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FIGHTING EXTREMISM AND CLARIFYING COMMITMENTS: HRH Prince Mohammad Bin Nayef's Visit to Washington

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Saudi Arabian Interior Minister, HRH Prince Mohammad bin Nayef bin Abdul-Aziz Aal Saud, comes to the American capital this week to continue consultations on a host of issues of mutual interest to Saudi Arabia and the United States. As Interior Minister with additional responsibility for the kingdom's policy toward the Syrian crisis, Prince Mohammad is uniquely positioned to coordinate with American officials Saudi Arabia's efforts against violent extremism, militancy, and the continuing slaughter in Syria. Coming on the heels of the recent visit by Minister of the Saudi Arabian National Guard, HRH Prince Mit'eb bin Abdulla bin Abdul-Aziz, this visit further highlights the important strategic relationship between Riyadh and Washington that serves the interests of peace, security, and stability in the Middle East.



*Prince Mohammad bin Nayef receives U.S. Senator John McCain in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in December 2013.
Photo: Mohammad Bin Nayef Counseling and Care Center.*

Waging War on Extremism

An essential element of Prince Mohammad's visit consists of coordinating respective visions, policies, and plans to challenge the scourge of radical militancy in the Arabian Peninsula and Iraq. Since the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States, when Prince Mohammad first took charge of the kingdom's counter-terrorism policy as assistant to his late father, HRH Prince Nayef bin Abdul-Aziz, who himself served as Interior Minister for 37 years, Saudi Arabia has been a linchpin in global efforts to fight terrorist

financing, recruiting, and ideology.

In 2005, King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz established the Financial Investigations Unit to crack down on terrorist financing in the kingdom, took steps to revitalize the educational system, reformed curricula and reading materials, increased the number of Saudi Arabian universities from eight to 25, and targeted extremist teachers and their colleges. Earlier in 2014, King Abdullah issued a decree prohibiting Saudi Arabians from joining so-called jihadi groups fighting in Syria and/or Iraq, promising punishments of seven-year jail terms, and donated US\$100 million to fund the founding of a United Nations counter-terrorism agency.

Despite occasional attacks inside the kingdom, the most recent taking place last month in a village in the eastern province of Ihsaa', Saudi Arabia has hardly been idle in its ongoing campaign to clamp down on the domestic challenge represented by extremist dissidents. At the Interior Ministry, Prince Mohammad has leveraged the power of state institutions -- including the intelligence apparatus, police, Special Forces units, counter-terrorism squads, border and installation protection forces, and more -- to ensure internal security and domestic stability.

Since 2011, Saudi Arabian security forces have arrested hundreds of potential militants belonging to sleeper jihadist cells with allegiance to 'al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula' (AQAP). In 2006, the Prince Mohammad bin Nayef Counseling and Care Center was founded to battle militant ideas and the distortion of the tenets of Islam. In 2009, Prince Mohammad himself barely escaped death in an assassination attempt by a member of AQAP.



Saudi Arabian Prince Khaled Al Faisal (third from right) visits the southern province of Jizan, near the border with Yemen, in November 2009. Photo: Saudi Press Agency.

What Prince Mohammad will likely emphasize in discussions with American officials are potential joint Saudi Arabian-American opportunities to counter threats emanating from al-Qaeda cells and fighters in Yemen's Hadramawt Province abutting the kingdom's southern border. Given the ongoing weakness of Yemen's state institutions, AQAP has ample opportunity to strengthen its ranks and focus operations towards the kingdom. A case in point is last July's incursion of a cell of AQAP fighters from Hadramawt at al-Wadi'a border post where five Saudi Arabian policemen along with the attackers were killed. Construction of a 10-foot border fence along the long Saudi Arabian-Yemeni border, with berms and an agreed-upon no-man's land on both sides of the barrier, does not obviate

the need for proactive efforts to stanch potential infiltrations and attacks.

Prince Mohammad will also discuss with American interlocutors ways to increase cooperation with U.S. advisors stationed in Iraq following ISIS's advances there. ISIS militants have come close to Saudi Arabia's and Jordan's borders after conquering much of Iraq's Anbar Province. ISIS's leader and self-proclaimed Caliph of the so-called Islamic State, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, has already called on his followers to launch attacks in Saudi Arabia, especially on its leaders, as well as in Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Algeria, and elsewhere.

