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The U.S.-Russia Framework for Disarming Asad: The Saudi Perspective

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The agreement brokered by the U.S. and Russia to confiscate and ultimately destroy the Asad regime's chemical weapons stockpile was an unexpected development in a region that is accustomed to the unpredictable. The diplomatic understanding abruptly shifted the media's attention away from Obama's efforts to enforce his declared red line and punish Asad for using chemical weapons. Its new focus was first on the complicated diplomatic process of removing Syria's chemical weapons stockpiles and then on the prospect of direct talks between Iran and the U.S. on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly annual September meeting. Media reports of mass civilian casualties in Syria and the status of American credibility faded away, and were replaced by discussions of weapons inspectors, the location of Asad's chemical stockpiles, and timetables for their confiscation and destruction. The ultimate outcome of the U.S.-Russian agreement and prospective talks between the U.S. and Iran remain to be seen, yet it is quite clear that these latest developments have deeply troubled Saudi Arabia.

For the sake of the internal stability of the Saudi kingdom, the ruling Saud family feels that it can not be seen as passively accepting the slaughter of tens of thousands of Sunni Muslims in Syria. It believed that Asad's chemical weapons attack would galvanize international public opinion and provide the U.S. with the necessary justification and opportunity to intervene in the Syrian civil war. For their part, the Saudis were ready to support the rebel forces plans to capitalize on the expected American military strikes against the Asad regime, while acknowledging that their own limited military capabilities precluded direct Saudi intervention.¹

¹ Ian Black, "Arm Syrian rebels to contain the jihadis, says Saudi royal," *The Guardian*, 25 January 2013.

Saudi Arabia's new deputy defense minister, 37 year-old Prince Salman bin Sultan, has been semi-permanently camped in Amman during the last two months, coordinating Saudi support for the Syrian opposition. Salman bin Sultan has worked closely with his older half-brother, Director General of Intelligence Prince Bandar bin Sultan, on intelligence issues and is believed to be close to second deputy prime minister and former director general of intelligence, Prince Muqrin bin Abdulaziz, who is second in line to the Saudi throne after the crown prince and defense minister Salman bin Abdulaziz. The Jordanian newspaper *Al Dustur* noted that in the aftermath of Asad's devastating August 21st chemical weapons attack on a rebel controlled neighborhood on the outskirts of Damascus that "Jordan is now closer to the Saudi stand on this crisis," and that high quality weapons were being transferred to the opposition "through Jordanian borders financed by Saudi Arabia and backed by a U.S. green light."² Indeed, earlier that month, large amounts of Saudi funds were reportedly being used to buy weapons and ammunition in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Syria, which were then smuggled into Syria via mountainous routes in the area surrounding Der'a, far from the range of the Syrian security radar, which in turn was being jammed using British and French equipment.³

In late August and early September 2013, Saudi officials also stepped up their diplomatic maneuvering and pushed aggressively behind the scenes for an American military strike against Asad's forces. There were even unconfirmed media reports that the Saudis had offered to foot the bill for the American military operation.⁴ Public statements from senior Saudi officials became increasingly shrill. At a news conference in Cairo on September 1st, before an Arab League meeting, Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal blasted opponents of Western military intervention in Syria, arguing that such opponents were saying "I will not help you and I will not allow you to be helped by others." Faisal demanded that the international community intervene to stop the bloodshed and "use its resources to stop the aggression on the Syrian people before they're exterminated." Nevertheless, despite strenuous efforts behind closed doors, the Saudi could not even convince the Arab League members to explicitly endorse military action against Syria. Even Egypt, which has received vital Saudi diplomatic and financial support (including a \$12 billion aid package tendered to the country's new military rulers), would not back the stronger language the Saudis were lobbying for behind closed doors. Instead, the Arab League adopted

² Oraib al-Rantawi, "Jordan and the Syrian Crissi" *Al Dustur*, 24 August 2013.

³ Bassam al-Badarin, *Al Quds Al Arabi*, 8 and 11 August 2013.

⁴ Wendy J. Chamberlin, "Gulf Governments Offer Financing for U.S. Strike on Syria," *The Middle East Institute*, 11 September 2013.

more ambiguous language that called upon the international community to “take all necessary measures” against the Syrian government.⁵

In late August, thousands of volunteers from Jordanian tribes and defecting Syrian soldiers were reportedly being trained in Jordan and then slowly dispatched into Syria.⁶ Saudi efforts have also apparently led to the establishment of a joint operations center in Jordan for coordination between Jordanian, U.S., United Arab Emirates [UAE], and Syrian opposition officials. The U.S. and Jordan have coordinated joint military exercises in Jordan under the name “Eager Lion” for the past two years.⁷ Jordanian and Saudi ruling elites share a deep animosity toward the Muslim Brotherhood, and Jordanian and Saudi interests in Syria are increasingly converging. They both want to end the massive displacement of the Syrian population that is putting particular pressure on the neighboring governments in Jordan and Lebanon. Still, Saudi and Jordanian interests are not identical. Jordan is primarily concerned with safeguarding its northern border with southern Syria, and specifically with shielding Amman, Irbid, and Zarqa from the war's spillover. It does not share the same level of concern for the fate of the Sunni populations of Damascus, Aleppo, and Dayr al-Zawr that the Saudis do.

