



Volume 10, Number 4

February 28, 2016

Saudi Brinkmanship in the Syrian War

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On Thursday night, February 11, Russia and the U.S., as leaders of the International Syrian Support Group (ISSG), signed a temporary ceasefire in Munich that was implemented on February 27. The ceasefire has silenced the guns for the time being, yet an important question remains: Is this simply a break in the action that allows all sides to catch their breath and improve their positions for the next phase of war, or will it ultimately prevent a spiral of regional escalation that would greatly increase the costs of the war?

In the aftermath of the initial ceasefire announcement on February 11, it appeared that all parties were gearing up for further escalation. Russia continued bombing the opposition north of Aleppo and dispatched the *Zelyony Dol*, a patrol ship armed with Kalibr cruise missiles, from its Black Sea fleet to patrol the Mediterranean near the Syrian coast.¹ The Saudis, for their part, were busy surveying Turkey's Incirlik air base, to which they will be sending fighter jets in a renewed effort to support the U.S.-led anti-Islamic State coalition in Syria.² To that end, the Saudis (along with the Emiratis, Qataris, and Bahrainis)³ also pledged to send their own ground forces.⁴ In response, Dmitry Medvedev, the Russian prime minister, told a German newspaper that "The Americans and our Arab partners must think hard about this – do they want a permanent war? All

¹ Agence France Presse (AFP) via *al-Arabiya*, "[Russia sends brand new cruise missile ship to Syria](#)," February 12, 2016.

² Vivian Nereim, "[Saudi Arabia Moves Jets to Turkey, Offers Troops to Fight IS](#)," *Bloomberg News*, February 14, 2016.

³ Fahd Theyabi, "[Qatar Will Join Ground Forces if Requested by Riyadh](#)," *al-Sharq al-Awsat* [Arabic], February 15, 2016; "[Bahrain says ready to commit ground forces to Syria](#)," *Reuters*, February 6, 2016.

⁴ Glen Carey, "Saudis Ready to Send Special Forces Against IS in Syria," *Bloomberg News*, February 9, 2016; Mehul Srivastava, Erika Solomon, Simeon Kerr, "[Saudis make plans to deploy ground troops in Syria](#)," *Financial Times*, February 9, 2016.

sides must be forced to the negotiating table instead of sparking a new world war.”⁵

The Saudi announcements may represent an ironic success for the Obama administration, which since last summer has been trying to convince its Saudi ally to and join the fight on the ground, if it wanted to help shape the outcome in Syria.⁶ However, the Saudi decision to finally “get in the game” may have been less the result of direct American pressure and more the failure of the U.S. to influence the negotiations in Geneva several weeks earlier, as well as increasing Saudi frustration with American policy in Syria.⁷ Ironically, the Saudis appear to have come around to the Obama position because they believe it may be the only way left to spur the U.S. into exercising greater leadership on the Syrian issue.⁸

With Russia’s military reordering the facts on the ground in Syria since September 2015, the Saudis recognize there is no longer any alternative to U.S. leadership in order to push back against the Russian-backed Asad regime. Therefore, Riyadh (along with Ankara) was hoping that its declared intent to commit troops to the conflict would lead the U.S. to be more assertive, in part, to control its allies, and prevent further unmanageable escalation. To put it another way, the Saudi declaration was a case of brinkmanship, which was directed as much at their American ally as it was at their Russian-backed adversaries. In the words of Saudi Defense Minister and Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, “the United States must realize that they are the number one in the world and they have to act like it.”⁹

Saudi Arabia believes that Russia and its partners will only change their inflexible posture on Asad if they begin to pay rising costs on the ground.¹⁰ Saudi Arabia’s declaration was also an attempt to put additional pressure on Russia and Asad to enforce the ceasefire. Put simply, the repeated announcements of intent were meant to signal to both the U.S. and Asad’s backers that the

⁵ Ian Black and Kareem Shaheen, “[Partial Syrian ceasefire agreed at talks in Munich](#),” *The Guardian*, February 12, 2016.

⁶ Jeffrey Goldberg, “[Ashton Carter: Gulf Arabs Need to Get in the Fight](#),” *The Atlantic*, November 6, 2015. Michael R. Gordon, “[U.S. Defense Chief Ashton Carter Prods Gulf States to Take Larger Role in ISIS fight](#),” December 15, 2015.

⁷ Aron Lund, “[Syria in Crisis: A Ceasefire for Syria?](#),” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 13, 2016; Kenneth Pollack, “[Fear and Loathing in Saudi Arabia](#),” ForeignPolicy.com, January 7, 2016. Ian Black, “[Saudi Arabia offers to send ground troops to Syria to fight Isis](#),” *The Guardian*, February 4, 2016; Sam Jones, “[Ban blames Russia for collapse of Syria talks](#),” *Financial Times*, February 5, 2016; “[Asiri: Saudi Arabia is ready to send ground forces to Syria](#),” *BBC Arabic*, February 4, 2016.

⁸ Jamal Khashoggi, “[Saudi Arabia’s Plan B in Syria](#),” *al-Arabiya* [English], February 16, 2016; Jamal Khashoggi, “[A long, long night...](#)” *al-Hayat* [Arabic], February 13, 2016.

⁹ “Transcript: Interview with Muhammad bin Salman,” *The Economist*, January 6, 2016.

