

## **COMMENTARY**

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### **Unifying Syria's Rebels: Saudi Arabia Joins the Fray**

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Various Syrian rebel groups have announced a spate of mergers and alliances over the past month. In theory, the trend is a welcome sign that the opposition's extreme fragmentation is at long last being reversed. Such a development would complement the emergence of a few dominant multi-brigade groupings and "fronts" within the armed rebellion over the past year.

But the reality is quite the opposite. The recent announcements reflect realignment rather than unification, and they reveal a competitive logic driven by the expectation of external funding that presages greater political polarization and deepening division.

This dysfunctional dynamic has long bedevilled the armed rebellion, but driving the latest trend is a Saudi plan to build a new national army for the Syrian opposition. It aims to create a force trained outside of Syria that is capable of defeating the regime of President Bashar al-Assad and countering the growth of jihadist rebel groups affiliated with al-Qaeda. The rebel groups realigning to receive Saudi support profess a supposedly "centrist" Islamist but avowedly Sunni ideology.

This Saudi effort will only serve to further polarize the rebels. The main losers are likely to be the currently recognized leaders of the opposition—the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces and the allied Higher Military Council of the Free Syrian Army. At its latest meeting on 22 October, the Friends of Syria core group, of which Saudi Arabia is a member, called on the National Coalition to commit to representing the Syrian opposition at a Geneva II peace conference slated for late November. But many of the new rebel

alliances, including those receiving stepped-up Saudi support, have already withdrawn their recognition of the National Coalition and Higher Military Council, or threatened to do so, in response to their presumed readiness to attend the conference.

Unless the Saudi-supported rebels adhere to an agreed political strategy and buy into being represented by the National Coalition, they are likely to suffer the same lack of cohesion and capacity as those they seek to supplant. And by funding its own chosen group of rebels, Saudi Arabia too risks slamming shut its windows of opportunity and undercutting its goals in Syria.

### **SAUDI ARABIA SHIFTS INTO HIGH GEAR**

The shift to an increasingly assertive stance on the Syrian crisis reflects the Saudi leadership's dismay about the U.S.-Russian agreement on dismantling Syria's chemical weapons capability. The effort effectively removes the spectre of U.S.-led military action against the regime and potentially rehabilitates Assad as a partner of the international community. Riyadh has long pushed for a tougher line. The additional prospect of a U.S.-Iranian understanding on the nuclear file has only made the Saudi leadership more grimly determined to bring down Assad.

The first public sign of Saudi Arabia's intentions was a 8 August statement by the chair of the National Coalition, Ahmad al-Jarba—regarded as a Saudi nominee—that he was working with the Free Syrian Army to form a unified force of 6,000 men to confront warlords operating in liberated areas. Other National Coalition members disclosed that the force was intended as the nucleus of a national army with strength of 7,000–10,000, including 6,300 army defectors who had taken refuge in Jordan and Turkey.

According to Saudi insiders, training involving some 5,000 rebels had already been under way in Jordan for several months with the aid of Pakistani, French, and U.S. instructors, although well-connected Jordanian sources suggest a much lower number. In any case, little can be expected from the defectors, who chose to leave Syria and have remained in isolated officers' camps in exile ever since. This may have influenced the thinking of Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal bin Abdul-Aziz, Director General of the Saudi Intelligence Agency Prince Bandar bin Sultan bin Abdul-Aziz, and Deputy Defence Minister Prince Salman bin Sultan bin Abdul-Aziz, to whom the Syria file has been transferred. Notably hawkish on Syria, their plan is to build a rebel army of 40,000–50,000 at a cost of “several billion dollars,” according to insiders.

The plan appears to have been discussed, at least in general outline, by the foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates, who met French President François Hollande on 13 September. This resulted in an agreement “to step up international support for the democratic opposition to allow it to cope with attacks from the regime.” A high-level Saudi delegation visited Paris a month later to negotiate contracts for arming and equipping both the Free Syrian Army and the new national army.

Following what it regards as the “defection” of the U.S. administration from the coalition of countries willing to support the Syrian opposition militarily, Saudi Arabia has turned to Pakistan to provide training for the new army. But this may prove difficult, given the major national security challenges facing the Pakistani armed forces ahead of the NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan and the uncertainty of the country’s civil-military relationship during the selection of a new chief of general staff. Sources with good access to the Pakistani Ministry of Defence and military intelligence services confirm that the armed forces were already reluctant or unable to meet a previous Saudi request to provide Special Forces training to the Syrian rebels. They regard the scale of the new Saudi proposal as unmanageable.

Crucially, it will be difficult to find a steady place to base and train the new force. Resistance to acting as a rear base for the rebels or supporting external military intervention in Syria is building up in Jordan, which has been a conduit for Saudi-funded training and arms since late 2012. Since then, the kingdom has become part of a clear axis with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates regarding Syria. But the new Saudi plan requires Jordanian commitment on a scale that is opposed within the security and military establishment and is unlikely to be implemented.

### **BUYING A READY-MADE REBEL ARMY**

The prospect of building a rebel army outside Syria is poor. The only practical way to build one is to amalgamate and sponsor existing armed groups inside Syria—but that too is becoming more difficult as rebel alliances shift and proliferate.

