

# Saudi-orchestrated gathering of Syrian “rebels” ends in disarray

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A gathering of Syrian Al Qaeda-linked militias and exile politicians convened by the Saudi monarchy in Riyadh concluded Friday with the adoption of a joint agreement but with little clarity as to who was supporting it and even less on what purpose it will serve in furthering the stated aim of a negotiated end to Syria’s bloody civil war.

The largest of the militia groups participating in the talks was Ahrar al-Sham, a Salafist Islamist militia that emerged essentially as part of an Osama bin Laden-approved “rebranding” of the Al Qaeda movement in Syria.

Ahrar al-Sham’s representatives in Riyadh reportedly signed the agreement, while its spokesmen in Syria repudiated it, declaring that the militia had withdrawn from the talks because of the participation of the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change, a secular opposition front which it considered insufficiently sectarian and too conciliatory toward the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad.

During the closed-door talks between the various “rebels” and exiles, Ahrar al-Sham had reportedly objected strenuously to language in the agreement calling for “democracy” in Syria. Like the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the Al Qaeda-affiliated Al Nusra Front, with which Ahrar al-Sham collaborates, the militia’s stated goal is the creation of an Islamic State; that is, deposing the secular dictatorship of Assad and replacing it with a Sunni sectarian dictatorship.

This is what is being portrayed as the “moderate rebels” extolled by the US and its regional allies. That the Saudi monarchy—itsself a Sunni sectarian dictatorship—should do so is hardly surprising. It, as well as the monarchical regime in Qatar and the Islamist government in Turkey, in collaboration with the CIA, has funneled billions of dollars in funding and

arms to these forces, which have ravaged Syria and slaughtered religious minorities.

To provide a civilian cover for these forces, various corrupt and aging exile politicians, many of them affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, were also brought to Riyadh. While portrayed as a political opposition, these elements represent nothing outside of their own mercenary ambitions and the imperialist powers and right-wing Sunni Arab regimes that fund them.

The Riyadh conference was convened ostensibly to lay the groundwork for the opening of UN-mediated talks between the Syrian opposition and the government of President Bashar al-Assad. The so-called roadmap negotiated in Vienna by the US and its European allies together with Russia and Middle Eastern governments, including those of Iran and Saudi Arabia, calls for these talks to begin next month. This supposedly would be followed by the imposition of a “transitional government” by next June and the convening of national elections within two years.

The statement adopted in Riyadh, however, reads: “The goal of the political settlement is to establish a civic state in which there is no place for Bashar al-Assad and pillars and symbols of his regime.” It adds, “Participants have insisted that Bashar al-Assad and his aides quit power with the start of the transition period.”

The thrust of this position, that Assad must be ousted at the outset of any transitional regime, is at odds with statements made by both US and European officials, who had previously indicated that they would accept his continued participation in such a transition for at least a short period.

Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir made clear that the Saudi monarchy is also continuing to demand Assad’s immediate removal. “Bashar al-Assad has two

choices: Either leave through negotiations, which could be faster, easier and best for everyone or he'll leave through fighting," he told reporters Thursday.

US Secretary of State John Kerry praised the "positive outcome" of the Riyadh conference, which he claimed had brought together an "extremely diverse group of Syrians." He added, however that "There are some questions and obviously a couple of, in our judgment, kinks to be worked out." He said he would be talking with Saudi Foreign Minister Jubeir about these issues.

Washington's aim in pursuing the talks on a transitional government is to achieve through negotiations what it has not been able to bring about by means of a proxy war: regime change in Syria. It is evidently concerned, however, that the ultimatum adopted in Riyadh will scuttle any talks before they begin.

Both Russia and Iran have rejected the ouster of Assad as the precondition for talks, taking the position that his fate should be decided by the Syrian people.

For his part, Assad rejected negotiations with the Syrian "rebels" so long as they continue an armed struggle against the government. "They want the Syrian government to negotiate with terrorists, something I don't think anyone would accept in any country," he said. The Syrian president added that he had "never thought about leaving Syria under any circumstances."

Kerry announced earlier this week that a new round of the talks initiated in Vienna would be held on December 18 at the United Nations building in New York City.

Russian officials, however, have insisted that there are issues to resolve before such a session. "As to the December 18 meeting, in order to set the final date and place for the meeting in Vienna format, it is crucial to achieve a consensus on the list of participants—to determine who is terrorist and who is not," Russia's ambassador to the UN, Vitaly Churkin told the RIA Novosti news agency Friday.

This a sensitive question, precisely because Washington and its allies have provided barely concealed backing, in terms of weaponry and funding, to Ahrar al-Sham and the al-Nusra Front, which, together with ISIS, constitute the main armed opposition to the Assad government.

US President Barack Obama and other American

officials have repeatedly denounced Russia for carrying out air strikes against "the moderate opposition"—rather than ISIS—without ever indicating the identity of these "moderates." In reality, what Washington objects to is Moscow's attacks on the non-ISIS al-Qaeda-affiliated militias, with which the US is in a de facto alliance.

Excluded from the talks in Riyadh was a force with which the Pentagon has collaborated closely in attacking ISIS in Syria, the Kurdish YPG (Peoples' Protection Unit) militia. The Saudi monarchy is hostile to the Kurds for the same sectarian reasons that it opposes the Shia, seeing it as an impediment to its drive for Sunni hegemony in the region.

Turkey, meanwhile, not only opposes its participation, but, according to Kurdish fighters, is actively arming and training Sunni "rebels" from the al-Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham to attack them.



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