

The Syrian Conundrum: Where is Saudi Arabia?

By Ely Karmon

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“Why Saudi Arabia and Qatar are not Part of Syrian Ceasefire Deal?” titled an article on the official Russian Sputnik news agency, referring to an agreement achieved in late December in Moscow by Russia and Turkey as its co-guarantors and Iran as part of it. There is no clear answer to this question in the article. The Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov declared that Egypt could soon become part of the Syrian peace talks, adding that Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan and Iraq will also be invited to take part in these efforts in the future. The article notes that Saudi Arabia and Qatar have long provided support to some of the radical groups fighting in Syria, one of the factors contributing to the continuation of the nearly six-years-long war.¹

After the active Russian military intervention in Syria since September 2015, the Saudis have taken a strong stand against it. Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir threatened his country would embrace a military option if Assad did not step down as part of a political transition. In early December 2015, Saudi Arabia organized a gathering in Riyadh of most of the Syrian opposition groups who agreed to form “a new and more inclusive body to guide the diverse and divided opponents of President Assad in a new round of planned talks aimed at ending the Syrian civil war.” A few days later the Saudis announced the formation of a 34-state “Islamic military coalition” – excluding Shi’ite nations – to fight global terrorism and challenge the Russian-Iranian alliance. In parallel, the Sunni Islamist rebel group Ahrar Al-Sham issued a joint statement with 40 other rebel groups calling for a “regional coalition” against Russia and Iran.²

In February 2016, striving to even a more active role in the civil war in Syria, the Saudis deployed military fighters at the Turkish Incirlik base. Brigadier Gen. Ahmed Al-Assiri, consultant to Saudi Minister of Defense Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, confirmed the arrival of Saudi Air Force jets at the Turkish base as part of

¹ *Sputnik*, “Why Saudi Arabia and Qatar are not Part of Syrian Ceasefire Deal?” January 1, 2017, at <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201701021049196607-saudi-arabia-qatar-syria/>

² Ely Karmon, “Russia’s Syria gambit,” *The Jerusalem Report*, February 8, 2016.

the international coalition led by Washington. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said at the time that Turkey and Saudi Arabia may join forces for ground operations against the Islamic State in Syria. Assiri also confirmed the kingdom's readiness to enter ground operations in Syria.³ After Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem, threatened Saudi Arabia “that [its] troops would be sent back home in coffins” while Hezbollah promised to “open the gates of hell” for the Saudi military, no Saudi ground forces were deployed in Turkey and there is no information about the military impact of the Saudi fighter jets deployed at Incirlik since spring 2016.⁴

According to another Russian official outlet, the RT citing political analyst Kevork Almassian, there are three important factors regarding the agreement: a gradual change in the Turkish rhetoric regarding Syria and its support to Islamist militants; the sidelining of the US from the deal in order to create new political realities before President-elect Donald Trump comes to power; and the sidelining of Saudi Arabia, which “has enormous influence on the ground on the Salafi and jihadi groups in Syria.” By making this agreement Russia, Turkey, and Iran are pushing Saudi Arabia into the corner and putting it in front of ... the big challenge: either accept the peace process or continue its aggressive policies toward Syria.”⁵

The Russian Ministry of Defense published a list of the "moderate" rebel groups included in the ceasefire: Failaq al-Sham, Ahrar al-Sham, Jaysh al-Islam, Siwar al-Sham, Jaysh al-Mujahidin, Jaysh Idlib, Jabhat al-Shamyah, which totals 65,000 fighters. The factions belonging to the "Southern Front" (23,000 fighters) are not included, but the hostilities have already ceased in the province of Deraa over a year ago, thanks to an agreement between Russia and Jordan. The leaders of 10 more armed formations in Syria have joined the Russian-Turkish brokered ceasefire, bringing the total to 104, the Russian reconciliation center announced at the beginning of January.⁶

The agreement has also provoked cleavages within the rebel groups and have exacerbated tensions between Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS) and the rest of the

