



A Saudi-Led Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism

Welcome Muscle in the Fight Against Terrorism, Desert Mirage, or Bad Idea?

By Brian Michael Jenkins

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Saudi Arabia recently announced that it was creating a “military alliance” of Muslim-majority nations to fight terrorism, but is the alliance real? Can it work? Is it a good idea?

The December 2015 announcement used only the word “terrorism” to identify the threat, but Saudi Deputy Crown Prince and Defense Minister Mohammad bin Salman explained that the coalition was aimed at the *disease* of Islamic extremism, specifically that exemplified by *Daesh*—the Arabic acronym for the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

The alliance reflects a new Saudi determination to act on behalf of its own security interests. Riyadh no longer sees the United States as the reliable ally it once was. Washington’s quick abandonment of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak when he was faced with internal dissent, its reluctance to take on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad or send in troops to destroy ISIL, and its nuclear deal with Iran have exacerbated Saudi anxieties.

The United States should welcome Saudi Arabia stepping up its efforts against al Qaeda and ISIL, but few believe that the Saudis can deliver, and many dismiss the alliance as a propaganda exercise. Some reactions in the West go beyond skepticism. The very concept of a Saudi-led coalition against violent extremism has been met with aversion in many quarters. Some American critics consider Saudi Arabia aggressive and determined to impose its own intolerant brand of Islamic law on the rest of the world. For others, the kingdom’s record of internal repression makes it an unsuitable ally.

What might a Saudi-led alliance do? Saudi officials have not made clear what military role, if any, they might be considering. Theoretically, there are a number of possibilities.

In a recent interview, King Abdullah of Jordan said that ISIL could be defeated “fairly quickly” if international efforts were coordinated. He meant that ISIL as a military power could be vanquished; the ideological contest is more difficult and will take much

longer. In the long run, only Muslims can defeat ISIL and al Qaeda both militarily and ideologically.

There have been discussions about deploying special forces from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to assist U.S. efforts in Syria. Although special operations are difficult to coordinate, Arab participation could add operational and political value.

More ambitiously, Saudi Arabia and its alliance partners could “put boots on the ground” to protect a safe haven north of the border between Jordan and Syria large enough to temporarily accommodate Syrian refugees. This humanitarian role could relieve some of the pressure that the influx of Syrian refugees has put on Jordan, and if ISIL began to disintegrate, alliance forces would be in position to quickly move in to prevent doomsday massacres.

At a minimum, fielding a multinational Muslim force could change the narrative promoted by ISIL’s propagandists that it is engaged in a final showdown between believers and unbelievers. Instead, the contest would be transformed into one in which ISIL’s leaders have to defend themselves against fellow Sunnis.

As coalition bombing degrades conditions in ISIL, many of those who live under ISIL’s rule may be forced to join its forces in order to survive. The nearby presence of a rival Muslim army could provide another option for those fed up with or fearing conscription by ISIL and could encourage desertions among recruits alienated by ISIL’s harsh rule and brutality. This will not happen without a rival force on the ground—and it is more likely to happen if the rival force consists of fellow Arabs rather than Western soldiers.

Greater Saudi-led involvement comes with risks. The Saudi initiative, which is obviously Sunni, could deepen the sectarian divide, although it seems that sectarian and ethnic divisions already

drive the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. Most of the insurgents in Syria and Iraq are Sunnis, while government forces and their militia allies are mainly Alawites or Shias. Deprived of power in both countries, Sunnis have only the insurgents as their avatars. (This is not to imply that Sunnis see ISIL as defending Sunni interests.)

A Saudi-led alliance would give Sunnis another protector, but that could complicate international negotiations aimed at resolving the conflicts. At a minimum, it would strengthen the hand of the Sunnis in any future political settlement, an unwelcome outcome in Baghdad and Damascus—and even in some Western capitals, where officials fear that it could dim the prospects for a solution and could make the current *de facto* partition of Syria and Iraq permanent. The United States remains officially committed to the proposition that more-inclusive governments in Damascus and Baghdad can achieve the national reconciliation that guarantees the territorial integrity of Syria and Iraq.

Some worry that the Riyadh initiative would divert Arab resources from the U.S.-led coalition aimed at destroying ISIL. More worrisome to some is the prospect of a parallel command structure that could act independently of the primarily Western effort. Imperial and great-power instincts survive. Diplomats in Paris, London, Istanbul, Washington, and Moscow may believe it is safer to let them sort out the region’s future. This kind of colonial perspective leads to outside powers drawing lines in the sand and should be avoided.

Some in Washington worry that any sort of U.S.-endorsed Saudi military alliance could get in the way of Washington’s nascent, but evolving, relationship with Iran, whose cooperation is viewed as essential to resolving the conflicts. However, the United States does not have anything near a rapprochement with Iran.

America's desire to further reduce hostility via the recent nuclear agreement does not constitute a strategic relationship. After decades of antagonism, normal relations between the United States and Iran will take years to bring about—and even this outcome is not preordained.

How should the United States treat the Saudi initiative? It might seem that the United States would welcome any efforts by regional powers to help share the military burden of defeating terrorist organizations like ISIL. But while the United States wants to avoid escalating military involvement, it has not given up on the idea that it can achieve its goals through diplomatic means and would prefer that locals not get in the way of its chances of doing so.

That course of action may be unrealistic, and it seems patronizing. Sectarian and ethnic differences have already made the contest existential for local belligerents. Iran, Turkey, and Russia are heav-

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ily invested in defending their local protégés. Whether the United States can so obviously display its determination not to commit its own forces to battle (at least on the ground) yet retain sufficient diplomatic leverage to shape a favorable settlement remains to be seen.

Ignoring the Saudi initiative would be a mistake. Riyadh still sees the proposed alliance as a work in progress. To help Saudi Arabia identify and achieve missions that would be most useful for shared goals, it might be useful for officials in Washington to create a small task force charged specifically with exploring the opportunities presented by the Saudi initiative. ■

Introduction

Saudi Arabia recently announced that it was creating a “military alliance” of 34 Muslim-majority nations to fight terrorism.¹ A Saudi-led military alliance could change the shape of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, but what does it mean? Is it real? Can it work? And is it a good idea for the United States to embrace and encourage, or should the United States stay well clear of it?