The Saudis have a great deal of experience with proxy wars. While most mainstream media outlets have referred to the Saudi support of the Afghan *mujahidin* against the Soviet Union in the 1980s, perhaps the more appropriate historical analogy is the Yemen civil war during the mid-1960s.⁸ In January and February 1967, Egyptian forces supporting the 1962 coup makers against the Yemeni royalists reportedly used poison gas dropped from Russian aircraft on the Yemeni village of Ketaf along the Yemeni-Saudi border and on the larger town of Najran, just inside Saudi territory. Analysts believe Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser was using the crudely weaponized gas to deter Saudi Arabia from encouraging the Yemeni royalists insurgency. The Saudis had helped create a debilitating quagmire for Abdel Nasser in Yemen. By early 1967, Abdel Nasser was struggling with the economic burden of maintaining approximately 40,000 Egyptian troops in northern Yemen in support of the republican faction.⁹ Meanwhile, oil-wealthy Saudi Arabia had avoided committing its own ground forces in Yemen. Instead, it was providing money, arms, and air support to the indigenous Yemeni royalist forces, coordinated by Kamal Adham, King Faisal's director of intelligence.

⁵ David Kirkpatrick, “Arab League Endorses International Action,” *The New York Times*, 1 September 2013.

⁶ Oraib al-Rantawi, “Jordan and the Syrian Crisis...” *Al Dustur*, 24 August 2013.

⁷ Abdel Bari Atwan, “For which lion are they preparing?” *Al Quds Al Arabi*, 17 May 2012.

⁸ The Yemen comparison was recently mentioned in Fahad Nazer, “Saudi Arabia's Proxy Wars,” *The New York Times*, 20 September 2013.

⁹ See Jesse Ferris, *Nasser's Last Gamble: How Intervention in Yemen Caused the Six Day War and the Decline of Egyptian Power* (Princeton University Press, 2012).

Today, Bandar and Salman bin Sultan have been playing Kamal Adham's role, burning the diplomatic candle at both ends in an effort to tilt the balance of forces in favor of the Syrian opposition forces. Bandar was behind the diplomatic effort to persuade the U.S. to do undertake more than just limited and punitive military action against Assad. Abdullah al-Askar, chairman of the foreign affairs committee in the Saudi Consultative Council publicly argued that the purpose of American military action should be ending Assad's regime: "If the attack is just a punishment to show that the international community will not stand for chemical attacks, Assad will just remain in his place and do his bloody work."¹⁰

Indeed, such an outcome seems unacceptable to the Saudis. Following the US-Russian agreement, Nawaf Obaid, a counselor to several Saudi royals, and Jamal Khashoggi, a prominent Saudi journalist, argued that "The removal of al-Assad is simply too important an opportunity to check Iranian interference in the Arab world for the Saudis and their allies to leave it to a deceitful Russian plan."¹¹ The Iranians, they said, "are coming to believe that their policies are paying off," and will thus increase their participation in the Syrian conflict. The U.S. decision not to intervene, they claim, will have ripple effects in Lebanon, Iraq, and Jordan. In the wake of the U.S. decision, the burden of "managing the political, economic and financial chaos of the regional consequences" has been shifted to the Saudi-led GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council).

Meanwhile, the Obama Administration hopes to parlay its agreement with Russia into progress on the Iranian nuclear issue. Obama and Secretary of State Kerry publicly portray the framework for the elimination of Syria's chemical weapons as an American diplomatic victory. In the face of overwhelming international and domestic opposition to American military strikes in Syria, the United States was able to secure, on paper, the elimination of Syria's chemical weapons arsenal. Should the plan to destroy all of Assad's chemical weapons by mid-2014 be realized, the U.S. believes it will be in a stronger negotiating position vis-à-vis Iran and its nuclear program.

In Tehran however, the Syrian saga may be perceived somewhat differently. By not intervening militarily in Syria after explicitly defining its red lines, the Americans may have reinforced the perception in Iran that the United States is extremely reluctant to get entangled in any additional Middle East wars. Therefore, Iran's current "charm offensive," which holds out the prospect of limited nuclear concessions, may be the carrot with which Iran hopes to induce the West to lift its biting sanctions on Iran's oil and financial sectors.

¹⁰ Jeffrey Heller and Angus McDowall, "As Obama blinks on Syria, Israel, Saudis make common cause," *Reuters*, 2 September 2013.

¹¹ Nawaif Obaid and Jamal Khashoggi, "Syria tragedy and turning point for the West," CNN.com, September 16, 2013.

Moreover, the Iranians view Russia's success counterbalancing American power in the region as another positive development. Although not quite a superpower of the American variety, President Putin and Foreign Minister Lavrov nevertheless demonstrated Russia's diplomatic savvy, which has assured Russia diplomatic leverage in any future regional initiatives. The Iranians are likely to try and exploit Russia's new regional role during any direct talks with the U.S. about the Iranian nuclear file. Iran, furthermore, has also benefited from the Russian-American chemical weapons framework by virtue of the fact that the Iran-Asad-Hizballah axis has not only escaped the chemical weapons predicament, but emerged with a greater chance of survival.

The Saudis, however, have put little faith in the U.S.-Russia framework agreement, and appear determined to find new ways to deliver more support to rebel forces fighting Asad, Hizballah, and Iran in Syria. The Saudis have historically demonstrated that they possess the will and the resources to sustain their involvement in regional proxy wars for years, in both north and south Yemen in the 1960s and early 1970s, and in Afghanistan in the 1980s. They clearly see the regional stakes in Syria in similar terms, and the Saudi king does not have to answer to any war-weary electoral constituency. As Obaid and Khashoggi noted, the Saudis feel compelled "to ensure that the al-Assad regime finally falls," arguing that the Saudis "must do it for themselves, for regional security in containing Iran, to prevent al Qaeda in the Levant from rising and, above all else, for the Syrian people."¹² Whether the Saudis can muster the capabilities necessary to "do it for themselves" in Syria remains an open question, but, at a minimum, it seems likely that we will continue to hear more of young Prince Salman bin Sultan and his work in the shadows of Amman.

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¹² Nawaif Obaid and Jamal Khashoggi, "Syria tragedy and turning point for the West," CNN.com, September 16, 2013.

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