

COMMENTARY

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Saudi Arabia's Syria Strategy: Rewriting the Middle East's Political Map

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Saudi Arabia has raised the ante in its battle with Iran by publicly committing to send ground troops to Syria. This latest move by the Saudis is aimed at drawing the US into a more direct involvement to confront Islamic State as well as the de facto alliance of Russia and Iran to keep Syrian President Bashar Al Assad in power. An agreement by major world powers to negotiate a cessation of hostilities in the next week does little to thwart Saudi Arabia's strategy.

In a recent, wide-ranging interview in *The Economist*, Saudi Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman was unequivocal in a recent about the goals of Saudi Arabia's more assertive, interventionist foreign and defence policy. To achieve the kingdom's goal of rolling back the popular uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa and contain Iranian influence in the region, Saudi Arabia needs to leave the US no option but to re-engage rather than simply focus on the fight against jihadism.

"The United States must realize that they are the number one in the world and they have to act like it," Prince Mohammed said, suggesting that the sooner the US re-engages the better. Reengagement means to the Saudi leader, aggressive US support for the kingdom's efforts to shape the Middle East and North Africa in its image.

What happens in Syria has a far more immediate regional fallout than events in Yemen where the Saudi military is struggling to win an unwinnable war against Iran-backed Houthi rebels unlike the war in Yemen, with its indiscriminate bombing of civilian targets, Saudi ground forces in Syria could force the US to become more involved.

Saudi intervention in Syria would, in contrast to Yemen, which the kingdom sees as a proxy war, bring Saudi troops in closer proximity to Russian forces and Iran's Revolutionary Guard. Russian and Iranian attacks on Saudi-backed rebels would inevitably have to elicit a Saudi response.

It's a high-stakes gamble that would create the perfect powder keg, from which the US would be unable to stand aside. The US hopes that implementation of an agreement by the International Syria Support Group (ISSC) to arrange a ceasefire in Syria within a week will avert Saudi military intervention. The agreement, despite Saudi support for the ISSC decision, excludes not only Islamic State but also the Saudi-supported Al Nusra Front from the cessation of hostilities, which raises questions about what the kingdom's real intentions are.

The agreement, even if implemented, does little to lower the risk of a Saudi-Russian-Iranian conflagration. By exempting the two jihadist groups, Russia and the US-led alliance retain the right to conduct airstrikes against the militant Islamists. Russia's track record so far has been that it has targeted a scale of rebel groups rather than just the jihadists in its bid to strengthen the Assad regime.

Saudi military spokesman Brigadier General Ahmad Assiri described the cessation of hostilities as being negotiated as "irreversible decision." At the same time, Saudi Arabia announced that a 34-nation military alliance made public by Prince Mohammed in December would meet in Riyadh next month.

In many ways, the Saudi offer, whether implemented or not, constitutes a master stroke. To sidestep the Saudi challenge and prevent a dangerous escalation of the Syrian war, the Obama administration will have to come up with proposals that justify delaying Saudi intervention, but go beyond air strikes against IS and futile efforts to breathe new life into peace talks.

Jamal Khashoggi, a prominent Saudi journalist with close ties to the ruling Al Saud family, defined "the Americans" as the target of the Saudi offer. "The Saudis are telling the Americans: 'we are ready to send our troops to Syria.' What the Saudis did not say is: 'what are you going to do about it?... How are you going to come along with us?' We are, I think, challenging the Americans because the Americans are not doing their duty... We are saying: 'Are you willing to send troops along with us?' Khashoggi said in an Al Jazeera interview.

The Saudi gamble ironically fits neatly with the strategy of the Russian and Iranian-backed regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Neither Saudi Arabia nor Syria and its backers want real negotiations that could end Syria's five-year old, brutal civil war until the lay of the battlefield definitively enhances their respective negotiating position.

The Assad regime made this clear by recently launching a major offensive in Aleppo that significantly weakened a rebel stranglehold on the city and its environs and ensured that United Nations-sponsored peace efforts were rendered stillborn before they even effectively started. Saudi Arabia, backed by Turkey, contributed their bit by persuading rebel negotiators to leave Geneva in the wake of the Aleppo offensive.

The Saudi offer of ground troops exploits an increasingly untenable situation. The Aleppo offensive has sent tens of thousands fleeing to the Syrian-Turkish border. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu has warned that the latest fighting could force an additional one million Syrians to flee.

With 2.5 million Syrian refugees already in Turkey and European leaders urging Turkey to accommodate them rather than allow them to head to Western Europe, Ankara is urging NATO to patrol the waters off its Mediterranean shore to prevent human traffickers from smuggling refugees to Greece. The Turkish demand for NATO assistance adds to the Saudi strategy of forcing the US to become more engaged.

For both Saudi Arabia and Turkey, Syria constitutes the ultimate battleground for hegemony in the region. Russian military intervention and Iranian backing have turned around the once waning fortunes of the Assad regime.

A Syria in which the regime and IS, rather than other rebel groups, are the only real domestic players turns Bashar al-Assad into a pivotal cog in the fight against jihadism. That is something Saudi Arabia cannot allow to happen. To turn the tide, it needs a United States that is engaged and willing to do its bit.

Khashoggi hinted at how far Saudi Arabia was willing to go when asked whether Saudi ground troops risked direct confrontation with Russia and Iran. “Yes, it’s a risk but it’s more of a risk if the Iranians win in Syria and have hegemony over that Arab land,” he said.

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