³ Awad Mustafa and Burak Ege Bekdil, “Saudi, Turkish Forces Prep for Potential Air, Land Invasion of Syria,” *Defense News*, February 13, 2016 at <http://www.defensenews.com/story/war-in-syria/2016/02/13/saudi-airforce-deploys-fighter-jets-turkish-air-base/80343088/>

⁴ *GlobalSecurity.org website*, “Syria – 2016,” at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/syria-2016.htm>

⁵ *RT*, “Syria ceasefire: New realities on ground before Trump takes office,” December 29, 2016, at <https://www.rt.com/op-edge/372171-russia-turkey-syria-ceasefire/>

⁶ *Sputnik*, “Ten Armed Group Leaders Join Syrian Ceasefire, Total at 104 Groups,” January 6, 2017, at <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201701061049330115-syria-ceasefire-russia-military/>

rebellion. The powerful Ahrar al-Sham is about to split: its radical branch wants to merge with JFS while another faction remains loyal to its Turkish backers. In the province of Idlib, Fatah al-Sham's hegemony has lukewarm support from several rebel groups that might defect if provided with Russian-Turkish protection. The fragmentation of Jaysh al-Fatah (the Conquest Army), the coalition led by JFS, is a prerequisite for the offensive that the Syrian army and its allies are preparing to launch against Idlib.⁷

“There has been huge pressure to sign [the ceasefire deal],” said a senior member of the major Islamist group Ahrar al-Sham. A senior member of Jaysh al-Islam, one of the signatories to the truce, complained of the Saudis: “Our backers have been nowhere to be seen all year. There’s no one from the Gulf here at all.” According to one senior regional official, Qatar, a prominent backer of the opposition and ally of Turkey, has sharply scaled back its support in the past six months partly due to a threat from senior Russian officials and because “they did not want to be associated with a losing cause.”⁸ It is of note that Qatar recently signed an \$11.5 billion deal for a 19.5% stake in Rosneft, Russia’s largest oil producer.⁹

Russia is now organizing a peace conference in Astana, Kazakhstan for later this month with Turkey as co-chair. The United States has not been invited, and Saudi Arabia probably won’t be asked to attend either. Some observers consider that Assad has won the war, thanks to Russian and Iranian intervention, and the Syrian rebels are doomed because all their outside supporters are peeling away. “The rebels are completely on their own and their only options are to surrender or die in the last ditch.”¹⁰

On the strategic level, the Saudi regional strategy has completely failed. On his coronation, King Salman decided that he must lead a more assertive policy vis-à-vis Iran and therefore needs the support of all Sunni actors, including the powerful Muslim Brotherhood (MB), whom King Abdullah and other Gulf states outlawed after the advent of Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Sisi as President of Egypt. King Salman

⁷ Fabrice Balanche, “Syria: A Tactical—Not Strategic—Ceasefire,” *The Cipher Brief*, January 6, 2017, at <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/article/middle-east/syria-tactical-not-strategic-ceasefire-1091>

⁸ Martin Chulov, “UN welcomes Syria ceasefire against backdrop of deadlock and dissent,” *The Guardian*, December 31, 2016, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/31/syria-ceasefire-russia-uk-iran-turkey>

⁹ James Marson and Scott Patterson, “Russia Sells Stake in Oil Giant Rosneft to Glencore, Qatar,” *WSJ*, December 7, 2016.

¹⁰ Gwynne Dyer, “The war is over in Syria,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, January 4, 2017, at <http://www.post-gazette.com/opinion/2017/01/04/Assad-wins-in-Syria/stories/201701040025>

tried to convince President Sisi to alleviate the oppression of the Egyptian MB. In February 2015, the King tried, without success, to organize a meeting in Riyadh between Sisi and Turkish President Erdogan, the most vocal ally of the MB, in an attempt to establish a new Sunni front.¹¹