The December 15, 2015, announcement used only the word “terrorism” to identify the threat, but at the accompanying press conference, Saudi Deputy Crown Prince and Defense Minister Mohammad bin Salman was more explicit. The coalition, he said, was aimed at the *disease* of Islamic extremism, specifically that exemplified by *Daesh* (the defense minister used the Arabic acronym for the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant—ISIL or ISIS) and its affiliates in the Middle East and beyond.²

Saudi Arabia is a long-standing ally of the United States, although circumstances in both countries require that the relationship always remain discreet. The United States has defended Saudi Arabia, as it did when the kingdom was threatened by the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. It was the Saudi monarchy’s decision to invite U.S. forces into Saudi Arabia that infuriated Osama bin Laden and led to his later terrorist campaign against the Saudi rulers. The United States has supported Saudi military actions against rebels in Yemen, although with growing misgivings. The United States would probably defend Saudi Arabia if the kingdom were openly invaded by Iran. The Saudis assist U.S. counterterrorist efforts in a variety of ways and currently participate, albeit minimally, in the

U.S.-led air campaign against ISIL. Saudi Arabia also helps finance U.S. programs to train and arm Syrian rebels.³

The United States would prefer that Saudi Arabia be more committed to defeating the Islamic extremists represented by al Qaeda and ISIL and would welcome Saudi Arabia stepping up its efforts against terrorism. If it became a real military force, a Saudi-led alliance could fundamentally alter the dynamics of the current conflict with ISIL. But few in either the West or the Arab world believe that the Saudis can deliver. Historically, it has proved difficult to assemble any Arab or Muslim coalition. The alliance seems too unwieldy, its mission too unfocused.

The reactions in the West, however, go beyond skeptical assessments of the prospects of implementation of a “military alliance.” The very concept of a Saudi-led coalition against violent extremism has been met with aversion in many quarters. Some American critics consider Saudi Arabia aggressive and determined to impose its own intolerant brand of Islamic law on the rest of the world. Some detractors see in Saudi Arabia the ideological and financial roots of the terrorists that most threaten U.S. security.

For others, the kingdom’s record of internal repression makes it an unsuitable ally. These critics point to Saudi Arabia’s single-day beheading of 47 men condemned as terrorists in January 2016, including prominent Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr, as a demonstration of just how far the kingdom diverges from American values. While Saudi-American cooperation can sometimes be difficult to defend, recent Saudi actions and the current political atmosphere in the United States have made it even more difficult for the U.S. government to publicly support Saudi initiatives right now.

The execution of Nimr, whose fate had become a *cause célèbre* in Iran, raises further questions about Saudi intentions. Is its proposed military alliance aimed at the Islamic State or at the Islamic Republic of Iran and its proxies in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen? And this raises a question about U.S. policy: Has Washington decided, as some in the Middle East suspect, that America's long-term interests lie in rapprochement with Tehran at the expense of its commitments to its traditional allies in the region?

Saudi Arabia's recent actions are not necessarily inconsistent. They reflect apprehension. A worried and increasingly assertive Saudi monarchy wants to send a strong message to foes at home and abroad, and it cares less about offending sensibilities in the United States, which it has come to regard as a less reliable ally. That would seem to presage growing distance between Washington and Riyadh, but as is often the case in relationships in the region, what we see is not always what is so. Invariably, things are more complicated.

Riyadh's Initiative Raises Policy Questions for Washington

The Saudi proposal raises a number of questions for Washington. How should the United States treat the Saudi initiative? For obvious reasons, America cannot lead a Muslim alliance. An open American embrace of any Muslim initiative almost certainly would be a kiss of death for the initiative.

Should the United States discreetly encourage the Saudi effort? The United States has welcomed Saudi participation in the American-led air campaign against ISIL and has provided intel-

ligence and logistics backup to the Saudi-led coalition fighting in Yemen. The proposed Saudi-led alliance could reinforce the military campaign against ISIL in the air and potentially on the ground, but the additional military assets would also complicate command and control and would change the political complexion of the multilateral effort.

Saudi officials have not made clear what direct military role, if any, they might be considering. While the United States may urge greater Saudi-led efforts to combat extremism ideologically and may accept Saudi funding for training and arming Syrian rebels, should Washington discourage any notion of direct Saudi-led military intervention?

That points to a chronic dilemma for U.S. policymakers. America's diplomatic objectives and the desire to avoid cumbersome command structures consign potential partners to nonmilitary or token military roles. Allies provide political cover, bases, and a few airplanes, and they issue communiqués denouncing Islamic extremism but achieving little else, while leaving the United States to bear the heaviest military burden. This has adverse domestic political consequences. Many Americans ask: If America's regional allies will not fight their own battles, why should the United States fight for them?

The United States demanded political changes in Iraq as a condition of U.S. military assistance in defending the Iraqi government, and it has sought to remodel Syria's government by bringing about the departure, sooner or later, of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The United States also calls for political reform in Saudi Arabia, but not at the expense of political stability. How can the

United States persuade the Saudis of its reliability as an ally but avoid being drawn by them into an anti-Shia, anti-Iranian alliance?

Growing Saudi Concerns

The Saudi initiative reflects growing concerns in Riyadh about the course of events in the Middle East, starting with the onset of the Arab Spring. Saudi Arabia faces threats from ISIL in the north, from Iran in the east, and from both Shia rebels and a resurgent al Qaeda in Yemen in the south. These external threats have internal parallels. The proposed Riyadh alliance may be seen as a follow-on to the Arab League proposal to create a unified Arab force, the Cairo Declaration of Saudi Arabia's alliance with Egypt to create a joint Arab military force, and the Saudi-led coalition to assist the government of Yemen in its fight against Shia rebels. All of these took place in 2015 and reflect growing apprehension about the threat posed to all Muslim countries by Islamic extremism, currently embodied by al Qaeda and ISIL—and, some would add, the Muslim Brotherhood—and by fears of subversion instigated by Iran.