Many of Syria’s rebel groups are positioning themselves to receive Saudi funding and weapons by declaring mergers and alliances. In fact, competition for external funding has long been a powerful driver of organizational dynamics within Syria’s armed rebellion. Not all of that support comes from government sources. It is already customary for private donors in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates to sponsor rebel groups of their choice, most often Salafists or jihadists, as the Facebook pages of these forces proudly attest.

Most prominent among the new groups receiving Saudi government funding is the Army of Islam, formed on 29 September. It was founded by 43 rebel brigades and battalions in the Damascus region under the leadership of Zahran Alloush, commander of the local Islam Brigade (the backbone of the Army of Islam) and secretary general of the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front. Although the Army of Islam denied press reports of Saudi sponsorship, its stated aim of “uniting the efforts of all factions . . . and forming an official army” coincided precisely with the Saudi objective.

The formation of the Army of Islam closely followed the publication by the association of Muslim ulema in Syria of a proposal to unite Islamist rebel groups under a single Army of Muhammad, with a stated target of building up to strength of 100,000 by March 2015 and

250,000 by March 2016. Although such an army would espouse a centrist and non-sectarian ideology, according to the proposal's authors, it would nonetheless follow "the path of the Sunnah and Jama'ah," unambiguously declaring its Sunni affiliation. Since then, the Army of Islam has discussed forming the all-encompassing Army of Muhammad with the "moderate Islamist" Tawhid and Suqour al-Sham Brigades.

The fracturing has gone even further. When Alloush announced the Army of Islam, several of his main partners in the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front complained that they had not been consulted and pulled out of the Damascus-area joint operations room in protest. Five of them then formed the Glories of Islam Assembly on 4 October. Elsewhere, four moderate Salafist groups in the north-eastern Albu Kamal region had already announced the formation of the Army of the People of the Sunnah and Jama'ah on 2 October.

A day after the Army of Islam was formed, the al-Habib al-Mustafa and al-Sahaba Brigades announced that, along with Ahrar al-Sham Islamic Movement, probably the strongest rebel faction in Syria, they were withdrawing from the Chamber of the Council of Kuwaiti Supporters of the Syrian Revolution in Damascus and Its Rif. They cited what they described as the hegemony of certain groups, the exclusion of others, and the lack of an agreed vision as the reasons for the pullout.

The competitive dynamic also seems to have prompted 106 non-Islamist rebel groups from across Syria to form the Union of Free Syrians on 13 October, again as "the nucleus of the future Syrian army." The absence of Islamist discourse from their founding statement may not preclude Saudi support, but a more favoured recipient is prominent Islamic preacher Sheikh Adnan al-Aroor. Aroor features in the network of rebel groups being pulled together in the new Saudi plan, highlighting its focus on building a Sunni rebel army.

### **TAKING ON JIHADISTS OR WEAKENING CENTRIST ISLAMISTS?**

The Saudi leadership may be forgiven for believing that, in contrast to the modest role it played among those supporting Syria's armed rebellion a year ago, its intervention will be decisive now that it is firmly in the driver's seat and ready to commit what an insider describes as "limitless" funds. But that approach may prove counterproductive. A year ago the battle lines were simpler: the Free Syrian Army versus the Assad regime. As former intelligence chief Prince Turki al-Faisal explained, the Saudi leadership seeks to wage two battles—one against Assad and his family, the other against al-Qaeda affiliates in Syria. But Riyadh is not winning the fight against the jihadists, and its efforts may splinter the opposition further.

A number of groups seem to have mobilized in the face of the Saudi effort. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, an umbrella group of jihadist insurgents formed in Iraq in 2006, has been moving forcefully against other rebel groups in northern Syria since late August, wresting control of border crossings with Turkey and forcing affiliates of the Free Syrian Army in Raqqa

and Aleppo to leave or declare allegiance to it. Along with other jihadist groups, it believes that it is targeted by the United States and U.S. allies such as Saudi Arabia. The group has also reached an understanding with its sister al-Qaeda affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, and the powerful Ahrar al-Sham Islamic Movement to set aside their differences, form a joint judicial council, and increase joint operations against Assad regime forces. This axis, along with several smaller jihadist groups that continue to appear, is bearing the brunt of fighting against regime forces to the southeast of Aleppo. Jabhat al-Nusra now also operates along the border with Jordan.

The network of alliances being woven by Saudi Arabia has yet to prove its mettle in this looming confrontation. On the contrary, the Tawhid Brigade, despite having been invited to join the Army of Islam in forming the larger Army of Muhammad, has repeatedly declared its neutrality in an onslaught waged by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant since mid-September in northern Syria.

