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Saudi Arabia's Shadow War

The Kingdom is turning to Pakistan to train Syria's rebels. It's a partnership that once went very wrong in Afghanistan. Will history repeat itself?

BY DAVID KENNER

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Saudi Arabia, having largely abandoned hope that the United States will spearhead international efforts to topple the Assad regime, is embarking on a major new effort to train Syrian rebel forces. And according to three sources with knowledge of the program, Riyadh has enlisted the help of Pakistani instructors to do it.

Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, along with the CIA, also supported the Afghan rebels against the Soviet-backed government during the 1980s. That collaboration contains a cautionary note for the current day: The fractured Afghan rebels were unable to govern after the old regime fell, paving the way for chaos and the rise of the Taliban. Some of the insurgents, meanwhile, transformed into al Qaeda and eventually turned their weapons against their former patrons.

While the risk of blowback has been discussed in Riyadh, Saudis with knowledge of the training program describe it as an antidote to extremism, not a potential cause of it. They have described the kingdom's effort as having two goals -- toppling the Assad regime, and weakening al Qaeda-linked groups in the country. Prince Turki, the former Saudi intelligence chief and envoy to Washington, **said** in a recent interview that the mainstream opposition must be strengthened so that it could protect itself "these extremists who are coming from all over the place" to impose their own ideologies on Syria.

The ramped up Saudi effort has been spurred by the kingdom's disillusionment with the United States. A Saudi insider with knowledge of the program described how Riyadh had determined to move ahead with its plans after coming to the conclusion that President Barack Obama was simply not prepared to move aggressively to oust Assad. "We didn't know if the Americans would give [support] or not, but nothing ever came through," the source said. "Now we know the president just didn't want it."

Pakistan's role is so far relatively small, though another source with knowledge of Saudi thinking said that a plan was currently being debated to give Pakistan responsibility for training two rebel brigades, or around 5,000 to 10,000 fighters. Carnegie Middle East Center fellow Yezid Sayigh **first noted** the use of Pakistani instructors, writing that the Saudis were planning to build a Syrian rebel army of roughly 40,000 to 50,000 soldiers.

"The only way Assad will think about giving up power is if he's faced with the threat of a credible, armed force," said the Saudi insider.

A State Department official declined to comment on the Saudi training program.

Saudi Arabia's decision to move forward with training the Syrian rebels independent of the United States is the latest sign of a split between the two longtime allies. In Syria, Saudi officials were aggrieved by Washington's decision to cancel a strike on the Assad regime in reprisal for its chemical weapons attack on the Damascus suburbs this summer. A top Saudi official **told** the *Washington Post* that Saudi intelligence chief Prince Bandar bin Sultan was unaware of the cancelation of the strike. "We found about it from CNN," he said.

As a result, Saudi Arabia has given up on hopes that the United States would spearhead efforts to topple Assad and decided to press forward with its own plans to bolster rebel forces. That effort relies on a network of Saudi allies in addition to Pakistan, such as Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, and France.

As Sayigh laid out in his Carnegie paper, Saudi Arabia is attempting to build "a new national army" for the rebels -- a force with an "avowedly Sunni ideology" that could seize influence from mainstream Syrian opposition groups. In addition to its training program in Jordan, Saudi Arabia also **helped organize** the unification of roughly 50 rebel brigades into "the Army of Islam" under the leadership of Zahran Alloush, a Salafist commander whose father is a cleric based in the kingdom.

Given the increased Islamization of rebel forces on the ground, analysts say, it only makes sense that Saudi Arabia would throw its support behind Salafist groups. These militias "happen to be the most strategically powerful organizations on the ground," said Charles Lister, an analyst with IHS Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre. "If Saudi Arabia does indeed follow such a strategy... it could well stand to become a major power player in the conflict."

In calling on Pakistan to assist in toppling Assad, Saudi Arabia can draw on its deep alliance with Islamabad. The two countries have long shared defense ties: Saudi Arabia **has given** more aid to Pakistani than to any non-Arab country, according to former CIA officer Bruce Riedel, and also allegedly **helped fund** Islamabad's nuclear program. In return, Pakistan based troops in Saudi Arabia multiple times over three decades to protect the royals' grip on power.

The current Pakistani government, in particular, is closely tied to Saudi Arabia. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was ousted from power in 1999 by a military coup - the Saudis allegedly **brokered a deal** that kept him from prison. Sharif would spend the next seven years in exile, mainly in Saudi Arabia. "For the Saudis, Sharif is a key partner in a key allied state," said Arif Rafiq, an adjunct scholar at the Middle East Institute.

But despite close collaboration in the past, Saudi Arabia may find its old allies chafing at the sheer scope of its ambitions in Syria. One Pakistani source with close ties to military circles confirmed that Saudi Arabia had requested assistance on Syria over the summer -- but argued that Pakistani capabilities and interests were not conducive to a sweeping effort to train the rebels.

Pakistan is already grappling with its own sectarian bloodshed and must mind its relationship with Iran, while its foreign policy is focused on negotiations with the Taliban over the future of Afghanistan and its longtime rivalry with India. "They have their hands full," the source said. "And even if they want to, I don't think they'll be able to give much concrete help."

Jordan is also reportedly leery about fielding a large Syrian rebel army on its soil. The ambitious Saudi plan would require a level of support from Amman "that is opposed within the security and military establishment and is unlikely to be implemented," according to Sayigh.

As the Saudis expand their effort to topple Assad, analysts say the central challenge is not to inflict tactical losses on the Syrian army, but to organize a coherent force that can coordinate its actions across the country. In other words, if Riyadh hopes to succeed where others have failed, it needs to get the politics right -- convincing the fragmented rebel groups, and their squabbling foreign patrons, to work together in pursuit of a shared goal.

It's easier said than done. "The biggest problem facing the Saudis now is the same one facing the U.S., France, and anyone else interested in helping the rebels: the fragmentation of the rebels into groups fighting each other for local and regional dominance rather than cooperating to

overthrow Assad," said David Ottaway, a scholar at the Wilson Center who wrote a biography of Prince Bandar. "Could the Saudis force [the rebel groups] to cooperate? I have my doubts."