The recent executions in Saudi Arabia underscore these concerns. Forty-three of the men executed were al Qaeda operatives who had been in prison for a decade or longer. Some were linked to the 9/11 attacks in the United States. Others were involved in activities in Saudi Arabia that date back to the terrorist campaign of 2003–2006. The other four were Saudi Shias accused of subversion in Saudi Arabia's restive Eastern Province, which has a Shia majority.

Nimr was arrested in 2013 for advocating the secession of the province. He preached that the ruling dynasties of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain were illegitimate, and he called for armed

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struggle to overthrow them. He was believed to be closely tied to Hezbollah al-Hejaz, an Iranian-linked group that carried out the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing in which 20 American servicemen died and hundreds were wounded.⁴

Nimr's execution provoked an assault on the Saudi embassy in Tehran, which prompted Saudi Arabia and several other Gulf monarchies to break diplomatic relations with Iran. Saudi Arabia sees its confrontation with Iran as a strategic priority. This contest has deep roots, going back almost 1,400 years to the split in Islam between Sunnis and Shias.

But it is the recently invented Islamic State that may pose the most immediate threat. Blocked on the west by the Syrian government's Russian- and Iranian-backed sectarian strongholds and Hezbollah fighters, on the east by Iraq's primarily Shia army, and on the north by U.S.-backed Kurdish fighters, the Islamic State can expand only southward into Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia's deeply conservative Sunni population and current economic difficulties may persuade ISIL's leaders that the Saudi kingdom is especially vulnerable right now. Since November 2014, ISIL has claimed responsibility for a series of terrorist bombings and shootings in the kingdom; more than 50 people were killed in the attacks, mostly Shias but also members of the security forces.⁵

The Islamic State has stated its intention to take over Islam's holiest sites in Saudi Arabia, and its forces have already attacked

Saudi border posts.⁶ In an audio message posted on December 26, 2015, ISIL leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi denounced the Saudi-led Islamic coalition and called for an uprising to overthrow the Saudi monarchy.⁷

In response to the chaos in Syria and Iraq, Saudi Arabia has built a wall along its northern frontier with Iraq, but hunkering behind walls will not alter the situation on either side. The main threat comes not from a military invasion, but from the ideological pull the Islamic State has on Saudi youth. Having previously dealt with a terrorist threat posed by young Saudis joining al Qaeda cells, the kingdom now faces a new cohort of radical extremists.

According to the Saudi Ministry of the Interior, between 2011, when the armed resistance movement in Syria began, and the end of 2015, 3,030 Saudi men joined jihadist groups in Syria; 725 have since returned. The exodus of Saudi recruits is not quite as traitorous as it seems. The Saudi government actively supported the Syrian resistance, including the Islamist formations. However, it does not support ISIL, which the government views as a threat. Moreover, some private Saudi donors, despite government efforts to block funding, reportedly have supported extreme groups, including Jabhat al Nusra (al Qaeda's affiliate in Syria) and ISIL. Do the returning veterans of the Syrian resistance now pose the principal danger to Saudi security, as returnees from al Qaeda once did?

Initially, Osama bin Laden resisted carrying out attacks in Saudi Arabia. He did not want to risk alienating his sources of financial support there. That strategy changed in 2003. Driven out of Afghanistan, several hundred Saudi veterans of al Qaeda secretly returned to the kingdom and began setting up sleeper cells. In a February 14, 2003, sermon, bin Laden called for the overthrow of the Saudi monarchy, which he accused of betraying the Ottoman

Empire in World War I and opening the door to "Crusader and Zionist" domination of the Muslim world.⁸

Al Qaeda initiated its campaign in Saudi Arabia in May 2003 with a series of attacks on Western compounds. In the months that followed, between 1,000 and 2,000 al Qaeda operatives carried out frequent attacks in cities throughout the kingdom. The violence subsided in 2006. In 2009, surviving Saudi operatives joined with Yemeni veterans and created al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Both AQAP and, more recently, ISIL have continued to plot and carry out terrorist attacks.

In 2015, Saudi Arabia announced the arrest of 800 Saudis and non-Saudis for planning or supporting terrorist acts inside the kingdom; others were arrested, but as of mid-January 2016, their status was not clear. More than 70 percent of the arrests resulted from tips to the authorities by friends or relatives of the arrestees, which indicates that they had not been identified by the authorities.⁹ As long as the Islamic State exists, Saudi Arabia cannot feel safe.

Although Defense Minister bin Salman, in announcing the alliance, specifically mentioned *Daesh*, not all Saudis see ISIL as the primary threat to the kingdom's security. For many Saudi Sunnis, it is the Shias, backed by Iran, who pose the greater peril. Saudis who hold this view say that a Shia threat to Mecca would bring the whole country down on them, but a seizure of Mecca by al-Baghdadi's Islamic State might even be welcomed by some Saudis.

Saudi Arabia's recent actions signal a hard line on dissent, but they also betray nervousness. There was concern in some Western capitals that the Saudi actions would send already poor Saudi-Iranian relations into a downward spiral, thereby complicating U.S. collaboration with Saudi Arabia on security matters.

The kingdom's rulers are no longer content to rely on others to defend them and are determined to play a more active role in the region.

Increased Saudi security worries come amid concerns about the economic future of the kingdom as oil prices plummet and growing uncertainty about the reliability of the United States as the kingdom's principal ally. Critics of what they deplore as hesitant U.S. military efforts in Syria and the Obama Administration's determination to improve relations with Iran assert that the Saudis and other long-standing American allies in the region have ample reasons for concern.

