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Saudi Arabia: Redrawing the Map of Regional Alliances

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In contrast to the international and Arab response toward Qaddafi, the Arab states have hesitated to adopt an assertive stance against Asad. Yet five months and two thousand dead later, different voices are starting to emerge: first, the joint statement by the Gulf Cooperation Council, which called for Syria to stop “the lethal oppression of its citizens,” and later the Saudi King’s statement, unusual for its severity, which declared that what is happening in Syria “is unacceptable to Saudi Arabia, which demands an end to the killing machine.” This statement testifies to Saudi Arabia’s positioning itself against the radical front led by Iran – after it previously did so in Bahrain – as it understands that the events in Syria have reached a critical level that may tip the balance against the Asad dynasty. This joins Saudi Arabia’s adoption of a more assertive stance since the start of the uprisings in the Arab world and its attempt to redraw the map of regional alliances in accordance with its interests.

King Abdullah, who until now watched the regional upheaval from a distance, is at present eager to see Asad fall, if only because this would make Iran lose its primary ally, undermine the radical axis, and give Saudi Arabia the chance to lead a Sunni camp that is larger and more consolidated than in the past, should the Sunnis, who are the majority, rise to power in Syria. Until now, Saudi Arabia has failed to extricate Syria from Iran’s embrace and create a cohesive anti-Iranian front comprising pro-Western Sunni states. The current protests in Syria give Saudi Arabia an extraordinary opportunity to realize this drive.

Although Saudi Arabia borders on some of the most extreme areas of conflict in the Middle East, it has to date preferred to neutralize these risks to its national security by avoiding overt use of military means and leadership-based activity. Diplomacy and cold cash were its preferred methods. Since the beginning of the Arab spring, the aging Saudi elite has started to understand that within a few years, it may find itself in very different political surroundings in which on the one hand vassals slowly become citizens with equal rights, and on the other, sectarian confrontations and instability grow. In its view, the

Kingdom's traditional means to shape its strategic environment no longer suffice, and thus it must shed its relative passivity in order to overcome national security threats and even, if necessary, attempt to lead the Arab region.

In this context, Saudi Arabia is doing its utmost to prevent Egypt from forging closer ties with Iran. The concern in Riyadh is that the “new” Egyptian leadership will lean more towards Iran, in part to placate the masses inclined this way. In the months following Mubarak’s fall, voices in Cairo were calling for renewed diplomatic ties with Tehran. Senior Iranian officials warmly greeted the calls in Cairo for a clean slate in relations and went so far as to say that Egyptian resistance to Israel and “the adoption of the model of the Islamic Revolution” would create a common denominator between Egypt and Iran. In addition to assistance to the tune of \$4 billion designed to help the Egyptian economy “float above water,” Riyadh also dusted off ideas on a series of joint ventures to strengthen bilateral ties, including an old proposal to construct a bridge over the Straits of Tiran to connect the two nations. While it attempts to close ranks in the Gulf states, Saudi Arabia is also trying to bring Jordan (and maybe Morocco) into a bloc of monarchies in order to prevent reforms and perhaps, as Morocco's Kings has started to do, establish the separation of powers and edge towards constitutional monarchies. Riyadh, seeking to inoculate the monarchies against possible dangers to their stability, is expected shortly to lead negotiations with Jordan in order to include the latter in some manner or another in the exclusive Gulf Cooperation Council club, despite the reservations of some member nations. Saudi Arabia has also given Jordan \$1.5 billion.

It is unclear to what extent Saudi Arabia’s declarative assertiveness vis-à-vis Syria is backed by substantial support of the Syrian protest movement (Riyadh has for some time supported the Syrian opposition), but it certainly serves as an Arab and Islamic seal of approval for steps that have not yet been taken. Yet despite the positive contribution to consolidating an anti-Iranian camp, Abdullah’s efforts are liable to decrease his freedom to maneuver, both at home and abroad. He will find it hard to rebuild his relations with Syria should Asad and his cronies stay in power. Is the king hoping to deflect criticism aimed at him? Perhaps. However, should the protest come knocking at his door, he will be hard pressed to explain why he hasn’t implemented his own recommendations. Asad’s possible fall is liable to be another domino in a process that ultimately leads to the Kingdom itself.

In order to back up his declarations (called “historic” by the Saudi press), the King recalled his ambassador for consultations, a move that may give legitimacy to other states to intensify the pressure on Syria. Indeed, a day after King Abdullah’s speech, Bahrain and Kuwait – the two Gulf states closest to Saudi Arabia – announced they too were recalling their ambassadors from Damascus to protest the violent suppression of the demonstrations (thus joining Qatar, which had done so previously). The King’s speech has

already generated a number of government-sponsored demonstrations in the Gulf against the Syrian regime and harsher critiques of Syria in the Sunni Arab world. Abdullah may also be paving the path for a change in America's hesitant policy and give President Obama an opportunity to toughen the tone about the continuing massacres.

What prompted King Abdullah's response at this time? The assertive position vis-à-vis Syria has to do with the King's anger at the continuing killing of Sunnis during the sensitive period of Ramadan, especially among tribes close to the Kingdom, and possibly also his frustration at having failed to promote a behind-the-scenes deal with Asad to restore calm.

Saudi Arabia's firm stance on Asad may be understood as an admission of its inability to affect the direction of events, in Lebanon as well as Syria, or as recognition that the balance is now, more than in the past, tilting in favor of the Syrian protesters. According to this rationale, Saudi Arabia sat on the sidelines until now in order to see which way the internal Syrian pendulum would swing. Abdullah was also slow to act because his concern of an Iranian reaction and uncertainty about America's policy on Asad, but he changed his position because of the emerging ethnic nature of the protest. King Abdullah is hoping that this step will distance him from Asad, understanding that the Alawi minority regime (a heretical minority, because of its leanings to the Shi'a) has been significantly weakened and may even collapse, and that Saudi Arabia must prepare itself for such an eventuality.

This is a dramatic step, certainly for King Abdullah who is usually quite restrained, and has the potential to generate a new direction for Saudi Arabia in the Arab and Islamic world. It is not distress about human rights violations that is at the center of the King's concerns; therefore, there is no contradiction between his support for the Syrian protests and the help he extended to suppress the protests in Bahrain. Rather, considerations of balance of power and ethnic rivalries are intertwined in Saudi "activism": an attempt to stop Iran and consolidate a Sunni front as a counter-force to Iranian influence. The fall of Asad would be the best outcome for Abdullah, second only to the fall of the Islamic republic itself, even if he understands, as Tarqi al-Faisal said, that "Asad will fight till the last Syrian standing." Either way, the Kingdom seems more ready than ever to harness its not inconsiderable economic and political assets to tackle Iran's regional ambitions.

