

Saudi Arabia pushes for renewed confrontation with Syria

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The Saudi regime has responded to the US postponement of war plans against Syria by pressing for stepped-up aid to the Al Qaeda-linked Syrian opposition, while arming itself to prepare for domestic repression.

Current discussions in Washington of again stepping up US aid shipments to the Syrian opposition highlight Saudi Arabia's role in helping the Obama administration and the CIA refashion the Syrian opposition in their interests. In September, shortly after Washington postponed its war plans, the Saudi royals helped form the Army of Islam (JAI), made up of 43 Sunni Islamist militias in Syria.

The JAI—backed by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and reportedly trained by the Pakistani army—is an attempt to rebrand the far-right Sunni Islamist forces fighting in Syria and sideline groups that became obstacles to US foreign policy. Such groups included the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), whose opposition to the US-backed Iraqi regime of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki made it unpalatable in Washington.

Saudi aims were spelled out in a comment by Mustafa Alani, director of security and defense studies at the Gulf Research Center. “Al Qaeda is getting stronger,” Alani noted. “It is undermining the Syrian revolution and giving the US an argument for not supporting it. It will backfire against Saudi Arabia and the Gulf sooner or later.”

The response of Saudi Arabia and of factions of the American state closest to it was not to turn against Al Qaeda, however. Rather, they sought to reorganize the Syrian opposition to align it more directly on US foreign policy, and thus to limit opposition inside the US foreign policy establishment to arming it against the Syrian regime.

Attempts by Saudi Arabia and US imperialism to

distance themselves from their Al Qaeda proxies in the Syria are a political fraud. They are still mobilizing the far-right, anti-Shia terrorist elements that are Al Qaeda's trademark. Often, these are fighters that worked directly with ISIS or other explicitly Al Qaeda-linked groups in Syria.

This emerged in a recent *New York Times* interview with a Saudi veteran of the Syria war, titled “Saudis Back Syrian Rebels, Despite Risks.” The *Times* spoke to Abu Khattab, a 43-year-old hospital administrator in civilian life, in the presence of two minders from the Saudi Interior Ministry. Noting his hatred of Shia Muslims, the *Times* said that Abu Khattab's “own convictions seemed scarcely different from those of the jihadists he had carefully denounced.”

It added, “He did not deny that he had often fought alongside members of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS, the brutal jihadist group affiliated with Al Qaeda. Abu Khattab also mentioned proudly that he is no stranger to jihad. He fought as a teenager in Afghanistan (‘With the government's permission!’) and, a few years later, in Bosnia.”

That is, Abu Khattab participated in the various Saudi operations to support the US wars in which Osama bin Laden and the original Al Qaeda leaders were trained: the Soviet-Afghan war of the 1980s and early 1990s, and the Balkan Wars of the 1990s.

The *Times* oddly accepted as good coin Abu Khattab's claim he is “disillusioned with the chaos of battle” and has given up terrorism. However, it noted Saudi authorities' ongoing support for the Syrian opposition: “They officially prohibit their citizens from going to Syria for jihad, but the ban is not enforced; at least a thousand have gone, according to Interior Ministry officials, including some from prominent families.”

The *Times*'s participation in this bizarre interview with an Al Qaeda operative, aiming to fumigate the terrorist activities of Saudi-backed forces in Syria, reflects the reactionary character of the US-led war in Syria and of US hegemony in the Middle East.

Powerful sections of the US ruling elite are calculating that renewed support to the Syrian opposition would strengthen the US position in talks—or, should talks fail, in war—with Syria and Iran.

The Saudi regime, for its part, has demanded more support to the Syrian opposition, even in the face of Western opposition. This was highlighted in a December 18 comment by Prince Mohammed bin Nawaf bin Abdulaziz al Saud in the *New York Times*, titled “Saudi Arabia Will Go It Alone,” denouncing the US decision to pull back from war with Syria.

He wrote: “The foreign policy choices being made in some Western capitals risk the stability of the region and, potentially, the security of the whole Arab world. This means the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has no choice but to become more assertive in international affairs.... We continue to show our determination through our support for the Free Syrian Army and the Syrian opposition.”

The Saudi regime's promotion of Al Qaeda-linked forces is bound up with the reactionary interests of the Saudi capitalist elite.

The Saudi regime was deeply shaken in 2011 by the revolutionary struggles of the Egyptian working class, and by the protests that erupted in neighboring, Shia-majority Bahrain. Its forces led the drowning the initial Bahraini uprising in blood in early 2011. The longest-standing prop of US imperialist hegemony in the Middle East, the Saudi monarchy viewed the uprising of the working class as a threat to its survival and rapidly aligned itself on Washington's neo-colonial wars in Libya and Syria.

Aware of escalating social tensions at home and terrified of renewed mass protests, it is arming itself and its fellow Persian Gulf oil sheikhdoms to the teeth (see “Saudi budget signals growing social crisis”).

The kingdom's military budget, which exceeded \$56 billion even before the present crisis, represents a greater outlay on personnel, weapons and infrastructure than all but four other countries worldwide. It is the world's seventh-biggest military spender.

Resolutions passed at last month's Gulf Cooperation

Council (GCC) summit in Kuwait highlight the Saudi-led escalation in the Gulf. The GCC—an alliance including Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates—was established in 1981 to foster economic and security ties among the US-backed oil sheikhdoms.

Saudi Arabia is transforming the Peninsula Shield force—founded in 1982 with 5,000 troops and now numbering approximately 40,000—into a unified Persian Gulf military command.

Saudi Prince Mutaib bin Abdullah, head of the newly created ministry controlling the country's National Guard, announced on December 20 that Saudi Arabia would contribute between 50,000 and 75,000 troops to the expansion of GCC forces. The new military command headquarters will be built in the Saudi capital, Riyadh, this year. The total force is to be expanded to 100,000 troops.

Another GCC resolution called for the creation of a joint police force. The GCC Supreme Council ratified the draft resolution, saying that the police force would “boost security and help expand anti-terror co-operation and co-ordination among member states.” It would coordinate operations with existing security agencies in the GCC countries.



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