The United States is not seen in Riyadh as the reliable ally it once was. The Saudis began to worry when they felt that the United States too quickly abandoned Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak when he was faced with internal dissent. Washington then laid down a "red line" in Syria regarding the use of chemical weapons, but it did not follow up when chemical weapons were used. The recent nuclear deal between the United States and Iran, freeing billions of dollars in frozen assets and opening up Iran to the West, added to Saudi concerns. In the Middle East, where perception is everything, the Saudis see the United States as having behaved weakly and the current administration as unwilling to reengage in the Middle East militarily. Asked whether the crisis in the region had become more difficult with U.S. disengagement, Saudi Defense Minister bin Salman responded, "We understand the work carried out by the United States. America is carrying out many efforts. . . . But the United States must realize that they are the number one in the world and they have to act like it."¹⁰

Saudi oil is no longer the lifeblood of Western economies, although Japan and other American allies still depend on it. The United States probably would come to the kingdom's aid in the event of an overt military invasion by Iran or one of its proxies, but an internal uprising inspired by ISIL or fomented by Iran is another story and might not bring U.S. help. The Saudis clearly fear that the Iran nuclear agreement represents a major realignment toward Iran and that Washington may now be thinking about a future Middle East that does not include the House of Saud. No doubt, some in Washington would agree with this view.

Clearly, the kingdom's rulers are no longer content to rely on others to defend them and are determined to play a more active role in the region. They saw the government of Syria invite assistance from Iran and Russia, which now cloaks direct Iranian and Russian military intervention and a permanent presence in Syria with a legitimacy that the world accepts. Saudi officials want to be able to generate and respond to requests for military support to counter any future requests to Iran for military assistance. That will require diplomatic muscle and military strength. In these circumstances, the advantages of assembling a Saudi-led military alliance become obvious. The military discussions that Saudi Arabia is having with both Egypt and Turkey also must be seen in this context.

Is the Riyadh Project Real?

The 2015 announcement of an international Muslim alliance against terrorism coincides with a longer trajectory. Saudi Arabia has become more assertive in recent years, participating in the NATO-led campaign in Libya, intervening in Bahrain, and assembling a military coalition to intervene in Yemen. The announcement also followed by days a meeting in Riyadh at which Saudi Arabia persuaded Syria's rebels to at least temporarily form a single bloc to negotiate with the Syrian regime.

Still, many pundits promptly dismissed the Saudi counter-terrorism initiative as a propaganda exercise calculated to bolster Saudi prestige rather than to actually form an operational military alliance. Even some in Saudi Arabia thought the announcement of the coalition was a rush to headlines, while some foreign Saudi-watchers, along with some inside the kingdom, suggested that the initiative was generated by rivalry between Saudi princes more than by strategic calculations.¹¹ (In discussions of a political system in which government decisionmaking remains largely closed to the public, there is a tendency to attribute all decisions to internal court politics.)

The coalition does look as if it was hastily constructed. There was no phalanx of Muslim defense ministers or foreign ministers at the announcement. The reality of the initiative was further undermined by the fact that Pakistan and Lebanon apparently learned of their presumed membership only after the announcement. Although also listed as likely to join, Indonesia said it had not yet decided. Other Muslim governments issued anodyne endorsements that they always stand ready to cooperate against terrorism.

The official Saudi statement declares that “a joint operations center shall be established in the city of Riyadh to coordinate and support military operations.”¹² Defense Minister bin Salman indicated that the alliance would pursue both security and military measures and efforts to combat the influence of extremist groups. “In Syria, he plans to send special forces against ISIS.”¹³ Asked whether military measures might include fielding ground forces, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir said that “nothing is off the table.”¹⁴ He went on to elaborate that the alliance would deploy troops if needed, but that this would “depend on requests that come and the willingness of countries to provide the support necessary.”¹⁵ That sounds a lot like “from each according to his ability to each according to his need.”

Beyond that, the official announcement is vague. Could Saudi Arabia and its alliance partners actually field a joint military force—in American parlance, “put boots on the ground”—in Syria? Malaysia ruled out any participation in military operations. The spokesman for Turkey's foreign ministry said the “coalition will not be a military structure. It is not on the agenda.”¹⁶ Saudi Arabia's fellow monarchies in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) generally share the kingdom's concerns about security, but they chafe at Saudi domination. Oman, a member of the GCC, has opposed Saudi efforts to move the GCC toward a closer alli-

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ance and was notably absent from the list of nations in the Riyadh announcement.

The Riyadh announcement did not specifically talk about military action against ISIL or al Qaeda, and Saudi observers themselves did not see the alliance as something that would send troops anywhere. Instead, some saw it as primarily intended to combat jihadist ideology worldwide. One Saudi official (who prefers to remain anonymous) saw it as an intelligence-sharing mechanism, noting that Saudi Arabia has been trying to organize such an alliance against terrorism since 2005, when the kingdom was in the midst of its battle with al Qaeda.

Nor is it clear how a Saudi-led coalition would attack ISIL, even if that were its intended purpose. Aircraft from Saudi Arabia and a handful of other Arab countries already participate in the U.S.-led air campaign. To take on ISIL more directly would require ground forces, but the Shia-dominated government of Iraq seems unlikely to invite Saudi or other Sunni ground forces into the country—and sending an army across the border uninvited would be an invasion. Deputy Crown Prince bin Salman himself said that “no military operations would be carried out in Syria without prior coordination with President Bashar al-Assad and the international community.”¹⁷ How likely is it that Assad, who depends on Russian and Iranian backing, would invite a Saudi-led Sunni army into Syria?

Reactions Are Skeptical

The Saudi initiative met mixed reviews in the West. Official welcomes were lukewarm, although the United States and its allies have been pushing for greater Arab participation in efforts to destroy ISIL. U.S. Defense Secretary Ashton Carter noted that the

Riyadh announcement is, in general at least, “very much aligned with something that we’ve been urging for quite some time, which is greater involvement in the campaign to combat ISIL by Sunni Arab countries.”¹⁸

Seven of the countries listed as members of the new Muslim military alliance are also participants in ongoing military operations against ISIL. Bahrain, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have actively participated in the air campaign, while Kuwait and Qatar provide air bases.