Equally significantly, the Saudi drive to build an unmistakably Sunni army may increase the potential for rebel fragmentation, even among the like-minded centrist Islamist and Salafist groups it targets. The groups that refused to join the Army of Islam, for example, include several of the main armed factions in the eastern Ghouta area of Damascus and members of the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front, bringing the army's unity and cohesion into question.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SECULAR MODERATES**

At a time of deepening polarization within the Syrian opposition, the Saudi plan's focus on creating a Sunni army undermines those who share an interest in preventing the rise of the Jihadist wing of the armed rebellion. Some members of the National Coalition have sought to join the bandwagon, speaking warmly of creating a "central political-military council under Islamic command." But this only underlines the declining fortunes of the coalition and the Higher Military Council, both of which have nominally been under Saudi patronage since last June, when Jarba became the coalition's new chair. The single-minded focus on a military approach undermines what residual standing and authority the National Coalition and Higher Military Council still have inside Syria.

Saudi disappointment with both bodies is understandable. Their leadership has lost credibility and lacks a strategy for defeating the regime, whether militarily or politically; by developing concrete proposals for transitional power sharing that might persuade the regime's principal institutional and social constituents to abandon it. The National Coalition also remains unable to govern liberated areas.

But by channelling funding and weapons flows directly to rebel groups on the ground, rather than entirely through the Higher Military Council, the Saudi approach runs counter to the needs of military consolidation. And by working around the recognized opposition and relying on

massive funding to create a unified rebel army, Riyadh neither assures its military effectiveness nor does anything to address the critical political failings of the Syrian opposition.

The focus on manipulating and micromanaging rebel dynamics also complicates civil-military relations on the ground. When, for example, civilian bodies announced the formation of an expanded civilian council for the city of Douma in eastern Ghouta on 13 October, Army of Islam commander Alloush condemned them for “dividing the voice of Muslims, which is haram [forbidden] and splits the ranks.” Their announcement of an independent judicial body was also, in Alloush’s view, an “inexcusable transgression” against the local Shura Council that he helped to found in March, and that he dominates.

All this has significant implications for the upcoming Geneva II peace conference. The National Coalition faces a particularly fateful moment as its partners drop away. Twelve rebel groups, most of which nominally belong to the Free Syrian Army, joined al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra on 24 September by rejecting the coalition’s representative status. On 15 October, 50 armed groups announced that they were forming an independent revolutionary command council in the southern region and withdrawing recognition of the National Coalition because “it has abandoned the principles of the homeland and the revolution.” Two days later, Alloush warned starkly that “the coalition will be treated as our enemy, just the same as Bashar al-Assad’s regime, if it decides to go to the Geneva II peace conference next month to seek a political solution to the Syrian crisis.” On 26 October, nineteen rebel groups, including all three members of the putative Army of Muhammad, regarded anyone attending the conference or negotiating with the regime as being guilty of “trading in the blood of the Syrian people and treason . . . [they] must be brought to justice.”

### **SCORING OWN GOALS**

Saudi Arabia has ample reason to be distressed by the continuing death and destruction inflicted on the Syrian people and dissatisfied with the actions of its friends and allies in the Friends of Syria group of countries. But its current approach risks undermining its own objectives in Syria.

Already, deep unhappiness with U.S. policy on Syria—as well as on Iran and Palestine—has prompted Saudi intelligence chief Bandar bin Sultan bin Abdul-Aziz to warn of a “major shift” in the two countries’ bilateral relationship. A policy shift on this scale is almost certainly unsustainable. More immediately, the widening rift places Jordan and the National Coalition, which are important to the success of Saudi plans in Syria but rely no less heavily on the strength and durability of their own relations with the United States, in a distinctly uncomfortable and potentially untenable position.

The divergence of Saudi and U.S. approaches additionally complicates the Geneva II peace conference. Although the Friends of Syria’s 22 October final communiqué set tough terms for participation in the conference and strict parameters for the transition that meet National

Coalition and Saudi expectations, Riyadh's insistence on excluding Tehran from the meeting opens up another possible rift with its allies, several of whom have openly signalled their willingness to accept Iranian participation.

The Saudi leadership might argue that its plan to increase military pressure on the Assad regime will compel it to accept the terms set by the Friends of Syria for participation in the peace conference. Turki al-Faisal seemed to argue this when he reiterated the need to help the opposition achieve "a level playing field." But this is belied by the unexpected and unusually public spat with the United States, which damages the prospect that the Saudi plan can weld rebels into a unified army. The conference may not convene or succeed anyway, but the fact that the rebel groups receiving Saudi support have vocally rejected the effort lowers its chances further. And the collateral damage to the National Coalition undermines a different part of the Saudi approach, constituting another own goal.

This leaves the Saudi leadership heavily dependent on Syria's Sunni rebels. If its plan to unite them fails, Riyadh's credibility will be diminished. Worse, Saudi Arabia could find itself replicating its experience in Afghanistan, where it built up disparate mujahedeen groups that lacked a unifying political framework. The forces were left unable to govern Kabul once they took it, paving the way for the Taliban to take over. Al-Qaeda followed, and the blowback subsequently reached Saudi Arabia.

In Syria, Saudi reliance on funding and weapons supply as principal levers of acquiring influence, the concentration on escalating military pressure on the regime without developing a clear political strategy to defeat it in parallel, and the focus on mobilizing and strengthening groups with an overtly Sunni Muslim character risk contributing to a similar outcome. The Saudi leadership should be careful what it creates in Syria: Muhammad's Army may eventually come home to Mecca.

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