,000 strong reserve force being raised by the Saudi-led “Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism.”²⁵ The Riyadh Declaration noted that these forces would be used “to support operations against terrorist organizations in Iraq and Syria when needed.”²⁶ The Trump administration has not announced its strategy for combating the Islamic State, but the declarations that came out of the Riyadh Summit suggest that the U.S. may have plans to partner with the Saudi-led Islamic Military Alliance in stabilizing the Sunni populated territories of eastern Syria and western Iraq after the Islamic State has been defeated.

Prince Turki al-Faisal, the former Saudi security chief, writing in the aftermath of the Riyadh Summit, embraced Trump’s regional agenda, but pointed out that everyone will be looking for the “action that will bring us all out of the rut of where we are.”²⁷ The U.S. presidential visit certainly restored Saudi confidence in

²² [Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Vision 2030](#); Marcus Weisgerber, “[What really matters in Trump’s \\$110B Saudi Arms Package](#),” *Defense One*, May 22, 2017.

²³ Frank Kane, “[Huge Trump deals give boost to Saudi military-industrial plans](#),” *Arab News*, May 25, 2017.

²⁴ William D. Hartung, “[There’s Less Than Meets the Eye in Trump’s Saudi Arms Deal](#),” *Defense One*, May 22, 2017; Marcus Weisgerber, “[What really matters in Trump’s \\$110B Saudi Arms Package](#),” *Defense One*, May 22, 2017.

²⁵ “[Joint Statement Between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United States of America](#),” Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, May 23, 2017; Jon Boone, “[Former Pakistan army chief Raheel Sharif to lead ‘Muslim Nato’](#),” *The Guardian*, January 8, 2017; “Pakistan clears Saudi move to make Raheel Sharif head of Islamic Military Alliance,” *Hindustan Times*, April 1, 2017; Salman Masood and Ben Hubbard, “[Pakistan Approves Military Hero to Head Tricky Saudi-Led Military Alliance](#),” *The New York Times*, April 2, 2017.

²⁶ “[Arab-Islamic-American Summit fosters global peace, stability](#),” *Arab News*, May 22, 2017.

²⁷ Prince Turki al-Faisal, “[Yes, Mr. Trump, we accept your partnership](#),” *Arab News*, May 24, 2017.

relationship that had frayed during the Obama years.²⁸ But it is “Actions,” as Turki reminded, that “speak louder than words.”²⁹

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²⁸ Ian Black, “[Obama’s chilly reception in Saudi Arabia hints at mutual distrust](#),” *The Guardian*, April 20, 2016.

²⁹ Prince Turki al-Faisal, “[Yes, Mr. Trump, we accept your partnership](#),” *Arab News*, May 24, 2017; Dr. Abdulaziz Sager, “[The Trump visit to Saudi Arabia: Time for Course Correction](#),” *as-Sharq al-Awsat*, May 21, 2017.