But thus far, these countries’ participation in the campaign against ISIL has been less than was hoped for. As of January 3, 2016, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE accounted for just 27 of the more than 9,379 air strikes in Syria and Iraq since the air campaign began in September 2014. In that 16-month period, Saudi Arabia carried out a total of seven air strikes in Syria and none in Iraq. Bahrain and Jordan have not carried out any air strikes in months.¹⁹ During his visit to the United States in January 2016, Jordan’s King Abdullah II did say that his country would be increasing the tempo of its air campaign.²⁰

Saudi Arabia’s military efforts have been diverted to assisting the government of Yemen against Shia rebels. Aircraft from Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Qatar, Sudan, and the UAE joined Saudi fighters in the bombing campaign in Yemen, while Saudi ground forces have also participated in the fighting. The Saudi-led campaign there has given the Saudis experience in coalition warfare, although some observers contend that their performance has been uneven at best.

The reality is that, apart from the Arab coalition effort in Yemen, most Arab-initiated attempts to achieve military cooperation since the 1973 October War against Israel have failed to get

past expressions of intent. The new alliance comprises mostly poor countries that have little military power and that are seeking financial help. Saudi money can always buy some support, but funding is no guarantee of success. U.S. efforts to create an effective moderate Syrian opposition force have been well funded but unsuccessful.

In March 2015, the Arab League announced the establishment of a “unified Arab force” to address new regional security concerns.²¹ The league instructed the military chiefs of staff of the participating nations to draw up a comprehensive plan within three months, but in August the group postponed the meeting at which the protocol forming the force was to be issued. Since then, little more has been heard about the initiative.

It is, of course, early days since the Riyadh announcement, and much diplomacy and planning must necessarily remain behind closed doors. However, Saudi Arabia has followed up with a number of visible steps to translate its still theoretical military alliance into a reality. The day after it announced the formation of its new military alliance, Saudi Arabia pledged \$8 billion in new aid and investments in Egypt, after Egypt, which already participates in the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen, announced that it would join the alliance.²² The king of Saudi Arabia will visit Egypt in April.

In February, it was announced that the kingdom would host the first meeting of the anti-terrorism coalition in March.²³ The Saudis also held a military exercise in Saudi Arabia that included troops from 20 nations and involved air, sea, and land forces. Its purpose, the Saudi statement said, was to send a “clear message that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and its brothers and friends of the participating countries stand united to confront all challenges and maintain peace and stability in the region.”²⁴ Saudi Arabia named

the exercise North Thunder, a possible clue as to where Saudi concerns lie.

A Negative Reception by Some in the United States

While the official reactions to the announced Saudi alliance were lukewarm, unofficial commentaries ranged from skeptical to overtly hostile. Popular punditry too often serves partisan agendas or is too much the product of mere drive-by analysis to inform a serious dissection of events and their consequences—who cares what commentators say or write? But not all commentary can be dismissed. Some of it is well informed, reflecting knowledge and experience. At the very least, the commentary displays popular attitudes that influence what government policymakers can do. Saudi Arabia’s announcement of a military alliance against Islamic extremism drew attention to the kingdom’s own behavior.

Some American critics see the Saudi-financed export of Wahhabism, a rigid fundamentalist interpretation of Islam that is believed to fuel extremism and is the ideological source of much of the terrorism the Saudis now propose to fight, as a straight line of fanaticism from Riyadh to San Bernardino. From this negative perspective, the Saudi initiative is viewed as mere propaganda aimed at deflecting international criticism from Saudi Arabia’s own support for extremism. As a *New York Times* editorial observed, “It is hard to see Saudi Arabia, a Sunni-led state, as a serious partner against the Islamic State unless it stops financing the Wahhabi religious schools and clerics that are spreading the kind of extremist doctrine that is at the heart of the Islamic State’s ideology.”²⁵

A December 21, 2015, *Bloomberg View* editorial suggested that if it wanted to assist in the campaign against Islamic extremism,

Saudi Arabia could crack down on extremist clerics at home, and not just those who explicitly back Islamic State. . . . Saudi leaders should also fulfill their promise to remove from state-issued textbooks passages so intolerant—including instruction on how best to execute heretics and homosexuals—that Islamic State has down-loaded them for children in its territories.²⁶

Pointing to the kingdom's lack of democracy and poor record on human rights, critics argued that Saudi leadership of the coalition only underscores the narrow choice open to Muslims between terrorist-created chaos and repressive regimes. As Max Fisher observed on the Vox website,

Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern regimes have, for years, co-opted religious establishments to serve their dictatorships. Thus, the more they heighten the differences between establishment Islam and ISIS Islam, the more they paint “establishment Islam” as a synonym for “brutal dictators who cynically exploit Islam for their own gain.”²⁷

The overall impression is that many of the commentators would not want any Saudi initiative to succeed.

The Saudis are sophisticated enough to understand that the United States is a politically complicated country that speaks with many voices from both outside and within its government—one need only look at American attitudes toward the Iran deal. Nonetheless, conflicting messages from the United States understandably provoke irritation in Riyadh. In Saudi eyes, the United States seeks Saudi support for U.S. initiatives and wants Saudi Arabia to increase its contribution to U.S.-led security efforts in the region, but when Saudi Arabia takes the initiative to defend its own national security interests, it is criticized for being unhelpful. Responding to questions about Saudi Arabia's more assertive

posture, Foreign Minister al-Jubeir said, “People are saying, ‘Why are the Saudis doing this?’ . . . It's one of those positions where it's damned if we do, damned if we don't. Make up your minds. Do you want us to lead or want us to support? And if you want us to support, who's going to lead?”²⁸

What critics of the Saudi regime, including many U.S. officials, do want is for the Saudi monarchy to reform in order to survive. But political reform has become a hard sell in the Middle East, especially in view of the chaos left in the wake of the Arab Spring. It is difficult to gauge dissent, but Saudis truly fear the kind of chaos that has afflicted Syria, and even those seeking political reform appear willing to keep quiet about a lot, pointing out that “at least we aren't killing each other.” Some progress has been made, but political liberalization in Saudi Arabia, to the extent that it occurs at all, is likely to be incremental and slow. Dramatic lurches could go in either direction—secularization and democracy or even more-ferocious religious fanaticism.

