

Saudi Arabia Ponders Its Syrian Conundrum

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The Arab awakenings and assertive international role of Russia and China at the expense of the United States have created a new strategic situation for the rulers of Riyadh. Seen from Saudi Arabia, the US stood idly by at the ignominious toppling of its erstwhile allies, the dictators of Tunisia and Egypt. Its rival across the Gulf, Iran, is on its way to having a nuclear weapon and has attempted to assassinate its ambassador to Washington. Although the US has ratcheted up pressure on Tehran, the mullahs seem to be running circles around Washington with the connivance of Moscow and Beijing. Even though Riyadh has been successful in limiting the contagion at home through a combination of the stick of its security forces and the carrot of financial munificence, its satellite kingdom in nearby Bahrain is ablaze, with majority Shiites protesting against the Saudi-supported minority Sunni Al Khalifa family. The US appears confounded, and as a result the Saudis believe they need to take up a larger role in the region.

Onto this strategic playing field — enter Syria and the insurrection currently under way. Iran looms large in the background as Riyadh calculates its moves toward Damascus. The Al Saud rulers would dearly love to see the destruction of the pro-Iranian Assad regime. Iran, through its proxies Syria and Hezbollah, have undermined the stability of Lebanon since 2005, when they connived to murder the staunchly pro-Saudi former prime minister of Lebanon, Rafiq al-Hariri, in February 2005. His successor and son, Saad, was undermined by a coalition of pro-Iranian forces and forced to resign as prime minister in January 2011. The result has been an increase in Syrian, Iranian and Hezbollah control over Lebanon and the stymieing of Saudi (and US) efforts to bring about a stable and independent Lebanon. Riyadh would have no problem with Bashar Assad receiving his comeuppance.

The longer the Syrian stalemate continues, the greater the possibility that regional powers will be sucked into the maelstrom. Saudi Arabia sees itself as the protector of the world's Sunnis as they face Shiite Iran. Tehran is giving money, military aid, and military advisors to prop up the minority Alawite regime as it battles Syria's Sunni majority. In an impassioned speech on February 10, King Abdullah took Russia and China to task for vetoing a UN Security Council condemnation of Assad's atrocities against Syrian civilians. Saudi papers have called for boycotting Russian and Chinese goods.

Saudi Arabia knows that the Arab League is powerless. The UN is stymied by China and Russia. There does not seem to be a way to get Assad to step down peacefully. The Saudis appear to already be funneling aid to the Syrian National Council, and led the Arab League in supporting a resolution calling for providing support to the Syrian opposition. What Saudi Arabia will now likely do is seek an alliance of Sunni states led by the Gulf Cooperation Council to funnel aid, perhaps via Turkey, to the rebels. Whether the US will help in this regard is still an open question.

Saudi Arabia will seek to parlay the current crisis into a net defeat for the Assad-Tehran-Hezbollah anti-Saudi axis by cutting the Assad's Alawite regime down to size. It would signal to Tehran that even in Shiite-dominated Iraq, the Saudis would not stand for a pro-Iranian regime. It would also put the mullahs on notice to keep their hands off Bahrain. Bahrain is of paramount importance to Saudi Arabia. Riyadh views it a bit like the US views Puerto Rico. It will do all it can to prop up the Al Khalifa regime, a fellow Persian Gulf monarchy.

The problem for everyone is that no one has any way of knowing what a Sunni dominated regime in Syria might be like. The opposition is fragmented and leaderless. Yet weaning Syria away from Iran will be a great accomplishment for the West.

Throughout its modern history, Syria has been the arena for struggle between competing Arab blocs and world superpowers. History repeats itself, as Saudi Arabia leads a Sunni coalition, with the possible

aid of the West, against an Iranian-led axis, supported by Russia and China.

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This post is part of The Caravan, a periodic discussion on the contemporary dilemmas of the Greater Middle East. Other commentary in this symposium on Syria is provided by [Charles Hill](#), [Itamar Rabinovich](#), [Habib Malik](#), [Russell Berman](#), [Nibras Kazimi](#), [Abbas Milani](#), [Joel Rayburn](#), [Josh Teitelbaum](#), [Reuel Gerech](#), [Asli Aydintasbas](#), [Camille Pecastaing](#), and [Fouad Ajami](#).

["Circling the Wagons: Middle Eastern Monarchies Confront the 'Arab Spring'," Advancing a Free Society \(Hoover Institution, Stanford\), June 13, 2011.](#)