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THE ISIS CHALLENGE AND HRH PRINCE KHALED BIN BANDAR'S VISIT TO WASHINGTON: THE ISSUES, THE IMPLICATIONS

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Strategic Saudi Arabian-U.S. cooperation continues. Another prominent Saudi Arabian leader – Chief of Saudi Arabia's General Intelligence Presidency HRH Prince Khaled bin Bandar bin Abdul-Aziz Al-Saud – visits Washington, DC this week. Coming after recent visits by Saudi Arabian Minister of the Interior, HRH Prince Mohammad bin Nayef bin Abdul-Aziz, and Minister of the Saudi Arabian National Guard, HRH Prince Mit'eb bin Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz, Prince Khaled's visit will most likely continue discussions on joint efforts to fight the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Four months after the formation of the U.S.-led international coalition to degrade and defeat ISIS, Prince Khaled will review past accomplishments, study lessons learned, and coordinate future steps to combat what has become a serious threat to peace and security in the Arab East.



Prince Khaled bin Bandar greets President Barack Obama upon his arrival in Riyadh in March 2014. Photo: Saudi Press Agency.

Ameliorating the ISIS Challenge

Since its June 2014 conquest of northern Iraq with a then-ragtag army, ISIS has become the foremost security and strategic challenge to the nation-state order in the Levant and Arabian Gulf.

A now-much-better-equipped and -armed military force occupying large swaths of Syria and Iraq, it possesses a contiguous base of operations that threatens all adjacent countries. The bearer of a messianic vision to re-establish what it considers a virtuous state – a “Caliphate” – that harkens back to the first few decades of the *pax Islamica* in the Arabian Peninsula more than fourteen centuries ago, ISIS and its close and distant adherents alike sadly represent a hope, albeit false, to disenfranchised, alienated, or simply misguided Sunni Muslims everywhere.

Fighting ISIS and its dogma is crucial to the security and stability of the Arab political order. Militarily, an anti-ISIS international coalition has taken up the mission of weakening the organization’s ability to launch attacks and sustain control over areas it has seized in Iraq. The coalition has also helped arrest ISIS’ advances against the northern Kurdish enclave, the capital of Baghdad, and areas in the western Anbar Province. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, and other Arab countries are essential partners in the effort and their respective air forces have performed admirably over Iraq and Syria. That the fight against ISIS until its ultimate defeat will take a long time is practically assured. As such, the reality only accentuates the necessity of Arab engagement and resolve to rid their societies of the long-term threat that ISIS represents.

Ideologically, the battle between the Islam evidenced in Arab and Muslim capitals, and its militant and violent variants represented by ISIS, al-Qaeda, Jabhat al-Nusra, and other militant organizations, has been long fought. Riyadh, Cairo, Abu Dhabi, Amman, and other Arab capitals

have vociferously denounced the unbridled brutality with which ISIS has pursued its agenda wherever it has ruled. They have also organized public campaigns contrasting the peaceful tenets of Islam with the hateful rhetoric and practice of radical jihadists. The fight over Islam has not been limited to ISIS and al-Qaeda in the Arab world, but has long since been manifested worldwide and become only more urgent, necessary, and fateful.

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While military, political, and ideological responses against violent extremism are essential tools of engagement, what is necessary for decisive victory are

successes in socio-economic growth to improve standards of living and enhance prospects for greater participation in the national development processes of the citizenry in countries with millions of disenfranchised and poor Muslims. For some of these individuals ISIS’s distorted ideology stokes a sense of despair and heightens feelings of neglect. This alienation can not only increase attraction to easy and superficial interpretations of religious and intellectual struggles experienced in Arab and non-Arab daily life and society. More pointedly, it can drive individuals to participate in what they believe are liberating actions, such as joining ISIS. Indeed, ISIS has been able to recruit from Arab, Muslim, and Western countries alike despite concerted efforts of

governments and international security organizations to blunt the movement and ideology's appeal.

Prince Khaled's Visit and the Road Ahead

Prince Khaled comes to the United States as the international coalition to fight ISIS continues its air campaigns in Iraq and Syria. His visit also comes as the economic bottom falls from under the Russian and Iranian regimes due to the precipitous and most likely at least medium-term decline in international oil and gas prices. As sponsors, funders, and defenders of the Syrian regime, Russia's and Iran's abilities to continue impeding political change in Syria will diminish, making the medium- and longer-term task of fighting the Islamic State, and Saudi Arabia's role in that battle, more effective and productive. It is thus likely that Prince Khaled's visit to Washington will address three strategic courses of action.



A U.S. Navy aircraft supporting operations in Iraq and Syria prepares to land in the Gulf in October 2014. Photo: U.S. Department of Defense.

First, as Chief of Saudi Arabia's General Intelligence Presidency since June 30, 2014, Prince Khaled is well-placed and authorized to decide the matter of recruiting, training, and arming contingents of Syrian opposition fighters to constitute the nucleus of a non-extremist force to fight the Syrian regime.