Tensions clearly exist in the kingdom, but it is difficult for outsiders to accurately gauge the internal threat to Saudi stability. Saudi authorities suppressed al Qaeda's earlier terrorist campaign. Is the internal threat greater now? Would a major terrorist incident, like the 1979 seizure by religious fanatics of Mecca's Grand Mosque, have greater resonance today? We do not know. Middle East governments are adept at exaggerating threats to justify tough security measures. (It happens elsewhere as well.)

Those advocating reform—an end to beheadings and torture and fairer legal proceedings—without questioning the legitimacy of the Saudi regime should be distinguished from those calling for regime change, although some argue that these changes will come only with a change of regime. But while Saudi behavior under-

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standably causes discomfort in the West, no one seriously thinks that a takeover of Mecca and Medina by ISIL or al Qaeda fanatics would bring anything other than catastrophe for the Middle East and the guarantee of religious war lasting decades.

Different Views of the Struggle

These reactions underscore the different perceptions of what the current conflict in the Middle East is about. Washington portrays it as a contest between the forces of freedom and democracy and brutal tyrants such as Assad and the monstrous terrorists of ISIL and other jihadist groups. Saudi Arabia sees it as a contest between itself as guardian of Islam's holiest places and Sunni heretics claiming to be the Caliphate for the hearts and minds of Islam, and between Saudi Arabia and the Shia, embodied by the Islamic Republic of Iran. Islamic State propaganda depicts Saudi rulers as apostates who have deviated from the true path.

Americans do not buy into the notion that the enemy of my enemy is my friend. They complain about the lack of local assistance but want America's allies to share American values. Perhaps if ISIL were seen in the United States as a greater threat, like Nazi Germany or Imperial Japan during World War II or the Soviet Union during the Cold War, Americans would be less fastidious about the prerequisites for those who fight on the same side. In morally murky circumstances, the United States prefers going alone

or standing aside. That can produce a surplus of villains and can complicate priorities.

Or, more ambitiously—and sometimes with disastrous consequences—the United States decides that the political terrain needs to be restructured. From Washington's perspective, Syria's Assad must go because he is a brutal tyrant dependent on foreign military props; he can never gain the true allegiance of the Syrian people, which only democracy can bring. His survival therefore guarantees continued conflict. However, Washington has recently walked back its rhetoric on Assad: He is still seen as a barrier to ending the conflict, but the United States no longer demands his immediate departure.

The perceived necessity of demolishing dictatorships and rebuilding political systems according to American precepts has some popular appeal, especially when phrased in tough-sounding rhetoric. And it has some logical weight—oppressive governments are less likely to work out reconciliations with internal foes, especially when the latter are armed. But America's political righteousness also can become an ideologically driven and dangerous conceit that carries the country into costly military missions or that paralyzes its efforts. And fears of ISIL-inspired terrorism, especially after the terrorist attacks in Paris and San Bernardino, have made ISIL's destruction the priority concern of many Americans—again, especially when phrased in tough-sounding rhetoric. There is far

less domestic enthusiasm for long-term military commitments and nation-building.

The Potential Benefits of an Arab Alliance

Putting aside America's long-running and unresolved debate between political morality and realpolitik, the Riyadh initiative, if it moved beyond words, could offer some benefits, but there are negative consequences too.

In a recent interview, King Abdullah of Jordan said that the Islamic State could be defeated "fairly quickly" if international efforts were coordinated. He meant that ISIL as a military power could be vanquished, although coordinating intelligence and maintaining security will continue to be challenges. The ideological contest is more difficult and will take much longer. The Riyadh alliance could add value to addressing the medium- and longer-term challenges described by King Abdullah. The defeat of ISIL and al Qaeda militarily *and* ideologically in the long run can be accomplished only by Muslims.

The risk is that such efforts can deteriorate into a succession of meaningless meetings and vacuous communiqués. Saudi Arabia's frustration that its \$10 million contribution to help start the United Nations Center for Counter-Terrorism in 2011, followed by another \$100 million contribution in 2014, yielded few results explains its current determination to set up its own alliance. The problem, however, may be inherent in all large-scale international efforts to address slippery topics such as terrorism.

Could the Saudi-led military alliance ever actually field a force? On the same day that Saudi Defense Minister bin Salman announced the new military alliance in Riyadh, Saudi Foreign Minister al-Jubeir said that there have been discussions about

deploying special forces from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE to assist U.S. efforts in Syria.²⁹ This is less than the military alliance announced in Riyadh, but some form of military collaboration on a smaller scale may be possible.

Although special operations are difficult to coordinate, Arab participation could add operational and political value. The authors of a recent *Foreign Affairs* article, for example, have suggested that the United States and the GCC countries should consider creating a joint headquarters for their respective special operations forces.³⁰

More ambitiously, Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham have proposed the creation of a U.S.-led regional army, including forces from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey, to destroy the Islamic State. The senators envisioned a large-scale ground campaign involving 80,000 to 100,000 troops. American soldiers would constitute 10 percent of the force.³¹ Absent some extraordinary provocation by ISIL—a 9/11-scale terrorist attack on the United States directly linked to ISIL, for example—the proposal borders on fantasy.

Nonetheless, could the Riyadh alliance form the backbone of an independent Arab contingent in a smaller international force? (During the first Gulf War, countries currently listed as members in the Riyadh alliance provided more than 130,000 troops to the U.S.-led operations. Few of them participated in combat operations—not all of the American units participating in the broader war effort saw actual combat operations either—but it was nonetheless an impressive turnout.) Would the participation of a Muslim alliance permit the United States to reduce its role in a multinational ground force to assistance in planning, logistics, and intelligence support? That would be more acceptable to an Ameri-

can public whose support for an increased U.S. ground combat role would be difficult to sustain.

Many would argue that Saudi and other Arab forces, with the exception of air power, should be kept out of Syria altogether, believing that the consequences of their involvement could only be negative. The presence of additional belligerents in the field, even if aimed at ISIL, would only complicate the situation, as in Yemen; raise concerns about indiscriminate violence; exacerbate sectarian tensions; and impede any peace settlement.

