

Saudi Alternatives to U.S. Power in the Middle East¹

Brandon Friedman

The conventional wisdom today is that Saudi Arabia will ultimately accept recent U.S. policy decisions that [it currently rejects](#)² because [it has no viable alternatives](#) to its U.S. ally.³ Still, 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.⁴ The Obama administration's decision to reduce the role of U.S. military power in the region's active conflicts⁵ means the Saudis are now searching for additional sources of military power to achieve their regional security goals, which center on preventing an ambitious Iran from altering the regional balance of power.

Prince Turki al-Faisal, the director general of the Saudi intelligence agency

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² See also: Jay Solomon, "[Saudi Royal Blasts U.S.'s Middle East Policy](#)," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 15, 2013.

³ 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.

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

⁵ In contrast to the Saudi critique of the U.S. decisions to back away from employing force in the region, some observers see it 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.

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?...Saudi Arabia has two large concerns about the Islamic Republic [of Iran]: its quest for nuclear weapons and its interference in its neighbors’ affairs.”

Riyadh is determined not to allow Tehran 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 into which Lebanon is being steadily drawn. More than one million Syrians have been pushed into Lebanon by the war.⁷ Sunni-Shi’i sectarianism fuels the fighting between militias backed by Saudi Arabia and Iran, respectively, 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 its common border with Iraq. Only a thin strip of Jordanian desert separates pro-Iranian government forces in Syria from a long, unsecured Saudi-Jordanian border. The Saudi oil infrastructure, located in its Eastern Province and neighboring Bahrain, 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 a challenge to its legitimacy if the king is viewed by leading Wahhabi religious figures 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 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 while insisting that any solution [must include the removal of Asad from power](#).⁹ To ensure a satisfactory political deal to end the conflict, they are pursuing a two-pronged strategy.

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).

⁷ International Crisis Group, “[Too Close for Comfort: Syrians in Lebanon](#),” *Middle East Report No. 141*, May 2013.

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.

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,¹² particularly against the "Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham" (ISIS), while limited, may give the Syrian opposition more negotiating leverage at the Geneva II conference, which opened last week. Second, the Saudis had already supplanted Qatar as the main outside backer of the opposition, and encouraged the opposition to reorganize its leadership outside of Syria into a [government-in-exile](#), led by Ahmed Tomeh.¹³

The Saudis are gambling that if a deal is struck to remove Asad from power, its clients in the Syrian opposition leadership will assure the Saudis of strong influence in post-Asad 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 militias fighting on the ground. However, they are only likely to do so if Iran agrees to reduce its support and funding to the varied Shi'i militias from Iraq that are fighting in Syria and order Hizballah to withdraw its forces from there. In this unlikely 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 President Michel Suleiman to abandon the governing March 8 coalition and weaken Hizballah's political influence.

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 See also: Aron Lund, "Pushing Back Against the Islamic State of Iraq in the Levant: The Path to Conflict," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 6, 2013, and Aron Lund, "Pushing Back Against the Islamic State of Iraq in the Levant: The Syria Revolutionaries' Front and the Mujahideen Army," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 7, 2013.

¹³ Samer Abboud, "Hard Road Ahead for the Syrian Exile Government," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 15, 2013; and, "[Syrian Opposition: Risks of Fragmentation and Necessity of Consensus](#)," Al Jazeera Center for Studies, December 22, 2013.

A key component of the Saudis' \$3 billion aid offer to the Lebanese army was 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](#).¹⁴

[Mustafa Alani, of the Gulf Research Center, argued](#) that the Saudi offer 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.

Further, the French share the Saudi view that the U.S.-negotiated six month 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.¹⁵ 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 to help advance their 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 regime in Cairo 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 traditional position of leadership in the Arab world. While the US has hesitated in fully backing Sisi's military, the Saudis appear willing to fill the void by funding alternative sources of the military equipment necessary for Egypt to maintain its hard power.

Looking beyond the Fertile Crescent, and assuming that U.S. and Iran extend their "[detente](#)" beyond the initial six-month period which has just gotten underway, Saudi Arabia has at least three potential alternatives given the new U.S. regional posture, and it may choose to pursue all three options simultaneously in order to address its short, medium, and long-term security needs.

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ John Vinocur, "France, Iran and 'The Front of Mistrust'" *The Wall Street Journal*, January 6, 2014.

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 a closer relationship with the Pakistani military. In combination with this step, Saudi Arabia appears to be showing interest in building its own military manufacturing and production industries, and has explored such possibilities with Turkey. 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.

Brookings Institution senior fellow Bruce Riedel [argues](#) that if and when a "permanent solution" to a nuclear Iran is done, the Saudis will push hard for the objective of a WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East. Yet what troubles the Saudis today is the scenario in which a "permanent solution" to Iran's nuclear program does not get done. In 2011 Turki al-Faisal made public statements on three separate occasions suggesting that there should be an Arab nuclear weapon if Iran obtains such a capability.¹⁶ On January 8, 2014, Prince Turki again [asserted](#) that "faced with a nuclear-armed Iran, the Gulf Cooperation Council members will be forced to weigh their options carefully – and possibly to acquire a nuclear deterrent of their own."¹⁷

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. They are not likely to place all of their eggs [in the Pakistan basket](#) when it comes to developing a nuclear program. Turki al-Faisal has claimed Saudi Arabia will invest \$100 billion to build 16 nuclear reactors by 2030. On 16 January 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

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ Turki bin Faisal Al Saud, "[Has Iran Changed?](#)", *Project Syndicate*, January 8, 2012,

AP1000 nuclear reactor.¹⁸ 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.

Steven A. Cook, a senior fellow 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."¹⁹ Cook is right to be skeptical, Saudi Arabia is often noted for being risk averse and cautious, yet in the past, it risked incurring U.S. ire in order to acquire the Chinese made DF-3A ballistic missiles in the 1980s.

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 that the vast cash reserves 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,²⁰ a fast growing and youthful population will tax the regime's resources and force it to move more aggressively than in the past in order 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 on whether to pursue nuclear weaponization will depend on a multi-dimensional calculation of how best to protect the Al Saud grip on power rather than a narrow response to one specific external regional security threat.

Today, the Saudis are worried, not confident. They fear the U.S. will make a final deal with Iran that will leave Iran's nuclear program intact. The Saudis believe that a deal that legitimizes Iran as a threshold nuclear weapons state would

¹⁸ *The Wall Street Journal*, 17 January 2012.

¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ Yitzhak Gal, "[Arab Use of Energy: Oil Out. Renewable Energy In.](#)" *Iqtisadi* 3:7: September 15, 2013.

come at the expense of their security. It would be short-sighted for Obama officials to accept the conventional wisdom and believe the Saudis will simply sit back and accept that they have no alternatives to U.S. power. Indeed, 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.

[Brandon Friedman](#) is a research fellow at the [Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies](#) at [Tel Aviv University](#) and a [senior fellow](#) at the [Foreign Policy Research Institute](#) (FPRI).

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