Saudi Arabia provided Cairo significant economic aid while President Sisi declared on several occasions that the Egyptian army is ready to defend Egypt's sister-countries in the Gulf. In April 2016, King Salman made a historic visit to Egypt, during which the latter acknowledged Saudi Arabia's sovereignty over the Red Sea islands of Tiran and Sanafir, under Egyptian sovereignty for years, and agreed to transfer them back to the kingdom. However, disagreements surfaced between the two countries on various issues – chiefly Saudi Arabia's openness towards Turkey and the MB, which Egypt regards as its enemies, and, conversely, Egypt's position on Syria.¹²

Egypt's refusal to participate in the Saudi-led military operations in Yemen, its tilt in recent months toward the Assad regime in Syria and its vote in mid-October in favor of Russia's draft resolution in the Security Council that emphasized that the battle for Aleppo was a fight against "terrorism," provoked huge Saudi anger and the suspension of shipment of Saudi petrol products to Egypt. Matters have since escalated further, as Sisi openly declared his support for the Syrian army as the backbone of a unified Syrian state.¹³

The relations with Turkey seemed to advance peacefully. Burhanettin Duran, a political scientist at the Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research, said that the relationship between Turkey and Saudi Arabia had not reached a "strategic dimension" but were "proceeding in the right way." During the visit of King Salman to Turkey in April 2016, Erdogan even asked for Saudi assistance in applying pressure on Egypt to ease President Sisi's oppression of the Egyptian opposition.¹⁴

¹¹ Semih Idiz, "Erdogan tests waters in Riyadh," *Al-Monitor Turkey Pulse*, March 3, 2015, at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2015/03/turkey-saudi-arabia-erdogan-king-salman.html>

¹² N. Mozes, The Egypt-Saudi Dispute Over A Resolution To The Syria Crisis Goes Public, MEMRI Inquiry & Analysis Series, October 18, 2016, at <https://www.memri.org/reports/egypt-saudi-dispute-over-resolution-syria-crisis-goes-public>

¹³ Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, The end of an alliance? *The Jerusalem Report*, January 9, 2017.

¹⁴ *Daily Sabah*, "Meeting between President Erdoğan, Saudi King underscores cooperation," April 12, 2016, at <http://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2016/04/12/meeting-between-president-erdogan-saudi-king-underscores-cooperation>

In fact, Turkey is giving priority to fighting the Kurds at home and eliminating their de facto state in Syria while getting rid of Assad is well down Erdogan's political agenda.¹⁵

The Russian-Turkish deal on Syria is the betrayal by Erdogan of its ally and supporter Saudi Arabia. The "Muslim Brother" has not behaved better than the secular Egyptian leader!

James M. Dorsey, a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore, presents a gloomy picture of the kingdom in 2016. Lowered oil prices sparked a domestic financial crisis that is forcing the country to restructure its economy. An almost two-year long military campaign in Yemen against the Iranian-backed Houthis and former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, has turned into a quagmire. The campaign has cast a shadow over the military capabilities of a country that ranks as the world's second largest importer of weapons. Saudi Arabia's use of its economic resources to keep president Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi in power and stabilize Egypt's deteriorating economy has failed to achieve a return. Instead, Saudi Arabia and the Arab most populous nation are at loggerheads over Iran, Syria, and various other issues.¹⁶

Saudi Arabia seems to be at its lowest point in the regional and sectarian conflict with its arch-enemy Iran, one of the main winners of the situation on the ground in Syria. It is difficult to envision an effective renewal of Saudi support to the weakened Syrian opposition in case the cease-fire brokered by Russia and Turkey collapses, as the main remaining fighting groups are the jihadists of JFS and ISIS and Turkey will tightly control the "moderate" and Islamist groups in order to achieve its own goals in the fight against the Kurds in northern Syria.

¹⁵ Patrick Cockburn, "The Syrian ceasefire agreement has shifted the balance of power to Assad," *The Independent*, December 30, 2016, at <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/syria-russia-turkey-ceasefire-agreement-bashar-al-assad-shifted-balance-of-power-a7502311.html>

¹⁶ James Dorsey, "Think that 2016 was a tough year for Saudi Arabia? Wait until you see 2017," *Daily News Egypt*, January 3, 2017, at <http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2017/01/03/think-2016-tough-year-saudi-arabia-wait-see-2017/>