Another way forward could take the form of a Muslim coalition mobilized to protect a safe haven north of the border between Jordan and Syria large enough to temporarily accommodate Syrian refugees. This humanitarian role could relieve some of the pressure that the influx of Syrian refugees has put on Jordan. It also could become a magnet for deserters fleeing ISIL, and if ISIL began to disintegrate, a Muslim force would be in position to quickly move in to maintain order and prevent doomsday massacres.

The fielding of a multinational Muslim force could also have a significant strategic effect. First, it would change the narrative promoted by propagandists of the Islamic State that it is engaged in a final showdown between believers and unbelievers. Instead of fighting Western troops, the contest would be transformed into one in which ISIL's leaders have to defend themselves against fellow Sunnis.

For those living under ISIL occupation, most of whom are Sunnis, the appearance of a Sunni force would be more welcome than the risks of reprisal that accompany the advance of the dreaded Syrian army or its Shia militia allies. Soldiers of a Muslim coalition could claim to truly liberate ISIL-held towns.

Soldiers of a Muslim coalition could claim to truly liberate ISIL-held towns. A well-funded Muslim coalition army could also out-recruit ISIL.

A well-funded Muslim coalition army could also out-recruit ISIL. As coalition bombing degrades the economy of the Islamic State, many of those who live in ISIL-controlled territory but who do not yet serve in its army could be forced to join its forces simply in order to eat. This has little to do with ideology and more to do with survival—here, money could make a difference. The nearby presence of a rival Muslim army could give those fed up with or fearing conscription by ISIL another option: a better salary and a less perilous future. Welcoming those who rally to the coalition forces could also encourage desertions among recruits alienated by ISIL's harsh rule and brutality, leading to a shift of allegiance away from ISIL in both western Iraq and eastern Syria. This will not happen without a rival force on the ground, and it is more likely to happen if the rival force consists of fellow Arabs rather than Western soldiers.

How to handle deserters or others who show up to join a Sunni force would pose a challenge for the Saudi alliance, but the Saudis are probably better at sorting this out than U.S. or other non-Arab forces. The Saudis have far more experience in dealing with tribal sheikhs and radicalized foes (although the kingdom's record in dealing with returnees is mixed).

The Negative Consequences

The first and most obvious shortcoming of a Saudi-led alliance is that it is simply for show and therefore would achieve none of the possible benefits listed above but would exacerbate regional tensions. Unlike the U.S.-led coalition against ISIL, which is broad and inclusive but with the Americans still doing the heavy lifting, the Saudi coalition seems narrow and exclusive. But is that really the case? The U.S.-led coalition has not been expanded to embrace the present Syrian government, Russia, or Iran. Turkey is running its own military operations (and many question whether Assad or ISIL is the primary target). The major difference between the composition of the existing U.S.-led coalition and the Riyadh alliance is that the former includes both Western and Arab nations, while the latter is intended to include only mainly Muslim nations. It does not include Iraq, though this is perhaps an understandable exclusion, since the Iraqi government already indicated its opposition to the earlier Arab League's proposed military alliance. Nor does it include Iran.

The American-led coalition is on the same side as Iran only in anti-ISIL operations, certainly not in the broader Iranian mission of defending Assad. Although the American-led coalition has no sectarian agenda, neither Iran nor Iraq is a member of the Combined Joint Task Force bombing ISIL targets in Syria and Iraq. Of course, the U.S.-led coalition is operational, while the Saudi alliance does not appear to be even close to being operational.

A second shortcoming is that the Saudi initiative, which is obviously Sunni, will reinforce and perpetuate the sectarian divide. Writing in *Foreign Affairs*, Michael Bröning made this argument against the earlier Arab League initiative, which excluded both

Syria, which was suspended from the League at the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, and Iran.³²

It seems, however, that sectarian and ethnic divisions already drive the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. The insurgents in Iraq, both jihadist and moderate components, are mostly Sunnis, while government forces and their militia allies are mainly Shias. The rapid spread of ISIL across western and northern Iraq was facilitated by the antipathy that Iraq's Shia-dominated government had generated among the country's Sunni population. Score-settling by pro-government Shia militias in some areas recaptured by the Iraqi government only further alienated Sunnis. The government of Iraq is aware of this problem. While it has not fully engaged Iraq's Sunni population, during the battle of Ramadi, Iraqi government forces and Sunni tribal allies reportedly took the lead, while Shia militias were kept back. From the beginning of the civil war, the Syrian government has relied on its Alawite stalwarts and other religious minorities against a mainly Sunni insurgency in a Sunni-majority country.

Both Syria, a long-time ally of Iran, and Iraq's Shia-led government turned to Iran for assistance in dealing with the insurgency. Iran responded by mobilizing Shia Hezbollah to assist Assad, by forming Shia militias in both countries, and, more recently, by facilitating the transfer of Iraqi Shia formations and Iranian fighters to bolster Assad's defenses. Meanwhile, the Kurds in northern Syria and Iraq have defended their own territory, with U.S. assistance. The current "front lines" in Syria and Iraq closely match sectarian and ethnic divisions.³³

Deprived of power in both Syria and Iraq, the Sunnis have only the insurgents and, in eastern Syria and western Iraq, only ISIL as their avatars. (This is not to imply that Sunnis see ISIL as

defending Sunni interests.) An effective Saudi-led alliance would give Sunnis another protector, but that might not be a welcome development in the West. The United States and Europe remain officially committed to the proposition that a more-inclusive government in Damascus can achieve national reconciliation that guarantees territorial integrity. They believe the same about Baghdad, but although the United States pressured Iraq to replace Nouri al-Maliki with a less Shia-partisan government, Iraq's political future is not the subject of current international peace negotiations.

A third shortcoming is that realization of the Riyadh initiative would divert Arab resources from the U.S.-led coalition aimed at destroying ISIL. But as already indicated, much of the current Arab support is political rather than operational—Arab members provide valuable backup but fly very few missions. What may be more worrisome is the prospect of a parallel command structure that could dilute precious talent and also act outside of and independently of the primarily Western effort.