¹⁰ Jamal Khashoggi, “[Saudi Arabia’s Plan B in Syria](#),” *al-Arabiya* [English], February 16, 2016; Jamal Khashoggi, “[A long, long night...](#)” *al-Hayat* [Arabic], February 13, 2016.

battlefield costs would rise if the offensive on Aleppo continued. Russia's initial response was to respond with posturing of its own, warning of a descent into another world war.¹¹

At the same time, Saudi Arabia's actions were not *just* a case of brinkmanship in order to encourage the U.S. to lead: the Saudis were also trying to signal to the U.S. that they are very serious about Syria, and they are willing to take unprecedented risks to advance their interests.

King Salman, with the help of his energetic son Muhammad, are trying to transform Saudi Arabia's regional role by injecting a new spirit of self-reliance into Saudi security doctrine. Salman's "doctrine," as outlined by Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, in the aftermath of the Saudi decision in May 2015 to intervene in Yemen, was intended to contain and even roll back Iran's regional influence. But what Khashoggi made explicit in articulating Salman's new doctrine was that it was born out of Saudi disappointment with the United States:

"...if Saudi Arabia has to act alone, then it will. Of course, it would have preferred an alliance with its old ally [the U.S.]; however it could not link the fate of the kingdom to this alliance...[so] it proceeded to form an alliance with its brothers and friends from the Arab and Muslim world."¹²

However, Russia's September 2015 intervention in Syria exposed the limits of the Salman doctrine. While the new doctrine represents a more aggressive plan to independently contain Iran in the region, it has less value when faced with Russia's escalation in Syria.

Many scoff at Saudi brinkmanship and pretensions of military power, but the new Saudi approach to military affairs is genuine. It marks an important shift in the Saudi political elite's attitudes towards its military capabilities. Two weeks ago the kingdom started its "Northern Thunder" (Ra'd al-Shamal) military exercise in Hafr al-Batin, which included 350,000 soldiers from more than twenty Middle Eastern and African countries.¹³ While it may be fair to dismiss Twitter-generated rumors that the exercise was a dress rehearsal for a massive joint anti-IS operation into Syria through Jordan,¹⁴ the Saudi media was in fact

¹¹ Sven Afhüppe and Matthias Brüggmann, "[Russian Prime Minister: Syria Could Trigger World War](#)," *Handelsblatt* (Global Edition), February 12, 2016.

¹² Jamal Khashoggi, "[The Salman doctrine](#)," *al-Arabiya* [Arabic], March 28, 2015. For an English version, see [here](#).

¹³ Fatah al-Rahman Yusuf, "[Forces from 20 countries arrive in Saudi Arabia to participate in the 'Northern Thunder' exercise](#)," *al-Sharq al-Awsat* [Arabic], February 15, 2016.

¹⁴ @mujtahidd, Twitter posts [Arabic], February 7, 2016, posted between, 4:24-5:12am: <https://twitter.com/mujtahidd/status/696309082811146242>; <https://twitter.com/mujtahidd/status/696309472466235392>; <https://twitter.com/mujtahidd/status/696312884851306496>; <https://twitter.com/mujtahidd/status/696314267549757440>;

discussing it as preparation for confronting “the forces of extremism” in Iraq and Syria.¹⁵ Most importantly, the scale and seriousness of the exercise demonstrates the new Saudi emphasis on enhancing its military capabilities.¹⁶ In terms of the Syrian War, however, the Saudis are ostensibly back to where they were in early 2013, searching for ways to prod their U.S. ally into playing a larger role.

U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter has repeatedly emphasized that the U.S. was looking for “the rest of the world to step up,” and for the “Gulf countries to do more.” Speaking to CNN on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference (February 12-14), Saudi Foreign Minister’s Adel al-Jubeir provided the desired response: “We are saying we will participate within the U.S.-led coalition, should this coalition decide to send ground troops into Syria, that we are prepared to send special forces with those troops.”¹⁷

In one sense, the Saudi announcement was an attempt to test the Obama administration, which has long defended its limited engagement in Syria by arguing that its coalition has lacked effective Sunni Arabs partners on the ground.¹⁸ The Saudis were now trying to undercut that argument and convince the U.S. to help them level the playing field that Russia has tilted in Assad’s favor. Underlying this gamesmanship is the Saudi understanding that only higher costs, or the serious prospect of them, will induce Moscow to support a negotiating process that can begin to wind down the Syrian War.

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This Note was [originally published](#) by the [Foreign Policy Research Institute \(FPRI\)](#). It has been shortened and revised for publication here.

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<https://twitter.com/mujtahidd/status/696316434482405378>;

¹⁵ Mongi al-Sa’idani, “[Forces continue to arrive for the largest military exercise in the region](#),” *al-Sharq al-Awsat* [Arabic], February 16, 2016.

¹⁶ Khaled Sulaiman, “[Thunder and Lightning in the North!](#)” *Okaz* [Arabic], February 16, 2016.

¹⁷ Mick Krever, “[Saudi Official: If all else fails, Remove Assad by force](#),” CNN, February 13, 2016.

¹⁸ Anthony Capaccio, “[Carter Chides Gulf Allies for ‘Strange’ Islamic State Inaction](#),” *BloombergBusiness*, January 22, 2016.

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