The Obama Administration and the American Congress, together with Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries, have already approved and provided start-up funding for such a force. Prince Khaled has the institutional standing, bureaucratic apparatus, and regional military connections necessary to assist in the recruitment, organization, training, and deployment of the force. Additionally, he has the authority to examine and assess the Obama Administration's thinking *vis-à-vis* the fate of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and to encourage a re-evaluation of the policy of not targeting Syrian regime forces. What might be of assistance to Prince Khaled in this regard is the impact of the seemingly deadlocked Iranian nuclear negotiations, which the administration had felt would be upset had the U.S.-led coalition targeted Syrian regime troops and assets.

Second, after the announcement of the establishment of a joint military command at the GCC Heads of State Summit in Doha, Qatar, in December,¹ Prince Khaled brings to Washington a

¹ See: Omar Al-Ubaydli and Andrea Plebani, eds., *GCC Relations with Post-War Iraq: A Strategic Perspective* (Gulf Research Centre Cambridge, 2014); Anoushiravan Ehteshami, "The Union Moment for the GCC," *Gulf Research Center*, September 21, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1D4wZfV>; and John Duke Anthony, "Gulf Cooperation Council Establishes

broadly unified GCC position on desired next steps related to Syria.² Along with the launching, arming, and deployment of a Syrian opposition force, GCC countries will, through him, re-affirm their commitment to remain the Arab pillar of the international coalition fighting ISIS. The GCC will also re-assert its commitments to help Jordan and Lebanon, states on the receiving end of millions of Syrian refugees, as partners in the coalition, and potential targets of ISIS and the al-Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front. Indeed, Prince Khaled arrives as a de facto representative of like-minded government leaders convinced of the essentially-Arab nature of the battle against violent extremism, conveying the leaders' message that they will continue to work to roll ISIS back and defeat it.



Iraqi President Fuad Ma'sum meets with Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz Al-Saud in Riyadh in November 2014. Photo: Saudi Press Agency.

Third, through historic economic, cultural, and tribal ties to Iraq's Sunnis, Saudi Arabia can throw its weight behind the recruiting and arming of a Sunni Iraqi force to constitute an anti-ISIS insurgency from within. Attempts to form an Iraqi national guard force are already afoot, resembling the establishment of the "Sunni Awakening" to fight al-Qaeda in Iraq in 2006-2007. Following Saudi Arabia's decision to re-open its embassy in Baghdad – after the appointment of Haidar al-Abadi as Iraq's Prime Minister and the visits to the Saudi Arabian capital by Iraqi President Fuad Ma'sum and Foreign Minister Ibrahim al-Ja'fari – Prince Khaled's General Intelligence Presidency

should find this task easier. The occasion of his visit will thus be an excellent opportunity to discuss urgent Iraqi matters, coordinate the formation and training of such a force with American officials, and influence how the Iraqi government conducts its operations against ISIS.

Conclusion

In the fight against ISIS, Saudi Arabia has been and will remain an essential player, partner, and leader in what, at the end of the day, are matters of no small moment in the world's most strategically vital region. As such, Prince Khaled's visit to Washington should serve as yet another occasion for Riyadh to re-affirm its commitment to the battle against violent extremism, destructive fanaticism, and unbridled brutality. It should also provide an opportunity to re-assert the importance of strategic Saudi Arabian-U.S. and broader GCC-U.S. coordination and cooperation

Unprecedented Joint Military Command," *National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations*, December 11, 2014, <http://ncusar.org/blog/2014/12/gcc-joint-military-command/>.

² For reasons of not wishing to provoke Iran, with which it has a special strategic relationship unlike any of the other GCC countries, Oman would be the exception here.

on essential issues and concerns.³ Here the focus ranges from finding a workable formula to end the Syrian carnage, to helping regional actors address serious threats directed against them, to enhancing the prospects for a peaceful and prosperous Middle East. Importantly, the visit highlights a stark truth amid the confusing challenges and contingencies facing the Arab world: that Saudi Arabia has emerged as the area's most reliable, stable, and effective strategic American partner.

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³ See: Abdulaziz Sager, "NATO and the Future of Gulf Security," *Gulf News*, May 28, 2014, <http://gulfnews.com/opinions/columnists/nato-and-the-future-of-gulf-security-1.1340193>; Christian Koch, "The GCC States and the West: Challenges of Arab Transitions," in Riccardo Alcaro and Andrea Dessi, eds., *The Uneasy Balance: Potential and Challenges of the West's Relations with the Gulf States*, (The Istituto Affari Internazionali, 2013); Joint Communique Following the Fourth Ministerial Meeting of the GCC-U.S. Strategic Cooperation Forum, *U.S. Department of State*, September 25, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/09/232169.htm>; GCC Joint Defense Council's Inaugural Meeting – Media, *Saudi-U.S. Relations Information Service*, May 20, 2014, <http://susris.com/2014/05/20/gcc-joint-defense-councils-inaugural-meeting-media/>; Imad Harb, "The Return of Strong GCC-U.S. Strategic Relations," *National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations*, November 26, 2014, <http://ncusar.org/blog/2014/11/return-strong-gcc-us-strategic-relations/>; and John Duke Anthony, "The Gulf Cooperation Council: Deepening Rifts and Emerging Challenges," *National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations*, May 22, 2014, <http://ncusar.org/blog/2014/05/gcc-deepening-rifts-emerging-challenges/>.