That, in turn, raises the fourth potentially negative consequence. An independent Arab military alliance, if it took the field, could complicate international negotiations aimed at resolving the conflict. At a minimum, it would strengthen the hand of the Sunnis in any proposed political settlement, an outcome that is not welcome in either Baghdad or Damascus—or even in some Western capitals, where officials fear that it could dim the prospects for a solution and could make the current *de facto* partition of Syria and Iraq permanent. Nor would Russia welcome a Sunni force, which would pose a long-term threat to the Assad government or any Russia-friendly successor. Imperial and great-power instincts survive. Diplomats in Paris, London, Istanbul, Washington, and Moscow may believe it is safer to let them sort out the region's

future. This kind of colonial perspective leads to outside powers drawing lines in the sand and should be avoided.

The fifth shortcoming is that any sort of U.S.-endorsed Saudi military alliance could get in the way of Washington's nascent, but evolving, relationship with Iran. That worries those in Washington who see Iran's cooperation as essential to resolving the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. It may upset others, primarily in Europe, who are becoming increasingly willing to accept the survival of the Assad regime in Syria if it will prevent the spread of chaos and stem the flow of refugees that is beginning to undermine the foundations of the European Union. In their view, the Saudi actions are spoilers, not just impediments. Those who see Iran as America's future strategic partner in the region would argue that the United States may not be able to halt or even shape the alliance and therefore should stay away from the Saudi initiative.

On the other hand, the United States does not have anything near a rapprochement with Iran in terms of normalized diplomatic relations; at best, it has the beginnings of a "détente." The recent nuclear agreement reflects narrowly circumscribed mutual interests. America's desire to further reduce hostility via the agreement does not constitute a strategic relationship. After decades of antagonisms and mutual distrust, normal relations between the United States and Iran will take years to bring about—and even this outcome is not preordained. Regardless, progress in relations will be uneven and subject to incidents that could cascade out of control.

Whether or not U.S. expectations of a new, friendlier relationship with Iran are realistic, if Iranian-American relations do not improve, Washington may be inclined to blame Saudi assertiveness, specifically its military intervention in Yemen—an action that is already seen in U.S. policy circles as unhelpful. This attitude would

further alarm and alienate Riyadh and could encourage responses that threaten its alliance with the United States. The policy question is whether the United States can maintain good relations with Saudi Arabia and at the same time improve relations with Iran. Or does the hostility of Saudi Arabia and Iran toward one another mean that the United States must choose between them—in either case, to the detriment of U.S. interests? The answer to this question will frame the actions the United States takes in Syria and Iraq.

How Should the United States Respond to the Saudi Initiative?

Without inflating the direct threat ISIL poses to U.S. national security, it is in the interest of the United States to contain and destroy the organization. That objective includes dissuading Sunnis in Syria and Iraq from seeing ISIL as their only defender.

American officials reiterate that the United States does not want to be the world's policeman. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have underscored the perils that come with American military intervention, and the Obama Administration has endeavored to avoid military engagements that turn into perpetual wars and unending imperial missions. The current conflicts in Syria and Iraq seem fraught with that risk.

It might seem, therefore, that the United States would welcome any efforts by regional and local powers to help share the military burden of defeating terrorist organizations like ISIL. But that is not always the case. While the United States wants to avoid escalating military involvement, it has not given up on the idea that it can achieve its goals through diplomatic means and would prefer that local powers not do things that get in the way of its chances of doing so. That would mean consigning the Saudi alliance, however

one may assess its aims or capabilities, to the sidelines while Washington sorts things out.

However, that course of action may be unrealistic, and it seems patronizing. First, America's confidence in its ability to achieve a favorable outcome through negotiations may be misplaced. Sectarian and ethnic differences have already made the contest existential for local belligerents. Iran, Turkey, and Russia are heavily invested in defending their local protégés. The Syrian government and its foreign allies have demonstrated their resolve. Whether the United States can so obviously display a determination not to commit its own forces to battle (at least on the ground) while retaining sufficient diplomatic leverage to shape a favorable settlement remains to be seen. American policymakers have debated this for decades.

Washington may view Saudi Arabia as a sometimes vexing ally—no doubt, the Saudis have the same view of the United States—but Saudi Arabia nevertheless remains a long-standing ally of America. As a friend, the United States owes the kingdom's rulers the courtesy of sometimes speaking bluntly. At the same time, the kingdom's initiatives merit serious consideration. The Saudi initiative reveals deep concerns and perhaps new determination. Ignoring it would be a mistake.

It might seem that the United States would welcome any efforts by regional and local powers to help share the military burden of defeating terrorist organizations like ISIL. But that is not always the case.

Building coalitions is hard work. The United States can encourage and assist, but it cannot overtly orchestrate what must be an Arab initiative.

A Muslim alliance against Islamic terrorism poses no danger to U.S. interests and could be helpful in several ways beyond current levels of cooperation—sharing intelligence, countering ISIL’s narrative, building networks to combat Islamic extremism worldwide, attacking the jihadists’ sources of financial support, protecting those fleeing the Islamic State, encouraging defections, fielding new anti-ISIL formations, and conducting guerrilla warfare against ISIL, as well as, potentially, conventional military operations. Future events may engender other roles.

Public statements suggest that the Saudis still see the proposed alliance as a work in progress, which, in turn, suggests that there are opportunities for the United States to help it identify and achieve missions that would be most useful for shared goals. If the Saudis are open to American input—which does not mean taking charge—a useful first step might be for Washington to create a small task force charged specifically with exploring the opportunities presented by such an alliance.

Conclusion

Political rhetoric has a tendency to applaud intention as if it were achievement. That appears to be a universal trait of governments that are dealing with unpleasant and apparently intractable problems. It is certainly characteristic of the current debate about U.S. strategy in the Middle East, where aspirations replace realistic assessments of the situation, and tough-sounding alternatives are cheered without thought as to how they might be implemented, let alone whether they would work.

Building coalitions is hard work. The United States can encourage and assist, but it cannot overtly orchestrate what must be an Arab initiative. Moving this initiative from press conference to battlefield will test Saudi determination and diplomacy, as well as the ability of Muslim nations to cooperate against the disease of extremism that is ultimately a threat to their own survival. ■

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