Prince Mohammad, together with his fellow ruling family members, also understands the challenge ISIS's distorted ideological message presents and the threat it poses for the future of Islam as a religion of tolerance. The beheading last September of a French tourist in Algeria, the attack on a Shiite village in the east, and the shooting of a Dane in Riyadh last month, all perpetrated by ISIS sympathizers, are poignant examples of the threat. Similarly shocking has been the spread of ISIS's appeal in Yemen, Egypt, Libya, the western Sahel region, Pakistan, and elsewhere. As a pillar of Sunni Islam, the site of two of Islam's holiest shrines in Mecca and Madinah, and a pivotal center for Muslims everywhere, Saudi Arabia is cognizant of the importance of the ideological battle with ISIS. Its leaders, and doubtlessly many among the country's rank and file citizenry, are also aware of the military necessity to stop the organization on the ground. As one of the nationally prominent Saudi Arabian authorities entrusted with the guardianship of domestic peace, security, and stability, Prince Mohammad is well positioned to help devise and execute a plan to do just that.

Responding to the Syrian Crisis

In charge of Saudi Arabia's policy on Syria, Prince Mohammad comes at a time of mounting confusion, the transformation of positions and roles among some of the rebel groups, and reconsideration by various parties of the allied coalition's policies and tactics towards Syria. In this environment, he and his Administration counterparts will be likely to consult anew with a view to re-assessing one another's thinking and analysis regarding the changing nature, pace, extent, and end goal of their joint and respective commitments.

Much of what the Administration has so far enunciated in terms of its policies and goals is yet to be accomplished. But the most burning issue between Saudi Arabian and American officials is their acknowledged need to help create and sustain a force of acceptable Syrians numerically large enough and sufficiently credible as a fighting force to be effective. It has hardly helped that lack of Administration clarity and White House squabbling with Congress, and *vice versa*, about what to do in Syria send contradictory messages and tend to confuse friends and allies more than they do supporters of the Syrian regime.

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The ouster of Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel at a critical juncture in America's declared commitment of making a difference against ISIS is not without cost. It betrays, even in the eyes of those ordinarily inclined to give the Oval Office the benefit of the doubt, that the Administration has no clear strategy for Syria.

Militarily, what most concerns Saudi Arabia and its GCC partners in the international coalition is something else. It is the fact that the coalition's operations seem to only benefit the Syrian regime since they target ISIS positions and not regime assets. Security and military analysts have noted that the Syrian army's battlefield successes in northern

Syria have come at the expense of other rebel factions while ISIS frequently manages to hide from coalition aircraft. In these circumstances, many GCC officials would likely be forgiven for harboring doubts regarding the American position on Syrian President Bashar al-Asad. Indeed, that would be understandable given that some appear to think that the United States may have already decided that the fight against the Islamic State is the only paramount battle in Syria, not political change in Damascus.

Needless to say, Asad's survival for Saudi Arabia and the GCC countries is at once a strategic and geopolitical gain for Iran; one that, unchecked, could eventually equate to the Islamic Republic's unchallenged hegemony over the Levant. It obviously did not help that Iranian aircraft were sighted attacking ISIS positions in Iraq, using air space supposedly controlled by the U.S.-led international coalition. The American claim that this was an instance where Iraq exercised its sovereign right could be seen as disingenuous since units from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps and Iran-supported Shiite militias are on the actual battlefield. What also deserves mention is that this comes as Tehran, on its side, and the United States and the other P5+1 countries, on their side, yet again failed to offer the necessary concessions for a deal regarding Iran's nuclear program.

So, where are we now? Last February, Prince Mohammad bin Nayef visited Washington to relay King Abdullah's doubts about the efficacy of America's plans, then, for a strategic pivot to East Asia and the Pacific, and about Washington's ineffective response to the Syrian crisis and Iranian involvement in it. In March, President Barack Obama visited Riyadh to quiet anxieties and allay fears.

This time around, following an American strategic re-commitment to the Middle East, and to Arabia and the Gulf in particular, Prince Mohammad's visit seeks to once again clarify United States intentions regarding the Syrian element of its commitments. It remains up to the U.S. Administration to put its foreign policy toward the Syrian crisis in order so that its strategic relationship with Saudi Arabia, and the GCC with it, can continue to flourish and prosper.

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