

In talks with Saudi monarch, Obama prepares escalation of US-backed war in Syria

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US President Barack Obama arrived in Saudi Arabia Friday, trailed by leaks to the Washington media suggesting that the US government had decided to escalate its intervention in the civil war in Syria. Press reports cited the ongoing conflict with Russia over Ukraine as a key factor in impelling the White House to change course in its attacks on Syria, a key Russian ally.

The visit to Riyadh, the Saudi capital, is Obama's first to the Middle East since his administration was forced to back away from threats to bomb Syria last September in the face of widespread popular opposition and significant divisions within the US political establishment and with major US allies.

Since then, members of the Saudi royal family have made blunt public criticisms of US policy, both in relation to the Syrian war and the ongoing nuclear talks with Iran. Obama's visit was the latest in a series of US efforts to patch up relations and shore up the dominant US position among the oil-rich monarchies of the Gulf region.

Hours before Obama's plane landed in Riyadh, the *Washington Post* published a commentary by its well-connected foreign policy columnist David Ignatius, headlined "Obama appears ready to expand covert assistance to Syrian opposition." Ignatius, the son of a Vietnam-era secretary of the Navy who has close ties to top CIA officials, is a frequent conduit for communiqués from the military-intelligence apparatus.

The column begins: "The Obama administration, stung by reversals in Ukraine and Syria, appears to have decided to expand its covert program of training and assistance for the Syrian opposition, deepening US involvement in that brutal and stalemated civil war. This stepped-up assistance program is likely to be discussed during talks Friday between President Obama

and Saudi King Abdullah."

Citing "knowledgeable officials," Ignatius gave an outline of the program as follows:

- Doubling the number of Syrian fighters to be trained at US-run camps in Jordan, northern Saudi Arabia and Qatar.
- Designating the Central Intelligence Agency, rather than the military, to run the training program and give it a "counterterrorism" focus, directed both at the Assad regime in Syria and the Al Qaeda-linked Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant organization.
- Giving US permission to Saudi Arabia to supply a limited number of anti-aircraft missile launchers, known as manpads, on a trial basis and with a remote shutdown mechanism installed, for use against helicopters and low-flying planes.
- Barring aid to three "rebel" groups: the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, Jabhat al-Nusra, and Ahrar al-Sham. Qatar, which has aided these groups, has agreed under US-Saudi pressure to stop doing so.
- Funneling assistance to rebuilding local police and border security forces in areas where the "rebels" have displaced the Assad regime.

Ignatius concluded: "The rationale, bluntly stated, is that to reach an eventual diplomatic settlement in Syria, it is necessary now to escalate the conflict militarily."

This column was widely cited in press accounts Friday and its content was confirmed by an unnamed "US official" who spoke with the Associated Press. The AP report said Obama "is considering allowing shipments of new air defense systems to the Syrian opposition" and that "Saudi Arabia would be likely to cheer a decision by Obama to allow the portable missile launchers into Syria."

The AP noted that this was a significant shift in the US position: "As recently as February, the

administration insisted Obama remained opposed to any shipments of manpads to the Syrian opposition. The US has been concerned that the weaponry could fall into the wrong hands and possibly be used to shoot down a commercial airliner.”

The *Wall Street Journal* reported “Saudi hopes” that manpads would be authorized, and quoted an unnamed “senior administration official” who said, “We have been working for the last several months to increase our coordination with the Saudis and to more effectively distribute assistance to the opposition. The president’s trip comes in the context of this closer cooperation.”

The trip was prepared by a series of earlier meetings, including visits by Secretary of State John Kerry and Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel to Riyadh, and last week’s visit to Washington by Prince Salman bin Sultan, the Saudi deputy defense minister, who is in charge of arming the rebels in Syria, for talks with Hagel and CIA Director John Brennan.

A Syrian “rebel” spokesman who visited Washington at the same time, Hadi al Bahra, told the *Journal* that while there had not yet been a final decision on supplying mandpads, “We all expect a decision after President Obama visits Saudi Arabia, which is in favor of increasing [rebel] capabilities.”

The Washington-based magazine *Foreign Policy* reported March 24 that the State Department was about to resume delivering tens of millions of dollars in assistance to the Syrian “rebels,” including ambulances, pickup trucks and communications gear, as well as packaged military meals and medical kits. This is in addition to small arms and ammunition supplied through the CIA and heavier weapons supplied by the Gulf monarchies.

This so-called “nonlethal” aid was suspended in December after the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant seized control of warehouses where supplies were being stored. According to *Foreign Policy*, “leadership and organizational changes within the rebel forces’ umbrella group, the Supreme Military Council, has led Washington to reopen the aid spigot.”

The timing of the renewal of aid—coinciding with the US-backed coup in Ukraine and the Russian annexation of Crimea in response—makes it clear that the Obama administration sees Syria as an arena where it can do additional damage to Russian interests, disrupting the tacit US-Russian agreement of last September, when

Obama called off threatened air strikes in return for a Russian-brokered plan for the supervised destruction of Syria’s chemical weapons stockpile.

The other key issue in the US-Saudi talks is the ongoing negotiations with Iran over its nuclear energy program. Deputy National Security Adviser Ben Rhodes told reporters on Air Force One that Obama would emphasize that a nuclear deal with Iran would not alter US opposition to Iranian activities in the Persian Gulf and Iran’s support for Assad and the Hizbollah movement in Lebanon. “Those concerns remain constant and we’re not in any way negotiating those issues in the nuclear talks,” he said.

After a series of speeches and remarks by Obama in Brussels, the Hague and the Vatican, where he postured as an advocate of democracy, human rights and economic equality, such pretenses will be abandoned in the talks with the 89-year-old Saudi monarch, who heads one of the few remaining absolute despotisms on the planet, where no one outside the ruling family has any rights at all.

There will be no discussion of the repressive internal regime maintained by the Saudi monarchy, or its own military incursions, such as the 1,000 troops sent into Bahrain in 2011 to suppress prodemocracy protests against the local dynasty.

Earlier this month, according to one report, the Saudi government issued a decree making it a crime to “call, participate, promote or incite sit-ins, protests, gatherings or collective statements for any purpose or in any form, or anything that could affect the unity and stability of the kingdom by any means.”

The Saudi government has also criminalized membership in the Muslim Brotherhood, equating it to Al Qaeda. The Interior Ministry, in an action that demonstrates the contradictions in US-Saudi policy in Syria, issued a decree imposing severe penalties on Saudis who might volunteer to fight as part of the Syrian “rebel” groups. The concern was that these militants might return to Saudi Arabia and take up arms against the monarchy.



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