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The Arab World and the Syrian Crisis

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In contrast to the determined and unified response to Qaddafi in 2011 (which was also a result of the Libyan ruler's attempts on the life of a few Arab leaders, among them the then-Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah) that included the use of force by Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, Arab countries have thus far failed to take a firm and united stand toward Syria. The Arab world remains divided on the Syrian question, as reflected in the Arab League resolutions of August 27 and September 1, 2013, which refrained from giving a green light for military action without the blessing of the UN following the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons on August 21, 2013. An announcement by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation on August 28, 2013 reflected similar intra-Arab divisions, and also fell short of any explicit endorsement for external military intervention in Syria.

Over the years, the Arab Gulf countries have preferred to avoid confrontation, focusing on attempts at mediation in the Arab world for the purpose of eliminating dangers while attempting to avoid being aligned with any side. In the case of Syria, they would have preferred American leadership. When this did not materialize, however, the Gulf countries, with their large coffers and Islamic influence, entered the resulting vacuum. Their previous attempts at distancing Assad from the Iranian axis were unsuccessful, but the rebellion against Assad gave them an unusual opportunity to weaken the Iranian front.

The Arab world began to adopt a tougher stance vis-à-vis Assad in the summer of 2011, when the Gulf Cooperation Council called on Syria to stop its "deadly suppression of citizens," followed by an unusually sharp statement by Saudi King Abdullah, who demanded that Syria "stop the killing machine." This new tone resulted from the King's frustration with the Alawite minority regime (which he considers heretical) regarding Saudi attempts at mediation, combined with the realization that events are likely to tip the balance against Iran. The King's anger increased following the killing of members of cross-border tribes that were the tribal lineage of his mother and two of his sisters, and the widespread killing of Sunnis during the month of Ramadan.

Since then, Saudi Arabia, with some coordination with Qatar (which has since cut back on its involvement) and the United Arab Emirates, has been aiding rebel forces that it regards as “moderate,” sometimes without taking into account American restrictions on armaments, and with a clear intention of dragging the US into the fray. Despite a joint interest in overthrowing Assad, Saudi Arabia regards Qatar’s regional activism as particularly irksome. One indication of this is the comment by Prince Bandar, head of Saudi Arabian intelligence and coordinator of its efforts in Syria, who recently described Qatar as “nothing but 300 people...and a TV channel.” Qatar’s support for extreme factions among the rebels is liable to cause Saudi Arabia to follow suit (with a low profile, in order to avoid criticism) in order to win influence among the rebels and balance Qatar’s influence. Overthrowing Assad (and weakening Iran and Hizbollah) has become the prime goal for Saudi Arabia. Their aim is to strengthen elements among the rebels, so that if and when Assad falls, those elements will gain control over what remains of the Syrian state.

The Arab Gulf countries tried to persuade the United States that the Assad regime had crossed the red line announced by President Obama in August 2012 and again in March 2013 concerning the use of chemical weapons. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, Saudi Arabian intelligence found proof that this weapon was used already in February 2013, and presented this evidence to the United States. However, American disinclination to get involved in Syria has caused the monarchies to doubt the credibility of the US, their main “defense provider,” yet another manifestation in their eyes of America’s diminishing regional influence. This sentiment joins existing Arab skepticism, given US difficulties with Iran, the situation in Afghanistan and Iraq, declarations of a pivot toward Asia, and future US energy independence. It was reported that the Saudi king, frustrated with American policy in the region, recently sent Obama a message saying “America’s credibility was on the line if it let Assad prevail.”

Even if not publicly acknowledged by the Arab states, a limited American attack is not fully consistent with their interests. Concern exists, mainly in the Gulf states, that a limited American attack will have the same result as American attacks on Iraq in 1993 and 1998, which left Saddam Hussein in power and prompted him to redouble the oppression of his own people. The Saudis are not talking about a sweeping victory. They too are aware of advantage in weaponry, organization, and external support enjoyed by Assad and his allies. They hope, however, that the support they provide will tip the scales in their favor. Their enemies – the Assad regime, Iran, and Hizbollah – weakened on a daily basis, thus far at no significant cost to the kingdom. Concern based on past experience, however, indicates that radical elements operating in Syria are liable to return to the Gulf and upset stability. Furthermore, while many Arab countries believe that the overthrow of the Assad regime could restrain Iran and “restore Iran to its natural size,” it could also lead to a confrontation. This concern is part of what has led Saudi Arabia some

of its smaller neighbors to raise the state of alert of the armed forces to one level below the highest.

The Arab world, which has long been plagued by divisions, has also failed to adopt a clear and uniform strategy on the Syrian question. The result is an ambiguous call by the 22 members of the Arab League, which in 2011 suspended Syria's membership and granted representation to the Syrian opposition, to the "UN and international community to assume their responsibilities in line with the UN charter and international law by taking the necessary deterrent measures," thus shying away from any explicit backing of American military intervention. Against the tough line advocated by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, Tunisia, Algeria (which has backed the Assad regime for the past two years), Iraq (which launders Syrian money and turns a blind eye to the use of its territory for Iranian weapons transfers to Assad), Lebanon, and Egypt (which perhaps seeks to maintain a degree of influence in Syria) have prevented any stronger decisions. Jordan, which fears retaliation from Syria, recently declared that its territory would not serve as a base for US military intervention in Syria, and Egypt, which condemned the use of chemical weapons, stated that a political, not a military, solution was the only way out.

Given the regional upheaval, the Gulf has become the main theater for setting the Arab agenda. The Gulf countries, which were formerly in the shadow of Cairo and Damascus, are now, despite considerable differences of opinion between them and limited but consistent social and political pressures on their home front, the most stable and united bloc in the region. The monarchies have at times acted as a revolutionary force and at times as a counter-revolutionary force, depending on their interests. They engineered the deal on the removal of Yemen's President Saleh from office, were involved in consolidating the new regime in Tunisia, and helped, perhaps more than any other Arab player, to overthrow the Qaddafi regime. On the other hand, they used force to maintain the al-Khalifa regime in Bahrain and sought to keep Mubarak's regime in power in Egypt. When this effort was unsuccessful, they gave billions in aid to the military regime in Egypt, which recently regained power.

The Sunni Arab world is unquestionably hostile to the Assad regime. Before the August 21, 2013 attack, a PEW survey found that 90 percent of Sunni Lebanese, 90 percent of Jordanians, and 81 percent of Egyptians held negative opinions of the Syrian regime. As a possible American attack approaches, however, even the governments that campaigned behind the scenes for military action have tried in their public statements to wash their hands of any military involvement in the crisis, thereby undermining the regional legitimacy sought by the United States.

The public hedging is designed to serve the interests of the Arab rulers on the day following an American strike. Behind closed doors, they will thank the United States for once again doing the dirty work for them in the event that the damage to Assad is significant and does not cause many casualties, but if the attack is limited in scope and does not deliver what they regard as an appropriate message to Iran, it will be criticized. If the attack goes awry – well, from the outset they did not advocate it.

